



The influence of local non-farm employment on rural household structure in Northeast Thailand



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the structure of rural households in Northeast Thailand is influenced by the availability of local non-farm employment opportunities. It compares the frequency of different types of households (i.e., nuclear, extended, skipped generation, and truncated households) in two villages that were similar in most respects but differed in the shares of households with members having local non-farm employment. Almost three-quarters of all households in the village with a large share of households having members with local non-farm employment were of the extended and nuclear types. In the village with a small share of households having members with such employment, half of all households were of the skipped generation and truncated types. The extent of out-migration of young adult villagers seeking jobs in large cities also varied according to the availability of local non-farm employment. The village where many households have members with local non-farm employment had a smaller number of out-migrants. This contributes to its having more extended and nuclear households and fewer skipped generation and truncated households than the village with a greater number of out-migrants. These findings suggest that, in an area undergoing rapid economic development and modernization, rural household structure is strongly influenced by specific local economic conditions, in this case the availability of non-farm employment, rather than resulting from a universal trend toward the dominance of nuclear households as posited by convergence theory.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine how the structure of rural households in Northeast Thailand is influenced by the availability of local non-farm employment opportunities. We do this by comparing the frequency of different types of households (i.e., nuclear, extended, skipped generation, and truncated households) in two villages that are very similar in most respects but which differ in the number of their residents having local non-farm employment. Differences in employment rates are associated with differences in the number of out-migrants from the study villages which in turn influences differences in household structures. Our analysis illuminates how the specific linkage between rates of local non-farm employment and out-migration operates to influence household structure in these

communities. Our findings also raise questions about the validity of convergence theory. Convergence theory asserts that modernization in developing societies inevitably leads to the increased prevalence of nuclear family type households. We find, to the contrary that the frequency with which different types of households occur is quite different in the two villages, with nuclear type households much more prevalent in one community than in the other, despite the communities sharing a common cultural tradition. Although our study adds to the existing body of literature challenging the universal validity of convergence theory, we see its main contribution to be the identification of specific factors that can be subject to empirical testing that influence changes in household structure at the local level.

The existence of diverse family types and household structures has been a topic of interest to social scientists since the earliest days of anthropology and sociology (Murdock, 1949). Numerous empirical studies in diverse cultures in many parts of the world

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have shown that both the size and structure of households are readily subject to change. For example, in recent years in both developed and developing countries, the number and public visibility of various types of non-traditional families have been increasing. These include lone person households, those with only old couples and those composed of grandparents and their grandchildren, unmarried or divorced family households, and same-sex couples (Cassells et al., 2013; Yeung and Cheung, 2015). The causes of these changes and the extent to which they reflect a universal historical trend as opposed to being the product of specific local conditions are the subject of intense debate among scholars. Multiple different causal factors, including demographic, economic and cultural conditions, have been invoked to explain changes in household size and composition (Mizuno, 1981; Kunstadter, 1984; Bongaarts, 2001; Silva, 2003; Verdery, 2015). Although these particularistic explanations are often quite convincing in individual cases, they lack a general explanatory value. On the other hand, the search for more universal explanations has not been notably successful either.

Perhaps the best known of these universalistic theories was proposed by William J. Goode (1963). He asserted that in all societies undergoing modernization there is an inexorable shift from large extended family households toward smaller conjugal family households resembling those prevalent in contemporary Western Europe and North America. This theory became commonly known as “convergence theory” (Stinner, 1982; Wongsith, 1991; Keeratipongpaiboon, 2012) although Goode himself did not use this term. Since Goode first proposed his theory, many empirical studies have challenged its universal validity by presenting examples of the decline of nuclear family households and an increase in the complexity of family systems in various developing countries (Stinner, 1982; McDonald, 1992; Takeuchi, 2004; Rigg and Salamanca, 2011; Cherlin, 2012). However, no alternative general theory has emerged to replace it. Although we find simply assembling a collection of particularistic explanations of structural change to be intellectually unsatisfying, we do not pretend to have the knowledge or insight to be able to formulate a universal theory to replace convergence theory. Therefore, in this paper, we have sought to explore the intermediate space of what Robert Merton (1949) labelled “middle-range theory.” In this approach we seek to identify certain specific conditions that in similar contexts are expected to produce specific types of change in household structures. We suggest that in developing agrarian societies, household structures change in predictable ways in response to changes in economic conditions. Specifically, we identify the availability of local non-farm employment opportunities as a key factor influencing household structure in rural communities.

In pre-modern agrarian societies, the economy of rural households was mostly subsistence-oriented. Family members were highly focused on economic, cultural and educational relationships within their households and villages with only limited engagement with the larger world (Smith, 1973). More recently, as countries in the developing world have undergone industrialization and urbanization, rural households have become heavily cash-oriented. Farming households diversified their activities not only to reduce the risk of seasonal fluctuations in income but also to meet the demands of surviving in an increasingly cash-oriented society. Survival was sought through producing non-traditional crops for the market or gaining income from non-farm activities (Devereux et al., 2012). Consequently, family members have become increasingly oriented to finding ways to earn cash income to support the consumption requirements of their households. One common consequence has been out-migration of young adults who move to cities in search of non-farm employment opportunities that can generate cash income to help support their families in the rural

areas (Funahashi, 1996; Shi et al., 2011; Amare et al., 2012). This movement of people can lead to changes in rural household structure. For instance, in some developing countries in Asia, including Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, and Vietnam, non-traditional household types (e.g., lone person households and skipped generation households composed of grandparent with grandchild) have emerged (Sittitrai et al., 1991; Silva, 2003; Rigg, 2015; Yeung and Cheung, 2015; Zimmer and Natta, 2015), often in association with out-migration (Piotrowski (2008, 2009). Thus, Piotrowski (2009) found in rural villages in Northeast Thailand that remittances from migrants are significantly associated with the increased prevalence of skipped generation households. The impacts of out-migration on rural households are not uniform, however. Garip (2014) found that poor households gained benefits from out-migrants through receiving remittances while rich households suffered from losing their labor force. Qin (2009) concluded that on balance rural to urban labor migration has the potential to promote rural community development.

Households in rural villages in Northeast Thailand, where the present study was conducted, have gone through the above economic and social transitions as the country has both industrialized and become more urbanized (Rambo, 2017). The average household size shrank from 5.2 people in 1980 (Keeratipongpaiboon, 2012:46) to 3.5 people in 2010 (National Statistic Office, 2010). Before the Northeast region underwent rapid economic development beginning in the 1980s, nuclear family type households were predominant. More recently, and contrary to the expectations of convergence theory, the share of nuclear households has decreased while the share of extended and other household types has greatly increased. Community studies in the 1960s in villages in four provinces in the region found that most households (>68%) were of the nuclear type (Lux, 1961; Janlekha, 1968; Keyes, 1975; Mizuno, 1981). A study of a village in Khon Kaen province in 1981 found that 64% of households were of the nuclear type but the share of this household type declined to 43% in 2002. In the same period the share of extended family households increased from 29% in 1981 to 39% in 2002. Other household types such as lone person households and elderly married couples living in their own separate households (which we classify as “truncated”) increased from 6% in 1981 to 12% in 2002 (Funahashi, 2006). In 2013, a survey of another village in Khon Kaen found an even higher share of truncated type households (19%) and a decreased share of nuclear type households (29%) (Shirai and Rambo, 2017). At the regional level, this decline in the prevalence of nuclear households can be largely explained as a consequence of the demographic transition which, by greatly reducing the number of children per married couple, has also lowered the rate of formation of new nuclear families while increasing the share of extended households. However, there is still a great deal of variation among communities in the prevalence of different types of households that cannot be explained by a simple demographic argument. Other factors, especially out-migration from rural villages of young adults to find work in other places, especially Bangkok and the east coast, also influence household structure. And out-migration is itself influenced by changes in lifestyle and consumption expectations of the villagers (as well as, of course, by the desire of young villagers to experience the excitement of urban living and escape the drudgery of agricultural work). Studies conducted in the Northeast have shown that rural household expenditures on consumer goods and products such as motor bikes and cars, refrigerators, and televisions have greatly increased over the past 20 years (Takeuchi, 2004; Funahashi, 2006; Grandstaff et al., 2008; Rigg et al., 2012). As Mills (2012:93–95) shown, the purchase of televisions and radios has in many cases been made possible by cash remittances sent to their families in the villages by out-migrant members. This has resulted in more and

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