

A LANDSCAPE OF MIGRATION IN THAILAND: AGENCY AND CHOICE IN NORTHEAST THAILAND'

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AIM

This research seeks to address the balance within migration studies. It seeks to overcome origin-destination dichotomies and delve into the socio-cultural processes that migrants are entwined in. It aims to better inform migration policies and debates on migrant livelihoods, security and identities and will contribute to the ESRC 'Wellbeing in Developing Countries' Research Project in which migration is a key theme.

BACKGROUND

Context of high rates of urbanisation in cities such as Bangkok.

Many migrants are attracted to urban centres in search of a better livelihood.

This has led to a context of change for migrants identities, aspirations and actions.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES



Source: www.lib.utexas.edu/maps

MAP OF THAILAND

The arrow indicates Mukdahan Province where my research is based.

My previous research finds that migration is not permanent but is primarily circular in Thailand. I have also found that areas of origin are important cultural identity markers for migrants when they work in uncertain urban environments. The circular and frequent nature of these movements means that it is all the more important to understand how migrants negotiate their identities within this context of hybrid lifestyles that entail spending large amounts of time in urban areas but keeping a rural 'home'. My research will focus on one area in Thailand, the Northeast (also called 'Isan'). With a third of Thailand's population, the Northeast is the least developed area of the country and is the area of origin for a high percentage of migrants.

My research objectives are as follows:

? How does migration challenge existing theories of identity? This emerges from the observation that migration is not a question of straightforward progression from rural to urban identities or traditional to modern binaries ('*Samai mai*' to '*Samai Kon*' in Thai), but a complex set of emotions about security and belonging and also obligations linking migrants back to their place of origin.

? Migrants are actively using their agency in the formation and reproduction of their own personal identities, symbolic identity and social identity and therefore the research question implies an exploration of migrant agency. How does this agency differ in migrant groups, for example young and old, or long term and short term migrants?

? Choice is part of a migrant's agency. Migrants are embedded into the societies in which they belong and this influences choice both consciously and unconsciously. How much autonomy do migrants show when making choices about their identities, namely who they are and who they are not? There may be emotional and psychological forces encouraging the reproduction of rural identities but simultaneously there are competing modernising forces of international political economy that affect these choices. This begs the question of what is the synthesis between a migrant's agency in forming and choosing their identities and the embedded structures in the places, in which they reside, that both enable and constrain choice? In the case of Thailand the role of assimilationist government policies must also be considered.

METHODOLOGY

Research will be based on **12 months of extensive in-situ fieldwork**. I will also 'follow' a set of selected migrants to their areas of destination in order to immerse myself in the processes and feelings involved in migrating from the point of view of my informants, whilst also being a participant in my observations. Other sources to be used are local Thai academics, local and national officials, non-migrants in the village, as well as secondary data sources such as past studies and governmental migration reports.

A biographical approach emphasises cultural dimensions within migration and how the act of migration fits into a person's life course. I hope to gain narratives of migration experiences through structured interviews at first and from these, select respondents for **in-depth life history** and **biographical analysis**. This will be triangulated with my own observations within the field, especially with my observations from living with a host family and also attending village festivals and spiritual ceremonies.

Focus group discussions will be used in order to research the inter-generational perceptions of identity within the village. Three generational groups will be used: teenage migrants (15-21), mid age migrants (22-40) and then retired migrants or long time migrants (40+).

Network analysis will also be used to illustrate the social resources migrants have and also to uncover migrant networks, niches and cultural surroundings of migrants that will affect their agency and choices.

The last three months of my research will be spent **travelling with 6-10 selected migrant respondents** and keeping a diary. This will give me a unique and in-depth experience of migration processes and the feelings and choices migrants make in their everyday lives.



Two female migrants in Mukdahan Province. Interviewed in September 2004. One worked as a seamstress, the other as a water seller whilst her husband worked on a construction site in Bangkok.