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Intergenerational strategies: the successes and failures of a Northern Thai family's approach to international labour migration

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ABSTRACT

International work migration from rural Thailand is not new, yet relatively little is known about the decision-making processes regarding this livelihood strategy at the family level and across generations. Drawing on concepts of transnationalism and livelihood pathways and trajectories, this case-study traces the agency that underpins labour moves over two generations of a rural family in Chiang Rai province. The focus is on individual trajectories that exemplify how the first generation of migrant labour entered the market and the degree to which the second generation is replicating or modifying the migration patterns of their elders. We also show, from an emic perspective, who is deemed to be the most and least successful in their livelihood approach. To do so, we draw on data gathered from life stories, conversational interviews, and village visits, focusing on 45 individuals and spanning a 30 year timespan of international work migration. Moves to Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia and a failed endeavour to reach New Zealand are analysed, in an attempt to contribute to debates on transnationalism while highlighting individual and generational differences in migration stories, the specific roles of brokers and informal social networks, and diverse spatial practices.

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1. Introduction

The study of international labour migration from Thailand is well established, with research already outlining the main flows of such migration (e.g. Vasuprasat 1994; Jones and Pardthaisong 1999), the degree to which remittances return to Thailand (Gullaprawit 1991; Sobieszczyk 2015), and gendered remittance behaviours (Curran 1995; Sobieszczyk 2000). Much has also been said regarding migrant flows to specific regional countries (e.g. Morita and Sassen 1994), and the impacts structural transformations in the Thai economy have on such labour migration (Vasuprasat 1994). However, less well known, and what we focus on here, are how these patterns are formed and negotiated within family networks, and how they evolve from one generation to the next. Studying one single lineage involved with moves to Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Japan, South

Korea, Singapore, Australia and a failed attempt to reach New Zealand, we wish to contribute a longitudinal case-study to debates on transnationalism while highlighting the roles of brokers and informal social networks, generational differences in migration stories, and diverse spatial practices.

Drawing on data covering 45 individuals and 30 years of labour migration from one rural village in northern Thailand, we trace the decision-making that underpins the labour moves of two generations of an extended family. We ask: what patterns of migration decision-making emerge within this lineage, and what are the specific processes involved? To what degree is the second generation replicating or modifying the migration patterns of their elders? And from an emic perspective, who is deemed the most successful in their livelihood approach and why? Our core data come from life stories and conversational interviews collected since 1991 and completed in Thai with a range of family members. These were corroborated by repeat visits to the village of origin by the second author, when he lived in northern Thailand for three years between 1991 and 1998. During different visits to Thailand from 2013 to 2018, the two authors then conducted interviews with two members of the first generation of the Sukhum family to migrate abroad, with the precise intention of writing this article.¹ These two individuals are Tik, the third born daughter of nine siblings and five half-siblings, and Pierre, her Western husband, who has observed changes in the village since 1980. Our study covers the decision-making of Tik, Pierre, eight immediate kin of Tik, their partners, and her five half-siblings and their partners, ten of whom have migrated overseas for work. We then trace 15 members of the next generation, seven of whom have also migrated overseas for work, as well as bearing in mind the initial internal migration of the grandparents, thus covering three generations. In total, of the 45 individuals within this lineage, 16 have migrated temporarily abroad for work, and one permanently, all of whom are discussed here. Bringing this research towards anthropological ground with methods such as life stories, three originalities and strengths of our qualitative approach lie in the focus on individual experiences, the high degree of trust established between the key informants and authors, and the long period of observations.

After conceptually grounding this study in recent literatures on transnationalism and livelihood pathways and trajectories, we contextualise the village and regional migration patterns, keeping details of the village location vague for confidentiality. We then recount the labour migration stories for the first generation to travel overseas for employment, focusing on the choices made and the broker or informal networks utilised. We examine the social capital individuals drew upon to establish themselves in new countries or, in the case of one individual, to flee one. We then turn to highlight the patterns of the second generation international labour migrants. Finally we interpret the livelihood pathway for this lineage as a whole and the livelihood trajectories of individuals, focusing on how emically-defined success goes beyond mere financial returns.

2. Conceptualising Thai transnationalism and migrant livelihood pathways

Transnationalism has been described as a lens to analyse ‘the social organisation and consequences of the complex interconnectivity of cross-border networks in multiple fields of social practice’ (Smith 2005, 235). More specifically, transnationalism can be considered ‘a framework to analyse the way in which migrants and their descendants participate in

familial, social, economic, religious, political, and cultural processes that extend across the borders of nation-states' (Glick Schiller and Levitt 2006, 8). As such, Conradson and Latham (2005, 228) suggest that transnationalism helps scholars reject the hyper-globalisation narrative that can arise regarding international migration by avoiding 'accounts of individuals traversing a somehow frictionless world, endorsing instead research that details the emplaced corporealities of such movement'. As Collins (2009, 438) adds, the 'optic' of transnationalism offers 'a way of interrogating the different enactments, experiences and effects of cross-border lives'.

To date, transnationalism research has tended to focus on the most mobile, rather than those needing to avoid state structures like border controls. Our case thus takes us in a different direction, as family members work hard to avoid the gaze of border officials or police. Still, we draw on this literature to help highlight the spatial patterns underscoring the migration decisions made by family members. Transnationalism research also draws attention to the 'continuous circulation of people, money, goods and information' or 'transnational migrant circuit' that individuals rely upon (Rouse 1991, 14). While there is a small but important body of work on transnationalism focusing on transnational families and women in Southeast Asia (e.g. Pratt and Yeoh 2003; Cortes 2015; Hoang and Yeoh 2015), we wish to extend this literature with an intergenerational approach.

We also bring into play a growing literature on livelihood pathways and trajectories (e.g. de Haan and Zoomers 2005; Baulch and Davis 2008; Sallu, Twyman, and Stringer 2010; Rigg, Nguyen, and Luong 2014). Pathways are considered by de Haan and Zoomers (2005) to be patterns that a particular social group might follow. Pathways are

patterns of livelihood activities which arise from a co-ordination process among actors. This co-ordination emerges from individual strategic behaviour embedded both in a historical repertoire and in social differentiation, including power relations and institutional processes, both of which pre-structure subsequent decision-making. (de Haan and Zoomers 2005, 43)

When discussing migration as a livelihood pathway, this work also has close links to migration network theory, whose proponents suggest: 'Migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and nonmigrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin' (Massey et al. 1993, 448). In turn, a livelihood trajectory approach allows for an examination of an individual's 'strategic behaviour embedded both in a historical repertoire and in social differentiation' (de Haan and Zoomers 2005, 43). Such literature examines both the 'upward' movement of livelihoods when livelihood status is improved, and the 'downward' movement, when a decline in livelihood status occurs. These trajectories change over time, influenced by income opportunities and constraints, social norms, and power relations, among other contextual factors (de Haan and Zoomers 2005; Rigg, Nguyen, and Luong 2014). In this study we draw on elements of the livelihood pathways approach to focus on the lineage as a whole and the livelihood trajectories approach to highlight individual stories.

3. The Northern Thai village context and family circumstances

Like nearby Malaysia and Indonesia, Thailand experienced an agrarian transition from the mid-1970s, with a declining role of the agricultural sector (Vasuprasat 1994). While the

rapidly growing industrial sector was able to absorb much of the labour displaced off farms, rural villagers also began to consider possible work opportunities abroad due to the income differences between Thailand and possible destination countries (Vasuprasat 1994). Jones and Pardthaisong (1999, 37) explain: ‘Temporary labour migration overseas ... has been prominent in Thailand since the emergence of the Middle Eastern labour market following the oil price hikes of the mid-1970s’. In the early 1990s, this flow to the Middle East declined, and ‘the migration flows have rotated toward East Asia, where labour shortages persist in countries like Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Brunei’ (Vasuprasat 1994, 176). As explored shortly, the destination countries of our case-study family migrants follow these temporal trends fairly closely.

International labour migrants from Thailand can be categorised into one of three types. First, authorised migrants who use government approved recruitment agencies. Second, unauthorised migrants who pay their own way and travel abroad illegally, albeit perhaps using a legal visa and then overstaying. These individuals oftentimes also pay an illegal recruiter to help with their passage and documents, with payment up front. Third, unauthorised debt-bondage migrants who must work off their debt to repay recruitment fees and travel expenses (Sobieszczyk 2000, 2015). While men dominate legal flows from Thailand, the number of women migrating for work overseas has increased significantly, especially via unauthorised channels (Sobieszczyk 2000, 2015).

Our case-study migrant sending village is located in Chiang Rai (เชียงใหม่), Thailand’s northernmost province. In 2017 the province’s total population was 1.28 million, with over 1750 villages (Department of Provincial Affairs 2017). The staple crops tend to be wet rice and garden vegetables, as well as animal husbandry for each household’s subsistence needs. Local cash crops include coffee, pineapple, coconuts, and banana. Provincially, tourism has become a major economic driver, although its direct effects and benefits remain within the main urban centres and along the Mekong River. Although Chiang Rai province has around 15 percent non-ethnic Thai population, which is high relative to the rest of the country, our case-study lowland village is nearly entirely Thai and deeply Buddhist.

We focus on ‘Blossom Village’ (pseudonym) which is home to roughly 800 inhabitants, an average-size in the province. Blossom Village is one of 17 villages (*moobaan* in Thai, หมู่บ้าน) found within Mai Ya, a subdistrict (*tambon*, ตำบล) of Phaya Mengrai district (*amphoe*, อำเภอ), in Chiang Rai. In 2005, Mai Ya subdistrict had a total population of 11,069 people (Thai Tambon n.d.). Along with the rest of Blossom Village’s inhabitants, the Sukhum family originated from Nan province, bordering Laos, and moved north-west to Chiang Rai province after chronic floods affected their homeland in 1945–46. Blossom Village was established in the wilderness, with the first inhabitants clearing the forest for agriculture, with glutinous rice and maize becoming the main and secondary crops respectively. Until the mid-1980s, the village had no electricity and was accessed via a dirt road which was chronically dusty during the hot season and muddy during the rainy season.

Tik’s parents were married in a traditional ceremony in 1946. After fathering the initial seven of nine children with his first wife, in 1964 Tik’s father also informally married a woman in another village, not a rare occurrence at the time. The next year, he went to live with his second wife about ten kilometres away from Blossom Village, returning regularly to his first wife. To avoid inheritance problems due to lacking registration papers,

Tik's father then officially married his first wife in the early 1990s. The children of both marriages (nine with the first wife and five with the second) have grown close and see each other regularly. They consider themselves one family and, as will be seen later, support for migration has run across these sibling groups. The first wife died in 2006, while the second wife is in her mid-70s and is well accepted by the first wife's children. Tik's father died in 2010 and directed that the land he owned in Blossom Village where he had lived with his first wife be evenly distributed amongst their nine children, while land he bought in the second village was distributed among the children of his second wife.

4. Two generations of international labour migrants

In 1980, when Pierre, soon to become Tik's husband, first arrived in dusty Blossom Village, there was not much in terms of modern living. At the same time, Middle Eastern countries presented employment opportunities far more lucrative than what was available in Thailand, hence many Thais began to migrate internationally for work (Vasuprasat 1994). With this new option, combined with the arrival of electricity in the village in 1986, local demand began to grow for amenities such as televisions, the first luxury item that villagers would buy. As images and sounds from the outside (including US soap-operas) reached the core of their daily life, the villagers' visions of the world widened and they craved, though could not yet afford, more modern conveniences such as refrigerators, cars, pick-up trucks, and motorbikes, along with better health care.

In the mid-1980s, private companies in Thailand were offering passage to the Middle East and a work connection for about THB100,000 [~USD3,980, 1985 exchange rate], a considerable fee for villagers. To raise the initial funds for their travel, villagers relied on the high-interest services of moneylenders or agreed to land swaps and mortgages with friends and kin who had extra cash from selling cash crops (see also Sobieszczyk 2015). In essence, the richest in Blossom Village were indifferent to going abroad because they did not feel the need for extra income, while the poorest did not have enough collateral to borrow the funds to leave. It was villagers with mid-range financial capital savings who scraped together enough funds for broker fees. Or as Jones and Pardthaisong (1999, 41) put it: 'While most of Thailand's [international] migrant workers come from its poorest regions, they are not from their poorest people, largely because of the high fee charged by agencies for job placement abroad' (see also Rigg 1989).

As a few Blossom Village men returned from abroad with high earnings, more and more people followed suit. Tik and Pierre estimate that over three decades, over a third of Blossom Village's ~180 households have had at least one member working abroad and, accordingly, remittances have made a significant economic impact on the village. Tik and Pierre recall that in 1980, the village was considered very poor by Thai standards, with only old, termite eaten houses and a very modest Buddhist temple. As of 2018, the village is filled with large concrete houses with tiled floors and modern bathrooms, showing off the overseas design ideas and wealth of families who have enriched themselves abroad. This wealth is reflected in improved village infrastructure and three affluent temples. In monetary terms, our key informants estimate that members of the Sukhum family who worked aboard and returned in the early 2000s saved roughly USD24,000 each (2000 exchange rate), while more recent returnees saved about USD31,000-62,000.

4.1. An initial disaster – jailed in Saudi Arabia

In the mid-1980s, Sister-3, Sister-6, and Brother-4 (see [Table 1](#) for specific details) were living in Bangkok, working as informal labourers. Brother-4 then decided to try his luck at employment in Saudi Arabia, as he had several years' experience on construction sites. In 1987, he paid a broker THB80,000 (~USD3,184) to organise his trip.² To do so, he sold some of his agricultural land in the village, borrowed funds from family members using the rest of his land as collateral, and his father mortgaged some land to help.

Upon their arrival in Riyadh, Brother-4 and a dozen other Thai contract migrants had been told that someone would meet them, but they found nobody. Stranded at the airport, they were approached by an unknown man who offered them jobs. Having few options they agreed, and Brother-4 started working with some of the others in a tomato greenhouse in Dhahran. After three months of receiving accommodation and food but no pay, the workers began to demand their wages along with the return of their passports. It soon became clear that neither were going to happen, and they had been cheated again. With no official papers, Brother-4 and two other Thai workers fled Dhahran.

A few months later, while searching for options in Riyadh, they were arrested and taken to a police station for processing. They managed to sneak out, but were eventually caught again and held. Brother-4 was then jailed without trial for four years from 1988 to 1991. He explained later that he endured very poor conditions, received no support from the Thai embassy, and observed several deadly beatings by guards of other migrant inmates, mostly from India (see also Jones and Pardthaisong 1999). As Gulf War hostilities began in 1991, the Thai government decided to repatriate its Thai workers stranded in the Middle East, and Brother-4 was finally visited by a Thai embassy official. The Thai inmates were told that if they purchased their own airplane ticket they would be repatriated home. A fellow inmate from Mae Sai district, also in Chiang Rai province, loaned Brother-4 funds for a ticket, and Brother-4 gratefully returned home, later repaying the loan. While Brother-4's first international labour experience had been disastrous and could have easily deterred other family members, it was simply considered bad luck. His little sister, Sister-6, was the next to leave and in many ways, her story is the perfect opposite of that of her unfortunate brother.

4.2. Better luck in Japan – marrying into wealth and connections

In the early 1980s, aged 19 years old, Sister-6 married a local man but soon discovered that he was already married. Ashamed, she left for Bangkok. There, she gained work as a seamstress and started seeing a wealthy Sino-Thai man, but his family refused to allow him to marry a non-Sino-Thai. Ashamed again, she decided to try her luck in Hong Kong (see also Lindquist 2004, regarding shame and female migration). Sister-6 recalled that a number of Thai women were going to Hong Kong in the late 1980s on one to three-month tourist visas, making good profits working at karaoke bars. Sister-6 followed this route, staying in Hong Kong for six months via two visits, and paying no broker fees to do so.

Then, in 1989, Sister-6 paid THB200,000 to an illegal broker to help her enter Japan on a visa, which she then simply overstayed, a common strategy for illegal migrants at the time (Jones and Pardthaisong 1999). In the course of working as a bar hostess, Sister-6

Table 1. Details of the Sukhum family members who have undertaken international labour migration.

Name/ code	Destination	Sex	DOB	Pre-migration work	Year migrated	Years abroad	Migration costs, including broker fees.	Entry route/visa type	Work abroad	Work on return to Thailand	Returned to Blossom Village
Brother 4	Saudi Arabia	M	1956	Construction labourer, Bangkok	1987	5 years (4 in jail)	80,000THB to informal broker	Work visa via informal broker	Farming	Went abroad again	
	Japan				1992	13 years	No broker fees – S6 helped with plane ticket	Arrived on tourist visa, overstayed.	Construction	Farmer	Yes
Sister 6	Hong Kong	F	1960	Seamstress	1988	6 months	No broker fees	Worked on tourist visas	Hostess in karaoke bars		
	Japan				1989	<i>Still there; 29 years +</i>	200,000THB to informal broker	Arrived on tourist visa, overstayed. Now legal	Hostess in Karaoke bar; then married rich Japanese benefactor; restaurant and massage parlour owner	Still in Japan	To be determined
Brother 7	Japan	M	1963	Farmer	1993	11 years	No broker fees – S6 loaned \$ for plane ticket	Tourist visa, overstayed	Restaurant worker (for Sister 6); Farmer construction; fish factory		Different village
Brother 9	Japan	M	18-03-1968	Farmer	1991	5 years	60,000THB to informal broker; loaned by S6	Visa from broker, entered as fishing crew	Restaurant worker (for Sister 6); construction; golf course worker	Farming	Yes
	Australia				1998	4 years	No broker fee-helped by BIL 3	Arrived on tourist visa, overstayed.	Restaurant worker; cook.	Tourist van driver (self-employed; then for company)	Rents house in Chiang Rai
BIL 2	Japan	M	1948	Farmer	1991	2 years	60,000THB to informal broker, loaned by S6.	Entered as fishing crew	Construction	Farmer	Yes
BIL 5	Japan	M	1958	Farmer	1991	5 years	80,000THB to informal broker, loaned by S6	Entered as fishing crew	Construction	Farmer	
	Australia				1998	2 years	No broker fee; helped by BIL 3	Arrived on tourist visa, overstayed.	Construction	School children transportation business	Yes
BIL 8	Australia	M	1961	Farmer	1995	7 years	30,000THB paid to informal broker	Arrived on tourist visa, overstayed.	Restaurant: assistant, then chef at same restaurant	Farming	Yes
	Japan				2017	1 year	Sold truck to buy ticket & to have \$ to show at immigration	15 days visa-free & overstayed	Irregular farming jobs.	Farming	Yes

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Name/ code	Destination	Sex	DOB	Pre-migration work	Year migrated	Years abroad	Migration costs, including broker fees.	Entry route/visa type	Work abroad	Work on return to Thailand	Returned to Blossom Village
SIL 9 (1)	South Korea	F	1969	Small restaurant owner.	2018	<i>Still there</i>	120,000THB for SIL9(1) & C9-(1)1 to informal broker	3 months visa-free & overstayed	Farming	Still there; will stay 5 years to get -- \$ to get house back	--
H-Brother 1	Malaysia/ Singapore	M	1966	Farmer	Around 1995-- 96	3 years	10,000THB to informal broker	15 days visa-free & overstayed	Construction	Farming	Yes
H-BIL 2	Malaysia/ Singapore	M	1968	Farmer	Around 1995-- 96	2 years	~10,000THB to informal broker	15 days visa-free & overstayed	Construction	Farming	Yes
C2-1	Japan	F	1977	Teachers college diploma	2002	1.5 years	No broker fee -- S6 loaned \$ for everything (plane ticket, school fees)	Legal study visa	Masseuse for Sister 6 Fled back to Thailand to avoid marrying an older Japanese man.	Teacher in different village	Different village
C4-3	Japan	M	1984	School student	2005	3 years	No broker fee	Legal work visa	Car factory worker	Worker in construction equipment factory	Different village.
C5-1	Japan	M	1984	Ran internet café in village (financed by S-6)	2017	1 year	No broker fee	15 days visa-free & overstayed	Farm labourer	TBD -- returned from Japan; wants to go to South Korea in near future	TBD
C5-2	Japan	F	1987	School student	2014	2 years	No broker fee -- S6 loaned everything else (plane ticket, school fees)	Legal study visa	Part-time masseuse. Fled back to Thailand to avoid marrying a rich, overweight Japanese man.	Opened a small restaurant, which went bankrupt. Now works as a part-time-secretary in a nearby village.	Yes
C5-3	Japan	M	1989	University student	2013	2 years	No broker fee -- S6 advanced everything else (plane ticket, school fees)	Legal study visa	Part-time masseur	University student. Wants to be tourist guide	TBD
C8-1	Japan	M	1995	Driver	2017	1 year	No broker fee -- S6 loaned \$ for plane ticket	15 days visa-free & overstayed	Couldn't find regular work	Two weeks after his return from Japan, went to South Korea	
	South Korea				2018	<i>Still there</i>	No broker fee; paid for flight	3 months visa-free & overstayed	Farming	Still in South Korea	TBD
C9-(1)1*	South Korea	F	1996	School student	2018	<i>Still there</i>	(See mother: SIL 9 (1))	3 months visa-free & overstayed	Farming	Still in South Korea	TBD

*C9-(1)1 = 1st daughter of Brother 9 and his 1st wife.

Note: Each of the first generation to experience international migration (the siblings and in-laws of our two key informants) are numbered brother/sister 1-9 (e.g. B4), with their related brother-in-law or sister-in-law 1-9 (e.g. SIL4). Likewise, half-brother/sister 1-5, and then child 1-15 (e.g. C5-2, is Sister 5's second child).

met a local man and married him in 1991. She left the bar scene to live as a housewife until they agreed on a divorce five years later. However, this first husband agreed to stay with her long enough for her to finalise her permanent residency in Japan. She then returned to paid employment and in 1994, met her second husband, a younger Japanese man, whom she married in 1997 and with whom she had a daughter. Pierre noted that Sister-6 ‘hit the jackpot with her second husband, marrying a rich Japanese benefactor’. This man happened to be the son of a powerful province-level police chief with a number of working connections with the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia. Her second husband gave her funds to open a massage parlour, as well as a Thai restaurant which she ran with Brother-7 after he arrived in Japan in 1993, detailed below.

Expectedly, her connections turned Sister-6 into very valuable ‘anchor’ (Hugo 1995, 397) connecting numerous Thais from her home village to job opportunities in Japan. We have witnessed her visits back to Blossom Village which trigger a spontaneous queue of young men outside the family home hoping to present their case to get to Japan. For family members, friends, and neighbours, Sister-6 has not sought to make a profit when assisting with their migration, although she does expect loans to be repaid, reflecting Rigg’s (1989, 37) observation that even among relatives such transactions are likely to involve reciprocity. For others outside the village, she has asked for a small fee but much less than what most informal brokers or ‘gangsters’ would ask for and, she has reasoned, with a higher guarantee of success (see Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh 2012).

To complete the picture for Sister-6, she divorced her second Japanese husband in 2005 and no longer helps people wanting to work in Japan except for close family members, being wary of potential problems with the police and the risk of losing her resident status. As of 2018, she is running a Thai restaurant and four legitimate massage parlours, pointedly hiring older masseuses to avoid police concerns that her establishments might be brothels. Over almost three decades, Sister-6 estimates that she has assisted over 30 kin and other villagers to establish themselves in Japan. Family members in Japan continue to direct remittances back to Blossom Village through Sister-6, whose legal status in Japan allows her access to banking services and, in turn, gives her control over her siblings’ money.

Sister-6 has reinvested substantial funds back in Blossom Village, where she has purchased land. She also owns an apartment in Chiang Mai, the capital of Northern Thailand, where she hopes to settle one day. Indeed, her relatives are sceptical of her ability to readjust to village life after so long abroad, but do imagine her returning to Chiang Mai city. She has also distributed a considerable amount of her own money to family members to pay for house renovations, education, cars, and computers. For instance, her funds supported her nephew C5-1 through school in Chiang Mai. After he then failed to find employment, she placed him in charge of an internet café that she established in Blossom Village. When he also failed at this, she found him work in Japan.

4.3. The impact of Sister 6: the flow to Japan increases

Five male members of the Sukhum family soon tried their luck in Japan as well, detailed here in temporal order. Brother-in-law-2 and Brother-9 entered Japan in early 1991, after Sister-6 had arrived there but before she was in a position to directly assist with their migration plans. They travelled under the guise of being sailors for a shipping business,

which made it easy for them to enter the country using a letter of invitation and visa. These were organised by a migration broker to whom they paid THB60,000, with the funds advanced by Sister-6. Brother-in-law-2 was satisfied with the profits he had made after only two years in Japan (1991–1993) working in construction and returned to Blossom Village where he bought land and built a house.

Brother-9 stayed in Japan for five years, working in Sister-6's restaurant before securing work in construction via her Yakuza connection, driving diggers and bulldozers. Brother-9 then moved to a more comfortable position working on a golf course belonging to Sister-6's husband and stayed there until his return to Thailand in 1996. A few months after these two arrived in Japan, Brother-in-law-5 used the same route, this time paying a higher illegal broker fee of THB80,000, also advanced by Sister-6.

After recovering from his Saudi Arabia ordeal, Brother-4 decided to work abroad again. With Sister-6's help he entered Japan, overstayed his visa, and gained work illegally on various construction sites. For 13 years, between 1992 and 2005, he remained in Japan. He returned to Thailand with his profits invested in Blossom Village, including a Japanese-style house he built on land his father gave him. He now lives there with his Thai wife whom he met in Japan and has no desire to move again. The year after Brother-4's move to Japan, Brother-7 followed suit, entering Japan in 1993, and overstaying for eleven years until 2004. He first worked at Sister-6's restaurant, then as a construction worker, and then in a fish factory. He sent his money back via Sister-6 to build a family house in Blossom Village.

Brother-in-law-5 and Brother-9 (both in Japan from 1991 to 1996) made significant amounts of money, but upon their returns to Thailand spent it all on home improvements and luxury consumer items such as home stereos, and longed to continue making more. However, this time around, they could not re-enter Japan legally, having been unmasked as illegal overstayers. Indeed, if entering Japan was tricky, leaving was comparatively easy. As illegal over-stayers, when they wanted to go back home, they bought a plane ticket and surrendered to the Japanese police. They would then remain in custody for a few days until they were deported (using their plane ticket). The only hiccup was that this made it near impossible to enter again. Many tried to obtain new visas by changing their names and passports (a very common occurrence in Thailand), but this seldom worked because Japanese authorities could check their Thai ID number (บัตรประจำตัวประชาชนไทย), which never changes. Moreover, the fees charged by migration brokers for further assistance had become very expensive in the mid-1990s, at around THB500,000 (USD15,500). Brother-9 even attempted an intricate charade involving taking tours all over Asia so that after visiting locations in China and Cambodia he could claim legitimacy as an innocent tourist wanting to visit Japan. His ruse failed. Likewise, Brother-in-law-5, having frittered away his money upon his return from Japan, was soon running out of cash and decided with Brother-9 to try out some new destinations that they had heard about.

4.4. Testing other avenues – New Zealand, Australia, and South Korea

In the mid-1990s, Tik and Pierre had connections via a 'friend of a friend' to a New Zealand man married to a Thai woman living in Auckland. This New Zealander and his wife had been facilitating work in construction and the restaurant trade for many Thais. Their 'friend of a friend' told Tik and Pierre that he could help find Sukhum

family members employment in construction in Auckland. Sadly, this intermediary became ill before he was able to visit New Zealand to make the necessary connections and died two years later, cancelling this possible migration avenue.

At the same time, Brother-in-law-8 had a brother working illegally in a restaurant in Sydney, Australia, who told him of opportunities there. Brother-in-law 8 borrowed money from his family, including his brother (already in Sydney), to pay an informal broker THB30,000, and migrated to Sydney in 1995. He then told Brother-in-law-5 and Brother-9 to follow, reporting that jobs were plentiful, life was good, and there were lots of Thais there working for Asian-owned companies that turned a blind eye to a lack of licenses or skill certificates.

In 1998, when Brother-in-law-5 and Brother-9 decided to follow Brother-in-law-8 to Australia, they tried a new border-crossing tactic to cut costs. They convinced Pierre to accompany them on a 'tourist trip' to Sydney. Pierre helped arrange tourist visas for the three of them at the Australian Embassy in Bangkok. With his status as a Westerner with a well-paid job, and because none of their wives were going, the embassy officials were not too suspicious, assuming that they would return.

The three of them arrived in Sydney with small bags, and things were going well until Brother-in-law-5 became separated at customs and wandered the wrong way by accident. When Brother-9 and Pierre shouted at him to follow them, immigration officials became suspicious. During the interview that followed, Pierre claimed that they were there for tourism, but could not provide his employment papers as he had not thought to travel with them. The official then asked what they were going to visit, but he had not prepared an answer and replied 'normal touristic places' without naming any. He was also unable to specify which hotel they were going to stay in, given that they were planning to stay with Brother-in-law-8. He had, however, brought two weeks' worth of cash – around USD\$700 each – and their return tickets, and the immigration officers finally let them continue.

Their airport ordeal over, they arrived at the home of the brother of Brother-in-law-8 in Parramatta, a suburb of Sydney. This house was shared with eight other Thai illegal immigrants, some having been there for 15 years, with many other Thais living in the area. The new arrivals were warned by their brother-in-law to never go out on Friday nights, when Australians went to pubs and often picked fights – otherwise, it was easy to live a peaceful life. In 15 years, none of their housemates had ever been bothered by the police or immigration authorities.

Brother-in-law-5 was quickly offered work by a Lao man, whose company repaired and painted houses for Asian homeowners. After two years working for this company, he returned to Thailand. Back home, he bought a van and began transporting the village's children to school as a business. He also bought a rotary cultivator, some more fields, and improved his house – already large after his initial success in Japan. Brother-9 landed a job in a restaurant the day he arrived in Sydney, working there and staying in Australia a total of four years. On his return to Thailand in 2003, he bought paddy fields and a new house outside Chiang Rai city, rather than in Blossom Village, because he had married a second Thai wife he had met in Sydney. He bought a large van and started a tourism transport business until he went bankrupt in 2006. He then switched to being a hired tourist driver. As well as making a number of poor financial decisions, his second wife cheated a number of people and had to 'disappear' to Bangkok, leaving Brother-9 with large debts, including the loss of the house he owned in Blossom

Village. To try to recover this house, his first wife (SIL9(1)) went to work in South Korea in 2018, along with their daughter. She borrowed THB200,000 for the trip, paying THB120,000 to an informal migration broker to get them there on a three month visa-free visit, which they then overstayed. As of late 2018, they both continue to work illegally as farm labourers in South Korea.

Brother-in-law-8 stayed in Australia for seven years. During this time, he stayed in touch with his wife by letters and the occasional phone call. He also had a son (C8-1), born shortly after his move to Australia, whom he did not see for seven years. On his return to Blossom Village he bought land with a house and a rotary cultivator. Nonetheless, he could not buy all he wanted to as, while in Australia, his wife had been persuaded by her father to give some of their savings to one of her siblings to pay brokers to send them to work in Singapore. Brother-in-law-8 was not amused upon learning this but had to bow to his father-in-law's will. However, he was still able to make the above investments, as well as paying for his children's education.

One can see that the vast majority of this generation who travelled overseas to work, then returned to Blossom Village to build a house and buy rice fields, rather than either staying in the host country indefinitely or moving to another Thai location. This first generation of illegal migrant workers also choose to invest heavily in their children's education, sending them to study in Chiang Rai or Chiang Mai, while openly declaring that they did not wish their children to make the sacrifices needed to work abroad as they had.

4.5. Second generation migrants – Japan remains the favourite, South Korea picks up

The nine siblings in the Sukhum family from the first generation of migrant workers have produced 15 children. Despite their parents' best intentions to spare them the hardships of both farm life and migrating overseas for work, seven of this second generation have now headed overseas. Alternative destinations such as Singapore have appeared on the village radar, but Japan has remained the destination of choice. Some members of this next generation continue to rely on Sister-6 to enter Japan, while others are more independent, aided by the fact that since 2014, Japan has allowed a 15 days visa exemption for Thai nationals. Meanwhile, South Korea and the farming opportunities there have also become a viable option.

As well as changing destinations, there are other telling contrasts in the migration patterns between this generation and that of their parents. First, there is less of a male bias regarding who is migrating, with three of the seven new migrant workers being female (compared to one out of nine first generation overseas migrants). Second, this new generation have all migrated before marriage, while none of their parents had. Third, only one of this younger generation of migrants has relied upon an informal broker to date.

Focusing on this second generation, and discussing them as family units, Sister-2 and her husband (BIL2) have a daughter (C2-1) and son. With some of the money he obtained in Japan, BIL2 paid his daughter's tuition, enabling her to earn a teachers college degree. Yet, shortly after her graduation in 2002, she too decided to travel to Japan for work. Officially, she went to study Japanese at a private school on a student visa but at the same time she also worked in Sister-6's massage parlour to pay back an advance Sister-

6 had provided to cover her costs. This arrangement soured however, when Sister-6 promised a much older Japanese man that he could marry her niece. Distraught, the young woman rang Tik and Pierre begging for funds to return to Thailand, which they provided. This daughter's ordeal did not end there however, as she then married her Thai boyfriend, who turned out to be a drug dealer and who subsequently spent two years in jail before dying in a road accident shortly after his release. Her luck finally changed, and she married a rich Sino-Thai man in 2017 and is now employed as a teacher in nearby Tak province. Nevertheless, she remains estranged from her aunt Sister-6, having never repaid her initial travel loan.

Brother-4 has one daughter with his first wife, and one daughter and son with his second wife. Between 2005 and 2008, his son worked legally at a car factory in Japan via a programme supervised by the Thai Department of Labour. His three year contract over, he did not try to overstay and returned to Thailand. There he married a young woman also from Blossom Village, but bought land and is building a house in a different village, while now working in a construction equipment factory.

Sister-5 has three children, one of whom we met earlier, being the young man financed by Sister-6 to unsuccessfully manage an internet café in Blossom Village. In 2017, this Son C5-1 travelled to Japan on a 15 day tourist visa and promptly overstayed, working as an irregular farm labourer. There he met a Thai woman, and they were soon expecting a baby who needed to be born in Thailand to access hospital care. Thus his pregnant girlfriend turned herself in as an overstayer to be deported in January 2018 and son C5-1 followed the same route a few months later. Sadly the young woman then had a miscarriage. As of August 2018, C5-1 plans to head illegally to South Korea to work as a farm hand, while his girlfriend will stay in Thailand.

Sister-5's daughter (C5-2) has a migration story fairly similar to that of Sister-2's daughter (C2-1, discussed earlier). Officially, Daughter C5-2 registered at a language school to study Japanese for two years from 2014, which she actually did. This is somewhat surprising given that as early as 1994, researchers had noted that many language academies in Japan were fronts for people looking to enter the country for work (Morita and Sassen 1994). Yet, like her cousin, Daughter C5-2 was also pressured by Sister-6 to marry a Japanese man, this time a rich but very over-weight young man to whom she was not attracted. The young girl managed to finish her second year at language school, but then fled back to Thailand without repaying her initial debts to Sister-6. C5-2 has since married her Thai boyfriend from a nearby village, and they are struggling to make ends meet. She and Sister-6 have also fallen out over her outstanding debt.

In 2013, Sister-5's youngest son similarly travelled to Japan to study Japanese, staying for two years while also working in his aunt's massage shop. On his return to Thailand he went back to university to study tourism and now hopes to become a Japanese tour guide in Thailand. Wanting to remain on good terms with his aunt, Sister-6, who fronted him the funds for his airfare and school fees, he was not able to save much while in Japan due to the need to repay her, as well as confessing to spending too much on clothes and beauty products.

Regarding the three remaining members of this generation with dreams of migrating abroad, Brother-7's daughter received a BA and works as an accountant in a fish-processing factory south of Bangkok, with no plans to return to Blossom Village. Despite her relative success, she has nurtured international migration plans, but these were

foiled in 2017 when she was unsuccessful in obtaining an Australian visa, even with the help of Pierre. In comparison, Sister-8 and her husband have one son, born in 1995 who did not complete higher education. In 2017, he travelled to Japan on a 15 day tourist visa with a plane ticket fronted by Sister-6, then duly went off the radar. He stayed for one year but struggled to find regular work and returned to Thailand. Two weeks later, he flew to South Korea, which was offering Thais three month visa-free visits. He overstayed and as of August 2018 is still working there as a farm labourer. Finally, the first wife of Brother-9 (SIL9(1)) – the brother who lost his Australian earnings when his second wife swindled them before fleeing to Bangkok – has one daughter who is a farm labourer alongside her mother in South Korea, as noted earlier, in an attempt to raise the THB700,000 needed to gain back their Blossom Village house lost by the estranged second wife.

A shift has clearly occurred between the first and second generations of international migrant labourers in the Sukhum family. The first generation, now in their late 40s or older, went abroad to accumulate savings and were happy to return to Blossom Village or nearby to settle and be with their families. In comparison, in line with fast modernising Thailand, the younger generation are increasingly choosing to extract themselves from rural settings upon returning from overseas migration, or – if they have not migrated – after the education they have received in cities thanks to their parent's earnings through migratory work. This younger generation consider that they have 'reached a higher status' than their rural folks and badly want to be 'modern', i.e. to root themselves in urban areas (see also Mills 1999; Rigg and Salamanca 2011).

5. Diverse livelihood trajectories and emic definitions of success

We believe that this international labour migration story, with a focus on one single lineage, is both innovative and informative – though we fully accept that it entails limited statistical validity. If we return to de Haan and Zoomers (2005) definition of livelihood pathways, we see members of the Sukhum family undertaking migration behaviours embedded in both historical knowledge and institutional processes. More specifically, the family's livelihood pathway highlights the degree to which social capital and informal networks play key roles in determining who accesses opportunities, where, and how. This also reflects a core proposition from migration network theory that 'the probability of international migration should be greater for individuals who are related to someone who has prior international experience, or for individuals connected to someone who is actually living abroad' (Massey et al. 1993, 460). Would so many family members have elected Japan as a destination if not for Sister-6's accomplishments there? It is unlikely. Her own livelihood trajectory has played a central role in facilitating the arrangements necessary for others to successfully move: visas, accommodation, employment opportunities, channelling funds back to the village, and even trying to arrange marriages. The early disaster of Brother-4's journey to Saudi Arabia could easily have nipped migration as a family strategy in the bud, yet Sister-6's immediate success in Japan tipped the balance. Afterwards, changing visa rules and stories from family members who had tried other migration channels expanded the scale and scope of the Sukhum livelihood pathway beyond the deeds of one particular member.

We also wanted to assess which individual livelihood trajectories in this lineage had been deemed the most successful and why. Village life in rural Thailand rests primarily on Theravada Buddhist values of proper conduct which materialise in the village into a drive to make merit on one's own behalf, as well as for one's family and community. This includes helping each other and those in need; giving as much money as possible to monks for the care of the local temple; working hard; avoiding drinking and smoking; and keeping away from extramarital affairs. At a more mundane level, it is also deemed important to make money to properly sustain one's family, from children to elders. The traditional Thai ideology of *bun khun* (บุญคุณ) obligations means that all children are considered to owe their parents a debt of gratitude, and it is expected that children will repay their parents over their adult lifetime (see Mills 1999). Together, such obligations often morph into craving to prove one's success by displaying family wealth publicly, such as with a nice house, a new pick-up truck, or plentiful consumer items. Against this background, this case-study illustrates a number of important aspects with regards to endogenous definitions of what constitutes 'success' for a rural Thai family deeply involved in international work migration. As discussed below, one can be moderately financially successful but still be considered a failure. Such a focus on culture hence moves us beyond more economic-based classifications of livelihood trajectories (Baulch and Davis 2008), and indeed perhaps points to a need to broaden current definitions of livelihood trajectories as a whole.

Unsurprisingly, family members consider Sister-6 the most successful and the one to admire. With more than three decades abroad, during which time she has opened the door for numerous kin and neighbours, lent money at low rates, and reinvested her earnings in the village, many in the community consider they collectively owe her – an unusual situation for a woman in rural Thailand. She has opened up important opportunities and reduced the migration risks and costs for family members across two generations, and to a lesser degree, for non-family villagers (Massey et al. 1993). The fact that she has worked in bars, was connected to shady characters in Japan, was divorced, and attempted to get two of her nieces married against their will, might diminish her aura slightly. Yet, overall, she is respected immensely for having 'made it' and for using her status to support so many family and fellow villagers when she could simply have forgotten them instead.

A close second, Brother-4 is also considered a very successful migrant. He was the first to head overseas to work, only to find himself unfairly imprisoned. By that time, Brother-4 was already considered to have suffered considerably in his quest to make a fair living. Yet, he showed moral strength by leaving again, staying in Japan for 12 years. He returned wealthy yet humble and settled into a peaceful village life with his family. He refrains from drinking and smoking, is faithful to his wife, cares for his children, and is willing to help whoever asks, also devoting time and money to his local village temple. All told, Brother-4 has become something of a local folk hero, embodying the best of rural Thai resilience and Buddhist values, and whose edifying story is told and retold as an example to younger generations.

The member of the Sukhum family considered to be the worst off is Brother-9, who is seen as having failed morally despite some financial successes in Japan and Australia. To most, he represents the exact opposite to Brother-4. Brother-9 frittered away much of his savings and proved to be a chronic womaniser, spending his hard earned cash on parties and drinking. His marital life went astray and, to add insult to injury, his second wife made

a series of poor business decisions and then fled, causing his first wife and daughter – but not *him* – to migrate to South Korea in the hope of saving enough cash to regain their own house. Despite initial financial success, Brother-9 is considered a disgrace to his household, his family, and to many in the village. Thus, for this first generation of migrants, financial success continues to be valued only when combined with factors of moral life coherent with tradition and religion.

For the Sukhum family, it appears that that Buddhist values of sacrifice, cooperation, and intergenerational debt which regulated rural life for centuries, are being slowly modified, but have not yet disappeared. Among the second generation of overseas migrants, a good degree of filial piety (ลูกกตัญญู) still remains in the form of remittances sent back to the family, both from those working abroad and within Thailand. Yet, compared with their parent's generation, there is a difference in the degree of sacrifice the younger generation is willing to accept to fulfil this prescribed piety. Second generation members are increasingly pursuing higher education and valuing urban employment in Thailand. For those who migrate overseas, the era of risking prison and many years of deprivation abroad to support one's family back home, while being separated from them, appears to be over in this family. The will to remain good sons and dutiful daughters (Sobieszczyk 2015) no doubt remains to a degree; it is the ways to achieve this that are changing. Here, as elsewhere in Asia, individualism is on the rise and 'monetary circulation in transnational families is embedded in complex systems of cultural expectations, self-worth and emotional economies' (Hoang and Yeoh 2015, 5).

6. Conclusion: agrarian change, networks, and dreams

In the only other longitudinal migration study we have found set in northern Thailand, Rigg and Salamanca (2011) conducted a restudy of two Northeastern villages initially investigated in 1982–3, then again in 1994, and 2008–09. They found that non-farm work, including migration, had transformed rural livelihoods, but that the family farm had not disappeared, rather 'it has been remarkably resilient in the face of deep-seated social and economic change' (Rigg and Salamanca 2011, 552). Nonetheless, they cautioned that 'the apparent resilience of the farm household needs to be set against a gradual erosion of the ability of farms to deliver a sustainable and sufficient livelihood' (Rigg and Salamanca 2011, 553). Approximately 600 kilometres to the north-west, we find similar findings in Blossom Village, albeit in a different agrarian and socio-economic context: a more forgiving agricultural climate, a region typically considered more 'developed' by state officials, and one less deeply entrenched in historical migration trends. In contrast however, Rigg and Salamanca (2011, 569) note that in their study villages in the Northeast there was a decline in international labour migration in the 1990s, while also observing that only four percent of villagers had gone overseas for work, with domestic migration being far more important. To us, these types of divergence warrant more village-based ethnographic studies to dig deeper into the causes of such differences.

For the Sukhum grandparents who migrated from a poorer area to establish Blossom Village, the choice was one of survival. They had to move. Making Blossom Village their home was not an aim but a necessity. Soon after the establishment of Blossom Village came government attempts to increase agricultural productivity through Green

Revolution packages in the 1950s and 1960s. For their sons and daughters, this meant the village was de facto their ‘home’ and farming livelihoods were fairly stable, also less affected by droughts than the Northeast. Then, in the late 1980s and early 1990s ‘education, the media (especially TV), and the insidious spread of consumerism helped to reshape aspirations and consumption preferences in the countryside and, therefore, partially to alter the ‘logics’ of mobility’ (Rigg and Salamanca 2011, 554). Nonetheless, in our case-study, among the first generation of family members to take the plunge to go abroad for work, we found that returning to Blossom Village was the dream that kept them ticking. The village’s rhythms not only satisfied them but, they say, felt reassuring, and today many continue to reside in the village or in surrounding ones. However, they do so with more ‘modern’ houses, pick-up trucks, and a greater number of rice fields than those who did not migrate for work, revealing the importance of such migration to continuing agrarian transformations. More recently, for the third generation, who are the second group using work migration to elevate themselves and the first group to access higher education beyond the village scene, the rural dream has faded. Blossom Village has become an outdated locale of social confinement and a ‘lack of’ everything modern and desirable (*chiwit thansamay*, ชีวิททันสมัย) (see also Sobieszcyk 2015).

In sum, a number of transnationalism researchers have called for ‘greater empirical detail and an emphasis on the spatial characteristics of transnationalism’ (Collins 2009, 437), a call that we help address here. This ethnographic case-study sheds light on less well-known micro-scale aspects of spontaneous international labour movements, and on the everyday dimensions of transnationalism for Thai villagers grappling with agrarian change. It highlights specific family strategies built around trust-based social networks and more rigid broker interactions, the multiple uses of remittances for betterment in the village, and generational differences in strategies, loyalties, and aspirations. It reveals changing possibilities for members of this family, with migration flows opening and closing, confirming that the spatialities of transnationalism are dynamic and inhabited differently (Collins 2009). As Collins (2009, 450) also highlights, this process is not over: ‘The continued enactment and negotiation of transnational spaces and connections suggests that these movements are never complete’. In Blossom Village, young, eager villagers keep an ear to the ground for the next auspicious destination and the best route to get there. They dream of better days, like their elders did before them.

Notes

1. All names in this study are pseudonyms. Sukhum in Thai (สุขุม) combines the meaning of being shrewd while discreet.
2. 1987 exchange rate. A case study of 295 farm households in two provinces, one in the Central Plains and one in the Northeast recorded the average annual real household income to be USD3,915 in 1987 (Cherdchuchaia and Otsuka 2006, 414).

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