

Factors Determining Migration among Hill Tribe People in Northern Thailand: A Case Study of Karen People in Pateung Community, Chiangmai Province, Thailand

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Abstract

Rural development program since the 1997 economic crisis has contributed to a rise of return migration from urban to rural areas. There were certain parts of Thailand where there was an on-going flow of rural-urban migration of labor. This was particularly the case for vulnerable and marginalized hill tribe people. Besides the problem of children and elderly left behind, the prospects for their sustained economic and social development were also expected to be jeopardized. This study focused on the Karen community, and was a comparative study of migrants and non-migrants in the Pateung Catholic Community in Northern Thailand, where there was a very high rate of migration of up to nearly 30%. By means of participatory observation and in-depth interview and within the framework of neoclassical economic theory and new economics of migration, it was revealed that the factor which was the main reason for migration of the hill tribe in the Pateung Catholic Community in Northern Thailand was the socio-economic factor, i.e., developing their own personal and family economic status. Also, the patterns of migration, which applied to individuals and the whole family, exhibited the trend of return migration back to their homeland as well.

Keyword: Migration, Ethnicity, Return migration

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ปัจจัยที่มีผลต่อการย้ายถิ่นของกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ชาวไทยภูเขาในเขตภาคเหนือ: กรณีศึกษา กลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ชาวไทยภูเขาเผ่ากะเหรี่ยง ชุมชนป่าตึง จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ ประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

การพัฒนาพื้นที่ชนบทตั้งแต่วิกฤตเศรษฐกิจในปีพุทธศักราช 2540 ทำให้จำนวนการย้ายถิ่นแรงงานจากสังคมเมืองสู่ชนบทมีปริมาณเพิ่มขึ้น แต่อย่างไรก็ตามยังคงมีกระแสของการย้ายถิ่นแรงงานจากสังคมชนบทสู่สังคมเมืองอยู่ โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งกรณีของกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ชาวไทยภูเขา ซึ่งเป็นสาเหตุหนึ่งของปัญหาการถูกทอดทิ้งของวัยพึ่งพิงทั้งวัยเด็กและผู้สูงอายุ อีกทั้งมีผลกระทบอย่างรุนแรงต่อโอกาสในการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจและสังคมอย่างยั่งยืนอีกด้วย การศึกษานี้เป็นการศึกษาชุมชนชาติพันธุ์ชาวไทยภูเขาเผ่ากะเหรี่ยง โดยการศึกษาเชิงสำรวจและการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกระหว่างผู้ย้ายถิ่นและผู้ไม่ย้ายถิ่นในชุมชนกะเหรี่ยงคาอิลีป่าตึง ซึ่งตั้งอยู่ในเขตภาคเหนือของประเทศไทยโดยชุมชนนี้มีอัตราการย้ายถิ่นสูงถึงร้อยละ 30 โดยใช้ทฤษฎีการย้ายถิ่น Neo-Classical Economics และทฤษฎีการย้ายถิ่นทางเศรษฐศาสตร์สมัยใหม่ ผลของการศึกษาพบว่าปัจจัยที่ทำให้เกิดการย้ายถิ่นของกลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ชาวไทยภูเขาในเขตภาคเหนือที่มีอิทธิพลอย่างมากนั้นก็คือปัจจัยทางเศรษฐกิจและสังคม ซึ่งเป็นปัจจัยหลักในการย้ายถิ่นเพื่อสร้างเศรษฐกิจฐานใหม่ให้กับตนเองและครอบครัว โดยมีทั้งรูปแบบการย้ายถิ่นเพียงบางคนในครอบครัว และการย้ายถิ่นทั้งครอบครัวซึ่งส่งผลให้เกิดแนวโน้มการย้ายถิ่นกลับไปยังภูมิลำเนาของตนอีกด้วย

คำสำคัญ: การย้ายถิ่น กลุ่มชาติพันธุ์ การย้ายถิ่นกลับ

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1. Introduction

In the present era of globalization, studies of migration in Thailand, a middle income country in Southeast Asia, have largely focused on transnational migration. This is in response to the fact that Thailand has, as the 2011 Thailand Migration Report (Huguet and Chamrathirong, eds. 2011) put it, evolved into “a global and regional migration hub for outgoing, incoming, and transiting migrants” in Southeast Asia. This compares to a declining trend of research in internal migration, which has turned into, as a scholar puts it, “a problem of the past” (Chamrathirong 2007: 10). Part of the explanation is a declining trend in internal migration from one region to another, from one province to another, particularly to Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, and the tendency for return migration from urban to rural areas to surpass rural-urban job-seeking migration, according to the National Statistical Office (2012). It is so despite an increasing trend of migration from rural places to urban growth in the same province, which can be expected to negatively affect the prospects for a rural demographic dividend contributing to appropriate rural development. The notion is essentially challenging considering the poor prospects for marginalized ethnic minorities in

remote and poor communities to enjoy economic security on their own. Their demographic movement has received relatively little attention in migration literature in Thailand.

Northern Thailand provides an appropriate setting for an investigation into the demographic movements of marginalized ethnic minorities. That part of Thailand has housed seven major tribes, namely the Karen, Hmong, Yao, Lisu, Lahu, Lawa, and Akha. This is in addition to the following rare and relatively small tribes: the Palong, Khamu, Thin, and Mlabri. Many of them have migrated to this area more than a century ago from neighboring countries. They have maintained their own culture, religion, language, and lifestyles, with little change for quite a long time.

The objective of the present study is to investigate into the demographic movements of marginalized ethnic minorities in Thailand. It specifically identifies the pattern of out-migration, the prospects for return migration, as well as the determinants and constraints of such demographic movements. This is based on the experience of individual migrants and non-migrants, from the perspective of the household members of the families of the migrants and the non-migrants themselves. The study is

expected to come up with an appropriate approach to help the minorities and their families to achieve sustainable ways of life while contributing to a sustainable demographic dividend in the community.

This paper is divided into seven parts. After the introduction, which identifies the rationale and the objectives of the study, the data and the setting of the study are provided in the second part of the paper. In the third part of the paper, the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the migrants from the Pateung Catholic Community to the City of Chiang Mai are elaborated comparatively with those of the non-migrants. This is followed by the patterns of migration, decision-making and determinants of migrants, and possibility for return migration, in the fourth, fifth, and sixth parts, respectively. The final part serves as the synopsis.

2. Data and Setting

This study relies on the case study of the Karen people in the Pateung Catholic Community in Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand. The Karen people in this community are Catholic. However, they still are animists and believe in the existence of a Lord of

the Earth and Water who is the master of virtually all natural phenomena (the earth, rocks, trees, etc.) due to the fact they cultivate continuously from generation to generation. The case study of the Karen people is selected purposively for this present study. This is based on the notions that the Karen, though distributed in many provinces in Western and Northern Thailand, are considered the largest tribal group in Thailand, despite the widely varied estimates from one source to another, particularly in Chiang Mai Province where they are estimated to contribute up to 70.09% of all hill tribes there (Tribal Research Institute, 2004). According to the registration data, the Pateung Catholic Community, which is located in Mae Jam District, Chiang Mai, consists of 1,579 Karen people (Chiang Mai Diocese Statistics, 2013) and all of them have Thai citizen identification cards. However, a preliminary survey by the authors in 2013 revealed that there are only 1,153 Karen people actually living there, and that 426 people or 26.97% of the total number of the registered Karen population in this village have migrated a short distance to urban areas, mostly to the City of Chiang Mai, which is growing rapidly in tourism and agro-industry while serving as an education and healthcare hub in the North.

The research design used was survey research together with qualitative research (case study). The tools of qualitative research used participant observation and in-depth interview approaches of qualitative investigation to comparatively study the experience of individual migrants and non-migrants, from the perspective of the household members of the families of both migrants and non-migrants. Such an interview was carried out during October 2013 to November 2013, with 25 samples of the households with at least one working-age member currently a migrant in the City of Chiang Mai, and 15 samples of working-age non-migrants. This is based on the notion of the demographic dividend framework, which highlights the productive contribution of the working-age population to the economy.

To identify the migration patterns, while seeking an understanding of the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of migrants and non-migrants, as well as what has caused the out-migration stream and non-migratory phenomena in the area of investigation, the study examines a combination of factors affecting decision-making to migrate or not to migrate, along neoclassical economic

theory and new economics of migration.

3. Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics of Migrants and Non-Migrants

The demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the migrants and non-migrants are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. The study finds 5.53 years to be the average period of migration for the migrants to migrate from the Pateung Catholic Community, with the standard deviation of 4.80 years. From the gender and age perspectives, the study finds the migrants to be mainly male (68%) and 31-40 years of age (40%), followed by those 20-30 years old (32%). The average age is 30.68 years, with the standard deviation of 8.72 years. The majority of the migrants is married (64%), with a higher proportion of those with children than those without. The case is not much different for the non-migrants. This is given that there are also more males (53%) than females (47%), at the average age of 30.53 years, with the standard deviation of 10.59 years. The proportion of married non-migrants is a bit higher (69%) than that of the migrants, while there is a slightly lower proportion of unmarried/single non-migrants than that of the migrants, 33% and 36%,

respectively. Moreover, the study finds that one of the migrants and non-migrants is illiterate. More than half of the migrants and non-migrants have attained at least the high school/vocational level, 60% and 66%, respectively.

As one may expect, the migrants have earned more than the non-migrants. A total of 16% of the migrants have earned over TB 16,000 per month, comparing to only 7% of the non-migrants having earned that much. At the same time, another 16% of the migrants have earned only TB 7,000 or below, comparing to 27% of the non-migrants. An explanation is that most (60%) of the migrants are employed in the service and industrial sectors, and 16% of them are established enough to run their own business in the City of Chiang Mai, while another 16% are engaged in street trading and 8% in a

religious mission. This represents a great change from their ways of life back home. The majority (52%) of the migrants lacked a job before migration, followed by those in the agricultural sector.

Yet, from the average monthly income perspective, the gap is not very wide. The income per month of the migrants is TB 13,832 on average, with the standard deviation of TB 7,330.40. This compares to average income per month of the non-migrants who have regularly earned (13 out of 15 persons) TB 10,500, with the standard deviation of 5,439.06. There are 2 non-migrants (13%) under investigation who have not regularly secured their income. The majority (73%) is self-employed in agricultural and handicraft sectors, while 13% are running their own small business, and around 17% are in the government and religious services.

Table1. Personal Characteristics of Migrants (N=25) and Non-migrants (N=15)

Background Characteristics of Respondents	Migrants				Non-migrants			
	N	%	Mean	SD	N	%	Mean	SD
1) <u>Gender</u>								
Male	17	68%			8	53.34%		
Female	8	32%			7	46.66%		
2) <u>Age</u>			30.68	8.72			30.53	10.59
20 or Below	4	16%			3	20%		
21-30	8	32%			5	33.34%		
31-40	10	40%			4	26.66%		
Over 40	3	12%			3	20%		



Background Characteristics of Respondents	Migrants				Non-migrants			
	N	%	Mean	SD	N	%	Mean	SD
3) <u>Marital Status</u>								
Unmarried/Single	9	36%			5	33.34%		
Married with no child	6	24%			3	20%		
Married with child/children	10	40%			7	46.66%		
Number of Children								
1 Child	4	40%			2	28.58%		
2 Children	2	20%			3	42.86%		
3 Children	3	30%			1	14.28%		
More than 3	1	10%			1	14.28%		
4) <u>Educational Background</u>								
No Education	-	0%			-	0%		
Primary School	3	12%			2	13.33%		
Secondary School	7	28%			3	20%		
High School/Vocational School	9	36%			8	53.34%		
College/University	6	24%			2	13.33%		
5) <u>Period of Migration</u>			5.53	4.80	-	-	-	-
1 Year or Below	4	16%						
2-3 Years	5	20%						
4-5 Years	5	20%						
6-7 Years	6	24%						
8-9 Years	3	12%						
Over 9 years	2	8%						
6) <u>Average Monthly Income (Baht)</u>			13,832	7,330.4 0			10,500 *	5,439.0 6*
7,000 or Below	4	16%			4	26.67%		
7,001 – 10,000	5	20%			4	26.67%		
10,001 – 13,000	6	24%			3	20%		
13,001 – 16,000	6	24%			1	6.66%		
Over 16,000	4	16%			1	6.66%		
					2	13.34%		
7) <u>Average Monthly Remittance (Baht)</u>			4,112	3,348.6 7	-	-	-	-
2,000 or Below	4	16%						
2,001 – 4,000	9	36%						
	6	24%						

Background Characteristics of Respondents	Migrants				Non-migrants			
	N	%	Mean	SD	N	%	Mean	SD
4,001 – 6,000	4	16%						
6,001 – 8,000	1	4%						
8,001 – 10,000	1	4%						
Over 10,000								
8) <u>Past Occupation in Original Area (the Pateaung Catholic Community)</u>	7	28%			-	-	-	-
Agriculture for subsistence	3	12%						
Agriculture for trading	1	4%						
Entrepreneur	1	4%						
Religion	13	52%						
No job								
9) <u>Current Occupation in Chiang Mai City</u>	7	28%			-	-	-	-
Services	8	32%						
Industrial Worker	4	16%						
Entrepreneur	4	16%						
Street Trading	2	8%						
Religion								
10) <u>Occupation in the Pateaung Catholic Community (Non-migrants)</u>	-	-	-	-				
Agriculture for trading					8	53.34%		
Entrepreneur					2	13.34%		
Handicrafts					3	20%		
Religion					1	6.66%		
Government Office					1	6.66%		

Note: Average and standard deviation were calculated and shown for only 13 non-migrants, due to 2 respondents having no certain income.

4. Patterns of Migration

The study finds that the migratory patterns of the Karen migrants from the Pateaung Catholic Community can be divided into these categories:

Components of the migratory stream: the movements of the Karen migrants under investigation can be divided into two migratory streams. One is that of an individual migrant; another

is that of a whole family. Among them, the former prevails. Some prefer to be alone, while others share accommodations with migrant workers from the same hometown or their working colleague.

Migratory stream by gender: as mentioned earlier, the migratory stream from the Pateung Catholic Community is dominated by males. Such a pattern is mainly attributable to the culture and norm in their home community, where males are the head and the main supporter of the family, while females are more associated with domestic work, with a comparative advantage in taking care of the children and the elderly. This is also the case for the family migration stream, which involves female and dependent children migrants.

5. Decision-making and Determinants of Migration

The family members of the Karen migrant workers provide different reasons for the latter to migrate to the City of Chiang Mai. The different reasons are: to attain better opportunity and wealth for their lives; to achieve better recognition in the society; to secure a better job and higher income; to support their children and family; to have a chance for higher education; to distribute their traditional

products to the city market; and to migrate because the family forces them. The first five reasons are mainly shared among migrants in all sectors under investigation—service sector, industrial sector, business owner, street trading sector, and religious services. Meanwhile, those in the industrial and street trading sectors are forced by their family to do so, and the distribution of their traditional products to the city market is another motivation behind those now running their own business in the City of Chiang Mai.

Meanwhile, the non-migrants provide these reasons for them to stay in their home village in the Pateung Catholic Community—being satisfied that their job can make a good benefit; staying close to their family; not wanting to change their lifestyle; contributing to the conservation of the hill tribe's culture; wanting to enjoy their life/running a life of pleasure; attaining recognition in their home village; and supporting their hometown. These reasons are shared by respondents in the agricultural and handicraft sectors as well as those running their own business—being satisfied that their job can make a good benefit; staying close to their family; wanting to keep their lifestyle; and wanting to enjoy their life/running a life of pleasure.

This is reflected in an interview with those who earn their living from agricultural produce and handicraft, as well as those running their own business, and those working in the government and religious sectors.

“In Pateaung, I can support and help my family to work. My family works in agriculture for trading. We cultivate according to the sufficiency economy philosophy bestowed by His Majesty King Bhumiphol; and our village is close to the Inthanon Royal Agriculture Station. The station has sent agricultural experts to support us and help distribute our agricultural produce. We can earn our income, can enjoy working in our hometown, and we can stay with our families. They are our best goals of life.” (Pipat, Agriculture for trading, Interviewed on 24 October 2013)

“I can continue our tribal heritage and support our hometown to develop our quality of life. If nobody did it, how would it happen? Our culture, our wisdom and our lifestyle will be lost for sure.” (Sombat, Handicrafts, Interviewed 24 October 2013)

At the same time, those in the handicraft sector also want to maintain the hill tribe’s culture, while those in the governmental and religious services would like to attain recognition in their home village and to support their

hometown. Those in the governmental sector are also satisfied with their job and would like to stay close to their families.

6. Possibility for Return Migration

The study finds 36% of the migrants to be part of a permanent emigration from the Pateaung Catholic Community for they have established their family life while enjoying their work and recognition from the people in the city along with the notion that a city life is good for their children. This is particularly the case for those running their own business there. This compares to 16% of them certainly returning for the reason that they have succeeded in what they want in both financial and social terms and would like to contribute their success to their hometown. Meanwhile, there are 48% of the migrants who will probably return to the Pateaung Catholic Community. This is particularly the case for those who have not attained their goal while weighing the costs and benefits of return migration.

7. Synopsis

Sample migrants and non-migrants seem to share, to a certain extent, their characteristics from the demographic and socio-economic perspectives. Given the migration under

investigation from the Karen's Pateung Catholic Community in Chiang Mai to the City of Chiang Mai, or rural-urban migration, one may expect, from the push-pull perspective of migration elaborated initially in Ravenstein's (1885) Laws of Migration and subsequent neoclassical frameworks, that economic factors play a role as the main stimulus for their migration. Wealth, job, and income do serve as keywords identified by the respondents in motivating such a rural-urban migration. In fact, there are also other reasons which seem to vary from one migrant to another. When considering those three keywords with the other reasons, this study is of the notion that they can even be re-grouped into one, i.e., migration for a better life. Particularly, it reflects the notion of migration as an investment towards a better life from a human capital perspective, as one may find in Sjaastad's (1962) and Becker's (1964) frameworks, through employment and the possibility for further educational attainment of the migrants.

From the decision-making process perspective, the migration of certain Karen migrants from the Pateung Catholic Community to the City of Chiang Mai can be explained along the neoclassical frameworks, highlighting that migration is an individual choice of

each migrant for utility-maximization or to mitigate misfortunes in the area of origin. This is despite the notion that the family/household of the migrants does serve as the relevant decision-making unit, as proposed in the Stark and Bloom's (1985) new economics of migration to overcome constraints on family production or consumption.

Even so, the study finds that such constraints are less attributable to market failures there than to the relatively poor social status of the migrant and that a better recognition, which is interpreted in terms of an improvement of their social status, is the key hidden motivation for migration, as well as the long-term goal for the migrants and their families to attain.

Interestingly, the relatively poor social status of the migrants is found to be more subject to a double sphere of vulnerability, one with the community itself and another within the Thai state at large. While the latter refers to their status as ethnic minorities in a less developed area, the former is the traditional norm of seniority in the community. This is given due to the fact that seniority is associated with social status attainment. Traditionally, a high social status is limited only to the elderly, despite the fact that those at a younger age are relatively efficient

at earn a living. This results in a limit for those at a younger age to move along their career path towards a respectable position. The sensitivity to such vulnerability varies from one to another. For some Karen migrants, the status as part of ethnic minorities is a dominant push factor to leave their village to work in an urban area, while others maintain that it was rather the traditional norm in the community itself that pushed them away. At the same time, both layers of vulnerability function as the push factors.

Both layers of vulnerability affect the local economy, the supply of infrastructure for transportation and fast communication, and the supply of social service facilities, particularly those for educational attainment. Authors' rapid assessment survey, along a non-participatory observation approach, finds many villagers work, relying upon sufficient small-scale agriculture for living and trading. It is so despite the abundance of natural resources. The migrants and their families considered it was impossible for the local economy to provide enough income. Such a rapid assessment survey also finds the community with only one secondary school. This reflects the problem of insufficient educational facilities in response to the demand of the community's population, despite the

government's Compulsory Educational Policy applicable to all children—indigenous Thais, ethnic minorities, and non-citizens.

In other words, the Karen migrants choose to migrate to attain a better economic status, which they think would lead to a better social status, at least relatively equivalent to the indigenous Thai people in general. Along that path in a medium-term perspective, a higher educational attainment can lead to a better income and a better job. This reflects particularly among the Karen migrants who have not yet become established in terms of a job in both service and industrial sectors, and those who can financially avail themselves of higher education. This can be compared to migrant workers in street trading, due to their relatively lower educational background and low income.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the non-migrants seem to enjoy an easy and peaceful life, considering that the sufficiency economy, the society, and the culture are satisfactory to them, besides the possibility to be with their own family.

Authors' post-survey observation finds the possibility for an on-going trend of out-migration from the study site to the City of Chiang Mai, particularly among the population at a

younger workforce age group. This trend is for further study after their graduation from secondary school while also looking for a job. Given that a number of migrants have already established their family life and even their small-scale business in the City of Chiang Mai, one would expect those permanent migrants to serve as the migrant network to facilitate the flow, job searching, and even employment. Accordingly, this study is of the notion that the Pateung Catholic Community will be more and more vulnerable to losing the chance to maximize the benefits of a demographic dividend, a prominent notion raised in a RAND publication authored by Bloom et al. (2003), in time to provide resources for the future and may be subject to a demographic onus instead.

To mollify against the possibility of losing the chance for the said demographic dividend, it is imperative for the Pateung Catholic Community to avoid permanent emigration while encouraging return migration of their working-age population. In this regard, the study is of the notion that, if the economy of the Pateung Catholic Community can provide more variety of jobs for their population than it does now, the community will be able to retain and keep their workforce to contribute productively to the local

economy. In other words, creation of jobs is in need there for their population to attain a better quality of life and to earn a secured income on a regular basis.

To pave the way for such a prospect, there are several things urgently needed. Among others, it is imperative to supply the community with appropriate infrastructure for fast communication so that the people in the community can upgrade their knowledge, competencies, resilience, and to be able to apply technology and innovation in response to the changing environment affecting the local economy, the society, and the culture. This is particularly from the human capital perspective.

Moreover, expertise and research and development to increase agricultural productivity should be rendered to the Pateung Catholic Community from nearby R&D facilities on a proactive and regular basis so that the local people are equipped with competencies to increase productivity, with knowledge of marketing and management, with the best farming practices, and with the ability to gain access to markets.

While agriculture can serve as the main source of income and food security, eco-tourism may serve as an option for extra income to improve the

well-being of local people, to reduce outflow of migration, and to motivate return migration.

Last but not least, social cohesion and intergenerational relationships are also to be strengthened in the Pateung Catholic Community while empowering younger generations to contribute with dignity to local economic restructuring and social development towards quality and sustainability.

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