

Population Dynamics and Livelihood Changes of Small-Scale Societies in Laos (International Perspectives in Geography, 22)
Edited by Satoshi Yokoyama, Takahito Niwa and Hongwei Jiang (Springer, 2025)

Reviewed by

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The broader context for the series of reports on population dynamics and livelihood change in Laos is the economic development of the last four decades beginning with a historic national reorientation, similar to that of its neighbors to the north and east. It consisted of the initiative to decentralize control and introduce free market reforms beginning during the final years of the 1980s. Even taking into account that the economy began to develop from a lower starting point, growth has been impressive, averaging 6 percent annually for 20 years. From 2008-2012 it exceeded 7 percent per year. In the communities, the effects of liberalization at the national and regional levels are the object of study by the corresponding disciplines of social science represented in this volume.

The studies of the collection edited by professors Yokoyama, Niwa and Jiang take the backdrop of the reforms and the promise of economic progress and modernization to consider a number of underlying forces of population change. The most prominent focus of the studies singles out:

- the new currents of migration (internal and international, rural-rural and rural-urban) and
- a shift in demographic trends tied to changes in fertility.

Our review will follow suit and mainly evaluate the authors' findings in these areas. The two transitions are related in a number of interesting ways. They affect, and are affected by, other population-wide changes examined in the book. As the authors suggest, indirectly in the introductory discussion, the unfolding of the two related demographic factors, in recent years, has contributed in large part to definitively put to rest the overpopulation theory of T. R. Malthus (1798). Internationally, among the countries of "lowest level of per capita GDP" birth rates began to decline during the 1990s. In Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, the same tendency coincides with the gradual recovery from the American War in Indochina, and eventual recovery from the early period of command economy (1975-1986), ushering in the transition to *Đổi Mới* in Vietnam (Hoang 2009) and the New Economic Mechanism in Laos (Songvilay et al. 2017). By 1990, the first tentative results of the transition in both countries were in evidence. The recovery in Cambodia merits a separate discussion.

Three localities comprise the setting of the project's comparative study:

- In Luang Prabang province, northern Laos near the border with Vietnam, a cluster of two contiguous villages and outlying settlements populated by ethnic Lao and Khmu peoples (speakers, respectively, of Tai family and Austroasiatic family languages) form a single greater bilingual community (coded NK/HB by the authors).

- In southern Savannakhet Province, one hamlet, of the Mankhong ethnic group (Mon-Khmer language family), and a separate village to the west, of Lao ethnicity. For its Thailand border location, we will call it the Mekong River village. The two settlements (AN and KH) are maximally contrasting. AN hamlet is a remote locality of subsistence economy supported by swidden rice harvesting and hunting and gathering. KH village is a lowland paddy rice farming community supported by extensive migration to Bangkok, communication and integration facilitated by a common language (of the Tai family of languages).

The circumstances of the NK/HB community of Luang Prabang province are singular in that despite the absence of grid electricity and passable roads (by automobile) two types of migration have marked its recent history. Originally an ethnic Lao population, rural-rural migration (prompted by official resettlement policy) has created a bilingual-bicultural community. Then, since the early 1990s, significant rural-urban migration, mainly to Vientiane, has transformed the community again.

The hamlet, AN (of Savannakhet Province), despite its location a few kilometers from the border with Vietnam, has no record of either internal (national) or cross-national migration, in stark contrast to the Mekong River village from which 35% of the population has crossed the border to Thailand for employment; see (Pholhirul 2012) for discussion.

The chapters that discuss rural-urban migration make pointed reference to the phenomenon of incremental and steady upgrading that the condition of free labor has allowed for. New migrants opt for the lowest paying unskilled jobs upon arrival to the city. But with experience in the urban environment and the free market, they learn about higher paying enterprises and opportunities to acquire new skills. In this regard we take note that the difference in per capita GDP between Laos and Thailand, for example, is approximately 2.7 times (p. 100).

The marginally higher wages and small but cumulative improvements in quality of life result in long term and permanent residency in Vientiane and Bangkok. In the case of the latter, legal employment is facilitated by authorities and employers, especially for Lao-language speakers with greater familiarity with the local culture, who in turn promote chain migration among friends and family back in Savannakhet. This general scenario is a recurring theme of the book, difficult to pass unnoticed. Readers may judge the authors' assessment as overstating the improvement in living standards for migrants, considering for example the comparison in hourly wage for equivalent work in unionized enterprises in North America, for example. However, two observations on this point are relevant: it is not the intention of the study, despite appearance, to portray Southeast Asian working conditions and wages in a positive light, in the abstract or comparatively, but rather to show how objective tendencies of recent history affect the rural economy and culture, regarding the specific historical and material facts on the ground. Secondly, it is fair to say that the comparison to Western standards is rapidly becoming anachronistic in all respects.

In the Luang Prabang bilingual community, the authors describe the current policy of consolidation of outlying settlements for the purpose of concentrating basic services and institutional commitments. The study's favorable portrayal of the recent measures emphasizes, for example, the provision of elementary school instruction for children, public health, electricity and transportation. In addition, the disincentivizing of swidden (slash and burn) agriculture, associated with geographic dispersal, follows from important

environmental considerations that cannot be deferred any longer. The general trend, incentive for voluntary resettlement, involves migration from high ground to lowland areas. Nationally, known as the Focal Sites program involving 1,200 villages and a population of 450,000 by 2002, the initiative has promoted greater land tenure security and so-called intensive farming (Évrard & Goudineau 2004). Villages with fewer than 20 households are not eligible for the material benefits associated with the status of independent or consolidated village.

In parallel, with the income from migrant labor the means of obtaining paddy fields, as a tendency over time, has shifted from inheritance to cash payment (p. 10). A limiting factor is disposable income as in the case of the twin villages where newer Khmu residents still fall behind in their ability to purchase low-land plots, resulting frequently in a return to subsistence swidden farming.

Alternatively, newer, rural-rural migrant residents, unable to acquire farmland upon relocation, if they are young enough, consider a major urban destination such as Vientiane; a smaller fraction have sought opportunity in urban locations within Luang Prabang province itself. In the northern provinces, the rural-urban route to the capital city began to increase with the inauguration of the New Economic Mechanism. Young women in particular were drawn to the newly expanding garment and textile industry, employment reportedly tied to significant remittances to the villages (p. 194). Success stories feature the case of the migrant who met her future Khmu-speaking husband in Vientiane, himself from the same NK/HB community (p. 201). Evident from the research accounts is that the sale of new cell phones in NK/HB has become a lucrative business opportunity. A reason worthy of mention for their decision to stay, given by rural-urban permanent migrants residing in the capital, aside from the instability of farming, is the opportunity for higher education for their children.

The chapter on food procurement strategy in remote regions, focusing on the Mankhong hamlet community, highlights the role of children's contribution to the family division of labor beginning from age 10. The study's assessment of overall nutritional adequacy takes note of a level, while not one of malnutrition, but of relative "insufficiency" (i.e., not reliable over time). If care for younger siblings is included, often starting at an earlier age, the conflicting incentive regarding elementary school attendance presents itself as a true dilemma. The authors suggest that the "subsistence structure" of most hamlets is not sustainable (p. 66). In regard to this important point, the detailed description of the diet survey will be useful as a baseline for future comparison, for answering the question posed: precisely, what are the changes in the new economic interrelations that might positively affect food procurement? From another point of view (that does not contradict the above assessment), what existing local resources are available and viable, that have not yet been exploited, for improving agricultural productivity (p. 241)?

For the villages of the province that are better connected to transportation networks in Savannakhet, migration to Bangkok, by the majority of adult children and many teenagers, has alleviated the problem of periodic short fall in farm land under cultivation, or short fall in yield, among other imbalances. In many migration-participating communities, the local population has declined (on average, one member of each household lives in Thailand) reducing the strain on resources and crop yields. In addition, remittances received more than compensate for the loss of local labor power. With the decline in population, rice paddy area per capita actually increases. Remaining local

residents engage to a greater degree in commercialization of surplus production (rice and livestock) as part of a growing integration into the modern cash and commodity exchange economy (p. 86). And finally, region-wide integration sometimes presents farmers, who are unable to secure new land following rural-rural migration, with the opportunity to join their urban residing adult children, and even become proletarians themselves.

We conclude this review with the authors' research on population and fertility. A topic that deserves its own volume, it is the interaction with migration that makes it especially relevant to the questions of rural development.

The access to modern contraceptives is only part of the transition away from traditional family responsibilities and change in future prospects by mothers. Improved health services and diet and new perspectives on parenthood, by both husband and wife, correlate with a higher percentage of surviving offspring and higher survival of mothers during child birth. Large numbers of young women have joined their brothers in the urban centers employed full-time, receiving a wage they never would have imagined. And sometimes they don't marry a young man from the same village.

Today, the industrialized high-technology countries of East Asia are not alone in facing significant demographic shifts; and the economies with fertility rates below 1.0 soon will not be able to compensate for them by relying on immigration from Southeast Asia. Returning, as a final reflection, to the early theories of unsustainable population growth cited at the beginning of the book, and in this review, we can today conclude that none of current versions of the Malthusian model apply any longer to any region of the world.

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