

Intergenerational Solidarity in Two Rural Thai Villages

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The population of Thailand has been rapidly aging for several decades. A number of studies have examined critical issues related to the welfare of older adults. This longitudinal study revisits some of those issues, using data collected primarily from interviews with women drawn from households in two villages in the northeastern province of Khon Kaen from 2002 to 2005. In addition, the study conducted focus group discussions and in-depth interviews of headmen of the two villages in the years 2006 and 2009.

As it is commonly assumed that the transition to an aging society undermines intergenerational solidarity, we attempt to unravel this issue at the micro level by looking at the situation in these two villages. The findings indicate that the family is still the primary social institution and continues to be the key social safety net for older people in these villages. Intergenerational support remains intact and is relatively unchanged. Property and other assets are passed from parent to child. While fewer children provide monetary support to their parents, there is evidence that the amount of assistance given to parents has increased. Based on the results of this study, we recommend that Thailand gives greater priority to intergenerational solidarity by formulating new supportive policies. These would include moving away from the welfare model toward greater engagement between parents and adult children by strengthening the activities that maintain or promote intergenerational solidarity.

Keywords: *intergenerational solidarity, aging, Thailand, Khon Kaen, intergenerational relationships*

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Introduction

Thailand achieved a rapid and remarkable demographic transition in a relatively short time span. In 1965, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR)⁴ was more than 6. Twenty-five years later, in 1990, this same measure of fertility had dramatically declined to slightly less than 2, below replacement level (United Nations, 2012) and by 2011 it was estimated at 1.41 (World Bank, 2014). During the same period the proportion of the population aged 60 years and older, which represented about 5 percent of the total population in 1965, increased to over 7 percent in 1990. Currently, the same age group accounts for about 14 percent of the national population, meaning that Thailand meets the definition of an aging society.

Because of the decline in the fertility rate and the increase in longevity, it is projected that the proportion of the older population will increase to about 20 percent in 2025 and to about 31 percent in 2050 (United Nations, 2010). Accompanying this phenomenon of demographic transition has been a decline in the potential support ratio (PSR) – the number of people age 15-59 per older person aged 60 or older – from 17.0 in 1975 to 9.4 in 2007. This figure is projected to decline further to 5.1 by 2025 (United Nations, 2007).

Population aging in Thailand has evolved out of demographic and socioeconomic transformations, as well as cultural and technological ones. Thus, we can relate the effect of lower fertility rates from the family planning programs of the 1970s to national socioeconomic development (Wongthanavas & Kamnuansilpa, 2004), which also serves not only as a precursor to but a catalyst for population aging. Following this notion, the interrelationships of fertility, economic progress and population aging at the macroscopic level have been analyzed and documented in many scientific studies. For example, Gavin Jones (1993), in his work on the fertility decline in Asia, warned that the countries that experienced a rapid fertility decline would eventually face an aging population. In addition, there have been a number of studies focusing on the consequences of the rapid fertility decline on marriage value systems and relationships of family members within the household in Thailand (Chamratrithirong, 1984; Richter & Podhisita, 1991).

⁴ The average number of children that would be born to a woman if she were to live to the end of her childbearing years and bore children according to a given fertility rate at each age.

As the population of Thailand rapidly ages, more and more studies touch upon critical issues related to the capacity of social and family institutions to provide care for the increasing number of older adults (e.g. Knodel, Prachuabmoh & Chayovan 2013; Knodel & Chayovan 2008; Knodel & Chayovan, 2009; Knodel, Chayovan, Graiurapong & Suraratdecha, 1999; Knodel & Chayovan, 1997; Siriboon & Knodel, 1994). Moreover, Knodel, Prachuabmoh and Chayovan (2013) used the data from the 2011 Survey of Older Persons in Thailand to examine the informal systems of social and economic exchange within families that support well-being of older people in Thailand. Based on the results of this national survey, it was noted that while the Thai government has made good progress in developing policies and a legal framework to support older persons, many remain highly vulnerable. This is particularly true for those in rural areas, even with the country's impressive economic development. Among others, Prachuabmoh (2014) shares the same concern that the increasingly aging Thai population may increase the vulnerability of older generations.

Moreover, the problems with the level of contribution to social security programs versus entitlement payments for older adults in more economically advanced countries such as Japan and the United States (Naohiro, 2014; Tuccille, 2014) indicate that this situation is almost inevitable in Thailand. Family support and intergenerational solidarity are seen as viable supplements to entitlement programs for the elderly. This conceptual thinking does not view the elderly as society's dependents but would bolster their role in the family and community. There are a number of studies on the role of family in the lives of older people, specifically those in Northeast Thailand, that take into account the changing family structure and societal modernization (Caffrey, 1992; Podhisita, 1994). To increase their quality of life, there must be programs to improve intergenerational relationships within the extended family, and especially with children and grandchildren (Kamnuansilpa & Wongthanavas, 2014; Knodel, 2014).

Objectives

This study investigates how declining family size in rural Thailand is affecting intergenerational solidarity, especially in terms of financial exchange between family members, in one of the

poorest regions in the country.⁵ It also explores how rural Thai people perceive their own future against the background of the overall demographic transition in the larger Thai society. It examines the effects of these changes on family dynamics (e.g. who takes care of older family members and the older generation's role in the care of the younger generation) in the northeastern province of Khon Kaen and how this affects the welfare of older adults. More concretely, the study explores who will look after this growing population in Khon Kaen, where the total fertility rate already declined to below replacement level in 2003 shortly after this study launched (National Economic and Social Development Board, 2003).

Methods of Data Collection

Data for the study came primarily from interviews with a sample of women in two villages in Khon Kaen province. These interviews were conducted annually, in March, from 2002 to 2005 by a joint research team composed of faculty members and students from Khon Kaen University and from the Economics Department and the College of International Relations, Nihon University, Japan. Prior to the interviews, the research team pre-tested the questionnaires, which were administered in the Thai language. The data from the completed questionnaires were transferred into an English format for data management and analysis. A pair of Thai and Japanese students conducted each interview, with constant supervision by two senior Thai students who were bilingual (Thai and English) and two Nihon University Population Research Institute members who were fluent in English. English was the medium of communication between the researchers. The survey data were supplemented by in-depth interviews with the village heads during the survey period and again in 2006 and 2009.

This survey attempted to reach all married, divorced or widowed women who were the eldest female or the daughter or daughter-in-law of the eldest female who was living in the

⁵ It should be noted that intergenerational solidarity is comprised of multiple factors, not just financial considerations. For studies on intergenerational solidarity as a whole, see Kamnuansilpa & Wongthanavas (2014).

household.⁶ We believed that these respondents were best able to provide accurate and complete information related to their own fertility behavior and also were more knowledgeable about community activities than their male counterparts. While this sample of women drawn from two villages should not be treated as representative of all rural women in Thailand, the researchers' past experience and knowledge of the culture led us to believe that they could provide the best picture of the emerging relationships between declining fertility and changing attitudes. In addition, they could offer information about the behavior regarding the care of older adults over the time of the survey. As the design of this study is longitudinal, we also hoped to understand the relationship between fertility and aging issues in more depth than otherwise possible through a cross-sectional national survey data with a much larger sample size.

Because of the relatively short time span covered, we were able to conduct only four rounds of interviews. Each year saw very few respondents who were absent from that particular interview due to illness, work, business or personal commitments. However, this did not present a problem for this study since, in almost all cases, we were able to follow the same respondents over the entire survey period. In fact, because of the good rapport we established over the years of the surveys, a few new cases were added in subsequent rounds. Thus, the number of respondents increased slightly from 180 in 2002 to 193 in 2003, 206 in 2004, and 207 in 2005.

Most of the interviews took place in the morning or late afternoon when the respondents had returned from their work in the market or agricultural fields. While we tried to maintain maximum privacy during the interviews, the interviewees were often joined by their children or by other family members, such as sisters. We feel, however, that the interview environments were peaceful and conducive to obtaining reliable data.

The interviews were followed up by a focus group discussion in each of the two villages in March 2009. The focus group moderator had extensive survey research experience, especially in demographic and health issues, with a focus on the rural population in Thailand. The sessions

⁶ This would, at times, entail two interviews for one household, a mother and her adult daughter or daughter-in-law.

were facilitated by a group of graduate students from the School of Nursing of Khon Kaen University.

Characteristics of the Two Villages

To ensure confidentiality of the participants, the two villages in this study are referred to as "Village A" and "Village B." Village A is located in Sawathi Subdistrict of Muang District, about 25 kilometers west of Khon Kaen Municipality. Its main economic activities are agricultural and its main product is rice. As this village is located on one of the main roads into the municipality and has convenient public transportation, a considerable number of villagers work in the non-agricultural sector in and/or near the municipality. The number of registered households at the time of the first round of surveys was 132, but the residents of eight of these households lived in Bangkok. Village A had a total population of 669, with over 6 percent aged 60 or older. Village B is in Nong Kung Subdistrict of Nam Phong District, located about 23 kilometers northwest of Khon Kaen Municipality. However, the village is situated in such a way that the travel time required to reach Khon Kaen City is much longer than Village A. Before 2008 it was inaccessible by road due to the absence of a bridge over a stream, isolating the village from other parts of the province, especially during the rainy season. Village B is also primarily an agricultural village. Just before the beginning of this study, an irrigation canal was built near the village, thus allowing the farmers to produce two rice crops a year and/or diversify their crops by raising peanuts or soybeans as well as rice. In terms of population size, Village B is somewhat larger than Village A. It has 245 households with a population of 1,098. Nearly 7 percent of the population is 60 years or older. The gender ratio of the villages is nearly the same, with roughly equal numbers of females and males.

Over the span of the four years from 2002 to 2005, we were able to observe some changes in the socioeconomic life of the two villages. For instance, new income generation activities were promoted in both villages. In Village A, under the leadership of the village headman, hog breeding and fish farming were introduced. In Village B, mushroom cultivation was initiated and the construction of a bridge over the previously mentioned stream was completed in 2008. This bridge gives the residents more mobility, no longer having to be slowly ferried across the stream to connect to the main road outside the village. It serves as the main conduit of transportation to the area.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Before proceeding to the main findings, we describe the demographic characteristics of the women such as their age, education, occupation and marital status. In addition, we look at their opinions on the ideal number of children and the number of additional children desired as expressed at the time of each survey.

The average age of the women interviewed was 42.2 years in 2002. On average, the women in Village A were slightly older than those in Village B; 42.1 years versus 39.1 years. The minimum age was 20 and the maximum 74. Most (98.4 percent) were currently married and only a few were divorced or widowed.

The majority, 92.5 percent, had finished primary school (six years of education, the compulsory education level until it was increased to nine years in 1999), while only a few had education beyond that level. There were no significant differences in education between the two villages. These educational levels are comparable to the figures for Thailand as a whole (Office of the Education Council, 2012).

In terms of occupational background, about half of the women were farmers (49.2 percent), with Village B having a slightly higher proportion of farmers (55.3 percent) than Village A (44.1 percent). About 10 percent were engaged in blue-collar work and approximately 5 percent were the owners of small general stores in the villages. Nearly 20 percent of them described themselves as housewives, with more in Village B (24.5 percent) than in Village A (14.1 percent). In terms of fertility, we found that the average number of children born to these women was about 2.7. This low figure reflected the success of the Thai national family planning program. Much of the fertility decline can be attributed to the family planning program, as substantiated by the fact that the majority of these women were using modern contraceptive methods at the time of the survey.

It is quite interesting to note that when we asked about the ideal number of children, in 2002 all of the women considered one or two as ideal (Table 1). From 2003 onward, the ideal number of children increased significantly, with more than 42 percent considering three to be the ideal number. The latter responses seemed to be more of an expression of wishful thinking rather than a response to their real situations. As we can see in Table 1, when asked whether they would like to have any more children, approximately 93 percent of these same women said they

wanted to have no more children. Clearly, a small family was well accepted, even in the rural areas like these two villages in Khon Kaen.

Table 1: Number of children desired among women of reproductive age in the two villages

Number of Children	Years							
	2002		2003		2004		2005	
	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%
Ideal								
0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.8	0	0.0
1	118	86.8	5	3.7	7	5.2	7	5.3
2	18	13.2	66	49.3	69	51.5	68	51.9
3 or more	0	0.0	63	47.0	57	42.5	56	42.8
Additional Children wanted								
0	127	93.4	125	93.3	123	91.8	122	93.1
1 or more	9	6.6	9	6.7	11	8.2	9	6.9
Total	136	100.0	134	100.0	134	100.0	131	100.0

Among those women who expressed their reasons for not wanting any more children, about half cited the high cost of raising children. The apprehension and concern about this was more pronounced in 2002 and 2003 than in 2004. As the age of the women advanced, they became physically tired and felt that it was harder to raise a child. From 2003, about 20 percent of them replied that it was physically tiring to take care of children (Table 2). Their responses also included opinions that raising children involves a lot of anxiety and responsibility, which may not allow parents sufficient time for them.

Table 2: Reasons for not wanting additional children among women of reproductive age

Reason for not wanting more children	Years							
	2002		2003		2004		2005	
	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%	Cases	%
High cost	72	56.7	64	51.4	76	61.5	48	39.4
Physically tiring	22	17.3	32	25.2	28	22.8	29	23.5
Poor living conditions	5	3.9	2	1.9	3	2.5	15	12.2
No need for more	28	22.1	27	21.5	16	13.2	30	24.9
Total	127	100.0	125	100.0	123	100.0	122	100.0

Intergenerational Solidarity

In Asian societies, older persons are held in esteem (Alam, 2010). In a traditional Thai community, children are expected to return the beneficence of their aging parents for giving

them birth and raising them. This reverence for elders extends to grandparents as well. The norm is prevalent at all levels of Thai society, regardless of socioeconomic status, and helps to preserve intergenerational solidarity in Thailand and sustain the well-being of older Thais. Within this cultural context, many anthropological studies indicate that the responsibility of taking care of the elderly parents often falls on the youngest daughter. This may be due to the fact that by the time the parents are old, most of their children have already married and moved away and have families of their own, with the possible exception of the youngest daughter who is still unmarried. In a matriarchal and matrilocal society like Thailand's, male siblings will eventually leave home to either live with the family of the wife or establish their own homes. This leaves the youngest daughter behind with her parents. Once the youngest daughter is married, her spouse normally moves in with her family.

Since the majority of families in this study were composed of only one or two children, we wanted to find out how the rural Thai people expect to take care of older adults and how they expected to be treated in the future. In effect, we attempted to find out whether the traditional custom or value system was still intact. Since most of the women in our study had practiced or were practicing family planning, they would be able to evaluate the implications of their own small family size on their care responsibilities and in their relationships with the older family members. The responses from the younger respondents, age 59 or younger, could be treated as a prediction of the expected behavior of how their children would treat them as they aged.

We asked respondents their views about children taking care of aging parents. As presented in Table 3, almost all of the women who responded to this specific question thought it was either a good custom or was the duty of a child to look after their parents when their parents become old, irrespective of the availability or lack of public support to older people.

While the proportion of the respondents who considered it a *good custom* that the children take care of their older parents declined from 49.0 percent in 2002 to 15.9 percent in 2005 in Village A and from 64.6 percent to 23.0 percent over the same period in Village B, the proportion of those who thought it was the *duty* of a child to look after the older parents increased substantially from 49.0 percent to 84.1 percent in Village A and from 35.4 percent to 77.0 percent in Village B. This change may reflect how people interpret the expectation of returning the beneficence to the older parents, from seeing it as custom to interpreting it as an obligation. In addition, there may be a slightly different viewpoint as the respondents, themselves, aged over the course of the surveys.

Table 3: Respondents’ opinion about taking care of older parents

Responses	Village A				Village B			
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2002	2003	2004	2005
N	98	109	112	113	82	83	86	74
Good custom	% 49.0	30.3	21.4	15.9	64.6	31.3	19.8	23.0
A child’s duty	% 49.0	69.7	77.7	84.1	35.4	68.7	80.2	77.0
Insufficient governmental support	% 2.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Throughout the survey period of 2002-2005, most of the women interviewed maintained the traditionally accepted view that it is both a good custom and a duty for children to take care of their parents when they become old. This was true in both villages. The response pattern to the issue of who should look after the older generations in the two Khon Kaen villages was consistent with other studies conducted in Thailand. For example, Knodel and Chayovan (2009) found that children are the main source of assistance to frail older parents. Another study, by Wongsith (1994), found almost universal (99.6 percent) acceptance of the view that it is the children’s responsibility to take care of their parents when the parents become old.

In addition to analyzing the relationships between the children and older parents from the normative perspective, this study also looked at how the norms were translated into expectations. We asked our respondents on whom they would depend when they become old and nearly all expressed that they would depend on their children. Only a few said they did not expect to be looked after by their children and, as shown in Table 4, all but one of these were in Village A. It was quite revealing to learn from one of the village headmen and his wife during our interviews in 2009 that, based on their observations of and experiences with the older people in their own families, they felt that it is necessary for older adults to have enough savings and, more importantly, an adequate amount of assets to guarantee their security as they grow older. The children may wish to take care of their aging parents but they are often financially unable to do so. The village head and his wife had five children but they were trying to be financially independent from their children.

Table 4: Percentage of respondents who thought they would depend on their own children

Responses	Village A				Village B			
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2002	2003	2004	2005
N	98	109	112	113	82	83	86	74
Yes	% 99.0	98.2	98.2	96.5	100.0	100.0	98.8	98.6
No	% 1.0	1.8	1.8	3.5	0.0	0.0	1.2	1.4

As our interest focuses on intergenerational solidarity of families with three generations, we pay close attention to the family constellation of three generations living either in the same household, in the same compound, or in the same village. Before investigating the situation regarding intergenerational solidarity, we looked at the health condition of the grandmothers in the sample. It should be noted that the analysis of this issue was restricted to those respondents who at the time of survey were grandmothers, regardless of age.

During the four-year period, we found that the percentage of grandmothers who had a degenerative health problem rose from 86.7 percent in 2002 to 94.4 percent in 2005. Nevertheless, their health problems do not seem to be of a debilitating nature. The most common ailments were problems with the back, followed by the eyes and ears. Only a few reportedly had internal medical problems such as heart, kidney or liver ailments during 2002 to 2005. The study found no more than four such cases until 2004 but the cases increased to nine in 2005. The in-depth interviews in 2009 also found that there was a greater incidence of liver cancer in the two villages.⁷

As the health condition of the older parents (or grandparents) is a factor that largely explains the supportive relationship between family members of different generations, we need to look at the ability of these women to take care of themselves and their grandchildren. Interestingly, in light of the number of people who reported health problems, more than 90 percent of the women who were grandmothers thought they were still able to look after themselves. In addition, the grandmothers in our study still thought they could make a significant contribution to the welfare of their grandchildren (see Table 5). We found that the majority of these women

⁷ Studies have shown that the incidence of liver cancer is related to the habit of eating raw fish among villagers in the Northeast (Fernquest, 2014).

lived in the same household with their young grandchildren and about 77 percent of the women in the two villages look after their grandchildren while their mothers worked in the fields or went to the market. Interestingly, there was no clear decline in the percentage of women who thought they could look after themselves.

Table 5: Percentage of grandmothers who consider themselves able to look after themselves and their grandchildren

Capability of taking care of:	Village A				Village B				
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2002	2003	2004	2005	
	N	18	14	13	20	12	16	14	16
Themselves	%	94.4	100.0	84.6	95.0	91.7	93.8	100.0	100.0
Grandchildren	%	88.9	85.7	76.9	90.0	100.0	68.8	78.6	81.2

In order to enhance our understanding of intergenerational solidarity in the two villages, we also looked at how assets would be transferred from one generation to the next. This issue has received attention at the macro-level, with both macroeconomic and demographic studies employing the National Transfer Accounts methodology to understand how assets are transferred from one generation to another (Lee & Mason, 2006). This microlevel study examined whether the grandmothers who were living in the same household or were regularly interacting with their children had received any financial support from them. An average over the four-year period found that 60 percent of the grandmothers in the two villages were receiving financial assistance from their children. While results of Chi-square tests showed that the differences from year-to-year were statistically insignificant, we saw a slight trend of a decline in the percentage of children who provided financial assistance to their mothers (who were also grandmothers), particularly in Village A. Here we note that if this trend continues, it suggests that intergenerational solidarity in Thailand may be of concern in the future.⁸ These results do warrant our attention and are important enough for us to be concerned about the prospect of weakening intergenerational links (see Table 6).

⁸ Unfortunately, because only a few women in the two villages had a working age grandchild, we did not ask whether these grandmothers received any financial assistance from their grandchildren. Therefore, the analysis of intergenerational asset transfer had to be truncated to only two generations.

Table 6: Percentage of grandmothers who received financial assistance from their children

Responses	Village A				Village B				
		2002	2003	2004	2005	2002	2003	2004	2005
Receiving	N	18	14	13	20	12	16	14	16
Yes	%	66.7	42.9	53.8	60.0	66.7	62.5	71.4	56.2
No	%	33.3	57.1	46.2	40.0	33.3	37.5	28.6	43.8
Amount received	N	12	6	7	12	8	10	10	9
1-400 B	%	33.3	33.3	28.6	33.3	62.5	60.0	60.0	22.2
401-999 B	%	16.7	16.7	14.3	8.3	25.0	0.0	10.0	11.1
1,000-7,000B	%	50.0	50.0	57.1	58.3	12.5	40.0	30.0	66.7

A comparison of the amount of financial help received from the children in each village shows an interesting pattern. A higher proportion of grandmothers in Village B, which is more rural and presumably poorer than Village A, received financial assistance from their children. A slight majority of them were receiving less than 400 baht a month from 2002 to 2004, but in 2005 more than 77 percent of them were receiving more than 400 baht a month, while about 22 percent were still getting 400 baht or less. As agriculture was the main source of income for families in Village B, the decline in the proportion of grandmothers who received financial assistance from their children, accompanied by an increase in the amount of money received, was explained largely by the increased remittance from the increasing number of family members who were employed outside of the village. While this indicates that Village B is surpassing Village A in the proportion of family members who worked in Khon Kaen city or Bangkok, we found that more family members from Village A worked in Khon Kaen city while those from Village B were primarily in Bangkok. These opportunities were made possible by improved road conditions and a more robust public transportation system, which facilitated more efficient movement between home and work locations.

Table 7: Percentage of respondents from the link generation⁹ who inherited property from their parents

Responses		Village A			Village B		
		2003	2004	2005	2003	2004	2005
Received inheritance	N	94	93	96	65	70	63
Yes	%	66.0	69.9	68.8	61.5	61.4	63.5
No	%	34.0	30.1	38.2	38.5	38.6	36.5
Division of inheritance	N	62	65	66	40	43	40
Given to youngest daughter	%	1.6	4.6	4.6	12.5	7.0	0.0
Given equally among children	%	91.9	87.7	93.9	70.0	81.4	92.5
Given to children who took care of parents	%	6.5	7.7	1.5	17.5	11.6	7.5

Note: Information was not collected in 2002.

Another development that had an impact on the pattern of financial assistance had to do with the increased agricultural productivity in Village B after the opening of the irrigation canal. The increase in productivity, thus income, may have created an impression on the part of the children that their parents do not need any financial assistance.

We can also see the picture of intergenerational solidarity more completely by looking at the proportion of respondents who inherited assets from parents, whether deceased or alive. In most cases, the parents of the respondents had already passed away. We asked whether the respondents had received any property from their parents. From the answers, we looked at the distribution of property inheritance. As can be seen in Table 7, slightly over 60 percent had received inheritance from their parents. The explanation for the balance was that, in most cases, their parents did not have property or assets to pass on. The differences by village were small and statistically insignificant.

In this connection, we also looked at how the respondents' parents divided and passed on the property to the children. Since it is not a normative practice of Thai villagers to make a will, the parents may not have been the decision-makers in dividing their property and assets. In a

⁹ "Link Generation" is a term used to describe that generation that falls between the grandparents and the grandchildren, thus providing a "link" between all three generations.

number of cases, the children agreed among themselves how the property of their parents should be divided.

Distinctly, the majority of respondents said the property was divided equally among them. An average of the percentages from the three years showed that this was slightly more common in Village A (91.2 percent) than in Village B (81.3 percent). The variation by year did not show a declining trend in this practice. In comparison, there is a noticeable declining trend of transferring the property to the youngest daughter or to the child who looked after the parents. In both villages, there is not enough evidence to support the general assumption that the parents will transfer their property to the youngest daughter, who traditionally is more likely to be the one who looked after them when they become old.

An indication of how the parents plan to transfer their assets to the next generation can be seen from Table 8. Of the respondents who have yet to transfer or have not made a definite plan to transfer their property to their children, the majority stated that they intended to distribute their property equally among their children. In 2003, about 85 percent of the respondents from both villages said they would transfer their property equally to their children. This proportion did not change significantly in the subsequent years; in 2004 about 86 percent of the respondents said they would transfer their property equally to their children, but the proportion of the same group of respondents increased slightly to 88 percent in Village A and to nearly 92 percent in Village B in 2005. The number of respondents who said they would give their property only to the youngest (or only) daughter¹⁰ was small. Only out of 157 (2.5%) in 2003 would give inheritance to the youngest daughters. Although the numbers increased slightly in 2004 (11 out of 175 respondents) and 2005 (10 out of 163 respondents), this only resulted in an insignificant percentage increase of 6.3 percent and 6.1 percent, respectively, with Village A the highest at was still less than 8 percent. There is not enough evidence, therefore, to support the notion that the youngest daughter will be more likely to be the person who inherits the property when her parents pass away. It implies also that there is no evidence to suspect that, because of her generally closer physical proximity to the older parents, the youngest daughter will receive more property.

¹⁰ The “youngest daughter” model for inheritance was rooted in a time when families were generally larger. With the smaller families of today, there may be only one daughter or, in fact, only sons.

Table 8: Future plans on how to hand down their property to their children

Responses		Village A			Village B		
		2003**	2004	2005	2003	2004	2005
	N	91	103	92	66	72	71
To youngest daughter only	%	3.3	7.8	7.6	1.5	4.2	4.2
Distribute among all offspring	%	85.7	85.4	88.0	84.8	86.1	91.6
Only to one who cares for me	%	11.0	6.8	4.3	13.6	9.7	4.2

Note: Information was not collected in 2002

At the same time, slightly more respondents intended to transfer their property only to those children who would actually take care of them, regardless of their birth order or gender. Nineteen out of the 157 respondents, or 12.1 percent, fell in this category in 2003. The proportion of persons who had the same intention declined to 8.3 percent in 2004 and to 4.2 percent in 2005. There does not seem to be any significant variance in this egalitarian trend between the two villages. Thus the traditional belief that only the youngest daughter or the children who care for their parents receive the inheritance is not supported, in view of the fact that most said they would distribute property equally among children. This may be attributable, in part, to the drastic decline in fertility rates to below replacement level in rural Thailand after 1990. When this happened, it became more feasible for the parents to leave a greater amount of their assets equally to a smaller number of children, which otherwise would be too small to divide to each and every child in a large family.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study finds that the family is still the most important social institution and continues to be the key social safety net for older adults in rural Thailand. As indicated in this study, the majority of parents still expect their children to care for them when they grow old. When health conditions permit, a grandmother would look after both her children and grandchildren.

We also find that the majority of respondents have received some financial support from their children. At the same time, we have noted that over the period covered by this study, there was a small increase in the proportion of grandmothers who did not receive some financial support

from their children. However, because the period we have observed was short, it is still unclear to us whether it was a yearly fluctuation or a real secular trend. However, the increase in the amount of money received from children has allayed our concerns of a weakening intergenerational relationship. Notwithstanding the upward transfer of monetary support, it is clear that the respondents in this study intended to hand over their assets to their children. Most of the grandparents have already handed down their property equally to their children. In a similar manner, most of the persons in the generation of the link generation (those who are children of the grandparents) intend to transfer their assets to their own children. All of these findings indicate that intergenerational solidarity is still strong in rural Thailand, at least in the two studied villages.

However, this study echoes some words of caution that have been expressed by other researchers. As the fertility rate in Thailand has already fallen below replacement level, the support ratio is considerably reduced. Therefore, one might ask whether adult children will be able to support their aging parents in the near future. This question is more pronounced in the villages of the Northeast where many young people have migrated to urban areas such as Bangkok to earn a living. Out of necessity, these young migrants often leave their own children to be taken care of by their aging parents. The impact of this arrangement on intergenerational solidarity, especially in terms of the well-being of older adults, has been addressed, in depth, by Knodel (2014), as well as Knodel and Chayovan (1997). These studies show that this living arrangement still results in continuing financial support to older people.

This study also found a few cases of older adults who were left behind by children who may be willing but not able to support them. As some young people move to urban areas, they establish their own families but often are unable to provide sufficient financial and emotional support to their parents who are left behind in the rural areas. Conventional wisdom will guide us to provide some financial aid on humanitarian grounds. Our data show that in 2002 more than 7 percent¹¹ of the older adults received some form of financial assistance from the government. After 2009, all Thai nationals aged 60 or older who are not entitled to retirement benefits from another source are eligible to receive a small monthly allowance. While the elderly welcome this

¹¹ We are suspicious of the possibility that, because of the unreliable method of means testing, the money did not go to the needy person.

entitlement, it is not a guaranteed source of happiness for them. While discussion of a “Theory of Happiness” is beyond the scope of this study, Seligman (2003) discusses the concept of “Authentic Happiness,” which is applicable to the intergenerational relationships examined in this study. Recent research indicates that older people who are involved in regular activities that foster intergenerational solidarity (particularly dining) with their children and grandchildren, are more likely to find happiness in life (Hanchingchai & Kamnuansilpa, 2014).

Already, Thailand has put in place a program to promote intergenerational solidarity through the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. The researchers of this study contend that the concept of intergenerational solidarity extends well beyond the family to the community and society at large. In the opinion of the researchers, the potential for development of Thai society rests largely within local government. As a concrete example of what we advocate, in 2015 Samprao Tambon Administration Organization (TAO), located in Udon Thani Province, adopted a policy to take on the challenge of the aging society by promoting intergenerational solidarity among the residents in its jurisdiction. The appropriate concern of Samprao TAO about the wellbeing of older citizens, with a clear goal of maximizing their happiness, is an example of what the local government can do for this growing population. We will be closely watching the outcome of this program.

In the final analysis, this study recommends that rather than allocating more budget for entitlement programs, both the central and local governments of Thailand should give a greater priority to intergenerational solidarity by formulating new supportive policies, facilitating a move away from the welfare model (e.g., simply giving a stipend with no other support) and toward an emphasis of increasing activities that maintain or promote intergenerational solidarity in the family and community.

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