

Economic Mobility of Migrants in Kanchanaburi DSS, Thailand

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Introduction

In recent decades, Thailand has become emblematic of migration transition, with increasing streams of immigrants arriving as Thai emigrants continue to embark across borders to seek opportunities abroad (Battistella, 2002). Although international migrants have become a significant share of the Thai labor force, little is known about the occupational and socioeconomic positions that they occupy in the Thai context, nor about their experiences of social and economic mobility. In fact, there has been little empirical analysis of the economic status and economic mobility outcomes of foreign-born individuals in emerging countries of immigration, especially those that are low- and middle-income countries. As existing knowledge has been based largely in Western countries with extensive immigration histories and elaborate immigration control policies, it is difficult to ascertain whether sociological and demographic perspectives on economic mobility of immigrants apply to more recent migration streams in different global regions. We use longitudinal data from the Kanchanaburi Demographic Surveillance System (KDSS), collected in Kanchanaburi province of western Thailand, to conduct an initial exploration of economic status and the interaction between migration status and ethnicity in an emerging immigration context. While the time frame of our analysis is quite short, four years to be specific, it is suitable for assessing whether immigrants economic fortunes are shifting in patterns parallel to native-born Thais, or if they progress or regress in a distinctive pattern.

International Migration in the Thai Context

In the current era of regional economic development, Southeast Asia has witnessed unprecedented levels of population mobility as migrants have moved internally and across borders to seek economic opportunity, as well as refuge from political persecution and economic dislocation (Bain, 1998; Castles, 1998). Thailand experienced a rapid, and somewhat unexpected, upturn in immigration beginning in the 1990s, with over one million migrants flowing into the country, largely from neighboring Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, over the course of several years in the early 1990s (Battistella, 2002; Chantavanich, 1999). Due to both its accessible border and employment opportunities, Thailand has been the recipient of most of Myanmar's million-plus population of migrants and refugees (Bain, 1998). Among the unprecedented numbers of migrants entering Thailand since the 1990s are many undocumented migrants from Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia (Shinnavaso, 1995).

Descriptive studies conducted to date provide an initial, but incomplete, sketch of the economic wellbeing of foreign-born workers in the Thai contexts. From these studies a picture emerges of several distinct types of migration and migrant economic niches in Thailand, including concentrations of migrant workers in the fisheries, agriculture, factory and domestic labor sectors. Migrant registration is limited, as is knowledge of migrants' rights to register and obtain migrant and worker protections (Amaraphibul, Beesey, and Gemershausen, 2002). The precarious situation of unauthorized migrants in the Thai labor market, coupled with the vast supply of potential migrants in neighboring countries, has contributed to a situation in which violations of workers' rights, such as payment below minimum wage and non-provision of social benefits, is commonplace (Battistella, 2002). Although the foreign-born are a relatively small share of the total Thai labor force (about 3% at the beginning of the decade), their heavy concentration in certain industries, such as fisheries and plantation agriculture, has created structural dependence on immigrant, and especially unauthorized immigrant, labor (Battistella, 2002). Furthermore, following from recent experience and principles of international migration and development theories, levels of

migration to Thailand are likely to increase and immigrants will be inclined to settle for lengthy periods or permanently (Huguet, 2005).

Several scholars have observed that international migrants, especially the sizable segment of unauthorized migrants, occupy vulnerable positions in the Thai labor market and perform jobs deemed undesirable by most native-born, and especially affluent, Thais (Chantavanich, 1999; Battistella, 2002). Immigrants' tendency to occupy the lower echelons of the labor market, and their often marginalized position in the wider society, leads us to inquire about their economic positions and experience of economic mobility vis-à-vis the native-born Thai population. To date there has very few attempts to delineate the economic livelihoods, or the short-term economic mobility experiences of immigrants and their households in contemporary Thailand. The current analyses offer one among initial studies in filling this empirical gap.

Perspectives on the Economic Mobility of Immigrants in Destination Contexts

Existing studies of immigrant incorporation and mobility, conducted largely in the United States and other long-standing immigration contexts, maintain that immigrants encounter limited opportunities and assorted social and cultural barriers in host societies that initially limit their success in locating jobs outside of the low-wage, secondary sector, and otherwise inhibit their integration into the destination labor markets and other institutions (Haberfeld, Semyonov, and Cohen, 2000; Rajzman and Semyonov, 1995). However, the passage of time in destination, which usually enhances host country information and work experience, familiarity with local customs, language and labor markets, and facilitative social network ties, tends to enhance immigrants' economic position relative to their initial status position (Chiswick, 1978, 1982; Rajzman and Semyonov, 1995). However, not all immigrants are equally successful in advancing their economic position in the host society, as gender, ethnicity and other characteristics condition pathways of immigrant economic incorporation and mobility (Haberfeld, 1992; Myers and Cranford, 1998; Semyonov and Lerenthal, 1991).

Extant research from the U.S. and other industrialized countries indicate divergent economic mobility outcomes among immigrant groups. While a long predominant assimilationist viewpoint maintains that immigrants and their children attain convergence with mainstream, native-born groups relatively quickly, such as within the span of a generation or two, more recent perspectives on the mobility of immigrants and their children recognizes greater variability and obstacles to economic mobility by the foreign-born that stems from the characteristics of the immigrants, their origin countries and the contexts of reception that they encounter (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996).

Compared to research investigating economic mobility across immigrant generations (e.g., Borjas 1993, 2006; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997), research that actually traces the intra-generational mobility experiences of first generation immigrants over time has been very limited (Chiswick, Lee, and Miller, 2003; Chiswick, Lee, and Miller, 2005b). In developing and emerging immigration countries this type of analysis is essentially nonexistent, hence we focus our review on analyses of the U.S., Australia and other settings with extensive immigration that have been the focus of immigration scholars. Borjas (2006:57), in a selective synopsis of immigrant mobility research, asserts that most immigrants to the U.S. experience earnings and socioeconomic status disadvantages relative to native-born individuals and that these disadvantages tend not to diminish during their lifetimes. Other scholars, while observant of intra-group disparities, are less pessimistic about positive forms of mobility in the first generation. While “catching up” to the native born is a select process that favors immigrants with certain occupational positions and national origins, this other body of research points to select groups that experience select mobility gains. For instance, Chiswick has often observed an upward trend in immigrants’ earnings associated with duration of residence in the U.S. or Australia (Chiswick, 1986). Recent analyses of the foreign-born in Australia demonstrate that those with transferable work experience and educational resources are more likely to experience positive forms of economic mobility in the host society than other migrants (Chiswick , Lee, and Miller, 2005a, 2005b). In the European setting, analyses of Mediterranean origin immigrants in Germany reveals that first generation immigrants, largely employed in low skill

occupations, experience quite limited socioeconomic mobility compared to native born and second generation workers (Seifert, 1997).

Study Setting, Data, and Methods

Kanchanaburi is the third largest province lining the 1,800 kilometers border separating Myanmar and Thailand. The province is a first point of arrival for many immigrants from Myanmar, authorized and unauthorized. According to a recent World Bank report (2006), fewer than 10 percent of migrants from Myanmar hold any legal documents when entering Thailand. Five of its 13 administrative districts border Myanmar including Sankhaburi, Thongpapoom, Saiyok, Danmakamchia, and Meoung. The border is porous, with hundreds of points of entry that are very difficult to monitor (Ananta and Arafat, 2004). The population of Kanchanaburi is ethnically heterogeneous, consisting of Thais, Burmese ethnics who have been living in the country potentially for generations, and recent migrants, primarily from Myanmar.

To date, the empirical gap on immigrant intra-generational economic mobility has stemmed, in part, from the absence of longitudinal data sets with earnings or economic status information on sufficient numbers of immigrants (Chiswick, Lee, and Miller, 2005a, 2005b). The KDSS is a unique data resource that provides repeated measures of household and individual level socioeconomic status among all adults and households in 100 communities of the western Thai province of Kanchanaburi. The KDSS design permits a short-term assessment of economic mobility patterns of foreign-born individuals as compared to native-born individuals in an emerging immigration society. Furthermore, given that the KDSS provides information on place of birth as well as self-defined ethnicity, it is possible to consider and compare the economic mobility experiences of cross-border migrants, non-Thai born in Thailand, and native-born Thais in this diverse border province.

Most research on immigrant economic mobility has highlighted variability in wage earnings among immigrants and their second-generation and native-born counterparts. This approach to measuring socioeconomic status is not feasible in the

context of contemporary Thailand, where a sizable segment of the population is engaged in own account and informal sector labor in both the agricultural and nonagricultural sectors. As such, many workers do not earn wages, but rather in-kind income and the profits of agricultural and nonagricultural small enterprises which are often produced by entire households, rather than individual laborers. Furthermore, the segment of workers that does earn wages often labor in the informal sector where wage earnings are highly variable over time. To overcome the many difficulties associated with measuring income in developing country contexts, numerous scholars have come to rely upon proxy measures to assess household wealth and living standards (i.e., Montgomery et al., 2000). These proxy measures have proven to be feasible to obtain, reliable, and meaningful for assessing the relative and shifting economic position of households. Therefore, we construct measures of household living standards that capture multiple dimensions of household wealth across all subsets of the study population and over the four year observation period. Rather than the standard assessment of labor market adjustment adopted in analyses of immigrants in advanced industrial economies, our focus on households as the unit of analysis as opposed to individuals, and a multidimensional measure of living standards, as opposed to earnings, is most appropriate to the Thai society and economy.

In our analysis, we use information about household assets to assess a household's economic status. While this measure is not perfect – wealth is not 'counted' if it is saved, invested in education or business, or otherwise devoted to non-measured possessions – it has shown to be a robust and accurate proxy in other studies conducted in developing countries (Montgomery et al., 2000). Twelve household assets and two characteristics of the household dwelling are included in the overall measure of household economic status. Household assets included in the index are the following: television, telephone, cell phone, satellite, stereo, VCR/VCD, air conditioner, computer, washing machine, refrigerator, microwave, car, pick-up, motorcycle, *e-tan* – a small, all-purpose truck common throughout Thailand, sewing machine, and truck. For housing value, another proxy for household living standard, we rely upon answers to questions about the construction materials used in the roof and the walls of the household's dwelling unit.¹ Using a Principle Component Analysis (Filmer and Pritchett,

2001), the number of each of the 14 items owned by the household, and weighted according to their relative value, are combined to form an asset index for each household in 2000 and 2004. In each year, based on the asset index, households are classified into one of three groups: poor (the lower bound 40 percent), middle (the middle 40 percent), and rich (the upper bound 20 percent). We then created the dependent variable of economic mobility by comparing economic status in 2000 and 2004. The dependent variable is categorized into 5 groups: no change (poor to poor), no change (moderate to moderate), no change (rich to rich), upward mobility (poor to moderate or moderate to rich or poor to rich), and downward mobility (moderate to poor or rich to moderate or rich to poor). As the dependent variable is measured at nominal scale, we employed multinomial logistic regression in our statistical analysis. A positive coefficient indicates that the independent variable increases the probability of being in a certain category compared to a reference category, whereas a negative coefficient indicates otherwise.

Existing research on immigrant economic incorporation and mobility has tended to compare migrants' fates according to the duration of time they have lived and worked in the destination society (e.g., Chiswick, 1986). Unfortunately, the KDSS does not provide information on the number of years foreign-born individuals have resided in Thailand. While we are not able to construct this important time-based measurement of host-country experience, the KDSS data do provide information on several other characteristics of individuals and households which serve as indicators of the degree of incorporation or assimilation into Thai society. For adults aged 15 and older, among other things, the KDSS collected information on ethnicity, which is self-defined in nature, and place of birth. By aggregating the birthplace information, we are able to determine whether the household is headed by persons who are: non-Thai and foreign-born; non-Thais and Thai-born, or Thais born in Thailand.

Following the logic above, we find that around 9% of households included in our study are headed by non-Thai persons. Among these non-Thai households, more than half (53%) are headed by the foreign-born. So, as a whole, 4.6% of the households are headed by non-Thai born outside of Thailand, 4% are households of non-Thai born

in Thailand. The majority of KDSS households in our analysis sample, about 91.4%, are headed by native-born Thais.

Our analysis also takes into consideration other covariates that have proven to influence economic status and mobility in previous research. These covariates include other individual characteristics of the household head (i.e., his or her age and sex), measures of household structure (i.e., household size and number of household member of dependent age), household socioeconomic status (i.e., whether any member of household has secondary education, whether any member is working in the non-agricultural sector, and the number of household members working in agricultural sector) and geographic stratum of place of residence (i.e., urban/semi-urban, rice, plantation, mixed economy, and upland). The stratum of residence, devised as a line of stratification for sampling villages for the KDSS, is significant in that it represents the structure of the local economy and hence the nature of employment opportunities available to local residents. Note that all of these control variables are measured in 2000.

Results and Discussion

There are 8,679 households interviewed in both 2000 and in 2004 included in our analysis. The economic status of the majority of our study households, about three fourths (74%), does not change between 2000 and 2004. Households that have improved their economic status during this 4 year period are 16% of the sample, whereas 10% of households experienced downward economic mobility. Table 1 further disaggregates this sizable group of households that did not experience a change in economic status over the 2000 to 2004 period. With this more detailed figure we can see that, in general, the highest proportion of households (41%) fall into a group whose economic status is classified as moderate and did not change over the 4 years of study period. Those who start off relatively poor in 2000 and still remain in the relatively poor category in 2004 comprise more than one fifth of sampled households (21%).

Table 1: Percentage distribution of household included in the analysis by economic mobility between 2000 and 2004

Economic mobility between 2000 and 2004	Percentage
Stayed poor	21.3
Stayed moderate	41.7
Stayed rich	10.7
Upward mobility	16.4
Downward mobility	10.0
Total	100
N	8,679

Table 2 describes economic mobility between 2000 and 2004 as it varies by the migration and nationality status of household heads, as well as other characteristics of households. In an initial view, it appears that non-Thai households experience mobility at about the same rate as Thai households. The non-Thai foreign-born especially seem to resemble native Thai households in this respect. Also, households headed by persons born in Thailand, but of non-Thai ethnicity, have economic improvement in a proportion quite close to that experienced by households headed by native-born Thais. However, the economic mobility picture looks quite different if we take into account the initial economic position of households, in 2000. Taking a closer look at this group of households that was static over the 2000 to 2004 period in terms of economic mobility, and classifying households according to whether they stayed poor, stayed moderate, and stayed rich, we see that non-Thai households are particularly disadvantaged. Native-born Thai households constitute a very small faction of households that remained poor over time, whereas remaining poor over time was the dominant economic outcome for non-Thai households. Foreign-born non-Thais are especially likely to remain poor over time -- almost 90% stayed poor over the 4 year period. Overall, we see very little economic improvement among the non-Thai households, a pattern that is distinctly different from the overall experience of the Thais.

Economic mobility patterns also vary markedly across particular household characteristics. For instance, households with members that have completed secondary education, and those with members working outside of the agricultural sector were less prevalent in the upland stratum. A greater proportion of households in the upland stratum remained poor as compared to those in other stratum.

Table 2: Household economic mobility between 2000 and 2004 by selected household characteristics

	Household economic mobility between 2000 and 2004						N
	No change (poor-poor)	No change (moderate-moderate)	No change (rich-rich)	Upward	Downward	Total	
Total	21.3	41.7	10.7	16.4	10.0	100.0	8,679
Household migration status							
Thai	16.6	44.5	11.4	16.9	10.6	100.0	7,931
Non-Thai, Thai-born	52.6	20.6	4.6	15.7	6.6	100.0	350
Non-Thai, foreign-born	87.2	3.5	1.3	6.3	1.8	100.0	398
Any member has > primary education							
Yes	7.2	45.7	20.3	16.2	10.6	100.0	4,155
No	34.1	38.0	1.9	16.6	9.5	100.0	4,524
Any member in non-agriculture							
Yes	10.03	42.75	20.71	15.68	10.83	100.0	3,738
No	29.75	40.82	3.1	16.92	9.41	100.0	4,941
Household head is female							
Yes	21.7	39.5	10.0	17.0	11.8	100.0	2,471
No	21.1	42.5	11.0	16.1	9.3	100.0	6,208
Strata							
Urban/semi-urban	5.6	36.3	32.3	14.0	11.9	100.0	1,691
Rice	16.4	51.3	4.2	15.5	12.5	100.0	1,649
Plantation	19.7	50.3	3.2	17.3	9.5	100.0	1,421
Upland	47.9	26.4	2.1	17.5	6.2	100.0	2,054
Mixed economy	11.6	48.3	11.9	17.4	10.8	100.0	1,864
Mean age of household head	48.3	47.6	48.2	46.4	52.6	48.1	8,679
Mean size of household	3.5	3.9	4.1	3.8	3.8	3.8	8,679
Mean number of dependent household member	1.6	1.5	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.5	8,679
Mean number of household member in agriculture	1.5	1.5	0.5	1.3	1.3	1.3	8,679

Next, we use multinomial logistic regression to further explore whether household migration status is associated with economic mobility, taking into account other household characteristics related to economic mobility. The results of these analyses, shown in Table 3, indicate that, compared to the Thai households, households of the non-Thai, foreign born or Thai born, are more likely to remain in poverty than to improve their economic status. To be specific, compared to households headed by Thais, households headed by the foreign-born are 8 times as likely to remain poor than to experience improvement in their economic position over the 4 year period. The likelihood of staying poor for households headed by non-Thais born in Thailand is not as great, however. It is about twice as great as the likelihood of staying poor experienced by households headed by native-born Thai people. The chance of staying poor, as opposed to remaining in the moderate or wealthy segments of the income distribution, is also greater for households of non-Thais as compared to Thais.

Further inspection of Table 3 indicates that economic mobility is also shaped by aspects of household structure and members' characteristics. Specifically, households headed by older adults are more likely to remain poor, as are those households in which dependent household members are numerous. Local economic opportunities also play a role in household economic mobility pathways. Specifically, households in which members engage predominantly in agricultural work, and households located in particular economic strata, especially in highland communities, are more likely to experience persistent poverty.

On the other hand, characteristics that are increase the likelihood of upward mobility are relatively large household size, household member employment outside of agriculture, and the possession of secondary or tertiary schooling by household members.

Table 3: Coefficients from multinomial logistic regression predicting economic mobility between 2000 and 2004

	Stay poor		Stay poor		Stay poor	
	/Upward		/Stay moderate		/Stay rich	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Household migration status						
(Ref: Thai)						
<i>Non-Thai, Thai-born</i>	0.78	0.33*	1.15	0.34**	0.76	0.39
<i>Non-Thai, foreign-born</i>	2.11	0.30***	3.21	0.52***	1.68	0.60**
Age of household head	0.01	0.00***	0.01	0.00*	0.00	0.00
Household head is female	0.17	0.10	0.25	0.08**	0.59	0.11***
Household size	-0.30	0.05***	-0.39	0.05***	-0.49	0.06***
Number of member in dependent age	0.18	0.05**	0.31	0.05***	0.39	0.07***
Number of member in agriculture	0.19	0.06**	0.07	0.06	0.49	0.07***
Any member in non-agriculture	-0.31	0.12**	-0.56	0.12***	-1.02	0.18***
Any member finish secondary+	-1.03	0.11***	-1.13	0.11***	-2.91	0.18***
Stratum of household residence						
(Ref: Urban/semi-urban)						
<i>Rice</i>	0.62	0.20**	0.40	0.22	1.98	0.30***
<i>Plantation</i>	0.64	0.21**	0.54	0.20**	2.20	0.24***
<i>Upland</i>	1.23	0.24**	1.68	0.30***	3.56	0.44***
<i>Mixed economic</i>	0.20	0.21	0.15	0.22	0.94	0.35**
Constant	-0.38	0.24	-0.66	0.23**	1.66	0.27***

N = 8,679

Log likelihood = -10621.71

* Significant at 0.05, ** Significant at 0.1, *** Significant at 0.001

Results in Table 4 are further shown to emphasize that the foreign-born are uniquely disadvantaged in terms of economic mobility, relatively to the native Thais and to non-Thais born in Thailand. Their likelihood of remaining stuck in the lowest segment of the income distribution is significantly greater than that experienced by native-born Thais and non-Thais born within Thailand. Households of the foreign-born

are almost four times as likely as those of the non-Thai, but born in Thailand to stay poor as compared to experiencing upward mobility and almost eight times as likely as the non-Thai, but born in Thailand to stay poor as compared to remaining in the middle of the income distribution.

Table 4: Coefficients from multinomial logistic regression predicting economic mobility between 2000 and 2004

	Stay poor		Stay poor		Stay poor	
	/Upward		/Stay moderate		/Stay rich	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Household migration status						
(Ref: non-Thai, Thai-born)						
<i>Thai</i>	-0.78	0.33*	-1.15	0.34**	-0.76	0.39
<i>Non-Thai, foreign-born</i>	1.33	0.34***	2.06	0.43***	0.92	0.49

N = 8,679

Log likelihood = -10621.71

* Significant at 0.05, ** Significant at 0.1, *** Significant at 0.001

Note: Other independent variables included are not shown

Conclusion

In this analysis, we use longitudinal data from the KDSS from 2000 to 2005 to conduct an initial exploration of economic status and the interaction between migration and ethnicity in an emerging immigration context. The data set also permits us to assess whether economic fortunes of migrants are shifting in patterns parallel to the non-Thai but born in Thailand, and to the Thai population, or if they progress or regress in a distinct pattern.

Our results indicate the disadvantaged economic position of foreign-born individuals and their households. Throughout the four year study period, the foreign-born experience very little upward economic mobility. They start off poor and tend to

stay poor for a number of years. Migrants tend to encounter limitations in improving their standard of living. Our findings are consistent with previous studies in long-history immigration contexts suggesting that the disadvantages that migrants encounter tend not to diminish during their lifetimes (Borjas, 2006:57). Beyond migration status, we also find that upward economic mobility among migrants is selective on education and on certain occupational sectors. Other scholars, while observant of intra-group disparities, are less pessimistic about positive forms of mobility in the first generation.

Limitation of longitudinal data confines our understanding on immigrant intra-generational economic mobility. With a unique design of the KDSS data, we are able to conduct a short-term assessment of economic mobility patterns of foreign-born individuals as compared to native-born individuals in Thailand context. Our study offers an initial exploration of the socioeconomic positions of migrants and their incorporation into Thai society. Clearly, the nature and extent of barriers to mobility among immigrants to Thailand demands further study. In an age of migration, as critical to understand migrants' socioeconomic prospects is to recognize the extent to which conditions hinder or facilitate their upward mobility. Our analysis has implications for policy makers as they consider national socioeconomic plans in order that certain social groups not be left behind, especially cross-border migrants whose arrivals have risen and persisted, and whose settlements have often been lengthy, if not permanent. While efforts to promote and protect migrants' welfare may be focused, relaxing any constraints of mobility among migrants should be also considered.

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Note

1. A good roof is defined as a house roof made of tiles or cement. A good house is defined as one with walls made of wood, brick, or concrete.

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