

The Return of Village Daughters from the West

การกลับสู่ถิ่นฐานของผู้หญิงที่แต่งงาน กับชาวต่างประเทศ

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษานี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของวิทยานิพนธ์ระดับปริญญาโท หลักสูตรพัฒนาสังคม มหาวิทยาลัยขอนแก่น การศึกษามุ่งที่ค้นคว้าสถานการณ์ทั่วไปของหมู่บ้านอีสานในอดีต ปัจจุบัน และอนาคต และที่สำคัญคือ มุ่งที่จะศึกษาการกลับมาสู่ชุมชนเดิมของผู้หญิงที่แต่งงานกับชาวตะวันตก การศึกษานี้ใช้วิธีการศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพ โดยการสังเกต และใช้การติดต่อสื่อสารส่วนตัว ผ่านช่องทางอินเทอร์เน็ตกับสามีของผู้หญิงอีสาน

การศึกษาพบว่า การพัฒนาตามแนวทางเศรษฐกิจพอเพียงอย่างยั่งยืน ในช่วง 30 ปีข้างหน้า จะขึ้นอยู่กับการรื้อฟื้น และการสร้างความเข้มแข็งให้แก่ทุนทางสังคม (รวมเศรษฐกิจการเมือง และวัฒนธรรม) ของหมู่บ้าน บทความนี้อธิบายภาพอนาคตของสังคมไทย ซึ่งเป็นการย้อนกลับของการเคลื่อนจากชนบทสู่เมือง และทำให้ชุมชนหมู่บ้านกลับฟื้นคืนชีพขึ้นมา และการย้อนกลับเช่นนี้ เป็นประโยชน์แก่ชนบท เมืองในต่างจังหวัด ตลอดจนทุนของชาติ และประเทศอื่นๆ ในลุ่มน้ำโขง น่าจะเป็นตัวอย่างที่แสดงถึงความเป็นไปได้ในการแสดงถึงการเสื่อมถอยของอุตสาหกรรม และการก้าวเข้าสู่ยุคของเศรษฐกิจพอเพียง

การศึกษาผู้ชายที่แต่งงานกับผู้หญิงอีสานพบว่า คู่แต่งงานจำนวนหนึ่งมีความตั้งใจที่จะกลับมาใช้เวลาในหมู่บ้าน



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ที่ผู้หญิงใช้เวลาในวัยเด็กและเติบโตมา ในช่วงวัยที่ผู้ชายเกษียณ จากการทำงาน ผู้หญิงเหล่านี้สามารถที่จะคาดหมายได้ว่าจะช่วยให้ทุนทางสังคมของหมู่บ้านขึ้นมา ซึ่งถึงแม้ว่าจะเป็นจำนวนน้อย แต่ก็เป็นส่วนที่มีความสำคัญอย่างยิ่ง

Abstract

The study was undertaken in preparation of an MA thesis in the social sciences at Khon Kaen University by a retiree student. It examines the general social situation in Isan villages in the past, present, and in possible futures.

The development of national sustainable sufficiency in Thailand during the next thirty years will depend upon re-strengthening the social (economic, political, and cultural) capital of the villages. This article describes a scenario of geopolitical impacts on Thailand causing its rural-to-urban drift to reverse, and of this reversal revitalizing the villages, to the benefit of the rural areas, provincial cities, and the nation's capital. Furthermore, it appears feasible that, led by Isan, Thailand and the other Mekong Region countries could lead by example and show the world one way forward through the epoch of declining industrialism to the era of sustainable sufficiency.

Enquiries were made among Western men whose Thai wives are living, and often working, in the West. Some of those couples intend to return to the wife's girlhood village for their retirement years. These wives can be expected to play a small, but significant role in contributing to the increasing social capital of the villages.

Keywords: Isan villages, wives of Western men, inward migration, returnees from the West

Introduction

During the coming thirty years, some women who have migrated to the West are intending to retire, with their Western husbands, to their girlhood villages in Northeastern Thailand (Isaan). Some of these couples have already had a house built in the wife's girlhood village, many years in advance of their retirement. They then visit that house on holiday each year.

The initial aim of the study was to consider the potential contribution of these women to the social capital of their villages. It was soon realised that other major factors can be expected to affect the villages during the period in which these village daughters will be returning from the West. The study then broadened to also consider how the villages may then be.

Robert Putnam coined the term ‘social capital’, with reference to a community. “By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital—tools and training that enhance individual productivity—“social capital” refers to *features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit*. Social capital enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital.” (Putnam, 1993). But, like aggregations of monetary capital, social capital can only aggregate to serve and multiply within the community if individual contributions of moral, human and monetary capital are forthcoming from the individuals and families that comprise the community. This study attempted to assemble a description (or ‘picture in words’) of the attributes that individuals and couples may bring and contribute in a time of return to village-life by some who have had the experience of many years of personal development in urbanized, industrial environments.

The village daughters who return from the West will have become women of greater ability since departing from their village. Their higher ability will have been acquired through their own social learning and adapting to living in a foreign land. Many have worked or have run a business in a western country; some may have worked professionally in “middle class” occupations. Some more may have reared their children and seen them through a university and have seen their youngsters work their way into a middle class profession. They will have local knowledge, as they are daughters of the village and have

kept in touch with its changing fortunes. After spending many years living abroad, they can be expected to possess a comprehensive set of the “building blocks of power.” They will be knowledgeable about Western modes of thinking, as well as Thai ones. Economically speaking, it is highly likely that they will have more disposable income than their counterparts in the village, in the range of 40,000 to 150,000 baht per month. Through their own saving and accumulated assets, they will have more deployable capital. This may be quite considerable as selling an average middle-class house in a Western city now brings in a sum of the order of twenty million baht (£300,000 or US\$600,000). They will have deployable time, due to being retired, and able to afford domestic help. And they will have a husband who is supportive in what activities they decide to take on, as proven by their husband’s willingness to live in their home village. It would be illogical to think of any woman with such assets being unequipped to take an eminent role in any part of society that she decides to enter. If she decides to be active economically, politically, or culturally, she can be expected to make a noticeable impact. And others will, informally but effectively, learn from observation of her and her impact. That is, she will be instrumental in the building up of the social capital of her village.

Because these Thai women, who intend to return to their girlhood village, have husbands who have not yet reached retirement age, they are still living in the West. So, early in the study, it became clear that the study fell into the area of the Social Sciences that is known as Futures Studies. Whilst doing an Internet search, to update his layman acquaintanceship with Futures Studies, the researcher noticed the University of Hawai’i has a 3-credit undergraduate course POLSC171 “Introduction to Futures Studies” that is undertaken by the students entirely on-line. Since it appeared practical, provided that the

University of Hawai'i regulations permitted it, the researcher enquired whether he could take the course from his home in NE Thailand. It was negotiated that the course could be taken on a 'non-resident, not-for-grade or credit' basis. So the researcher took the Hawai'i course in parallel with the preparation of the Proposal Document for the MA with Khon Kaen University. The first module of that course required submission to Hawai'i of an assignment that was a 500-word essay entitled "My community in 30 years time". In that essay, which is printed below, the researcher described an imagined scenario. The MA study at Khon Kaen then became, very largely, a matter of examining that scenario for feasibility; that is, to look for evidence that indicated that the scenario could possibly (though not necessarily will) come about; and to look for evidence that cast doubt on whether it could come about, or even suggested that it was an impossibility. The scenario said:

What my community will look like in 30 years.

My community lives in a small, compact village of about 200 houses in rural Northeastern Thailand.

Through the lens of a camera it will look much the same as it does now in 2006, or would have done, a century ago, in 1906.

But 'seen' from the point of view of the social scientist, it will 'look', demographically, quite different from now, as much as it now looks different from 1906.

As a result of economic happenings far away, its demography in 2006 is significantly different from 1906, and will change again before 2036.

My community, (and, literally, thousands of these Thai villages that are spaced about two miles apart), as it lived in 1906, was well described by Prince Damrong:

Since entering monthon Udon, I have visited many villages along the way. Some places have large villages established for a long time over many generations. I went down to ask about the social customs of these villagers. From the villagers' replies, I found one surprising fact. Each village household has a house with enough space for living and a granary to store enough rice for one year. In the yard of the house they plant chili, eggplant, galangal, and lemongrass for making curry. Outside the house they have a garden for fruits such as banana, sugarcane, betel and coconut. And between the garden and the paddy field, there is a place to plant mulberry for raising silkworms. Each household has enough paddy fields and cattle to grow enough rice for the whole household. In the rice-growing season, everyone helps—man and woman, child and adult. After the season, men travel to find things to sell. Women stay at home, raise silk and weave cloth. Leftover food is used to raise chicken and pigs for sale. Villagers around here make all their own food and scarcely have to buy a single thing. The things they have to buy are metal articles like hoes, spades and knives; and crockery. Sometimes they buy yarn for weaving, or cloth and other attractive things brought by traders. They have just enough cash for these purchases because their cattle have surplus young, and they raise extra pigs and chickens with surplus food from each meal. These animals can be sold for cash to buy what they want.

Each family is independent. Nobody is slave and nobody master. Family members are under the guardianship of the head of their family, and in addition there is a phuyaiban (village headman) and kamnan (sub-district

head) to oversee. They administer themselves easily. But in the whole tambon (sub-district) it is impossible to find one rich man with 200 baht or more stored away. Yet you cannot find a single person who is poor to the point of being another's servant. They must have been like this for a hundred years. Because the villagers can farm to feed themselves without resorting to cash, the feeling that they need cash is not strong. Money does not have the same power as in the city which is called "civilized". So nobody accumulates but you cannot call them poor because they feed themselves happily and contentedly.

That quotation is taken from:

Chattip Nartsupha "The Thai Village Economy in the Past" (Translation (with added Afterword) by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongphaichit of original {in Thai, 1984}). Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai 1999

Now imagine three photographs, each one of a group of some 100 villagers assembled in a house and witnessing a wedding in 1906 and 2006 and 2036.

At first glance, all the three photographs would look much the same. The clothes, the sitting on the floor on the mats, the food in the many dishes being served, and the construction of the big and airy, but sparsely furnished, house would all look the same.

However, anybody might distinguish the 2006 one from the 1906 one, by the electric ceiling fans that followed the arrival of rural electrification twenty years ago, and the satellite-tv decoder that came in 2000, and the DVD player that came in 2003.

But, even without those clues, the demographer would spot which was the 2006 one. S/he would point to the high numbers of the grandparent generation, and the appropriately high numbers of children, and to the relatively very, very low numbers of the parent (middle) generation

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S/he would say:

“This was typical of the early years of the twenty-first century.

Most of the middle generation of the villagers had migrated to jobs hundreds of miles away, from where they sent money to the grandparents to bring up the children. A little of it was spent for food and drinks which supplemented the home-grown rice, but most of it was spent on the education of the children as pupils and on the youths as students.

Thailand’s workforce was, then, 60% engaged in agriculture, 30% in industry and commerce, and 10% in tourist-related work.

And the majority of the lower-paid workers in that 30% and 10% were drawn from the North and NorthEast to work in Central Thailand in the Greater Bangkok Metropolitan Area, or on the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estates, or in the southern seaside resort towns.

The photograph with the missing generation is the 2006 one. Most of the missing were working away; but some were dead from that scourge of migrant male workers, AIDS.

That is the population of villagers (grandparents and grandchildren) who worked hard to grow enough rice for their consumption, and had low-labour crops like sugarcane and starch-roots, which brought in a little more cash, on the rest of their land.”

I predict that a 2036 photograph would show a return to balanced numbers of the three generations again, when the present parents had returned to the villages and become the grandparents, and the present children had never gone as migrant workers, but had stayed in the village to become parents and had replaced the low-labour crops with labour-intensive rice. It would also show a number of retiree Thai women with their ‘baby-boomer’ Western husbands. And, in the background, there would be sophisticated equipment for on-line operation by the new peasantry, who would be farming like their predecessors but also have the intellectual pursuits born in their school, college and university student days.

I predict this “return of the parents” (and “the return of some of the village’s prodigal daughters” with their Western husbands in tow) by extrapolation from the state of the world economy, now, in 2006.

The bubble is bound to burst.

America cannot finance US\$800,000,000,000 (\$800 billion) trade deficits by borrowing the savings of the Chinese (and some other nationalities) indefinitely.

The dollar will tumble.

In the resulting recession, many Western workers-with-the-hand-and-brain will become unemployed with the collapse in demand.

Since they will start the recession in credit-card and mortgage debt, the recession will become a Depression (psychological, as well as economic).

The tumbling dollar will trip up the euro and the pound.

Hopefully the globalised world’s edifices of fiat currency will be only shaken, not stirred to the extent of collapse.

Thailand will be fortunate, in that, when its factories shut for lack of orders, the workers can come home to their villages.

There is enough land that even many city families can move to rural areas and re-start the peasantry of their great-grandparents.

So self-sufficiency, with some rice for export, can come again.

And Prince Damrong's words, of 1906, will again describe my community, in 2036.

But it will then be a village of educated peasantry, conscious of its need to maintain its sustainability.

And it will provide a blueprint for others to emulate, on the international scene.

As a prediction, the situation envisaged in the above essay is optimistic to the extent of being nearly utopian. The reason is that (as was observed in one of the Talmudic documents written in Ancient Hebrew): "We don't see things as they are. We see things as we are." Changing the tense, we get: "We don't see things as they will be. We see things as we hope, or fear, they will be." However, written by an optimistic great grandfather though it was, it could still serve as a scenario that could be examined for feasibility. If evidence was found that there were impediments that made an impossibility of that scenario, it could still lead to construction of a different scenario that was feasible. In the event, though, no intrinsic impossibility came to be noticed; so it stands as a hoped-for possibility.

Methods

The main tactic adopted to gather relevant information was to read widely. The reading took two forms. There was the reading of what has been written and published on paper in books and articles and, concurrently, there was the reading of what is being written and published on the forums of two Internet websites (TV 2006/7 and T-UK 2006/7). These are forums to which contributions are made by some of those Western husbands who are becoming, or who plan to become, a part of the future of an Isaan village. A secondary tactic was to follow up some of those Internet contributions either by contributing to a discussion that was underway on the forum or by sending a Personal Message (PM) to a contributor. A tertiary (opportunistic) tactic was to interview face-to-face any such couple who happened to be met and who were willing to be interviewed.

First, it had to be ascertained that there were indeed a significant number of such couples intending to retire to the wife's girlhood village. Second, it was necessary to consider the villages as they will be when these couples retire from the West. That is, to consider the societal (economic, cultural and political) condition of the villages as they are today and what changes can be expected. Third, it was necessary to consider the village daughters and western husbands presently living in the West from the viewpoint of what individual attributes of social, monetary, human and moral capital they may possess as potential contributions to the village when they return for retirement. Fourth, it was necessary to consider how the couples were preparing themselves to settle in to village life.

No literature was found that reported academic studies relating to the life and living conditions of western husbands who live in a village in Thailand.

Some surveys have been done of the acceptance of Thai-Western marriages by the families of the Thai wives, but they make no mention of wives who have lived in the West. (Bunmattaya, 2005; Promphakping, 2006; Wongthanavas, 2006). To understand the past, present and possible future of Isaan village life the author perused the literature written by the scholars of Isaan. Among these literary works, **A Child of the Northeast**, which is a historical novel (and a Thailand classic), written by Boontawee (1976), describes village life in the 1930s. **Khru Ban Nork** (English version titled ‘The Teachers of Mad Dog Swamp’), which is another historical novel and another Thailand classic, describes village life in the 1970s (Khonkhai, 1978). **Thailand: A Short History**, which is considered to be the definitive authority (in English) of the development of Siam and Thailand, also provides a picture of the more recent past (Wyatt, 1982). **Rural Development: Putting the Last First** contends that researchers, scientists, administrators and fieldworkers rarely appreciate the richness and validity of rural people’s knowledge. (Chambers, 1983) An article entitled **State Identity Creation, State Building and Civil Society 1939-1989** traces the interplay of the dominant values, and their proponents, during the attempted change of character of Thailand towards being a modern capitalistic society in an era of increasing globalization. It explains the on-going national identity crisis of a country whose monetary-economic players operate in Bangkok, whilst the majority of the voters live in semi-self-sufficient yeomanry-peasantry in rural areas such as the Northeast (Samudavanija, 1989). In **The Thai Village Economy In The Past**, Nartsupha (1999) shows how the villages existed before the State, and before capitalism, and remained with their subsistence economy largely intact for much longer than was commonly thought. It explains much that is seen still in the villages, with Buddhism co-existing with much older local beliefs, and only superficially

affected by urban influences.

In an edited collection of his past papers, **The Thai Rural Community Reconsidered**, Professor Kitahara (1996) discusses the partial introduction of aspirations towards techno-economic achievements over the past thirty years (which is approximately one generation). He also discusses the interplay of Governmental, NGO and Community Member efforts towards village development. More recently, in **Thailand's Boom and Bust**, Phongpaichit (1998) cast light on the conditions that resulted in able-bodied adults being drawn from the villages to work in urban areas, their enforced return after the 1997 currency crisis, and the ability of the villages to cushion major changes in employability in urban areas. The observation: "The villages are the Social Security system of Thailand" has much truth in it. The functional relationship between villages and urban areas was explored and explained by McVey (2000) in **Money & Power in Provincial Thailand**. Its overall flavour is encapsulated in the title of its Introduction: "Of Greed and Violence and Other Signs of Progress."

In addition there is also a close connection between social and political affairs. Thus, there is a need for the growth of a diversified, actively-committed civil society. In **Thai Images: The Culture of the Public World**, Mulder (1997) examined how Thai children and adults have Thailand's national identity presented to them by curriculum, newspapers and contemporary fiction. The impending world oil shortage in the next decade and henceforth, as detailed in **Hubbert's Peak**, will undoubtedly have a paramount effect on Thailand and its villages (Deffeyes, 2001). This conjecture is supported by the report of the group commissioned by the US Government that put facts and figures to the outlook for the fuel supplies have underpinned the capitalist structure of all developed nations. (Hirsch et al, 2005). Following from the interpretation

of Hutton (2006) in his article entitled **Hope for the Best, Prepare for the Worst**, Thailand should therefore prepare for the effects of global economic volatility and recession. For Thailand, this may not be as gloomy an outlook as it may be for longer-industrialised countries.

Results

The topic “**Thai wives retirement destination**” was posted by the author of this study on the appropriate forum on the **Thailand-UK** Community website (T-UK 2006/7). This website is ‘frequented’ by Thai-Western couples who are living in Britain. In summary, 38 couples voted, with 11 (29%) intending to retire to a Thailand village and of these 7 (18%) were intending to retire to a village in Isaan.

The topic “**Farang houses in the Villages, are they for retirees to come?**” was posted on the Isaan forum of the **ThaiVisa** website (TV 2006/7). This website is ‘frequented’ by a much larger number of readers and contributors than the Thailand-UK website, as it is a long-established site that gets contributions from all categories of Western men who are interested in life in Thailand. In the four days that the topic was active, there were 17 comments posted. 7 of these indicated that the contributor and his Thai wife were living in the West and had built a house in the wife’s girlhood village, to which they were planning to retire. The flavor of the contributions can be tasted from comment #15 by ‘radar’:

“Yes, Martin. We built our home in the wife’s village about six years ago. We both live and work in Australia, but we go home a couple of times a year, and for what it cost to build, it is well worth the money to be able to stay and do what you want in your own home. One day in the future we will retire to

Thailand and it is a bonus that we are already set up for this move. The wife's father gave us the land to build on, and the house cost about 1 million baht, six years ago. But if you were to build the same house today, it would be much, much more than that, so it is a long term investment as well."

Although this method of gathering information only reveals 'straws in the wind', and no quantitative conclusions can be drawn, it was sufficient to confirm that a significant number of villages do have daughters intending to return after life in the West.

A review of how Thailand's industrialization has impacted on the Isaan villages was found (Myers, 2005). It is entitled: **The Isaan Saga: The inhabitants of rural northeastern Thailand and their struggle for identity, equality and acceptance (1964-2004)**. The abstract says:

"The village-dwelling Isaan people of rural northeast Thailand are in an ongoing struggle for personal identity, prosperity, and equality, as well as a desire for respect and acceptance by their fellow countrymen. Presently over twenty-one million in population (as of 2004), the Isaan people have taken the initiative over the last several decades to seize various opportunities and are currently emerging from their poverty-stricken agrarian roots and lowly social position to becoming the formally-recognized labor class of Thailand. This ongoing process is occurring despite long-standing economic exploitation and neglect, as well as hindrances placed in their way by their more urbane, status-conscious Central Thai cousins, who have customarily dismissed the Isaan dwellers as being simpleminded and ignorant. Notwithstanding, their progress is now clearly evidenced by an increasing acceptance by the Thai, together with enjoying a greater significance on a national scale in socio-cultural, economic and political terms."

During the study, on 01 October 2006, the newly-appointed Prime Minister of Thailand, retired-General Surayud, said, in his speech of acceptance of the appointment: *“I will not focus on GDP as the previous governments, but I will adhere to the sufficiency economy advocated by the King. I will focus on the happiness of the people rather than the GDP.”* (‘Sufficiency’ in the context of the national economy means ‘not being dependant on supplies from overseas suppliers or orders from overseas customers, over which we have no control.’ For Thailand, that means moving to an economic regime that requires no oil imports.) Since growth of GDP comes only from increasing urbanization, and since urban living inherently needs high energy inputs for transportation and building services, this reversal of political direction inherently implies reduction of the rural-to-urban drift of Thailand. Later, in a speech on 24 January 2007, PM Surayud made a carefully-considered, authoritative, definitive statement on this resolve of Thailand’s new government to pursue sustainability and sufficiency. In that speech, to the Joint Foreign Chambers of Commerce in Thailand, and the various Ambassadors to Thailand, the Prime Minister said: *“In fact, the “Sufficiency Economy Philosophy” is a Thai model for sustainability, the importance of which is only now becoming recognized around the world. As an early adopter of a sustainable approach to development, Thailand should, I believe, be praised, for it is a path down which every country or company will have to travel sooner or later.”* For the villages, the consequences may well be profound. The logical result of PM Surayud’s statement is that many urban-born middle-class Thais will migrate and take their skills from the unsustainable big-city environments to the sustainable communities in the rural areas. The ingress of middle-aged adults with the experiential learning from wage-earning and from operating service-sector businesses in the urban areas would increase the potential of the villages to

improve on their levels of social capital. Hence the occurrence of the development of the scenario of the re-emergence of the ‘balanced’ village, balanced both in age groups and in socio-economic classes. But it is only a scenario, and not a prediction. As PM Surayud pointed out: *“Deeply entrenched vested interests will struggle to defend their special access to power and money,”* and may impede the successful implementation of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy.

From the literature review, it was seen that of crucial importance will be the fact that the returning daughters spent their early formative years in the villages when the villages still had the immensely-cohesive social capital described by Boontawee in **“A Child of the Northeast.”** (Boontawee, 1976). Considering the poor-quality land, insufficient rainfall, and periodic droughts, (i.e. a paucity of material capital), it is a tribute to the social capital of the villages that the villagers survived at all. The villages have had an unfortunate forty years, but their social capital situation can recover and be improved simply by the return of those who were lost to urban drift. (That is in contrast to the countries of Europe and North America, which industrialized more than a generation ago, and will have immense difficulty in re-inventing their sufficiency.) This ‘stored’ social capital and other attributes that the couples may bring with them in retirement were obliquely touched on in internet discussions and, in two cases, in face-to-face interviews. A typical example of an Internet discussion is part of a Personal Message in which ‘john b’ tells of the extent to which his wife and he are contributing to the strength of one part of a village in advance of their planned retirement there in 2010:

So, what has this westerner brought to the village? Well, we built a house there in November/December 2005. Right next door to aunty’s house, where everyone had slept until then.

Now, whilst we are earning money in Europe, Mam's daughter, her two brothers and one sister sleep in the new house...taking care of it...tend the garden, look after the cows we bought etc.

Mam's daughter has a bank account now and has a monthly allowance to cover all her school expenses, clothing etc. We pay one of Mam's sisters a little bit to do the washing, keep the house clean etc. We go there for a couple of months every summer. Well, Mam does; I can only get away for one month. We built a small house for her father across the road last year and added a hong nam recently. Daughter and brother in law will need to move to senior school in the next two years. We will pay for whatever that involves. We provided uncle with a motorbike, later Mam's 16 year old brother with one too. Our part of the village has, in short, been transformed, not only in terms of its structures and current disposable income, but also in terms of its future prospects. Mam and I will return there to live when I retire. My pension is not great but it will do for us there and will help the family too.

Planning of the monetary side of their retirement is a feature of the middle-class section of the 'baby boomers' and it is not being neglected by these couples. For instance, on the **Thailand-UK Community** website, there was a discussion entitled: "**Would £200,000 be enough?**" The replies indicated that other couples were planning to have capital of £300,000 (i.e. 20 million baht) at least, and income in excess of 40,000 baht per month. That correlates with remarks made by many men who 'post' on the **ThaiVisa** forums. A very illustrative 'thread' was one in which 'Bryn and Mot' (presently buying, renovating, and re-selling houses in Northern England) tell of the progression of their retirement plan (T-UK 2006/ 2007). As they are retiring to a farm in the hills that separate Isaan from North-Central Thailand (near Petchabun), they are not in either of the target groups of this study.

However, the ‘thread’ does delineate an excellent example of retirement planning, which could well be helpful to other self-employed artisans. It is also an example of the potential power of Internet forums in disseminating lifeskill information to self-selected specialized groups.

From their conversations and communications, the couples who plan to retire, or have already retired, to live in the wife’s girlhood village seem to have four characteristics in common. The wives are members of prominent, well-established families in the village, and their husbands describe their wives as having above-average acumen and ability to benefit from experiential learning. The husbands are men who have plenty of intellectual and practical interests to occupy their time during active retirement, and they are appreciators of the village environment and lifestyle. Unlike previous generations of Westerners, for whom life-expectancy was much lower, the ‘baby boom’ generation is bombarded with reminders that their retirement years may be long and possibly healthy and that they should make financial provision for that period of their lives. The comment by ‘radar’, quoted earlier, saying that he and his wife had built their house in the village six years ago and *“One day in the future, we will retire to Thailand and it is a bonus that we are already set up for this move”* is typically indicative of the thinking-ahead of the ‘baby boom’ middle-class. The enquiry on the Isaan forum of the **ThaiVisa** website: **“What do you guys do up north? What would I do?”** drew 94 contributions and 5,493 viewings between 20 January 2006 and 17 February 2007. **“Do you live in a village full-time? Describe a typical day for you?”** is also a very popular topic, with 271 contributions and 19,742 viewings between 05 September 2006 and 23 March 2007. Much of that viewing is from those who are yet to retire who are taking an interest in the activities of those who have already retired to their wife’s girlhood village.

Through the immensely-better information-gathering opportunities brought about by the Internet, and their rehearsals of retirement to the village when they visit on holiday, these couples are getting themselves well prepared.

Discussion and Conclusions

The first of the original objectives of the study was to ascertain the reasons that will bring these couples to retire in the village. The ‘raw materials’ that were gathered and sifted to find mentions of these reasons were, first, three ‘threads’ (or topic-discussions) on the Isaan forum of the Forums section of the website **www.ThaiVisa.com**. Their titles were: **2007 Plans, I love my Isaan village**, and **You all seem so content**. Then came the comments to the topic that was posted by the author of this study on the Forum section of the website **www.Thailand-UK.com** entitled **Thai wives’ retirement destinations**. From the 90 contributions to these four topics, it was concluded that the main reason, by far, for choosing to live in the village in retirement is the wife’s desire to be amongst her family. Subsidiary, but still substantial, attractions are the lower living costs, the lower cost of land upon which to build a house, the bigger house plots (permitting a spacious garden and privacy), and the relaxed lifestyle of the village.

The second objective of the study was to acquire a general picture of the lifestyle of such couples who have retired to villages and the ‘threads’ above contributed many indications of features of the retirees’ lifestyles in their villages. But the Isaan forum of **www.ThaiVisa.com** also ran five other very active relevant ‘threads’ on topics related to village lifestyle during the period of the study. These threads drew 1,179 contributions in total. They

were: **Do you live in a village full-time? Describe a typical day for you, What do you guys do up North?, Farang/Thai partnerships. Do you and your wife share the chores?, How about a Buriram forum on here? and Building a house in the boonies. How different to the cities?** The conclusion drawn is that the picture is very much one of a husband and wife who give each other plenty of 'space', for him to his hobbies and she to her social interaction with relatives, friends and neighbours. Some couples divide their time between periods of staying at their house in the village and periods of visiting Bangkok and the resorts.

The third objective was to consider the scope and need for further research on the topic in future years. The study took no more than a superficial overview of a huge, but apparently little explored area of what may follow from the interconnected 'peakings' (peak oil, peak water, peak gold, peak travel, peak industrialism and peak globalization) that are occurring in the here and now. There is scope for much deeper studies of individual parts of that area, not just by social scientists, but also by agriculturalists, economists, educationists, engineers and so on through the entire university departmental alphabet. For the social scientists alone, there is scope to look deeper into social capital, structuration, identity-negotiation and the social imaginary as they develop in Isaan during Isaan's time as a leading-edge region in the transition from the Late-Capitalism/Globalisation era to the Sustainable Era. That can be expected to entail and bring about a paradigmatic shift from Growth through Greed, to Thrift through Frugality. All the works of the industrial era sociologists (Appur dai, Durkheim, Featherstone, Giddens, Marx, Parsons, Putnam, Said, Weber to name but a few) will need to be re-visited, revised and updated.

In Isaan, right down at the most basic level, recording of the build-up in the numbers of such retiree-couples to the villages, and of their narratives, would provide useful ‘hands-on’ exercises for students of the Social Sciences. To be relevant to the new economic and political situations that will arise in the transition from the industrialization era to the sufficiency era, Village Studies can be expected to become a much greater part of the undergraduate curriculum for students in both the physical sciences and the social sciences. And, at postgraduate level, there will be a massive requirement to do the necessary technical and socio-economic research to underpin the work of the relevant ‘think tanks’. For the past two centuries, expanding industrialization as more and cheaper fuel resources became available was a relatively-easy reactive process for the previous seven generations of mankind. Managing during times of contracting and diminishing resources will be a much more demanding pre-active process. Preparation and implementation of contingency plans based on Sufficiency Economy philosophies will be a major responsibility for all the governmental bodies concerned in all the areas of society---political, economic and cultural.

As originally conceived, the study has looked at ‘a coming event, casting its shadows before it’. These have been ‘concrete’ shadows in the case of the building of houses in the villages ahead of retirements, and ‘virtual’ shadows in the case of over two thousand internet postings that have been perused. In addition, there have been some twenty personal message enquiries made and several face-to-face discussions.

The information gained has proved to be a huge collection of ‘straws in the wind’. Each in itself is but an unquantifiable fragment, but when all the ‘straws’ blow in the same direction they give confidence to the assertion that

a feasible scenario---one possible future--- is that the Isaan villages will demonstrate sustainable sufficiency in both its economic and cultural aspects, and that returnee village daughters and their Western husbands will make a significant contribution.

There is also a feasible scenario that a strengthened rural Thailand, with the appropriate 'servicing' from a reduced urban Thailand, could lead the world in demonstrating a sufficient and sustainable society for the age of post-globalisation, and that returning village daughters with supportive husbands could play a significant part in that service to mankind.

They are but scenarios. Whether they come to pass, or other conditions prevail, remains to be seen. We will live in interesting times. And the historians of the future, when they look back at the early twenty first century, may have a special regard for rural Northeastern Thailand.

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