

## Small Towns and Regional Urban Centers : Reflections on Diverting Bangkok-Bound Migration\*

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### Introduction

Any discussion concerning Bangkok's primacy risks sounding redundant. The problems associated with Bangkok's primacy are numerous, often mentioned and condemned by scholars and laymen alike. But in essence, serious studies on the causes and impacts of Bangkok's "ills" are few and lacking in depth. Furthermore, analytic studies that deal with the multi-faceted dimensions of Bangkok's problems are virtually non-existent.<sup>1</sup> An underlying assumption of Bangkok's "problems" concerns her sheer size : a city with a population of over five million. Although urbanization is a natural process of societal development and change, Bangkok's urbanization, because of its size and nature of centralization of economic, social, industrial, entertainment, cultural, educational, and commercial activities, has been relegated to represent inequities and disparities that exist in Thai society.

Hence, in a sincere and earnest effort to tackle Thailand's developmental problems, the National Economic and Social Development Board included the issue of urban development in its fifth and current national economic and social development plan. Briefly, the section on urban development in the Fifth Plan emphasizes that Thailand's economic growth pattern during the past twenty years has been such that interregional and rural-urban disparities have not been reduced but have increased. This unbalanced growth pattern has favored the Bangkok metropolis far more than other cities. In order to alter the imbalance caused by economic develop-

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ment and human settlement patterns, the Fifth Plan proposes accelerated development of regional urban centers and smaller urban centers which are intermediate between provincial cities and rural villages. In addition, the Plan advocates the deceleration of the Bangkok metropolis' growth, to curtail the role and influence of the Bangkok metropolis.

Imbued in the above stated intention of the Fifth Plan concerning urban development is the notion that migration to Bangkok must be deterred, if not altogether prevented. The underlying assumption behind this notion is that further in-migration to Bangkok from the rural areas will inevitably pose grave problems for the already over-burdened city. The plan proposes to achieve a balanced "urban system" for the future through industrial and economic restructuring policies. Such policies call for measures to provide various economic incentives for the private sector to invest and operate businesses and industries outside of Bangkok. Similarly, disincentives will be imposed on industries that persist to operate and/or propose to be launched in Bangkok. The government is required to play a major role in decentralizing Bangkok by rendering full support to the development of regional urban centers and small towns through the building of both physical and social infrastructures, through loan provisions and licensing measures, etc. Clearly, these policies would require serious governmental intervention, commitment and investment, monetary and otherwise.

Although the major thrust of the Fifth Plan's urban development policies concerns economic aspects of development for regional and small urban centers, the Fifth Plan has a provision that calls for the strengthening of regional identity. It was conceived probably with full knowledge of the central migration pattern which is Bangkok centric. And consequently, this measure is intended to counter Bangkok-bound migration. This issue is mentioned specifically in the policy guidelines: "Regional identity will be promoted and strengthened so that regional urban dwellers can be proud of their heritage." There is no direct reference to what measures are appropriate and ought to be adopted in order to promote and strengthen this regional identity. Also absent is a convincing explanation of the rationale behind regional identity and pride as a major basis for migration decisions. We believe that migration decisions are quite independent of regional and ethnic pride and identity -- a central point we shall return to in the paper.

If economic and social plans could be easily and readily implemented, social realities will not deviate too far from planners' vision of an ideal future society. In Thailand's case, her future urban scene, if all features of the Fifth Plan could be implemented successfully, will boast of a Bangkok metropolis with a population of no more than 6 million by 1968. Also, her economic and industrial activities and growth will be guided to fulfill the nation's developmental objectives. In this vision, urban regional towns will have flourished, making it possible to absorb

migrants that would have flocked to Bangkok otherwise. Small towns and regional urban centers will be linked up with one another and will also be linked with rural villages, exchanging mutual benefits and extending interdependence. Hence, greater social equality will thrive in such a system.

Lest we be swept away entirely by the promises of the Fifth Plan's intention, we must pause to examine certain fundamental issues and assumptions of this urban developmental policy. In particular, we will focus on the issue of rural to urban migration as a mechanism for achieving a balanced urban development system.

The fundamental issue we will examine here is whether or not the development of regional urban centers and small towns in Thailand will necessarily, unquestioningly, and inevitably alter the existing pattern of rural to urban migration. Presently, rural to urban migration heavily favors Bangkok over other regional cities and towns. Even though available statistics vary on the rate of net migration in Bangkok and other regional cities, nonetheless, Bangkok has shown a steady increase in net migration annually over the years which is not the case for five out of the other six regional cities.

In view of rural migrants' overwhelming preference for choosing Bangkok as a destination for migration, we shall try to explore, understand and analyze the reasons accounting for such a preference. Specifically, we shall study the nature, pattern, meaning and function of migration in Thai society. Migration is a complex social process and should be considered as such. Too often, it is taken as a social phenomenon explainable in economic terms. Its economic effects and impacts have been given overwhelming attention over other considerations. We will examine the different types of migration and their ensuing implications for the migrants themselves and for the Bangkok metropolis and regional cities. In particular, we will focus on the Bangkok-bound circular migrants who are mainly young and single men and women with a great number from the Northeast of Thailand. Through this study, we hope to make the following points :

1. Concerted governmental efforts to generate the growth of regional cities may not drastically alter the existing pattern of rural-urban migration.
2. Bangkok will remain the primary center of attraction for the nation in the foreseeable future.
3. Young circular migrants who come to Bangkok need not create or exacerbate social and economic ills for the metropolis. In fact, circular migration of the young and single has developed a mutually beneficial and interdependent relationship with the metropolis.

Tables 1-5 show that during the years 1970-1980 the Bangkok metropolis has shown a steady increase in net annual migration ranging from net

Table No. 1

## Components of Population Change : 1976-1975

City	Population		Change		Components of Change			Net Migration	
	1976	1975	Number	Percent	Births	Deaths	Number	Percent	
Bangkok Metropolitan	n.a.	n.a	n.a	n.a.	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	
Cholburi	669,123	644,052	25,161	3.91	20,336	4,335	9,160	1.37	
Nakhornratchasima	280,196	267,372	12,824	4.80	8,001	1,359	6,182	2.21	
Khonkaen	222,560	259,571	-37,001	14.26	6,604	1,132	-42,483	-19.09	
Chiangmai	166,818	167,022	-204	-0.12	11,074	929	-10,349	-9.20	
Songkhla	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	
Haadyai	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	

Sources : 1. Division of Public Health, Ministry of Public Health  
2. Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior

**Table No. 2**  
**Components of Population Change : 1977-1976**

City	Population		Change		Components of Change		Net Migration	
	1977	1976	Number	Percent	Birth	Deaths	Number	Percent
Bangkok Metropolitan	4,742,774	4,545,608	197,166	4.34	134,051	18,020	81,135	1.71
Cholburi	681,232	669,213	12,019	1.80	18,390	4,359	-2,012	-0.30
Nakhornratchasima	287,365	280,196	7,169	2.56	7,926	1,397	640	0.22
Khonkaen	230,340	222,560	7,780	3.50	6,305	1,054	2,529	1.10
Chiangmai	169,569	166,818	2,751	1.65	10,712	961	-7,000	-4.13
Songkhla	165,618	159,144	6,474	4.07	6,285	825	1,014	0.16
Haadyai	215,830	209,814	6,016	2.87	5,640	916	1,292	0.60

Sources : 1. Division of Public Health, Ministry of Public Health  
2. Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior

**Table No. 3**  
**Components of Population Change : 1978 - 1977**

City	Population		Change		Components of Change		
	1978	1977	Number	Percent	Birth	Deaths	Net Migration
						Number	Percent
Bangkok Metropolitan	4,870,509	4,742,774	122,735	2.69	131,879	18,404	0.29
Cholburi	696,835	681,232	15,603	2.29	18,422	4,731	0.27
Nakhornratchasima	294,418	287,365	7,053	2.45	8,900	1,201	-0.22
Khonkaen	237,443	230,340	7,103	3.08	10,263	1,082	-0.88
Chiangmai	172,603	169,569	3,034	1.79	12,591	882	-5.02
Songkhla	171,534	165,618	5,916	3.57	6,021	690	0.34
Haadyai	222,004	215,830	6,174	2.86	5,522	883	0.69

Sources : 1. Division of Public Health, Ministry of Public Health  
2. Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior

**Table No. 4**  
**Components of Population Change : 1979-1978**

City	Population		Change		Components of Change		
	1979	1978	Number	Percent	Births	Deaths	Net Migration
						Number	Percent
Bangkok Metropolitan	4,999,515	4,870,509	129,006	2.65	135,596	20,635	14,045 0.28
Cholburi	712,426	696,835	15,591	2.24	18,553	4,507	1,545 0.22
Nakhornratchasima	301,869	294,418	7,451	2.53	10,233	1,200	-1,582 -0.52
Khonkaen	245,678	237,443	8,235	3.47	10,364	952	-1,177 -0.48
Chiangmai	167,403	172,603	-5,200	-3.01	13,538	884	-17,854 -10.66
Songkhla	177,584	171,534	6,050	3.53	6,530	753	273 0.15
Haadyai	228,396	222,004	6,392	2.88	5,604	827	1,615 0.71

**Sources :** 1. Division of Public Health, Ministry of Public Health  
2. Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior

**Table No. 5**  
**Components of Population Change : 1980 - 1979**

City	Population		Change		Components of Change Net Migration		
	1980	1979	Number	Percent	Births	Deaths	Number      Percent
Bangkok Metropolitan	5,153,902	4,999,515	154,387	3.09	126,808	19,640	47,219      0.92
Cholburi	725,407	712,426	12,981	1.82	18,230	4,334	-915      -0.13
Nakhornratchasima	306,518	301,869	4,649	1.54	9,237	1,189	-3,399      -1.11
Khonkean	252,309	245,678	6,631	2.70	10,780	1,052	-3,097      -1.23
Chiangmai	176,102	167,403	8,699	5.20	14,225	1,183	-4,343      -2.47
Songkhla	174,326	177,584	-3,258	-1.83	6,356	718	-8,896      -5.10
Haadyai	238,313	228,396	9,917	4.34	6,135	904	4,686      1.97

**Sources :** 1. Division of Public Health, Ministry of Public Health  
2. Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior



annual increases of 1.7% or 81,135 persons to net annual increases of .28% or 14,045 persons. Other regional cities like Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen have not shown such consistent patterns of increase in net migration over the same period of time, although these cities have been designated as regional cities within the growth poles to be promoted in their development to counter Bangkok's growth. In particular, these cities have shown more of a decrease than an increase in net migration. Chiangmai, for example, has shown a steady loss or negative net migration over the entire period. Khon Kaen has negative net migration in four out of the five years. See Tables 1-5 for more details.

### **The preference for Bangkok as a migration destination**

Existing available statistics and data indicate that migration to Bangkok is a phenomenon of great significance and impact both to the rural areas and to the metropolis of Bangkok itself. Sternstein attributes half of Bangkok's growth to net migration.<sup>2</sup> The National Statistical Office gives net migration in Bangkok between 1977-1979 as 122,875—a number that does not include people who migrate in line of their work affiliation with institutions such as the military or the civil service.<sup>3</sup> The figure given by the Division of Statistics, Ministry of Public Health and the Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior shows that net immigration to Bangkok accounts for between .28% to 1.71% of Bangkok's total population, depending on the specific year.<sup>4</sup>

Tables 1-5 also confirm the argument that urban growth centers have yet to attract migrants from their surrounding rural areas. It is quite evident from the tables that dwellers of regional urban towns and cities have a tendency to migrate to the capital city. Fuller suggests in his study that perhaps the most able dwellers of smaller towns and regional urban centers have expectations and aspirations far beyond the opportunities that are available to them in their towns or cities. They would therefore opt for migrating to Bangkok where educational, social, economic, and political opportunities are multifarious and challenging for them.<sup>5</sup> In the same view, it is argued that as a result of regional urban centers' development, the people who live there would have also developed high expectations and demands for their lives which could act to push them to Bangkok in search of greater opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

The case of Khon Kaen city and Khon Kaen province provides a vivid example of what has been said thus far—in spite of concerted governmental efforts to generate and promote the growth of the province and the city of Khon Kaen, Khon Kaen has lost its native dwellers to Bangkok, as evidenced by the net number of Khon Kaen out migration to Bangkok.<sup>7</sup> A few words about the background of Khon Kaen will be helpful to strengthen the preceding point.

In essence, the idea of decentralizing urban centers is neither novel nor of recent origin. The Fourth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1977-82) had forwarded the concept of regional 'growth poles' and designated cities such as Khon Kaen, Nakhon Ratchasima, Choburi, Haad Yai, Chiang Mai to be the centers of such 'growth poles.' Khon Kaen, for instance, was designated as the development center for the Northeast as early as 1962. But according to Larry Sternstein,<sup>8</sup> even though Khon Kaen was especially infused with governmental efforts to assist in its development, it has yet to succeed in evolving into a viable and thriving urban center with the ability to attract migrants from the rural Northeast. Governmental efforts for Khon Kaen have been sizeable both in terms of direct and indirect stimulations for growth and development. Tens of governmental agencies have regional or subregional offices there, which has also meant the transplant of personnel from Bangkok or other areas to Khon Kaen. A university of the region was built then. So was a regular technical school. In addition, physical infrastructures such as an airfield, modern bus terminal, a network of paved roads, a renovated railway, were built in Khon Kaen. Other urban facilities were also improved. Commercial activity has also diversified.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, Khon Kaen has not grown as expected.

It suffices to conclude this section with the observation that the tendency and actual rate of rural to urban migration still favors Bangkok over all other regional cities. In one study, rural respondents from the Northeast indicated their preference for migrating to Bangkok over Khon Kaen even if the pay in Bangkok were significantly less than the pay in Khon Kaen.<sup>10</sup> The writer has yet to hear a migrant in Bangkok indicate a preference for another city over Bangkok at the initial moment when the decision to migrate was made.<sup>11</sup>

### **The nature and pattern of migration**

Migration is not a simple process, generalizable with ease. Inherent in rural out-migration is the complexity of rural problems and expectations, and rural attempts to solve existing problems. Too, migration does not assume one pattern; it is not a unilinear process or an event with uniform characteristics and implications. In fact, migration produces contrary results, both positive and negative, as well as short-term and long-term impacts on sociocultural and structural changes of both rural and urban societies.

Migrants can be roughly assigned to several categories. But before doing that, we shall describe certain general characteristics of migrants as an overview of migrants in Bangkok. The majority of rural migrants to Bangkok are young and single. Female migration has increased over the last decade and is now

an integral aspect of rural-urban migration. In fact, there are now more females who migrate than males.<sup>12</sup> Female migrants also expect less difficulty in finding work, although unemployment is generally not a problem among migrants.<sup>13</sup> Most migrants find work within a month.<sup>14</sup> Most migrants to Bangkok work in service, labor (both unskilled and semi-skilled) and sales -- occupational categories with a high degree of horizontal mobility, indicating inter-changes of similar stature and pay among these three categories. Most migrants of working age are employed.<sup>15</sup> Migrants, especially those from the Northeast, migrate upon the advice, urgings, and information received from relatives, friends, or acquaintances. Women migrants tend to have prearranged work or a place to stay awaiting them at the place of destination. Women migrants are paid less in cash but receive payment in kind--room and board. In fact, about 50% of women migrants moved in with their employers' families, in mainly service occupations.<sup>16</sup> Migrants who have become dissatisfied with their work or have been unhappy in the city will readily resort to returning to their original place of residence--the rural area.<sup>17</sup>

Migrants can be assigned to the following categories :

1. Rural to smaller urban centers and urban towns migrants. Migrants in this category present a picture different from the preceding overview.<sup>18</sup> Although migrants in this category are differentiated into long-term and recent migrants, their average age is higher than those who migrate to Bangkok; singles do not outnumber married people greatly; and their occupational stature appears to be somewhat higher or better than those who migrate to Bangkok. In terms of figures, 40% of migrants in urban centers other than Bangkok hold low status occupations as compared to 58% of migrants in Bangkok who hold similar low status occupations.<sup>19</sup>

Migrants in this category also tend to be older, married with family, and doing well in small urban towns. Fuller believes that these migrants have considered moving with care and with a concrete plan and purpose in mind. Because of rational planning with a definite purpose and because they are older and have to be responsible for their immediate families, they are competitive and are motivated to be successful in smaller towns, where the best and most able of the towns' natives have already moved away in search of a better life in the bigger city.<sup>20</sup>

2. The second major category of migrants are the urban to urban migrants, be it from other urban areas to Bangkok or from an urban town to a regional urban center. Studies on this category of migrants reveal that urban to Bangkok migrants tend to have better housing, jobs, and income than rural to Bangkok migrants.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, inter-urban migrants outside of Bangkok are found to be fairly satisfied with life and faring well compared to recent rural migrants.<sup>22</sup>

Inter-urban migrants tend to be selective in that those who move from other urban areas to Bangkok go to Bangkok in search of better opportunities or education. They also tend to come better equipped with education, skills and money than the majority of cityward migrants from the rural areas. Hence their relatively privileged background provides them with a definite edge over the rural migrants.

3. The third major category of migrants consists of those who are primarily young and single who mainly migrate to Bangkok either for an extended period or for short periods which may range from as few as a couple months (as in between agriculture seasons) to as much as a couple years. The migration literature has designated the term "sojourners" to such a category of migrants. In the Thai context, sojourners may be seasonal migrants who contribute to what is called circular migration where the process of migrating to Bangkok, returning to home village, migrating back to Bangkok is in a perpetual circular motion. There is a uniqueness to this type of migrant. In the following section, I shall submit a model to explain Bangkok-bound circular migrants. Although the model needs verification through future research, I am nevertheless quite confident of its accuracy.

#### **A model for Bangkok-bound circular migrants**

A great portion, if not majority, of Bangkok-bound migrants come to Bangkok in part because of rural poverty, but economic considerations are only one among the many reasons which simultaneously "push" and "pull" migrants toward Bangkok. During the past twenty years, a typical village youngster will invariably have come into contact with the modern telecommunication system wherein events, news, information and entertainment programs from the capital city are made known to him. Contact with Bangkok culture and ways has unconsciously and unknowingly instilled in him a sense of awe, mystery and challenge combined. While he grows up experiencing hard work of a low technology--agricultural life amidst inconveniences and material simplicity, if not sheer deprivation, he sees older village-mates returning from Bangkok looking well physically (lighter skin colour and smoother skin tone as a result of being away from prolonged and direct exposure to sunlight) and looking fashionable and smart in their modern clothes. What this typical youngster hears from the returning village-mate arouses in him a great urge to experience Bangkok. The magic, mystery, light and sound, "modernity," and conveniences of Bangkok form an irrepressible desire in him to go and see Bangkok. The relatively calm, uneventful and monotonous village life pales in the face of an exciting, complex and everchanging Bangkok filled with all possibilities and adventures. Added on to this desire are other factors which serve to reinforce his eventual departure for Bangkok.

For example, there are precedented cultural practices which sanction and even encourage geographical mobility. Going *Pai Tiaw* (to go in search of a good time) has been traditionally carried out by nobles and freemen alike. Young men especially of the same age group engage in *Pai Tiaw* as a common activity in that stage of their lives. Monks travel long and short distances, in search of spiritual knowledge and guidance or to propagate religious teaching. The Lord Buddha himself had travelled extensively in his role as a religious seeker of knowledge and truth and later as a religious mentor. Hence, travelling is part of the Thai cultural tradition. Now if a group of young men or women, or even a mixed group, intends to travel in search of fun, money, experience, or whatever, there are no strict cultural hindrances against such an undertaking.

Moreover, important structural reasons which facilitate young rural Thais to undertake migration ought not be overlooked. First of all, temporary migration assures the migrant that his "bridges are not burned." In other words, his place in the home village is not jeopardized by the result of the intended migration. Being able to return any time indeed alleviates a lot of pressure from the migrant which allows him to undertake his venture with greater ease. The differences in expectations, behaviors, and attitudes of migrants in town are shaped by the intended purpose of their move.<sup>23</sup> Young and single migrants may view their stay in Bangkok as an experience well worth recalling in later years—an experience to be lived up fully. They may not even care much about negative aspects of their lives in the city. After all, unfavorable living and sanitary conditions may not be of foremost importance to them. And in any case, running water in a squalid bathroom may appear far superior to having to walk a long distance to fetch two pails of water—a condition not uncommon in the rural areas. More importantly, whatever appears undesirable can be better tolerated when a person believes that the need for tolerance is of finite duration. Hence, circular migration of the young provides structural prerequisites for migration to proceed smoothly and continuously.

Moreover, the Northeast culture has a special feature which serves as a mechanism for social adjustment. This is the characteristically high value Northerners place on friendship and concern for others.<sup>24</sup> Group solidarity and group consciousness are intense, particularly in an alien environment. Hence, Northeastern migrants exhibit a strong commitment to assist one another. Their social bond is binding and enduring, subject to immediate activation. Unlike social science studies on Thailand which characterize the Thai social structure as loose,<sup>25</sup> lacking commitment and enduring association, Northeastern migrants form informal associations to serve the functions of mutual-aid, entertainment, job-recruitment, and linkage to home village, to name only a few. One's effort would be entirely misdirected, if in

the study of the dynamics of migrant society in Bangkok, one fails to understand and account for the importance of such informal affiliations of Bangkok.

An example is in order.

Many years ago (upward of 30), a young Northeastern migrant came to work in Bangkok. He was placed as an apprentice to a Chinese lapidary. Years of apprenticeship and faithful service to the master lapidary created a strong patron and client bond between the two parties. When the Chinese lapidary retired, he assisted his former apprentice and now faithful and loyal client to set up his own business by selling the existing business to this Northeastern man partly on credit. Years of economic boom boosted sales of precious stones & jewelries which greatly profited our migrant from the Northeast. He operated his business after the manner of his former master. He recruits young apprentices from his own and nearby home villages. His prosperity does not go unrecognized in his home village or even nearby. As a patron to the rural area he came from, he does not sever his ties with his past but reinforces his status in the village through generous contributions to local causes like annual temple renovations. He becomes a symbol of success for young people from his rural area to emulate. In concrete terms, his business has become a job recruitment and job placement center for young people in his part of the rural world. He is also a pillar for young migrants to lean on, thereby serving as an institution for adjustment in city.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, regionalism or its miniaturized version of village "*esprit de corps*" serves as an important mechanism for migrants' social adjustment in the city. The ease with which rural migrants cohere and the natural way in which they develop a sense of camaraderie is ever surprising to the urban educated classes. Most migrants form friendships rather easily and quickly with strangers from the same region or ethnic group. For those who already know each other or hail from the same village or district or even province, kinship terminologies and obligatory relationships appear to be in use. As discussed earlier, many migrants have pre-arranged jobs and places of residence. In this light, we understand how important social networks are to migrants' adjustments in the city.

In addition, institutions that are totally congruent with the Thai sociocultural tradition are utilized as mechanisms for migrants' survival and adjustments in the urban milieu. Patron and client relationships provide a case in point. A migrant

who finds a good patron will likely make use of the patron's resources, e.g. networks of relations to engage in job placement for villagemates and friends. Many long-term migrants switch to independent occupations such as painters, construction contractors, etc. after years of apprenticeship, usually with Chinese master/businessmen. Hence, we also see how a master and apprentice relationship serves to train and prepare a migrant for an eventual career as a master/businessman. Successful and even not too successful migrants also serve as patrons for recent and would-be migrants. Thus, structural mechanisms, even though generally informal, do exist and are highly functional within the migrant society.

In addition, certain existing conditions in Bangkok also facilitate circular migrants' move to Bangkok. The Bangkok urban middle and upper classes are serviced partially through labor provided by other people. In the absence of a completely mechanized or machine operated home environment, the middle and upper classes' laundries need to be washed, houses have to be cleaned, babies and children need to be taken care of, food needs to be cooked. Therefore rural labor to carry out household chores is in great and perpetual demand. The shortage of domestic servants is a rampant source of social complaints in Bangkok. Viewed in this light, rural migration to Bangkok will be readily absorbed at least in this occupational category. This would confirm the figure cited earlier concerning 50% of female migrants residing with their employers.

### **Reasons for migration**

The above model provides in human terms a picture of how and why a rural villager migrates, the way he goes about doing it, and the existing mechanisms which facilitate his undertaking. At least among young and single migrants, migration is motivated by economic reasons along with the great desire to experience new things -- to be able to see, visit, and experience Bangkok. All the potentialities and possibilities that Bangkok can offer are large and even overwhelming; but they are most enticing. Even if most possibilities were out of reach of the average migrant, this does not appear to present a problem. Migrants tend to concentrate on what is available to them. For example, clothes in similar styles but different materials are sold to migrants in market areas instead of in fashionable boutiques. To an outsider rural migrants may appear to be exchanging rural poverty for urban poverty, but to the migrants themselves, urban life can be fun, satisfying and rewarding. Having lived in Bangkok will also confer status on a migrant when he returns to the village either to stay or to visit.<sup>27</sup>

Existing migration literatures have cited reasons for village out-migration, although these reasons have not been systematically analyzed or explained.<sup>28</sup> Such reasons include :

1. the desire to see Bangkok ;
2. to accompany spouse or family ;
3. the enticements or encouragements given by returnees who have migrated ;
4. the dislike for agricultural work ;
5. the monotony and drudgery of village life.

More likely than not the above reasons go together in bringing about a decision to migrate. In other words, each reason is probably not powerful enough in and of itself to effect a decision. But a combination of reasons provides sufficient cumulative effect to stimulate action.

However, the most prevalent and taken for granted assumption and explanation for rural to urban migration is economic. Economic hardship and rural poverty caused by low productivity, low technology and high population growth are seen as the pivotal force in pushing rural populations out of rural areas. This assumption also underlies the basic rationale and philosophy of the architects of the Fifth Plan, who believe that if economic conditions were improved in regional urban centers, then out-migration could automatically be diverted away from Bangkok to these urban centers. Economic solutions tend to be seen as solutions to other existing problems in society as well.

#### **The meaning and function of migration**

Migration in Thailand does not assume a uniform pattern. Differences in the nature of migration render complexity to this phenomenon. Hence, generalizations about the desirability or undesirability of migration, together with policies which are formulated in response to such generalizations, are misdirected and simplistic. The impacts of each type of migration, both on the city and the local village, differ. The impacts of migration should also be analyzed in terms of immediate effect and long-term effect. Research on this topic would clarify matters for us. Thus far, evaluations by older villagers reflect both positive and negative feelings of village out-migration. They worry about young women's behavior and moral uprightness when they are away from their elders. They complain of inconveniences due to the lack of youthful labor. They dislike certain characteristics of independence in the young - stubbornness and disobedience. Other important questions need to be seriously studied: does migration reduce local incentives to cooperate and utilize local resources for development? Reliance on remittances alone can retard local developmental initiatives. Does migration increase social differences in the rural area which may well lead to local conflict? Export labor is a form of migration and should be included in this study as well. How remittance is spent in the village



is also a clue to the relationship between migration and development. How has migration affected the labor force in the rural area is another question that needs to be seriously studied. Short-term migrants return to the rural areas at the peak of each agricultural season. But we do not yet know if labor shortage in the rural area is a real problem or not.

Migrants' positive evaluation of their move aside, local villagers appreciate the remittances which help to improve their standard of living. New houses with corrugated iron or tile roofings have increasingly come into existence. To the village community as a whole, migrants have contributed significantly as well. It is not uncommon for migrants to help build or improve local schools and temples. In fact, many Northeastern migrants have institutionalized an annual visit to their home village to make merit at the local temple. The organization of this kind of trip requires a lot of work, time and energy. But it is also an avenue through which village solidarity, cohesiveness, identity and sentimental ties are maintained over the years. Typically, most migrants from the same village hold meetings, discussions, and arrangements for this annual visit. Then money is raised for offering to the temple. On the appointed date of departure (for many villages, this visit coincides with the Chinese New Year because a lot of migrants work in Chinese businesses and homes), a bus (or buses) is chartered. Then the migrants converge on the bus amidst laughter, songs and music as they journey back to the village. Once in the village, festivities go on, climaxing at the ritual of presentation of money to the temple or school. Often the bus is chartered to bring the young migrants back to Bangkok once again.

Material improvements also attest to migrants' contributions to the rural area--radios, electrical appliances where there is electricity, and other symbols of affluence.<sup>20</sup> Too, the villagers are impressed by migrants' practices concerning hygiene and body care, by migrants' ability to prepare different dishes and desserts, and by their seemingly polished and refined mannerisms and clothes.

In a very important way, migration has helped to bridge the gap between the rural and urban sectors. Interactions between the sectors are made possible through the migrants. Contrary to the generally accepted belief that migration creates problems for the city and therefore must be discouraged, we believe that migration is a mechanism which helps to merge the two mutually exclusive worlds of rurality and urbanism, by transforming the differences into that of socioeconomic differences. Bangkok and urban culture of yesteryears were more exclusively the urbanites' private domain than they are today. The heterogeneity of the city today reflects better the diversity that exists in the nation as a whole. Northeastern food is sold practically on every street corner. Regional dialects are spoken openly and

with pride. Modern clothes and other goods are sold to the rich as well as to the poor, but usually in an imitation model. Movie theatres, department stores, entertainment places are frequented by urbanites and migrants as well. In this sense, migration is partially responsible for greater sociocultural egalitarianism in society.

#### **Recapitulation – Migration re-examined**

From the above discussion, a few fundamental assumptions concerning migration and urbanization need to be reexamined. First of all, decentralization of urban centers may not necessarily reduce or divert the flow of migration from the Bangkok metropolis to other urban centers. At least among the young and single temporary migrants, going to Bangkok means more than an economic exercise. The fun, excitement, adventure, prestige and status that a Bangkok experience can provide far outweighs economic considerations. Secondly, migrants do not significantly create or contribute to urban social and economic problems. Their expectations, demands and requirements are low and more easily satisfied, especially if they did not plan to stay permanently in the city. A majority of them find work and do not become unemployed and restless. Since at least half of the women migrants and a good percentage of the males as well, reside with their employers, housing problems of the city should not be attributed singly or centrally to the migrants. Thirdly, the impacts of migration on urban and rural areas need to be studied systematically and scientifically. In at least one aspect, migration has helped to equalize social disparity – the Bangkok metropolis, despite all its shortcomings, has become more diversified and responsive to different segments of Thai society.

Aside from fulfilling a young person's dreams of experiencing the city, many young Thai people have incorporated migration to Bangkok as a stage in their life cycle. Young and single men and women from the rural areas migrate to Bangkok for a period in their lives prior to marriage or prior to having children and having to settle down. Many sojourners or temporary migrants eventually return to the rural areas, just as do export laborers who seek money in the Middle East. Serious research ought to be undertaken as regards the extent to which migrants return to the rural areas once they start to bring up a family. There are migrants who migrate as a family, and there are also married male or female migrants with children who choose to leave their children behind in the rural area with relatives. Parenthetically, however, it should be noted that the majority of migrants in Bangkok consist of young and single people, those who compose the circular migration pattern.

Another issue which is neglected by the literature on migration is the importance of personal income to the individual migrant. This is because the rural family performs the combined role of production and consumption, which means that household income and resources are to be shared and utilized by members of the

family as a single entity. But in reality, heads of household (or just one head of household) control decisions on how to spend their resources. Where cash is in limited supply, as in the situation of most rural Thai families, it is difficult, if not miserable, for young men and women not to have personal incomes – cash to spend on desired goods. This is one major reason which migrants give for moving to Bangkok. The excitements of Bangkok entice them along with the comforting notion that they will earn money (however small the amount may be) by themselves and for themselves. Migrants are pleased too that the situation is reversed for them once they become cash earners. Now their parents have to request, demand, or even beg for money from them instead of the other way around. Peasant economy, as Chayanov has so well analyzed, ought to be differentiated from other types of economies.<sup>80</sup> The peasant economy can also pose tensions within the family especially when it is practised in this era. This can be attributed to changed rural conditions, which extend to the following considerations :

1) rural families are much less isolated from the outside world than before;

2) commercial consumerism as propagated and propagandized by the mass media and telecommunication systems has indiscriminately created needs and desires for modern consumer goods;

3) contacts and interactions with the external world have also caused the rural young to require cash for entertainment in the form of paying to be entertained by performers.

In sum, dependence on cash (money) has increased, particularly on the part of young individuals. Migration is therefore a functional means toward achieving self-esteem, economic independence, and individual self-worth.

Are we then to conclude that the Fifth Plan which proposes to decentralize urban areas is a misguided effort? We think not. What this paper attempts to do is to point out the complex nature of the urbanization and migration process. The basic notion of creating regional urban centers and small towns both to counter Bangkok's primacy and to serve as centers of development and linkages with their respective rural areas is a sound idea that is highly commendable and worthy of implementation. The problems, however, lie with how to implement ensuing policies of decentralization. Even if the government were to seriously commit itself to a huge and prolonged investment in regional urban centers, there is no assurance that regional urban economy and industry will "take off" readily. More importantly, the creation of regional urban centers and small towns will not automatically deter or divert migration to Bangkok. In the foreseeable future, young and single migrants will continue to be attracted to Bangkok. But regional urban centers could

be promoted to attract older migrants, especially migrant families. Those who migrate primarily for economic reasons will assess the advantages available to them in such urban areas. Hence, it will be useful to adopt migration management techniques through information and other services<sup>31</sup> to direct the flow of this type of migration to regional urban centers and small towns.

Because Bangkok is expected to provide the most excitement, status, prestige, and adventures which draw migrants from everywhere, especially from the Northeast, migrants will likely migrate to Bangkok as long as they are young and single. In terms of policy implications, regional urban centers should be promoted as symbols of prestige, excitement, adventures and status as well as being economically viable centers. Recognizing that regional urban centers will not likely equal Bangkok in terms of the above, at least they should be promoted along this line. The Fifth Plan's attention to promoting regional identity as a source of pride essentially misses the heart of the problem. Ethnic and regional pride and identity can be independent of migration decisions. Northeasterners today are living testimonials to the above argument. Northeasterners are proud of both their ethnicity and heritage, but they comprise the majority of migrants to Bangkok today.

## Notes

1. An exception to this is an excellent article by Suchitra Punyaratabandhu-Bhakdi, "Structural Problems in the Governance of Bangkok", paper presented at the Conference on "Two Hundred Years of the Chakri Dynasty," Northern Illinois University, Nov. 11-13, 1982.
2. Sternstein, Larry, "Chain Migration to the Primate City: the Case of Bangkok," *Journal of Tropical Geography*, 41 : 70-4, 1975.
3. *The Survey of Migration in Bangkok Metropolis, 1981*, National Statistical Office, Office of the Prime Minister.
4. See Tables 1-5.
5. Fuller, Theodore, "Satisfaction with Urban Life: the Judgement of Villagers Transplanted to Small Urban Centers in Thailand," *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 1980.
6. Sternstein, Larry, "Internal Migration and Regional Development: the Khon Kaen Development Centre of Northeast Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Volume 8, No. 1, 1977.
7. Sternstein, Larry, *Ibid.*
8. Sternstein, Larry, *Ibid.*
9. *The Survey of Migration in Bangkok Metropolis, 1981*, National Statistical Office, Office of the Prime Minister.

10. Kamnualsilpa, Pirasit, *Migration and Development*, forthcoming.
  11. Sternstein, L., *Op. cit.*, 1975.
  12. *The Survey of Migration in Bangkok Metropolis, 1981*, N.S.O.
  13. *Ibid.*
  14. Chamratrithirong, Aphichat, et. al., *Recent Migrants in Bangkok Metropolis*, Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, 1979.
  15. *The Survey of Migration in Bangkok Metropolis*, N.S.O.
  16. Chamratrithirong, A, et. al., *Op. cit.*
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. Fuller, Theodore, "Migrant-Native Socioeconomic Differential in Thailand," *Demography*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 1981.
  19. *Ibid.*
  20. Fuller, T., *Op. cit.*, 1981.
  21. Tirasawat, Penporn, "Economic and Housing Adjustment of Migrants in Greater Bangkok", *International Migration Review*, 12 : 93-103, 1978.
  22. Fuller, T., *Op. cit.*, 1980.
  23. Nelson, Joan M., "Sojourners Versus New Urbanites : Causes and Consequences of Temporary Versus Permanent Cityward Migration in Developing Countries," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 24 : 721-757, 1976.
  24. Kamnualsilpa, P., *Op. cit.*
  25. Embree, John F., "Thailand: The Loosely Structured Social System," *American Anthropologist*, 52 (1950) : 181-93. This article was the forerunner of this line of thought which dominated Thai studies for a great number of years.
  26. From an interview I conducted for a preliminary study of Northeastern migrants in Bangkok.
  27. Kamnualsilpa, P., *Op. cit.*
  28. This idea is expressed by many authors although not in exact same terms. See for example research report by Sunthorntada Amar and Orapan Hawchangsinh, Research Report No. 55, Mahidol University, September 1981 (in Thai) and article by Krisnapoote, Vilaivat in *Khon Kaen Social Science Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1981 or see Chamratrithirong, Aphichat, et. al., *Recent Migrants in Bangkok Metropolis*, Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, 1979.
  29. Krisnapoote, V., *Op. cit.*
  30. Chaynov, A.V., *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. Daniel Thorner, B. Kerblay, R.E.F. Smith (Homewood, Ill. : Richard D. Irwin, for the American Economic Association, 1966, originally published in 1926).
  31. Kamnualsilpa, P., *Op. cit.*
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