

Rural migration network in Northeast Thailand: A case study in the upper watershed of the Songkhram River

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ABSTRACT

Rural migration was formerly an important custom by which farmers obtained new farmland in Northeast Thailand, but this tradition is now in decline because of lack of suitable land for reclamation. Comparison of two series of topographic maps of the 1950s and the 1980s reveals many new villages on maps of the 1980s. Some of the newly established villages are branches of nearby villages, while others are located far from villages that existed on maps of the 1950s. I focus on such newly established villages to study the rural migration network, since it is expected that some of the first generation of migrants are still alive in these villages, and many of the second generation who migrated with their parents are playing important roles there.

This is an interim report after the first survey of my current research project at a target village, here called Ban N, in the upper watershed of the Songkhram River, where there are many newly established villages. Using data of geographical distance, overall characteristics of the target community relating to birth places and migration are discussed. The villagers of Ban N can be classified into two generations, and four stages can be recognized in the history of the community.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Songkhram River is one of the three major branches of the Mekong River in Northeast Thailand. Its watershed covers northeastern Udon Thani Province, eastern Nong Khai Province, most of Sakon Nakhon Province, and northern Nakhon Phanom Province. According to topographic maps of the 1950s, villages were sparsely distributed in the upper watershed of the Songkhram River. Topographic maps of the 1980s, however, show many new villages, especially in areas that were classified as forest in the 1950s. For example, a topographic map of the 1950s covering a rectangular area of about 490 square kilometers between 17°40' and 17°50' north latitude, and between 103°15' and 103°30' east longitude, shows 19 villages, whereas the corresponding map of the 1980s shows 61 villages. Some of the newly established villages in Northeast Thailand are apparently branches of nearby villages, while others are located far from villages that existed on maps of the 1950s.

Rural migration was an important custom by which farmers could obtain enough farmland in Northeast Thailand. In the early 1980s, Fukui conducted detailed studies on agroecology in a Thai-Lao village in Khon Kaen Province. He reported details on migration, such as origins and destinations of migrants, reasons for immigration and emigration, and migration for employment (Fukui 1993). But nowadays, this tradition is declining because of lack of suitable land for reclamation.

While Fukui's target village has a long history of almost one and a half centuries, there are, as noted above, many newly established villages with histories of less than half a century

in the upper watershed of the Songkhram River. It is expected that some of the first generation and many of the second generation of migrants are still alive in these new villages.

My primary interests are how pioneer farmers found new lands for farming, where they migrated from, and why they had to find new lands in these new isolated villages. In a preliminary survey in June, 2008, interviews with senior people and village leaders in about 20 villages revealed that their reasons for migration are almost the same, but their original homes are many and various. Some farmers migrated from 300 km away, and they are by no means exceptional with regard to the migration distance. Households from many different provinces are represented in such frontier villages.

In August, 2008, I conducted a detailed survey at household level in one from the villages surveyed in June. I obtained much information relating to rural migration, and data analysis is still in progress. This is an interim report.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Target Village

The target village is here called Ban N. Administratively, it is located in Ban Dung District, Udon Thani Province, Thailand. Geographically, it is located in the upper-to-middle watershed of the Songkhram River. According to the overview booklet of Ban N issued in 2007, Ban N was officially established in 1963. Its population in 2007 was 850 people in 173 households. A primary school and a day nursery are located in the village, but the nearest secondary school is 11 km away. A Buddhist temple received certification as a *wat* in 2007, and there is a Christian monastery which is almost abandoned.

In late August 2008, I conducted a household-level survey in the village. The major interview issues were: year and place of birth, year and place of marriage, household structure, migration history, agricultural activities, and religious activities. In total, 146 households were interviewed. The remaining 37 households had not been resident for long at the time of the interview.

2.2 Geographical Preprocess

The interview items included location information at village level, such as places of birth, marriage, and past residence. Such location information was checked for its geographical coordinates, longitude and latitude, based on the name at village, *tambon*, district, and province levels. Topographic maps of the 1950s and the 1980s were the basic geographical materials used for this process. Some present-day road maps were used to check boundaries at the *tambon* level, which is the upper local administrative unit of the village.

The greatest difficulty in this process derives from changes in name at every administrative level. This resulted in significant differences between the names known to informants and present names, especially in the case of senior informants.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Birth Places

Of 289 informants and their spouses, the birth places of 273 people are known at village level. Of these, the birth places of 200 people can be identified in terms of their locations in geographic coordinates.

Figures 1 and 2 show the distance of original homes from Ban N for males and females, respectively. According to these figures, villagers can be roughly separated into two groups by age: a) over 45 years, and b) 45 years or less. Here, they are called the senior generation and the meridian generation, respectively.

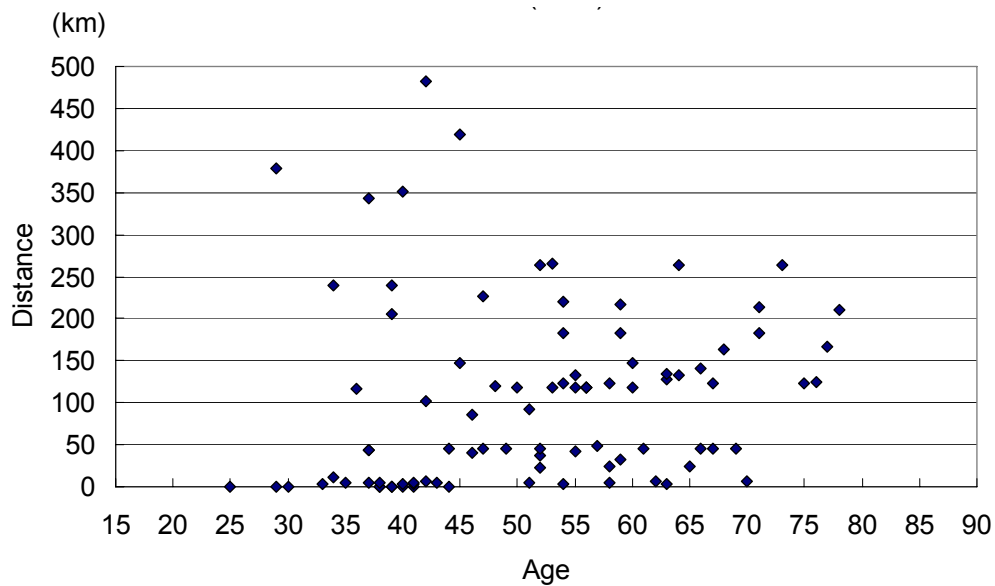


Figure 1. Distance of Original Homes (Male)

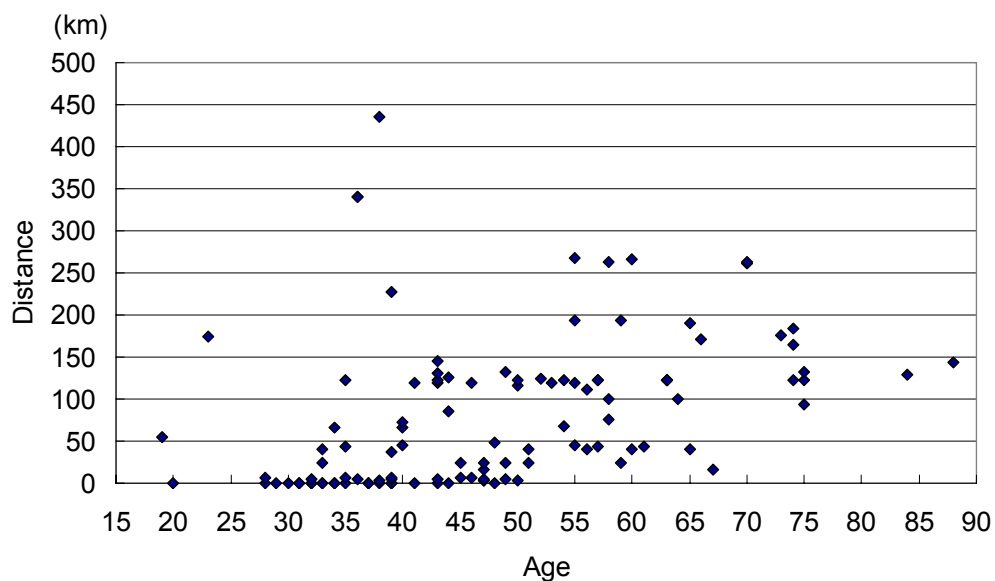


Figure 2. Distance of Original Homes (Female)

Figures 3 and 4 are cumulative distributions of distance of original homes from Ban N by generation and sex. These figures reveal some significant points about the original homes of each generation. Only about 10 percent of the senior generation were born in neighboring villages of Ban N, whereas about 60 percent of the meridian generation were so. About 60 percent of the senior generation were born more than 100 km away, but less than 300 km away. Less than 30 percent of the meridian generation were born more than 100 km away, and their distances are more scattered than those from the senior generation. The farthest place from the meridian generation is almost 500 km away.

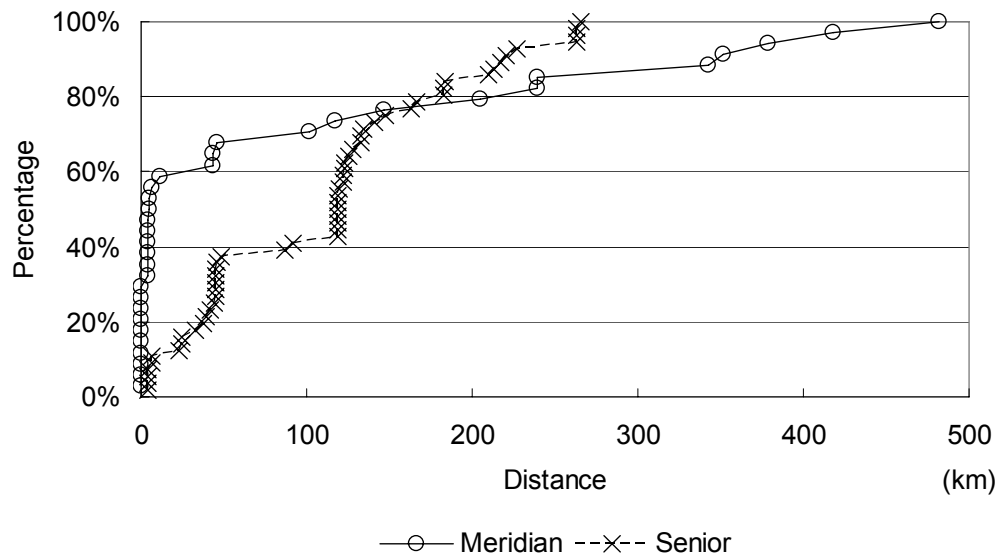


Figure 3. Cumulative Distribution of Distance of Original Homes (Male)

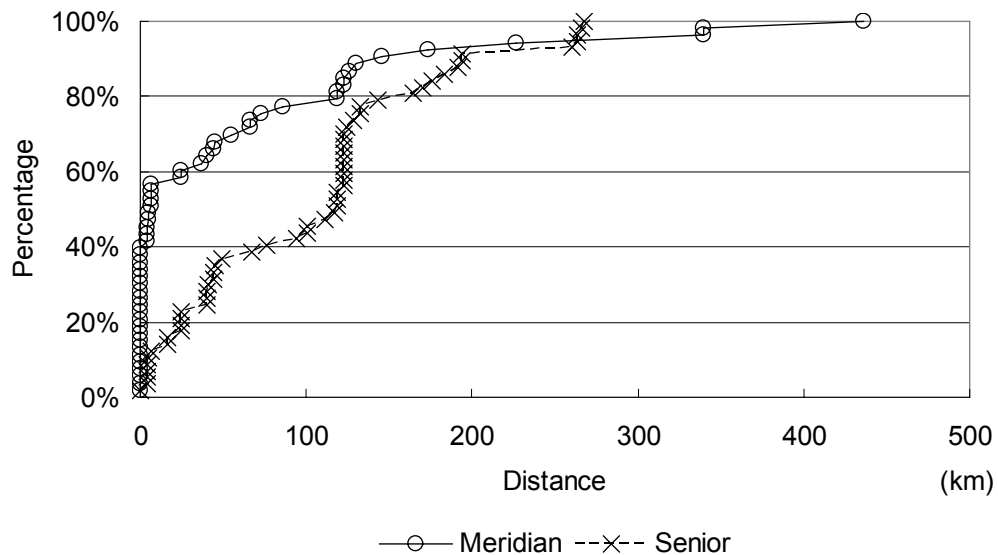


Figure 4. Cumulative Distribution of Distance of Original Homes (Female)

More careful observation of Figures 3 and 4 reveals other slight but significant differences between males and females. Those born in the Ban N account for about 30 percent of the male meridian generation but about 40 percent of the female meridian

generation. This difference may have resulted from the custom of uxorilocality (Fukui 1993). Those born more than 100 km away account for about 30 percent of the male meridian generation but about 20 percent of the female meridian generation. Thus, male immigrants tend to have come farther than female immigrants in the meridian generation. The same tendency can also be observed for the senior generation, though it is not so clearly significant.

3.2 Migration

Rural immigration was indispensable for the establishment of Ban N and for many years for expansion. Many migrants came from various distant areas: only about 10 percent of the senior generation have their origins in neighboring villages.

Figure 5 shows the cumulative number of new households established by year. The year of establishment is the year of immigration for immigrant households, and the year of marriage for households in which at least one spouse was born in Ban N. Some households are excluded since their migration histories are not clear. Also, the number of households which have emigrated to other areas are not included, as I could not obtain data on them. In this sense, Figure 5 shows estimates, but it should correlate well with the actual number of households at each year. The solid line represents the cumulative number of all households, and the dashed one represents the cumulative number of immigrant households.

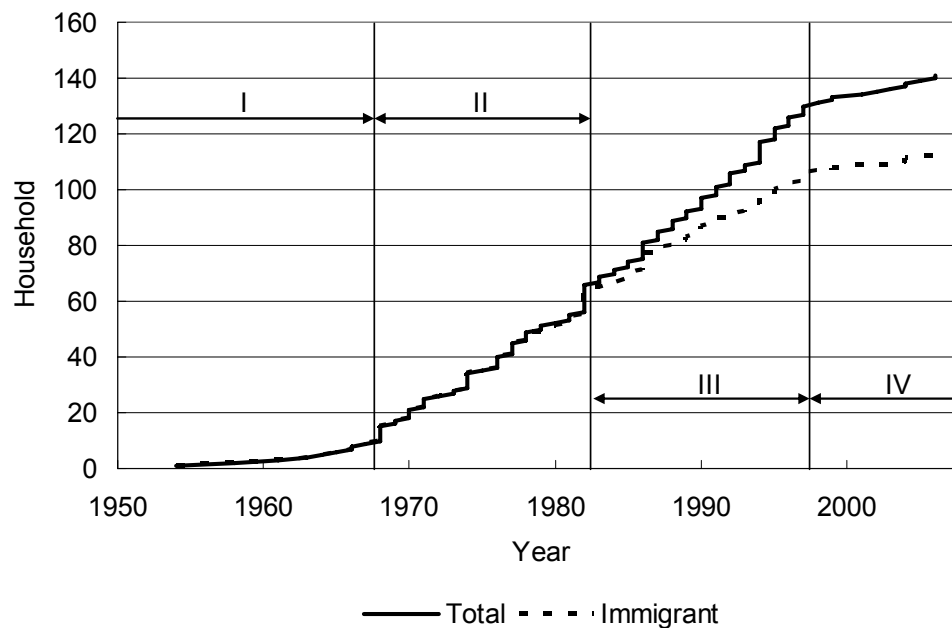


Figure 5. Cumulative Number of New Households by Year

From Figure 5, the history of this community can be divided into four stages: I) the early stage until 1967, II) a growth stage of 15 years between 1968 and 1982, III) a growth and reproduction stage of 15 years between 1983 and 1997, and IV) a slowing down stage after 1998.

In the early stage, households increased by only one per year. However, there must be many households missing from the record, either due to emigration or death of all household members.

In the growth stage, the number of households increased steadily at a rate of almost four households per year, and at the end of this stage, it reached about half of the present number. The third stage, the growth and reproduction stage, shows the same overall tendency as the previous stage, with households increasing at a rate of almost four per year. A significant difference, however, is that the number of immigrant households is less than three per year, while the remainder are derived from new couples, at least one of whom was born in the community. Roughly one third of the increase in households is reproductive. In the recent stage, the slowing down stage, the rate of increase in household numbers is as low as only one per year, and almost all new households are reproductive. In other words, this stage can be called the saturated stage.

4. CONCLUSION

This is, as mentioned in the beginning, an interim report of the first survey of my current research project. Much of the data obtained through interviews remains to be processed and correlated with other items not covered in this report. Thereafter, a supplementary survey in Ban N will be needed. Kinship relations are another important factor in rural communities, but I have not considered such sociological factors at this moment. Nevertheless, this report shows a basic overview of rural migration and the turning points of the community establishment of Ban N. Further surveys in different villages in differently situated areas may allow me to make a comparative study of rural migration.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

During the survey, Mr. Sopsan Petchkam and Mr. Wirat Ritthitham conducted interviews with villagers. Without their friendly and sincere approach to villagers, I could not have obtained important information. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to them both.

6. REFERENCES

Fukui, H., 1993, *Food and Population in a Northeast Thai Village*, University of Hawaii Press