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Chapter 3

The Importance of Being Wrong: Interpreting the Roots of Change in Rural Thailand

Jonathan Rigg

Abstract This chapter reflects on more than three decades of ‘being wrong’. In so doing, it partly highlights the point that we should expect to be wrong when it comes to research in the social sciences and humanities, and possibly be wrong more than ‘right’. Being wrong is nothing to hide: our ideas need to be exposed to being proved, in time, wrong. Evidently, this is the way in which we get things right. The chapter dwells on four aspects of error, focusing in turn on the methods we use, the theoretical or conceptual framings we employ, our interpretations of the ‘data’ we generate, and the histories we recount. To make the case, the chapter will draw and reflect on field research in rural Thailand.

Keywords Thailand • Research • Methods • Fieldwork • Error • Rural

3.1 Introduction

Why does scholarship so often prove to be wrong about the nature and direction of change? Why do we, social scientists, either fail to anticipate key developments or, with hindsight, provide faulty interpretations of the processes underway? Is such a litany of anticipatory and explanatory failure necessarily a problem? The reasons for explanatory failure are multiple and interlocking. It is not simply that ‘stuff happens’, and no one can foresee such matters. It also speaks to the nature of social science and the ways that theoretical perspectives, conceptual framings and methodological approaches narrow the remit of our research and therefore open up the possibilities for

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error-making. Of course, narrowing down is something that we are forced to do in a world of endless possibilities. But this is also a process of omission, and those omissions may prove, in time, to be critical.

We need to be wrong, and be willing to be wrong, in order to be right. The important issue is to understand *why* error makes its way so irrevocably into research in the social sciences and humanities, and then to make a positive case for productive error-making. The empirical examples that I use to make this case are drawn from my own work, over more than three decades, on matters of agrarian change in Southeast Asia and more particularly Thailand.

3.2 The Error Context: Thailand

Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn are two Thai villages that I have been studying since the early 1980s. I use the villages as the empirical pivot for the chapter and begin by introducing them through three quick-and-dirty vignettes from 1982, 1994 and 2008, pairing these vignettes with extracts from the relevant Thai five-year national economic and social development plans produced by the national planning agency, the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB).¹ These plans are useful encapsulations of the development state of play, at least from an official point of view, at these particular development junctures.²

3.2.1 *Vignette 1: Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn in 1982*

In 1982 Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn were semi-subsistence, rice-growing villages, like most other such settlements in the northeastern region of Thailand. While not isolated from the provincial capital, mobility was limited and most people made a living through growing rain-fed glutinous rice to meet their subsistence needs,

¹ For pictures of the villages over time, see my photo essay in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (Rigg 2019b).

² While these national plans are domestic planning documents, they speak closely to the World Development Reports of the World Bank. They therefore bring international debates into conversation with the Thai context. This was especially true of earlier plans when the NESDB drew quite extensively on World Bank expertise and input.

and upland crops, mostly cassava, to generate a modest income. Life revolved around the village and the demands of agriculture. Men travelled occasionally, women even less; native and improved varieties of rice predominated; incomes were low and material deprivation widespread; few people had an education beyond a primary level; and the coresidential household was the basic social unit. The development prospects for the villages and the livelihoods of the households were far from bright. The sense at the time, in the wake of the second oil price rise, was that Thailand would experience slow growth over the medium term and rural livelihoods in this historically poor and environmentally marginal region and province would likewise improve only gradually. The village came quite close to Jacques Amyot's (1976: 45) description of the Thai village as 'an intimate universe' where society, space and production interleaved. The *Fifth national economic and social development plan (1982–1986)*, released just before I began my fieldwork, captured the perceived development challenges of the era as follows:

world economic changes during the past 7–8 years, particularly the rise in energy price, international financial crisis, high inflation and low economic growth, have greatly affected the Thai economy because our economy is heavily dependent on international trade, and imports of energy, capital and many other factors of production. Meanwhile, we have not adequately adjusted the structure of our economy to cope with changes in world economic conditions. Our problems are compounded by political tensions in neighbouring countries which have created greater economic tension and a larger defence burden.... It should be remembered that most of the problems we are now facing are structural problems which cannot be solved with simple ad-hoc solutions, but require understanding and cooperation from all sides. We will have to accept facts of life by lowering our expectations, and adapt ourselves to new world economic changes. In the beginning, we may face hardships, but it is vital for us to create a national economic discipline in order to allow the socio-economic system to adjust in the right direction to be capable of withstanding future world economic changes. (NESDB 1982: 2)

3.2.2 Vignette 2: Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn in 1994

By the mid-1990s the villages had been transformed at a speed and to a degree that I simply had not anticipated—but then, to be fair to myself, nor had many scholars or commentators. Traditional and improved varieties of rice had been replaced by hybrid varieties; personal mobility was significantly greater, for both men and women; educational levels had risen; material conditions had improved significantly; and income poverty had steeply declined. In 1981 36% of the population of northeast Thailand lived below the (very low) national poverty line; in 1992 the figure was 22% (Feeny 2003: 34; and also see Moore and Donaldson 2016).³

What scholars and practitioners did not see coming, of course, was Thailand's transformation from a slow-growing economy beset with problems to a miracle economy. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the kingdom was the fastest-growing large country economy in the world.⁴ This came about because of a massive increase in foreign direct investment, propelled by changes in the global economy and particularly the appreciation of the Japanese yen against the US dollar. These changes in the global economy impacted on Thailand and, in turn, rippled through to conditions in Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn. Land was no longer a key marker and determinant of wealth, and the land poor seemed to be able to lift themselves out of poverty through engagement with nonfarm work beyond the village. The increase in female mobility, as young women took advantage of jobs in export-oriented factories, was especially pronounced and surprising given the social codes that had formerly militated against women's mobility. The *Eighth national economic and social development plan (1997–2001)* (NESDB 1996), released a few years after a follow-up study of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn that I undertook in 1994, lauded Thailand's modernisation experience:

Thailand has achieved an exceptional record of economic development over the last 30 years, as witnessed by the rapid expansion of the national economy at an average rate of 7.8 per cent per annum. The Kingdom's average per capita income reached 68,000 baht in 1995, compared with only 2,100 baht in 1961. The drop in numbers of people living in absolute poverty has surpassed all expectations, falling to only 13.7 per cent of the population in 1992, far outstripping the Seventh Plan's target of 20 per cent by the end of 1996.

³ The respective figures for the whole of Thailand were 24% and 13%.

⁴ That is, discounting such city-states as Hong Kong and Singapore.

Thailand's sound economic position is internationally recognized. In addition, sustained public investment in economic and social infrastructure has made a significant contribution to an overall rise in incomes, living conditions and quality of life. (ibid.: 1)

3.2.3 *Vignette 3: Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn in 2008*

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn were, in many respects, 'deagrarianised'. The trends that had emerged during the second period of fieldwork in 1994 had cemented. Farming was no longer the linchpin of rural livelihoods; few of the younger generation saw farming as a likely or a respectable occupation; farmwork was increasingly the preserve of the elderly; the buffalo as a working farm animal was effectively extinct; villagers were spatially mobile, commercially astute and voracious consumers; and extreme poverty had been effectively eradicated, even if relative poverty continued to be a feature of the village. Debates over well-being and quality of life had, by then, replaced those over poverty. The *Tenth national economic and social development plan (2007–2011)* noted the multiple crises that had afflicted the country in the decade before its release, warning against the hubris that had characterised the country during the miracle years (and reflected in the previous above):

The economic crisis was a lesson in unbalanced and unsustainable development partly caused by an approach to economic and social development which, unlike the royally initiated approach to development, did not take into account the context of the country, its socio-geographical conditions, status of organizations, readiness of manpower or administrative system of the country. Thailand at that time depended on imported knowledge, technologies, capital, or markets without having built strong internal foundations or resilience against internal and external fluctuations. At the same time, an accumulation of unsolved problems became the structural weaknesses of the Thai economy and society, causing unfair distribution of capital, development, income and benefits, multitudes of social problems as well as a decline in morality and quality of environment and natural resources. (NESDB 2006: 11)

3.3 From Vignette to Explanation

The straightforward way to account for my—and many others’—failure to see these era-defining changes in society, economy and livelihoods is to fall back on a historical explanation. Who seriously thought, in the wake of the second oil price rise, that Thailand—along with Indonesia and Malaysia—would become, by the middle of the decade, emergent ‘miracle’ economies? (World Bank 1993) Who predicted that at the moment of Thailand’s greatest economic success in 1997, and reflected in the hubris of the eighth plan, the edifice of growth would come crashing down with the onset of the Asian financial crisis, leading the economy to contract by more than 10% and millions to be thrown out of work?

While historical factors are important, we cannot simply resort to the explanation that ‘stuff happens’. This is not a sufficient explanation for what I misinterpreted or simply missed. More significant is a less immediately obvious set of factors that relate to the very nature of method in the social sciences. These can be arrayed under four broad headings (the fourth of which brings history back into the discussion):

- Theoretical framing and problem statement
- Conceptual categorisation and objects of attention
- Methodology and analysis
- Interpretation and the ripples of history

3.3.1 *Theoretical Framing and Problem Statement*

When I formulated my PhD proposal, I had never travelled to northeast Thailand. I had only a very sketchy impression of what I would find, all informed by ‘the literature’ on Thailand, which I was intent on surveying as best I could from several thousand kilometres away, in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. My views were also shaped by the literature animating scholars of rural development. Michael Lipton’s *Why poor people stay poor: Urban bias in world development* was published in 1977, drawing mainly on his experience of South Asia. Robert Chambers’s *Putting the last first* was published in 1983, when I was in the

field, although related work on rapid rural appraisal was being published before that date. These were defining texts for scholars interested in rural and agricultural development. The localist and indigenous turn against high modernism—the Green Revolution and state-led projects of development—was causing scholars and practitioners to rethink what *the* problem of the rural was, where it was located and how it might best be addressed. There was growing disenchantment with the ability of governments, experts and science to address rural underdevelopment in the Global South. My PhD was informed by these texts and the arguments of the day:

it is arguable that the agricultural policies so far initiated [by the Thai government] are either poorly implemented or are out of tune with farmers' requirements, for a minimal proportion are utilising the resources which the government has (apparently) made available [not least] high yielding varieties of rice. (Rigg 1985: 49)

In the year that I completed my PhD, Paul Richards (1985: 9) published *Indigenous agricultural revolution*, with a focus on West Africa, in which he noted the 'width of the gap between what science has to offer and the needs of typical West African small-scale farmers'. I attended some of his classes in London.

I took these ideas and assumptions with me into the fields and homes of Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn. It shaped the questions I asked, how I chose to ask them, what I looked for and therefore saw, and how—when I returned and wrote up—I interpreted what I saw. In retrospect, it is easy to identify the things I privileged: the rural over the urban; sedentary over mobile lives; local and indigenous knowledge over expert knowledge; production over reproduction; and farm over nonfarm. This privileging was not always 'wrong', but it did take my research in certain directions, and therefore not in others. The directionality of my work was informed as much by books, journal papers and the seminar room as it was by 'the field'. Indeed, the field that I saw and recounted was a product of what I had read. In a real sense, it came into view through the literature that I had absorbed.

Research in the social sciences has to be 'framed', normally in terms of some combination of aims, objectives and research questions. Sometimes scholars use hypotheses, problem statements or puzzles as organising or framing conventions. There is good reason for this. It encourages a scholar to be clear about what it is they are doing, and possibly why they are doing it. Scholars make a case for 'significance'

and this, too, is made in quite particular ways. Some issues are thought to be important because they catch a policy moment or an academic wave. But pinning down what we do in this manner is also a form of narrowing, and therefore of selection. Framing—or what is sometimes termed the explanatory ‘lens’—becomes a set of blinkers (Burawoy 2009: 194). Tacit in such a process is the prioritisation of certain things relative to others. What makes an objective or aim interesting, significant or important? What shapes a question or hypothesis? The answers to these questions are not self-evident; the aims and questions emerge out of the way in which research ‘problems’ or ‘gaps’ are identified. Discourses of development, for instance, make problems ‘real’ and therefore worthy of study, and predetermine how they are articulated. This is powerfully set out in Timothy Mitchell’s *Rule of experts: Egypt, techno-politics, modernity*:

Fields of analysis often develop a convention for introducing their object. Such tropes come to be seen as too obvious and straightforward to question.... Objects of analysis do not occur as natural phenomena, but are partly formed by the discourse that describes them. The more natural the object appears, the less obvious this discursive manufacture will be. (Mitchell 2002: 210)

These discourses are varied and sometimes at odds. They emerge from the literature and the way that certain areas of work attain a particular status or import in the scholarly milieu. In the last decade, for example, ‘resilience’ has become a theme of the moment both in areas of scholarly development debate and policy-making, latterly morphing into a focus on ‘equitable resilience’ (Matin et al. 2018). Another set of examples can be seen reflected and reproduced in the *State of land in the Mekong region* report (Ingalls et al. 2018). This report frames the ‘state of land’ question for the countries of the Mekong region as follows:

- State of land in Cambodia: marginalising or centring smallholder farmers?
- State of land in Lao PDR: turning land into capital for whom?
- State of land in Myanmar: land reform or new dynamics of land alienation?
- State of land in Thailand: smallholder security or structural inequality?
- State of land in Vietnam: land for livelihood or land for development?

We might ask: How were these framings arrived at? From where did they come? And more pertinently, what does such a framing mean for how we come to see the land question in each of these countries and, therefore, the policies that might emerge? The

executive summary of the *State of land in the Mekong region* report makes a number of claims and judgments, for instance: that ‘understanding the changing role and contribution of land to development is critical’; that there are ‘key data and information [necessary] to identify and describe important issues and processes’; that these issues lie in ‘five domains’; that there are ‘a number of key indicators within each of these domains’; and that ‘data and information on [these] key indicators are disaggregated and examined to identify country-specific conditions and trajectories of change’ (Ingalls et al. 2018: xiv). This sort of sifting and prioritisation is not restricted to matters of policy, animated at a particular historical juncture and, sometimes, in a particular place (such as with this report). Objects of study may also emerge out of a particular theoretical approach that has attained (pre-)eminent status.

The point is that no research project emerges from the ether, magically conjured into existence from a miasma of facts and processes which the scholar carefully sifts, unimpeded by prior assumptions. The project is a product of a certain intellectual and policy era, perhaps of a certain geographical space (country or region), and, without doubt, of a certain disciplinary context.

Returning to my two Thai villages, I did not enter that rural space unencumbered. While I had never worked in rural Thailand up until that point, I had read a great deal. This set the context for my project, ensuring right from the start that I paid attention to some things and not to others, collected data in a certain manner, and found myself chasing down certain hares, but not others. My work was far from inductive and exploratory. More specifically, this prior knowledge was reflected in the conceptual categorisations that I used to ‘operationalise’ my research.

3.3.2 Conceptual Categorisation and Objects of Attention

As researchers, we are inured to the idea that we need to define and demarcate, to signify and separate. The definitions we employ, the categories we choose and the lines we draw are not natural. They are artificial but we often assume they map onto some reality—that they have emerged *a posteriori* following decades of careful fieldwork, rather than *a priori*. I address three here, which demarcate and corral much of my research: *the rural*, *the village* and *the household*. These are almost second-

order tropes, not as powerful as those that Mitchell explores, but in a sense even more significant because they seem so much more ‘natural’. That in writing of ‘the village’ or ‘the household’ all we are doing is giving words to natural facts.

The rural is often used as a synonym for the countryside, the ‘first’ rural, ‘that we typically regard as prior: the epistemology of rural as space, as lower population density, as (at times) primary production, as nature, as the non-urban which is so plain to see—the *material moment* of the rural’ (Bell 2007: 408) (see Table 3.1). In Thai, this is *chonnabot* and it comprises the space that governments aim to develop and modernise and which I, in 1982, set out to study and understand. This first rural, in turn, comprises villages, and these provide the entry point for thousands of ‘village studies’ across Southeast Asia. Like other scholars, I saw ‘the village’ as a natural container that held not just people—villagers—but also circumscribed their lives and livelihoods. Villages, in turn, were made up of households, as coresidential dwelling units based on the propinquity of their members. I sought to find ‘my’ village and reveal or expose the households therein. I focused relentlessly on the village as my initial entry point, and households in villages as the social units that I would need to count, survey and understand if I were to appreciate the developmental context of the village and, scaling up, the rural development challenge that northeast Thailand faced at that time. There was a scalar and social logic to my research that was antecedent to my arrival in Thailand.

Table 3.1 Delineating the first, second and third rural

| First rural | Second rural | Third rural |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Visually rural—the countryside | Social norms and behaviour | Mobile living |
| Low population density | Consumptions patterns and processes | Multisited livelihoods |
| Farming (primary production) | Social interactions | Hybrid/hermaphrodite spaces |
| Nature | Aspirations and preferences | Occupational multiplicity |
| Nonurban | <i>Baan nok</i> | Peasant cosmopolitan (Keyes 2014) |
| <i>Chonnabot</i> | Political and cultural identities | |
| Peasant | Middle-income peasant (Walker 2012) | |

Source Rigg (2019a), drawing on Rigg (2013) and Bell (2007)

Note This table is to be read downwards and not across

What became clear to me, but only in time, was that the first rural is not enough. There is also a second rural which focuses on social norms, behaviours, consumption practices, aspirations and preferences that are emblematic of rural life, living and society (the Thai term *baan nok* probably encapsulates this), and a third rural which constitutes patterns of rural living and livelihoods. Any consideration of the second and third rural necessitates that we look beyond the first rural: rural sensibilities can be found in urban contexts, just as urban norms and behaviours can infiltrate rural spaces; and rural livelihoods are often thoroughly nonrural in their location and nonagricultural in their activity. I came to realise that villages were, in part, products of attempts by the state to make rural Thailand visible and governable (Scott 1998), were far more porous and fractured than notions of the ‘village-community’ permit (Rigg et al. 2008) and, moreover, that households were multisited or translocal rather than coresidential (Rigg 2019a). My early work focused excessively on what I could see, measure and interview, and underplayed the degree to which households depended on flows and activities in distant places.

It is not possible to enter the field (and even the term ‘the field’ is problematic) without deep-seated assumptions that shape, even determine, where (and how) we look. ‘The facts’ never emerge unbidden. This means that no research is open and ‘innocent’ (Burawoy 2009: 248). For Michael Burawoy (ibid.: 195–196), problem choice in inductive research is often ‘relegated to [the] footnotes’, while it should be foregrounded. No research is therefore truly ‘exploratory’, in the sense of being open to possibility. Christian Lund (2014) in his paper ‘Of what is this a case?’ sets out the protocol and justification for case selection as follows:

A case is an edited chunk of empirical reality where certain features are marked out, emphasized, and privileged while others recede into the background. As such, a case is not ‘natural,’ but a mental, or analytical, construct aimed at organizing knowledge about reality in a manageable way.... Our research has the potential to be a case of many things depending on the configuration of our specifications and generalizations, and our concretizations and abstractions. It is

through these analytical movements that the case is produced out of seemingly amorphous material. (ibid.: 224, 225)

In this handful of sentences one can see the tensions and interplay between the academic desire to frame and demarcate, on the one hand, and the ‘realities’ of an ‘amorphous’ world, on the other. Case selection is about making sense of a quite particular world. ‘As investigators,’ Lund writes, ‘we establish frames of inquiry through which we understand the world’ (ibid.: 226). Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn were selected on the basis of a prior set of aims, their ‘reality’ mentally corralled by a particular intellectual frame, and this ‘reality’ then measured on the basis of certain ‘facts’, but not others, collected and analysed in a particular manner. This last point raises the next issue, the question of method.

3.3.3 Methodology and Analysis

The methods we adopt to explore the questions, problems or puzzles we set out are, like theory, also far from innocent. Our choice of methods is in part disciplinary, but also a matter of fashion. A few years ago, I submitted a paper on the human effects of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami to the journal *Disasters*. The paper was rejected, mainly because of one sharply negative review. The referee wrote:

The analysis interweaves the authors’ local findings with secondary sources, and positions this within a wider literature ... it has more in common with journalism than solid research.... had the authors been able to interview a large, homogeneous sample of people ... then they might have been able to say something about tsunami recovery and poverty [than with this] rather opportunistically chosen, small sample of informants. [The paper] leans heavily on some individual ‘stories’. This and the prior section might be interesting journalism.... [H]owever, this is not science.

In writing this, the referee was making clear his/her methodological preferences: surveys over interviews; quantitative over qualitative; random over purposive sampling; science over ‘journalism’; prediction over interpretation; and a broadly natural science approach over a social science one. Only by adopting the first of each

of these pairings could we, it seems, have said something credible and meaningful about the human effects of the tsunami. The methods we used made our paper, in the view of the referee, unfit for publication.

To return to Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn: in my PhD I undertook a sample survey using a semi-structured questionnaire, and then punch cards and a mainframe computer to analyse the data I had collected. Perhaps if I had waited a handful of years, I would have adopted a more ethnographic approach, reflecting the qualitative turn in human geography that took root a few years after I returned. Even within individual methodological traditions, however, there are important issues to consider when it comes of matters of analysis and interpretation. For instance, in longitudinal work, whether to adopt a cross-sectional approach or a panel study approach. The same data can reveal very different stories.

Fig. 3.1 presents income quintiles for 77 households surveyed in Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn in 1982 and 2008. The data show that wealth has accrued across the wealth spectrum, with even the poorest quintile seeing significant increases in real incomes over the period. Indeed, relatively speaking, the poor have done rather better than the rich. What these data do not show, however, are the individual households that populate the columns in Fig. 3.1. It is often tacitly assumed that the individual households concerned have largely maintained their position relative to other households. The data can, then, be used to make the case that while inequality remains high, rapid economic growth between the two survey dates has not widened those inequalities in Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, and may have helped to narrow them. That in this graph we see a smooth upward trajectory as economic growth nationally and, notwithstanding the Thai economic crisis of 1997, has fed into rising incomes locally. Or, to use the aphorism, that a rising tide lifts all boats.

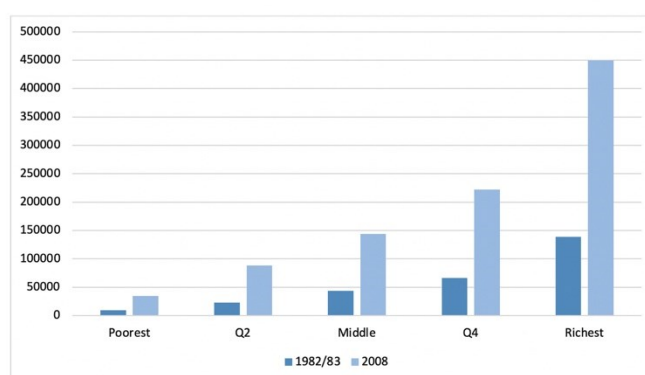


Fig. 3.1 Mean income of households, Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, by quintile (1982/83 and 2008)

Note Constant 2008 prices; n = 77

Fig. 3.2 tracks the same 77 individual households between these two survey periods, revealing relative trajectories at the household level. It is evident that the apparently smooth accretion of wealth across all households revealed in Fig. 3.1 is not reflected in Fig. 3.2. The relative ‘rich’ of the early 1980s were not the relative rich of 2008. Ten of the 13 original poor (i.e. bottom quintile) households had moved into a higher income category; while only five households among the original rich (i.e. top quintile) retained that position in 2008, moving down the village income profile. Fig. 3.1 indicates a smooth accumulation of wealth across all wealth categories; Fig. 3.2 reveals considerable livelihood turbulence. Fig. 3.1 might lead us to think that national economic expansion has been imprinted in the livelihoods of these households quite smoothly; Fig. 3.2 entreats us to think critically about how wealth and poverty have been produced, reproduced and transferred in Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn (Rigg and Salamanca 2015).

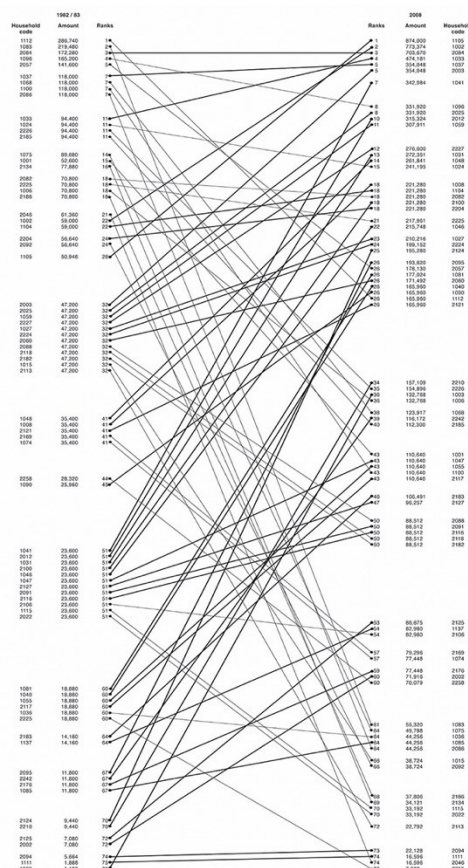


Fig. 3.2 Snakes and ladders: turbulence in a panel study of household incomes in Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn (1982/83 and 2008)

Source Rigg and Salamanca (2015: 298)

These data also led me to look more carefully at idiosyncratic events rather than structural processes. Interview transcripts revealed how important individual events were in shaping livelihood outcomes, events that do not come through in the data sets or even, usually, in village histories. Of 15 households we selected to interview in more details, five suffered business failure, six premature death or severe illness, and one family's house was razed by fire. Some of these households 'coped', but others had to sell or mortgage their land and found their sustainable livelihoods undermined, and they were pushed into insecurity. As the title of Anirudh Krishna's (2010) book *One illness away* hints, for households in the Global South where there is no or only a thinly woven social safety net and health care system, it is hard to recover from events like these.

In the final section of this chapter, I return to the theme that I started with: history. How do wider histories become imprinted in places like Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, and among the households and families that call these villages 'home', even if they might not reside there?

3.4 Interpretation and the Ripples of History

Few would wish to second-guess the flight of time's arrow. As noted, the transformation of Asia from Gunnar Myrdal's (1968: 34) region beset by problems—the 'abysmal reality' of the 'inert masses', as he put it—to the miracle region of the late twentieth century was not expected, even by the most Panglossian policymaker or scholar. A more interesting question, perhaps, is how such high-level historical processes of economic transformation come to rest at the local level, in villages and people's lives. Sometimes quite remarkable change comes, in time, to be seen as entirely normal and altogether prosaic. The fact, for example, that millions of rural Thais responded to the availability of nonfarm work and left the security and

familiarity of home to venture to urban Bangkok and beyond. Looking over the shoulder of history and the wake of the past marks out a path of change which seems inevitable, almost preordained. But did it have to be this way?

In 1982 mobility in Thailand, while not rare, was unusual. Like other rural areas of the Global South, approaches to understanding the countryside were informed—problematically, it should be said—by a sedentary peasant paradigm. When peasants did move it was mostly men, and often driven by distress. In *Village Chiang Mai* (Abha Sirivongs et al. 1979), based on fieldwork in three villages in northern Thailand in 1970, migration was said to be ‘so nominal that it has no effect on the growth rate of the total population’ (ibid.: 29). By the turn of the century, mobility was normal.

Figs. 3.3 and 3.4 show farm and nonfarm work in Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn by age cohort and gender. Fig. 3.3 seems to show that mobility in 1982 (nonfarm being used as a proxy for work outside the village) was rare, linked to life course and largely male. Fig. 3.4 reveals that mobility by 2008 had become common, in evidence across all age cohorts, and as common for women as for men. This mobility revolution is linked to Thailand’s wider modernisation. We see here in the decisions of households and individuals the local effects of the country’s industrialisation and the policies and decisions, national and international, that have been taken.

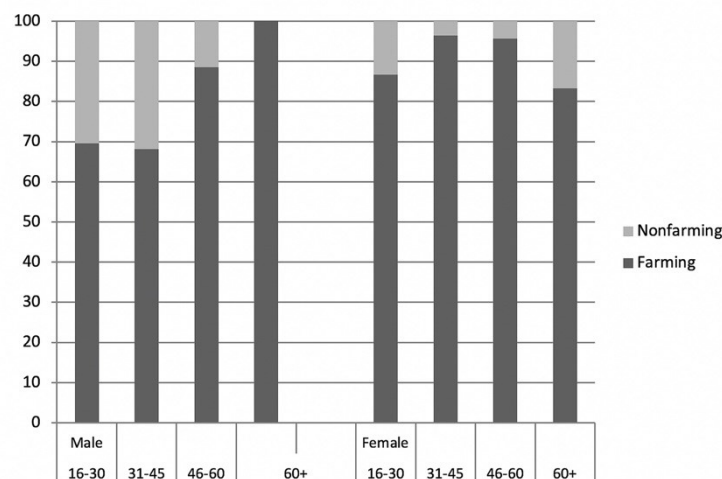


Fig. 3.3 Farm and nonfarm work by age cohort, Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, Mahasarakham (1982)

Source Rigg’s survey, 1982, n = 258

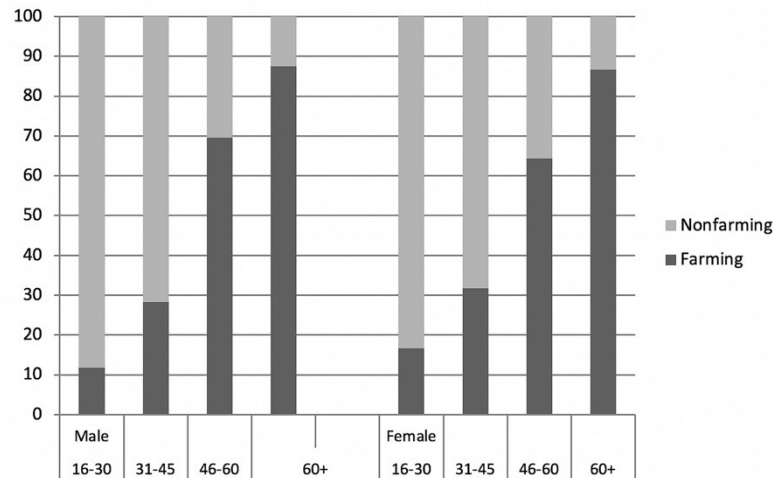


Fig. 3.4 Farm and nonfarm work by age cohort, Ban Non Tae and Ban Tha Song Korn, Mahasarakham (2008)

Source Rigg and Salamanca's survey, 2008, n = 241

These opportunities would not have arisen without the availability of nonfarm work in distant places, but at the same time Thailand's miracle growth and industrialisation could not have occurred without the willingness of millions of (mainly) young women and men to leave their homes. There is one further wrinkle, however, which in global, theoretical and empirical terms is a surprise but regionally has become normal: the continuing links between these migrants and their natal households and villages. Household footprints such as those in Fig. 3.5 and distributions of work such as those in Fig. 3.6 show how rural populations have juggled the need to improve and strengthen their livelihoods when farming is vulnerable and nonfarm work is precarious. But the farm-size transition, in which holdings amalgamate into larger units of production, has not been a feature of the villages or, indeed, of the wider Asian region (Rigg et al. 2016). This challenges assumptions about agrarian transitions based on historical experiences in the rural north, and the theories derived from those experiences. To understand the surprising persistence of the smallholder in Thailand and wider Asia we need to pay attention to the precarity of nonfarm work in an era of late capitalism (Rigg 2019a). In August 2016 we interviewed Mae Thong, a 66-year-old widowed farmer in another village in northeast Thailand, in Khon Kaen province. When we asked her why she was holding onto her small farm given her age, she explained:

No, I never want to sell it [her land].... I saw people here who sold their land and they are miserable. I have seen it with my own eyes. I don't see anybody who sold their rice farm and are rich, probably just the first couple years after they sold their farms. When all the money is gone, they have to start thinking about where to farm rice so they can feed their family. I saw rice farmers with millions of baht after selling their farm lands run out of money in just one year! When all the money is gone, they rethink and wish to have their land back.

The focus on precarity—and also precarisation and the precariat—is yet another trope and framing informed by an intellectual wave of the moment, encouraging us to look under particular explanatory stones, but not others (see Standing 2011; Hewison and Tularak 2013).

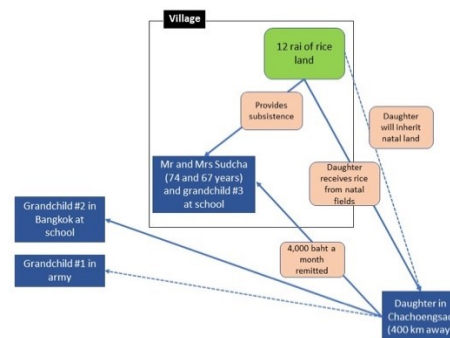


Fig. 3.5 Livelihood footprint (2016)

Source Fieldwork (2016)

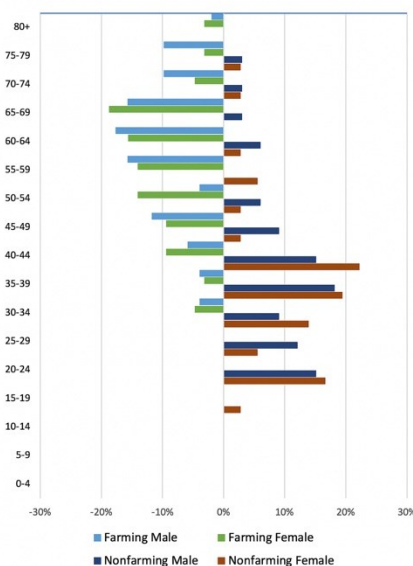


Fig. 3.6 Ban Prasat, primary occupations: distribution of age of farming and nonfarming household members (2016)

Source Fieldwork (2016)

3.5 Expectations of Error: A Conclusion

In this chapter, I am less interested in the fact that I have been wrong, several times in fact. Rather I am interested in why I have been wrong. Where does the source of error lie? Certainly, historical moments can confound matters, and idiosyncratic events—whether world changing or highly individualised—can turn matters upside down. Families’ livelihoods compromised by illness (Krishna 2010) or flows of foreign direct investment driven by currency realignments (Thomsen 1999) can change matters quite profoundly at both local and national levels. These are often impossible to predict. The Thai economic crisis of 1997, for example, came a matter of months after the release of Thailand’s *Eighth national economic and social development plan (1997–2001)*, rendering it, in effect, a dead letter. The plan envisaged ‘stable and sustainable economic growth’ (NESDB 1996: 3). Instead, the Thai economy contracted more precipitously than at any time since the end of the Second World War. So there is a historical story to tell; and history trips up even the most skilled prognosticators.

Though important, I am more interested, however, in how error arises from academic ‘moves’—essentially the choices that we make in terms of theoretical models, conceptual framings, analytical categories and methodological approaches. All these are also in thrall to the moment, in the sense that different academic eras have their preferred approaches. Paid less attention to in the literature, however, are the narrowing and selection practices of academic traditions. The way they encourage us to look in a particular direction, to privilege certain things and overlook others, to treat our units of analysis as facts of nature rather than intellectual constructs, and to assume that certain methods over others capture the true state of affairs.

In Pieter Breughel the Elder’s painting *Landscape with the fall of Icarus* (c.1555), the end of the foolhardy early aviator is almost lost from view, as his body disappears into the green waters, with only his legs visible in one corner of the canvas. The rest

of the painting is quotidian in the face of the event. The shepherd tends his flock and is gazing at the stars; the ploughman guides his mule intent on turning the soil, with his back to the moment; and a ship sails towards the far horizon, with better things to do. W.H. Auden, in 'Musée des Beaux Arts', writes:

In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster ...

Scholars, also, are caught wondering where, and with what tools, to focus their attention.

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