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# Becoming a young migrant or stayer seen through the lens of 'householding': Households 'in flux' and the intersection of relations of gender and seniority

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## ABSTRACT

This paper conceptualises migration and staying by young rural Lao in the empirical context of above replacement level fertility as manifestations of 'householding' that interacts with other dimensions of householding. Drawing on the framework of the inter-generational contract and by juxtaposing qualitative and quantitative data I show that becoming a young migrant *and* becoming or remaining a young stayer is shaped by young migrants' situated agency.

The second part of the paper departs from conventional household-based analyses and introduces the notion of 'households in flux'. This highlights the dynamic interaction between changing external dynamics affecting rural households, and internal dynamics that constantly reconfigure the field of the household. These conceptual readjustments require going beyond inflexible notions of the household, the analytical disconnection between a focus on migrants and stayers in migration research, and static readings of relations of gender and generation. Furthermore, the paper argues that intra-household relations need to be appreciated as gendered relations of relative seniority which are in the process of householding constantly made and remade, among other things, by young dependents through 'staying' and 'leaving'. These conceptual moves help explain the empirical puzzle of why in rural Lao households young women are both the ones most inclined to become a young migrant as well as most inclined to become or remain a young stayer.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper approaches 'migration' and 'staying' by young people through the analytical lens of 'householding' (Douglass, 2006). This specific focus on young 'dependents' in relation to questions pertaining migration *and* non-migration as aspects of householding contributes to (1) a deeper theorisation of child and youth migration, (2) a greater understanding of the role of relations of age in intra-household dynamics, and (3) it contributes to correcting for the limited attention paid to questions of 'staying' in migration research.

The paper focuses empirically on migration and staying by rural Lao youth. The rapid integration of particularly the lowland areas of Lao PDR into the wider Southeast Asian, and global, market economy is transforming the Lao countryside (Rigg, 2005a). Furthermore, widespread migration by young Lao within Lao PDR and across the border into Thailand primarily (MolSW, Committee for Planning and Cooperation National Statistical Center, ILO-IPEC/TICW, 2003; Phetsiriseng, 2003; Huijsmans, 2008; Phouxay et al., 2010) is recognised as a key, yet generational specific, manifestation of this social transformation (Barney, 2012; Huijsmans and Baker, 2012).

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Research on young people migrating independently from their parents or care-givers has developed considerably over the past decade, based on case-studies from across the globe (e.g. Iversen, 2002; Punch, 2007; Hashim and Thorsen, 2011; Huijsmans, 2011). A key consensus emerging from this work is that children and youth are not passive objects in migration (Dobson, 2009). Instead, young people negotiate the social process of migration. Yet, their agency is frequently constrained (e.g. Klocker, 2007) and cannot be understood in isolation from the unequal relations of power in which it is embedded (Huijsmans and Baker, 2012). However, only limited attention is paid to questions concerning 'non-migration' or staying (but note: Huijsmans, 2010; Hertrich et al., 2012) and how this may be understood as a form of agency, despite the fact that 'staying' remains the majority experience in most contexts.

Methodological choices are often accountable for such partial perspectives. Migration research typically focuses on 'movers' and not on 'stayers' (Toyota et al., 2007), and research limited to receiving sites provides only a partial answer to questions pertaining sending dynamics. Moreover, although the household is often given a central place in migration research its full richness is seldom captured. Quantitative research typically presents a unified image of household characteristics and behaviour, whilst qualitative research too often focuses on young people exclusively.

This paper reconciles such different methodological perspectives by juxtaposing quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the same research location and pertaining to the same research subjects, and moving back and forth between young people's own perspectives and that of their parents. In doing so, it explains the paradoxical observation that in rural Lao households young women, relative to young men, are both the ones most inclined to migrate (as suggested by quantitative data) as well as most inclined to stay (as suggested by qualitative data).

## 2. Household(ing), migration, social reproduction, and relations of age

A focus on the household is not new in migration research. In fact it is central in the influential 'new economics of migration' (e.g. Stark and Bloom, 1985; Lauby and Stark, 1988). In this school of thought the household is treated as an entity with a joint utility function. Feminist conceptualisations of the household have problematised this by rejecting the view of households as socially undifferentiated units and, instead, have highlighted the various power relations operating within the intimate space of the home (Folbre, 1986). This has led to the acknowledgement that both children and parents (as well as other actors in the households) 'may have agency, objectives and interests' (Whitehead et al., 2007: 41). This conceptual work has informed work on gender and migration (Chant, 1992) and more recently also work on young people and migration by highlighting the importance of age as a relation of social differentiation (Cole and Durham, 2007; Huijsmans, 2010; Hashim and Thorsen, 2011).

Feminist reconceptualisations of the household have also contributed to moving away from the household as a bounded 'unit' and towards a view of households as 'fields' in the Bourdieu sense of the term. In this view, the household is one of several fields comprising society and like other fields it is composed of actors possessing different stocks of capital and, importantly, whose practices and interactions are shaped by habitus. The latter Bourdieu (1990: 64–65) defined as a 'disposition, always marked by its (social) conditions of acquisition and realization, [which] tends to adjust to the objective chances of satisfying need or desire, inclining agents to 'cut their coats according to their cloth'.

Children, parents, cousins, grandparents, sons- and daughters-in-law, etc., are all habituated to act in a particular way. Such practice is shaped by the normative script of relations of gender and age which, in the field of the household, are embedded in the overarching frame of kinship (including fictive kin). The inter-generational contract (Whitehead et al., 2007) constitutes an important relational fabric shaping the field of the household and contains 'simultaneous elements of dependence, interdependence and independence' (Whitehead et al., 2007: 41–42). This renders the household a site of 'cooperative conflict' (Sen, 1990). This has implications for our understanding of agency as 'a person may have various goals and objectives other than the pursuit of his or her well-being' (Sen, 1990: 127) or the realisation of immediate aspirations because such goals and objectives are shaped by a person's sense of obligations and perception of legitimate behaviour which are relational and temporal.

The youth studies literature has shown, however, that we need to be careful in taking the reproduction argument underpinning the above conceptualisation of 'practice' too far and that we should remain sensitive to how young people by exercising agency create elements of change within broader patterns of social continuity. The work of Mills (1999), for example, shows that the involvement of rural adolescent girls from the Northeastern region of Thailand into the Bangkok-based manufacturing industry may on the one hand be read as a continuation of the traditional subject position

of 'dutiful daughter'. However, the parameters of this subject position are shifted and challenged by these migrant daughters through their engagement with the social practice and cultural production of Thai modernity made possible by their involvement with urban based migrant wage labour.

Douglas's notion of 'global householding' emphasises that processes of 'householding', understood as the creating and sustaining of a household as a 'continuous process of social reproduction that covers all life-cycle stages and extends beyond the family' (Douglas, 2006: 421), are increasingly global affairs most importantly due to migration. Despite the centrality Douglas (2006: 423) attributes to the household in social reproduction<sup>1</sup> and his claim that this 'covers all life-cycle stages', a theorisation and analysis of age as a relation of social differentiation manifesting within the field of the household, intersecting with other relations of differentiation, and shaped by external forces remains implicit in Douglas's work.

## 3. Context and methodology

Lao PDR is an ethnically diverse nation. Yet, the research on which this paper is based was conducted in one village which is predominantly ethnic Lao.<sup>2</sup> In ethnic Lao societies, residence is matrilineal and it is the traditional practice that the last-born daughter takes up the responsibility of looking after her parents when they enter old-age. Lao households are largely family-based; yet, not necessarily nuclear because co-residing parents or siblings of the main couple, cousins, and fictive kin are common. In addition, migrants who frequently return to the household and/or contribute to the household through, for example, remittances are mostly considered part of it despite their physical absence.

The research village, which I will call *Baan Naam*,<sup>3</sup> is located on the banks of the Mekong River which forms the border with Thailand and is connected by dirt road to the Lao capital Vientiane. Agriculture constitutes the main economic activity in *Baan Naam*, with rice (rainfed only) as the main crop. Next to subsistence crops like rice, many households have also started growing cash crops such as maize, cassava and soy beans. Salaried employment in *Baan Naam* is limited to teachers predominantly, who, however, still continue to be engaged in agricultural activities to supplement their meager wages. Only a handful of trading and business households have livelihoods that are entirely disconnected from the land.

*Baan Naam* is a fairly large village according to Lao standards with a total population of nearly 1400 inhabitants distributed across nearly 300 households. It is also one of the wealthier villages of the district. Socio-economic developments have been rapid in *Baan Naam*, especially over the past decade. A full primary school was established in the mid-1980s followed by a secondary school in the 1990s. Electricity reached the village in 1998 which sparked a rapid increase in ownership of electrified consumer goods. For example, village statistics from 2007 recorded a total of 150 VCD-players and 184 mobile phones owned by the village population. Moreover, in 2007 around 30–40 households possessed cheap (around US\$40) Chinese-made satellite dishes which provide access to numerous international channels, whereas just over a decade ago, prior to the arrival of electricity, the few people possessing a black and white television set had it powered on a car battery and could receive very few channels only.

<sup>1</sup> Social reproduction is here understood as the 'material and discursive practices which enable the reproduction of a social formation and its members' (Wells 2009: 78).

<sup>2</sup> Note that there is a larger ethnic Lao population living on Thai territory than on Lao soil.

<sup>3</sup> *Baan Naam* is a pseudonym and so are the names of persons presented in this paper.

The research on which this paper is based was mixed-methods and adopted an overall ethnographic approach. The latter is illustrated by the length of the research project (2007–2009) and the attention that was paid to the qualitative dimension of the research. The mixed-methods approach comprised a household survey covering 54 households and a range of mostly qualitative methods conducted with a sub-sample of 26 young people and their families who were purposefully selected from the pool of household covered by the household survey.<sup>4</sup> For the latter part of the research a range of methods were employed, including focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and activity surveys. In addition to the primary data described above, the paper also draws on a range of secondary sources. These include various reports from Lao government bodies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) operating in Lao PDR.

Migration and cross-border mobility was fairly widespread in the research village yet it remained highly sensitive and most of it went undocumented. As the case elsewhere in Lao PDR (e.g. Phouthonesy, 2007; Pongkhao, 2008), cross-border migrants were occasionally fined and at times imprisoned for having crossed the border and worked in Thailand in an undocumented fashion. For these reasons, research on migration is delicate and fraught with ethical and methodological problems. This was also recognised by the Deputy Director General of the Lao Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare when speaking on some of the challenges collecting official statistics on cross-border migration:

... some parents lied to local authorities that their children were working in Vientiane, when in fact they were working in Thailand... (Pongkhao, 2007)

In such a study context, conducting long term research is essential for building up the required levels of rapport and requires an ethnographic approach in order to go beyond the spoken word and the formal interview setting.

#### 4. Becoming a young migrant, becoming a young stayer: Interpreting outcome and process data

This section juxtaposes two methodological approaches towards becoming a young migrant and becoming a young stayer in the Lao countryside. First, quantitative research material is introduced which presents 'outcome data'. The quantitative material comes from two sources. Large scale snap-shot data is compared and contrasted with purposefully sampled longitudinal data from one village. The findings emerging from the quantitative material are juxtaposed with qualitative data presented in the second sub-section. This latter data shed light on the 'processes' underpinning the 'outcomes' captured by quantitative research and draw attention to the exercising of agency in the process of becoming a young migrant or stayer.

##### 4.1. Quantitative perspectives: Looking at outcomes

To date, the 2003 Lao Migration Survey remains statistically the most comprehensive overview of migration in Lao PDR (MoLSW, Committee for Planning and Cooperation National Statistical Center, ILO-IPEC/TICW, 2003). The survey employed representative sampling techniques covering a total of 5966 households (36,398 household members) in three central and southern Lao provinces (Champasack, Khammuane, and Savannakhet). The survey found

a total migration rate of 6.9%, with most migrants (over 80%) involved in cross-border migration and Thailand as the destination for the vast majority of cross-border migrants.

The data illustrate that migration in Lao PDR is heavily shaped by the intersection of relations of gender and generation. First, migration is clearly situated in the youth stage of the life course as more than 70% of all migrants are aged between 15 and 25 years. Second, despite an initial impression of a fairly gender-balanced picture with females only slightly outnumbering males in the total migrant population (0.44 gender ratio); the intersection of age and gender produces strongly gendered patterns in the cohorts of young migrants (Table 1).<sup>5</sup>

The shaded rows highlight that in the lower age cohorts female migrants outnumber male migrants in both the total migrant population and among the cross-border migrants. The gender disparity is particularly stark in the 10–14 years cohort of the cross-border category with one male migrant for every six females. Among older migrants this gender disparity gradually disappears and from the cohort of 26–30 years the gender balance tips with male migrants outnumbering females.

In internal migration men outnumber women in the overall figure. However, also here a gender pattern is evident with the gender ratio closer to parity among migrants in the youth stage of the life course than among older internal migrants.

The gender-age patterns described above contrast with the traditional mobility patterns among ethnic Lao. In ethnic Lao societies, mobility among the young was traditionally a male affair (Huijsmans, in press). Not only did boys and young men leave the natal household to join the Buddhist Sangha for shorter or longer periods of time, the traditional practice of *pai thiaw* (literally: to go wandering) was also limited to male youth as research among the ethnic Lao on the Thai side of the border has shown (Kirsch, 1966; Keyes, 1986). The predominance of matrilineal residence patterns and the practice of bride price tied into the above and work as further factors underpinning the traditionally male dominated mobility patterns, as did the parental concern about mobile daughters' involvement in 'inappropriate sexual activity' (Mills, 1995: 258).

In Thailand, and elsewhere, the rise of export-oriented, labour intensive industry contributed in major ways to bringing about a feminization of the internal migrant population (Wolf, 1992; Mills, 1999). The Survey data presented above suggests that a similar feminization of migration has come to characterise migrant populations in and from Lao PDR (see also Phetsiriseng, 2007).

The 2003 Lao Migration Survey material is useful for its quantitative strength, yet it suffers from a number of important shortcomings. Some of these are general shortcomings inherent to most one-off surveys on migration, others are specific. First, in rural settings like Lao PDR migration dynamics are heavily affected by the agricultural calendar, which complicates the interpretation of any one-off survey (see also: Wright et al., 2012). This may be partly mitigated by inquiring about household members currently working elsewhere *as well as* their past migrations. The survey questionnaire suggests that both these questions were indeed asked but the report is unclear about how this has informed the analysis. Lastly, as discussed above, migration, and particularly, cross-border migration remain highly delicate issues in Lao PDR. Since survey research does not allow building up rapport, there are good reasons to believe that survey methods capture in such a context little more than the tip of the iceberg.

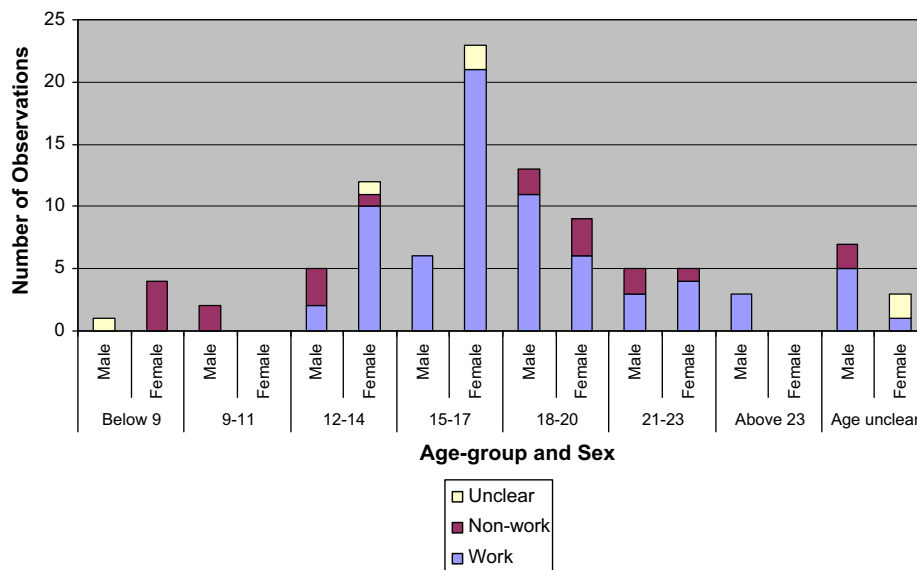
Research conducted over a longer period of time that has invested in building up the necessary levels of rapport is able to

<sup>4</sup> The sampling procedure for the household survey was based on the administrative structure of the village. Lao villages are divided into units, which in the case of *Baan Naam* totaled 24 and ranged from about 10 to 15 households per unit. The household survey selected households from even number units only and strived to interview five randomly selected households per unit.

<sup>5</sup> Here it is important to flag that it is not clear whether the survey has collected the current age of migrants or the age at which one became involved in migration.

**Table 1**  
Lao migration data by gender, age, and destination. Adapted from MoLSW et al. (2003).

Cohort	Internal migration			External migration			Total gender ratio
	Male	Female	Gender ratio	Male	Female	Gender ratio	
0–4	3	0	1.00	4	2	0.67	0.78
5–9	1	0	1.00	5	1	0.83	0.86
10–14	10	7	0.59	11	66	0.14	0.22
15–17	37	49	0.43	109	239	0.31	0.34
18–20	67	55	0.55	194	365	0.35	0.38
21–25	77	56	0.58	256	325	0.44	0.47
26–30	51	20	0.72	158	142	0.53	0.56
31–35	20	7	0.74	38	40	0.49	0.55
36–40	13	2	0.87	19	11	0.63	0.71
41–45	1	1	0.50	15	8	0.65	0.64
46–50	3	1	0.75	11	10	0.52	0.56
51–55	1	0	1.00	2	1	0.67	0.75
56–60	0	0	n/a	4	1	0.80	0.80
61–65	0	0	n/a	0	1	0.00	0.00
66–70	0	0	n/a	0	0	n/a	n/a
71+	2	0	1.00	3	1	0.75	0.83
Total	286	198	0.59	829	1213	0.41	0.44



**Fig. 1.** Main purpose of migration by age and sex for 98 migration events (75 young migrants).

address many of the problems of survey research described above, albeit at the cost of statistical properties. Fig. 1 combines household survey data from *Baan Naam* with observations on villagers' mobility from subsequent research covering more than one calendar year. It presents data on migration by young migrants only, understood as young people who have become involved in migration prior to having attained social adulthood, locally understood as being married. Furthermore, migration includes here both past and current events and was essentially defined as taking up residence somewhere else. The assessment of whether a form of mobility constitutes migration was left to the respondents. This was based on the assumption that forms of mobilities which are considered part and parcel of everyday life are not brought up in response to questions about staying elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the data presented here includes relocations across hundreds of kilometres to, for example, Southern Thailand as well as relocations to

relatively nearby destinations within Lao PDR. Furthermore, some migrations lasted years, whereas others were terminated within a few days. Lastly, where possible, data is organised by first age of migration and covers a total of 98 recorded migration events involving a total of 75 young migrants (34 male, 41 female).

*Baan Naam's* household survey yields a significantly higher migration rate (18%) than the 6.9% observed in the 2003 Lao Migration Survey. However, this figure is not necessarily disproportionately high as research has shown that in the Lao context villages located on the road network and those near the Thai border tend to have considerably higher migration rates (MoLSW, Committee for Planning and Cooperation National Statistical Center, ILO-IPEC/TICW, 2003; Messerli et al., 2008). Both these characteristics apply to *Baan Naam*.

The 2003 Lao Migration Survey inquired about migration for purposes of work only. Fig. 1, however, distinguishes between migration by stated purpose, limited to work (formal employment and informal work) and non-work purposes (including fosterage, education, joining the Buddhist Sangha). It should however be emphasised that such a distinction is often misleading because even in cases where work was not stated as the purpose of

<sup>6</sup> For example, commuting for day labour to the Thai village across the Mekong River (or other nearby villages on Lao soil) is here not considered migration as this was part and parcel of everyday village life, even though this may have involved spending a few nights on the Thai side of the River to cut out commuting costs.



migration, it still constituted an important dimension in the young migrant's everyday life (Huijsmans, 2012). Despite these methodological differences, the gender-age nexus emphasised in Table 1 also emerges from Fig. 1. However, a focus on first age of migration presses this pattern towards the lower age-cohorts.

#### 4.2. Qualitative perspectives: Looking at processes

The qualitative material presented in this section zooms in on the dynamics and interactions through which young villagers become young migrants or remain young stayers.<sup>7</sup> The analysis is limited to the field of the household, which, as argued above, is understood as comprising 'multiple actors, with varying (often conflicting) preferences and interests, and differential abilities to pursue and realize those interests' (Agarwal, 1994: 54). Hence, the numerical overrepresentation of female young migrants may be explained through the next qualitative lines of reasoning. Stressing young women's agency, these patterns may be the result of rural teenage girls being willing migrants whose desire to leave their rural homes is relatively unconstrained (see for example Phetsiriseng, 2003). Alternatively, if one were to assume that household decision-making processes are predominantly adult-centred (see for example Lauby and Stark, 1988), these patterns may suggest that parents would rather see their daughters becoming involved in migration than their sons, regardless of the girls' willingness to become young migrants. Whilst these lines of thought both feature in the literature, the material presented below demonstrates that both perspectives are too one-sided and fail to situate young people's agency relationally as well as account for it in the process of staying

Buanoi is 16 years old when I first meet her. She is the third-born in a relatively better-off household consisting of two parents and five children. She has two older brothers, a younger brother, and a younger sister. Her oldest brother left *Baan Naam* in August 2006 for migrant work in Thailand through a Lao employment agency when the other children were still in school. A year later (2007) Buanoi quit school at the start of secondary 4. She made this choice against the wishes of her parents who put pressure on her to return to school. As the only one of the children out of school (apart from the brother in Thailand), Buanoi spent her days working the family fields and doing domestic work. Talking about this, Buanoi explained that at times she wished she was working and staying in Vientiane as many of her friends had gone there as well. She argued that it was no fun staying in *Baan Naam* since most of her friends were working elsewhere. However, her parents opposed this idea. They argued that work in Vientiane was much harder than working the family fields and only poorly paid. Despite these claims, retaining Buanoi's labour for the household economy seemed to be an important underpinning motivation on the part of Buanoi's parents to discourage her from migration. Although this was not directly expressed, it became apparent when Buanoi's parents suddenly became more relaxed about their daughter's migratory aspirations in late 2008. This only happened once her older brother (2<sup>nd</sup> born) had finished his secondary education and became full-time available to the family farm, and when, at roughly the same time, her younger sister had become a teenaged girl capable of doing most of the domestic work. Buanoi has since worked briefly in Vientiane and for some months in the *Isaan* region of Thailand. (Composite notes from interviews with Buanoi and Buanoi's parents conducted between October 2007 and March 2009)

<sup>7</sup> The analysis is limited to the sending site only and did not factor in how demand side factors (which are gendered and generationed too) influence dynamics at supply side (for this see for example Harvey 1989, in Mills (1997: 38) and Esara (2004)).

Buanoi's case appears to reproduce the idea that young villagers eagerly trade their rural, agrarian lives for an apparently more exciting and modern Lao urban or cross-border Thai location. Whilst this is indeed an impression emerging from the literature (Phetsiriseng, 2003; Rigg, 2006; White, 2012) it needs to be stressed that certainly not all young people were keen to leave the village. In fact, some of the young people interviewed in *Baan Naam* (male and female) had actively negotiated their position as 'stayers', at times based on negative migration experiences:

I don't want to live in Vientiane because people there will look at me since they can see that I'm from *baan nòòk* (the countryside). They will also talk about me since I will make mistakes. This will make me feel shy. I know this is true because I stayed in Vientiane when I was 14. My relatives had asked my mother if I could come and stay with them. I went and worked in my aunt's shop but I left after one week already because I felt I couldn't stay there. (Notes from an interview with Choi on 8/2/2008. Choi is the third born and oldest daughter, she was 15 years old at the time of interview)

Although Buanoi unambiguously stated a desire to leave her village, she did not simply pack her bags and leave. This is particularly significant since Buanoi seemed to have had ample scope for doing so because many of her friends were already involved in forms of migrant work and would have had the ability to facilitate her entry into migrant work (Huijsmans, 2012). In addition, it is also worth noting that her parents did not have to press very hard to have Buanoi stay; a few subtle remarks here and there seemed to suffice.

The subtleness with which Buanoi's parents seemed able to direct their daughter's decision-making stands in stark contrast with parental admittance of their very limited influence on their sons' behaviour. This was clearly articulated by Choi's mother. In 2006, her husband and second born (son) departed for Thailand on a 2 year contract. This reduced the household to Choi's mother, her oldest son and two daughters (the last born still in primary school). In anticipation to this loss of male labour, the first born son promised to postpone his marriage (and his subsequent leaving of the household) until his father and younger brother would return in 2008. However, soon after his father's departure this promise was broken and the oldest son moved in with his in-laws. While he kept the first part of his pledge to delay the ceremony till his father's return, he did not keep the second part of his promise to continue working his natal household's fields. Stripped of male labour Choi's mother explained she had to alter the agricultural production. For example, she decided not to farm melons for two consecutive years because the heavy job of harvesting and transporting melons would be too much for the small and young all-female household labour force. She estimated this had amounted to a loss of at least one million Kip a year (110–120 USD). Reflecting on this course of events Choi's mother remarked:

Girls will change their minds. Girls listen to, and believe, their mother. But boys think they are stronger than girls and can take care of themselves. Therefore, they don't listen to their mothers. (Notes from interview with Choi's mother, 15/3/2009)

It is worth noting that despite evident financial implications Choi's mother and the other household members appeared not disappointed in, and neither did they express a sense of being let down by, the first born. Instead, a subtle sense of pride often transpired from such maternal recollections. By disobeying, sons display having a mind of their own. This is generally valued positively as a manifestation of a hegemonic notion of masculinity; regardless of the problematic consequences it may have (Huijsmans, in press).

The analysis of qualitative data has so far revolved around gender norms. This cannot, however, be seen in isolation from gender roles and its material implications. To illustrate this point I return to the case of Buanoi introduced above. When Buanoi eventually migrated this should be appreciated against the reconfigured relations of labour within the household. Her older brother had by that time finished school and her younger sister was considered youth and able (and expected) to shoulder much of the work Buanoi used to do. It was these shifts in the household composition of labour that underpinned Buanoi's parents' change in attitude towards their daughter's migratory plans.

In the rural ethnic Lao context, the gender division of labour among children and youth may on first sight not appear very strong as both genders may be seen carrying out a wide range of activities. Data collected between late 2007 and mid-2008 through a series of activity surveys among 26 young villagers (13 male, 13 female) selected with an eye on fair distribution in terms of birth position, school-status, and age confirmed this. A total of 40 different work-related activities were recorded and boys were found involved in 32 of these and girls in 35. Frequency patterns show, however, significant gender differences. The 13 girls and young women scored a total of 195 occurrences, whereas the 13 boys and young men came to 122 occurrences only.

These patterns indeed contribute to the observation that many parents appear trying much harder to retain a daughter to the household than a son. In addition, the more reluctant attitude of many sons to contribute to the productive and reproductive spheres of the household led in some cases to a concern about sons' idleness. Unable to direct their sons to the family fields on a regular basis and concerned about popular associations of young male idleness with drunkenness, getting into fights, crashing motorbikes and impregnating girls, some parents actually resorted to actively stimulating sons into migrant work as a form of discipline quite unconnected with whether this would bring in any remittances. It was for this reason that Anu's father got his last-born son to work in a road construction camp at the age of 17. The young man had quit secondary school against the wishes of his parents and the discipline of a road construction camp was viewed by Anu's father as an appropriate medicine against Anu's appetite for hanging around in the village. Whilst daughters were, at times, also actively encouraged to migrate by parents, this was mostly based on economic (remittances, one less mouth to feed) or educational considerations (learning a skill/trade) and never observed on disciplinary grounds.

The above has demonstrated that gender scripts shape the intergenerational interactions between parents and their children. This should not, however, be equated with a reading of rural daughters as mere pawns in structurally determined games. Although Buanoi did not simply pack her bags and leave, she exercised agency nonetheless. This is most clearly observed when she terminated her education despite the efforts of her parents to keep her in school. In addition, Buanoi's initial act of staying should be understood as form of agency too even though this co-existed with migratory aspirations. This becomes clear by situating Buanoi's agency in the framework of the inter-generational contract. Whitehead et al. (2007: 16) have made the case for evaluating how children and parents take account of their mutual obligations in relation to migration decision-making processes not only in relation to the present, but also in relation to the medium and long term. This is particularly important since relations of mutual obligation shift as both parents and children progress through the life course. Hence, by respecting her parents' wishes Buanoi actively contributed to maintaining her part of the inter-generational contract. The importance of this became evident in a follow-up study in 2012. Buanoi had meanwhile married (in 2011) and had just given birth to her first child. The young family was co-residing with

Buanoi's parents and Buanoi was clearly benefiting from this arrangement:

Everything [related to being a mother] is completely new to me, and I learn what I need to do from my mother. (Notes from interview with Buanoi, *Baan Naam*, 5/2/2012)

Hence, viewing Buanoi's initial act of staying in relation to the longer term sets of mutual obligations embedded in the inter-generational contract it can be viewed as an active contribution on part of Buanoi to maintain this important relational resource. Moreover, Buanoi's case underscores that this contract is evidently gendered; in the matrilineal context of ethnic Lao societies daughters have more to lose *and* gain than sons in maintaining the contract.

The importance of situating young people's agency in migration decision-making processes in relation to immediate as well as medium and long term relations of mutual obligation is further underscored by the case of Chanthawy. She is the fifth and last born of a marriage that has more or less fallen apart due to the drinking habits of Chanthawy's father. Being the last-born daughter, Chanthawy would be the one residing with and looking after her parents in old age. However, Chanthawy shows little sign of picking up this customary role. In fact, she left the village regularly without informing her mother about the details of her whereabouts.<sup>8</sup> When talking about this with Chanthawy's mother, she complained that now that all her children had grown up she could not control them anymore like when they were young. Grown-up children have their own ideas and they do not simply listen to their parents anymore. As the case in point, she explained that Chanthawy acted like a boy in various ways when young and that she had worried much about this crossing of gender scripts and had tried hard to make her change. By now, however, she laughingly admitted that she has given up worrying because she simply could not control her daughter anymore (notes from interview with Chanthawy's mother, 29/2/2008, *Baan Naam*).

Although Chanthawy's mother is attributing her inability to direct her daughter's behaviour to individual characteristics and to the idea that 'today's youth have their own mind', Chanthawy's much bolder decisions need to be viewed in relation to an inter-generational contract which is more or less broken down due to her father's drinking habits. Situating her agency as such, the medium and longer term mutual obligations appear of much less importance. And indeed, when we last met the family Chanthawy was staying with a boyfriend in southern Thailand where she was still working and her mother had split with her husband and was now staying with one of her other daughters in *Baan Naam*.

##### 5. Conceptual readjustments for capturing householding

The analysis presented in the previous section has demonstrated that agency may be most visible in becoming a young migrant, yet is not absent from remaining or becoming a young stayer. The previous section further demonstrated that gender relations are vital for understanding young people's agency in migration decision-making processes. Agency was shown to be situated, among other factors, in the inter-generational contract between parents and children in which negotiation about aspirations (such as migration or staying) need to be viewed in light of immediate as well as medium and long term relations of mutual obligations which evolve in distinct gendered ways. These analytical perspectives have shown that daughters are both most inclined to become a young migrant (as shown by the quantitative

<sup>8</sup> She had migrated several times for relatively short spells of time to North-eastern Thailand and Vientiane before leaving long term at the age of 17, initially together with her mother, to work in a pineapple canning factory in southern Thailand.

data) as well as most inclined to become a young stayer (as shown by the qualitative data) and exercise agency in both processes.

This ambiguous conclusion follows from the conceptual model used so far. However, limiting the analytical focus on the household to the inter-generational contract between parents and children and applying this to a nuclear notion of the household does not pay sufficient attention to important relations of differentiation between siblings, and the role of other household members other than parents and their off-spring.

The analytical lens of ‘householding’ (Douglass, 2006) enables making greater sense of the complexity of the field of the household. Migration is one of several manifestations of householding, and hence, one of the various dynamics contributing to the reproduction of the household and, importantly, never operating in isolation from other forms of householding such as marriage, child bearing, adoption, and education.

Capturing this complexity that is shaping the field of the household and underpins questions of migration and staying of young household members requires making two conceptual readjustments. First, it requires appreciating households as ‘in flux’, and second, it requires taking the analysis of intra-household relations further than parent–child relations by studying important relations of social differentiation between ‘household dependents’. These conceptual adjustments are elaborated below, and are of particular importance in the relatively high fertility regime characterising the rural Lao context.

Fertility levels in Lao PDR may be dropping but are still considerably higher than in various neighbouring countries like China, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam (Fig. 2). Since this paper concerns the current generation of grown-up children, it is the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of the late 1980s that is of relevance here, when Lao PDR topped the ranks in Southeast Asia. Fairly large numbers of children make it necessary for intra-household analyses to appreciate how children within a household are positioned differently in ways other than mere gender. This may well be an important cue to get to a deeper understanding of the paradoxical observation that daughters appear both most inclined to migrate and most inclined to stay.

### 5.1. Households ‘in flux’, and beyond gender and parent–child relations

The first conceptual move is appreciating households as ‘in flux’, rather than static and stable units. Households are in flux due to internal and external dynamics. The internal dynamics are on the one hand intrinsic to the Lao conceptualisation of the household

and on the other rooted in a Chayanovian awareness of the household developmental cycle.

The Lao term for household is *khobkhua*, which translates literally as ‘covered by kitchen’ (Sparkes, 2007: 230). In contrast to a nuclear conceptualisation of the household (akin to family) based on static blood relations, the concept of *khobkhua* revolves around commensal relations, which are greatly flexible. Hence, the quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (e.g. age, gender) composition of the household as well as its actual membership is greatly in flux (see also Klausner, 1993: 34). This state of flux is in part due to Chayanovian household developmental events such as the ageing of children and parents, marrying in/out of children and death of household members (Shanin, 1982; Evans, 2008). In addition, the state of flux is further compounded by the taking up of additional, and at times biologically unrelated, household members.

Households are also in flux due to external dynamics caused by the expansion of the market. Brought about by two decades of continued, gradual economic liberalisation combined with the re-opening of borders with neighbouring Thailand and a politics of regional integration, Lao rural livelihoods are gradually transforming away from the land and away from farming (Rigg, 2005a; Barney, 2012).

Such a process of rural transformation is by no means unique to the Lao countryside and observed across Southeast Asia and beyond (Bebbington, 1999; Rigg, 2005b; Kelly, 2011). However, the important role that young people play in deepening and furthering this process of rural transformation, as part and parcel of ‘global householding’, is only seldom given the attention it deserves (exceptions include Koning, 1997; Huijsmans, 2010; Barney, 2012; Naafs and White, 2012: 4).

The second conceptual move is going beyond the conventional focus on gender and parent–child relations in analysing intra-household decision-making processes. This is here done by accounting for relations of relative seniority between dependents in a household. This complexity allows making sense of not uncommon scenarios in which, for example, the migration of one young member ties other(s), in gendered and generationed ways, more closely to the household as was clearly evident in the case of Buanoi described above.

### 5.2. Returning to data

With these conceptual adjustments in mind I now return to the quantitative data on *Baan Naam*’s young migrants. A minority of these young migrants (6/75; 8%) were not biological children of the households’ main couple. However, the share of ‘non-offspring’

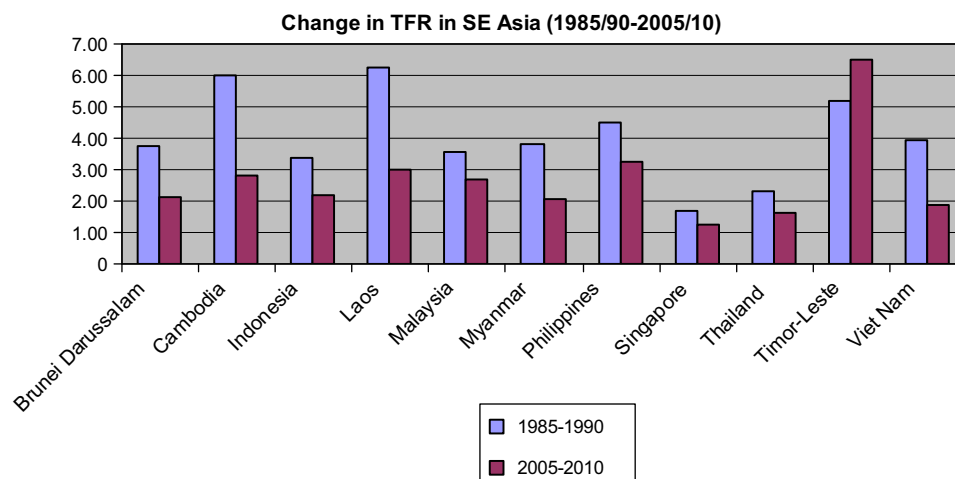


Fig. 2. Change in TFR in SE Asia (1985/90–2005/10). Adapted from United Nations (2011).

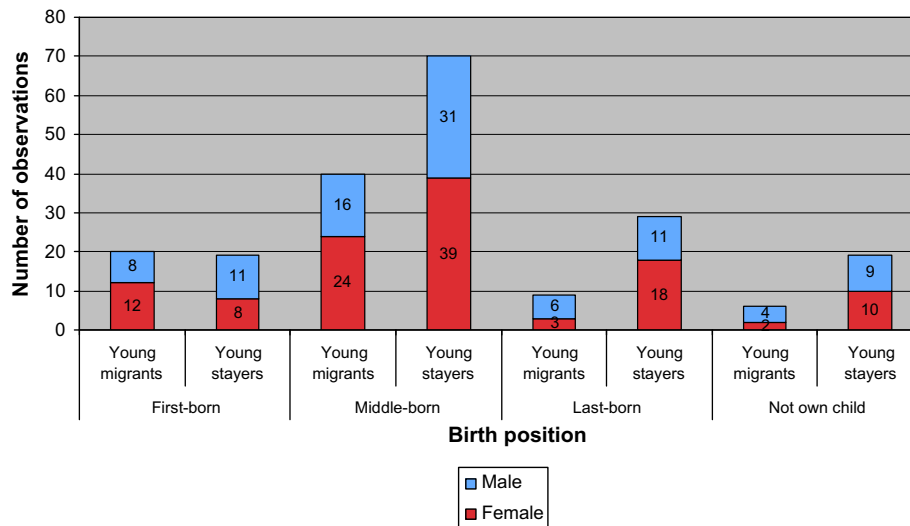


Fig. 3. Migration and staying by birth position and sex.

household dependents is nearly twice as large among the young dependents who remained in the natal household following the first migration of the 75 young migrants (19/137; 14%).

The presence of 'non-offspring' dependents among the young migrants and young stayers illustrates firstly the importance of the flexible and partly non-nuclear composition of the household which was observed in nearly one-third of the households at time of survey (17 households; 31%). Second, the presence of 'non-offspring' is in itself a manifestation of householding. The taking in of a cousin, a daughter-in-law,<sup>9</sup> or other 'dependents' constituted in a number of cases a response to the out-migration of own offspring. This particular form of chain migration went some way towards filling gaps in the gender and generational division of labour created by the outmigration of one or more own children.

In a context in which most parents have more than three children and a number of households also have other dependents staying in the homestead it does not suffice to limit analyses of intra-household dynamics to gender relations and parent-child relations. It needs to be complemented with an appreciation of relations of social differentiation between dependents within the household. Relations of seniority are here the case in point especially since these relations are central to the ethnic Lao kinship system (Enfield, 2005: 55; Rende Taylor, 2005: 413; Sparkes, 2005: 23; Enfield, 2007: 101).

Fig. 3 presents a birth-order approach to relations of seniority between young dependents in the household in connection with young people as migrants and stayers.

Since most parents have more than three children the category of middle-borns is logically largest in Fig. 3.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the low share of young migrants in the last born category is primarily because the children in this category were simply youngest and at times too young to become involved in migration, and less due to the custom of the last born daughter staying with the parents to look after them in old-age.

<sup>9</sup> The moving in of a son-in-law, which was in itself not uncommon despite the matrilineal ideology, was never observed in such a relation.

<sup>10</sup> Note that with the exception of five, all 40 young migrant sending households have three or more own children. The exceptions include four households with two own children (one of these has one 'not own child' living in) and one household with one own child (but with three young dependents living in). The cases of two own children are in Fig. 3 recorded as first born and last born. The case of one own child this is recorded as first born.

The most striking observation is the near-even distribution of migrants and stayers in the first-born category because this is starkly out of tune with the unequal overall division between young migrants (75) and young stayers (137). Moreover, daughters outnumber sons in the first-born category of young migrants. This observation contrasts with findings from Rende Taylor (2005) in the matrilineal context of northern Thailand, which is otherwise very similar to the ethnic Lao context of *Baan Naam*.<sup>11</sup>

...firstborns [daughters] act more as home helpers, and their important role in the home reduces their risk of being entered into child labor outside of the home. (Rende Taylor, 2005: 422)

The birth-order perspective on relations of seniority between young dependents in the household is useful for it breaks down the category of 'daughter' (see also Punch, 2001). However, it is ultimately unsatisfactory as it does not fit with the dynamic notion of householding underpinning the constant state of flux brought about by the challenge of social reproduction. Basing relations of seniority on relative age, rather than birth-order, captures these dynamics better. It first allows integrating the category of 'not own children' in the seniority analysis.<sup>12</sup> Second, it allows for readjusting the analytical frame in case certain acts of householding reconfigure everyday relations of seniority between dependents. For example, if a first-born marries out of the household the second-born will take up the social position of most 'senior' as far as everyday interactions in the household are concerned.<sup>13</sup> If this second-born were then to migrate, this is in Fig. 4 included in the 'senior' category of young migrants. The methodological consequence of such a dynamic event-based analysis is that the category of stayers (included in Fig. 3) cannot be included in Fig. 4 as this becomes highly complex in case of the common scenario of more than one young migrant in the same household.

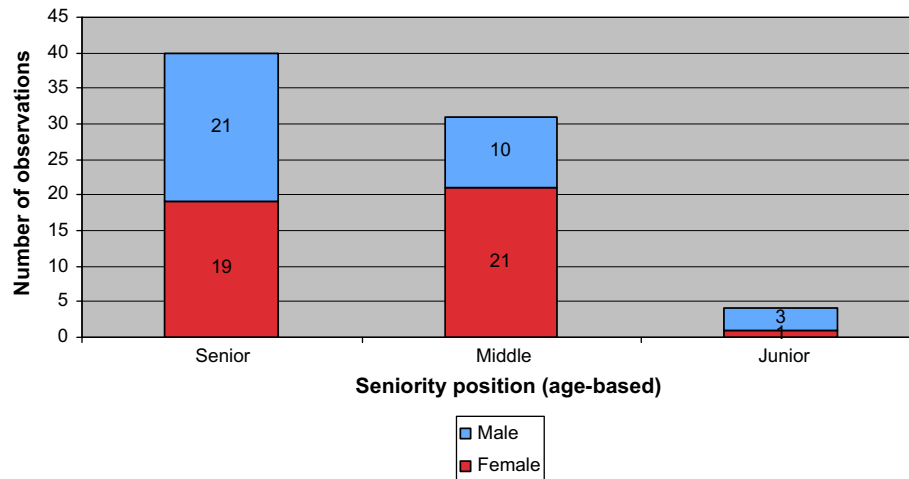
Comparing Fig. 4 with the analysis based on actual birth order (Fig. 3), it shows that the share of 'seniors' in Fig. 4 is twice as

<sup>11</sup> Note that Rende Taylor's work concentrates on migration for work only, focusing particularly on hazardous work, and does not cover other purposes of migration which are included in the *Baan Naam* data. Hence, Rende Taylor's work provides not more than a sounding board for the data from *Baan Naam*.

<sup>12</sup> This is done on the basis of their chronological age.

<sup>13</sup> Still, this is only an approximation of actual relations of seniority as seniority is not only determined by relative age, but also by factors such as personality and disability.





**Fig. 4.** Young migrants by position of relative age-based seniority in the household ( $n = 75$ ). Note that this figure includes one ambiguous observation. One young male migrant (last born son) left his elderly parents by themselves (without any living-in dependents) when he migrated. As such, he was both the most junior as well as the most senior dependent at the time of migration. This observation is here included in the 'junior' category.

large as the share of 'first-borns' among the young migrants in Fig. 3. Although this overall difference follows logically from the dynamic approach to relations of seniority underpinning Fig. 4, this is not the case for the difference in gender composition between the two conceptualisations of relations of seniority. The analysis by relative age shows that slightly more males than females migrated whilst being the most senior dependent in the household at time of migration. This contrasts with a birth-order based analysis in which first born daughters outnumber first born sons (12 vs. 8) among the young migrant population. What has happened when moving from a birth-order analysis to one based on relative age is that the total number of male young migrants in the category of most senior has increased considerably (from 8 to 21 observation, a 163% increase), whereas this is much less the case for female young migrants (from 12 to 19 observations, a 58% increase).

A further point of interest is the difference in gender distribution among young migrants in the senior/first born and middle categories between the two figures. In Fig. 3, the gender distribution is precisely the same in the first born and middle born category (2 males for every 3 females). Fig. 4, however, illustrates a shift in gender distribution between the 'senior' (near even distribution) and 'middle' category (2 females for each male). This suggests that the involvement of young females in migration is to a much greater extent related to the actual presence of a senior young person in the natal household than is the case with young male migrants. Departing from an analysis of seniority based on birth-order and limited to 'own children' to one based on relative age and including all dependents allows for further nuancing the discrepancy between the *Baan Naam* findings and those of Rende Taylor discussed above. It remains standing that in the ethnic Lao context of *Baan Naam* it is not necessarily the case that the first born daughter takes up the role of 'helper in the nest'. However, Fig. 4 shows that once a senior dependent of either gender (including 'not own children' like sons- or daughters-in-law) has taken up this role this has a gendered effect on the likelihood that young people in the middle category become involved in migration, with females more likely to become involved in migration than males.

Lastly, the very few observations in the junior category in Fig. 4 underscore that hardly any household remains without any young dependents present. This underscores the importance of having young people in the household. Particularly when the main couple ages, the hands of the young (whether grandchildren, cousins, or

other young children) are indispensable for carrying out a wide-range of everyday domestic activities as well as for affective purposes.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has approached migration and staying by young dependents through the analytical lens of householding. This was done by treating migration and staying as forms of householding that interact with each other as well as with other dimensions of householding. Moreover, by drawing on the analytical framework of the inter-generational contract as a key dimension shaping the field of the household the paper demonstrated that young people's agency is not limited to its most visible manifestation (becoming a young migrant) and may also be exercised in relation to becoming or remaining a young stayer.

The paper juxtaposed quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the same research location and pertaining to the same research subjects, and moving back and forth between young people's own perspectives and that of their parents. The quantitative data show that young women outnumber young men in migration and also that at any point in time the majority of young people of both sexes are *not* involved in migration. However, in seeming contradiction with the quantitative patterns the analysis of the qualitative material showed that young women are far more constrained in becoming a young migrant.

In this paper I made sense of this puzzle through two conceptual readjustments. In a context characterised by above replacement fertility and rural transformation I first conceptualised household as 'in flux'. Lao rural households are not only in flux due to internal dynamics related to the continuous shifts in relations of inter-dependency as well as due to shifts in its physical composition. They are also in flux due to the changing livelihoods orientation brought about by the processes of capitalist expansion shaping the socio-economic landscape of contemporary Lao PDR. In addition, it required appreciating intra-household relations as gendered relations of relative seniority which are constantly made and remade, among other things, by young dependents through migration and staying. These conceptual readjustments were applied to the *Baan Naam* data set. This demonstrated how in the process of householding in the context of above-replacement level fertility in which rural Lao households are situated young dependent women are both the ones most inclined to become a young

migrant as well as most inclined to become a young stayer related to shifts in their relative position in the field of the household.

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