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The Dissertation Committee for Maryann Bylander Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

**Looking Elsewhere:
Migration, Risk, and Decision-Making in Rural Cambodia**

Committee:

Mounira Charrad, Co-Supervisor

Bryan Roberts, Co-Supervisor

Christine Williams

Alexander Weinreb

Erin Hamilton

**Looking Elsewhere:
Migration, Risk, and Decision-Making in Rural Cambodia**

by

Maryann Bylander, B.A., M.A.

Dissertation

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Looking Elsewhere:
Migration, Risk, and Decision-Making in Rural Cambodia

Maryann Bylander, PhD

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Co-Supervisors: Mounira Maya Charrad, Bryan Roberts

International labor migration has become an increasingly common livelihood strategy in rural Cambodia, in some villages becoming a defining and normative part of community life. This dissertation is an ethnographic study of one such rural community, where migration to Thailand has become a primary livelihood strategy over the past decade. Drawing on three years of fieldwork in *Chanleas Dai*, a commune (*khum*) in Northwest Cambodia, my research explores the complexities of the migration decision-making process, and the meanings of migration for rural households.

This work is motivated by debates within the dialogues of migration and development, most of which seek to understand the potential for migration to promote development by focusing on the *impacts* of migration. My work departs from previous studies by focusing explicitly on decision-making, seeking to understand how and why families make developmentally important migration decisions. This is a critical area of inquiry, as the potential that migration has to promote or sustain development rests on a series of individual choices, for example who migrates, or how households invest remittances. Yet research tends to focus on the outcomes of these choices, neglecting a sufficient understanding of why they were made.

In Chanleas Dai individuals are deeply ambivalent about migration, understanding it as both a constituent cause of insecurity and also the best path to security, mobility, and status. Whereas migration is perceived as low-risk and high-reward, village-based livelihoods are widely perceived as insufficient, impossible, or too financially risky to be meaningful. These perceptions are strongly linked to the recent history of environmental distress in the area. As a result, households often prioritize investment in further migrations, rather than using wages earned abroad for local investment or production. This is particularly true among youth, who see few potential worthwhile strategies to “make it” at home. Credit and agriculture programs theorized to curb migration, and/or promote local investment have not substantively challenged these perceptions. My conclusions discuss these findings in terms of their implications for the migration and development dialogues, definitions and understandings of development, and rural development policies both within and outside of Cambodia.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Trucks stop nearly every day on the wide dirt road that cuts through Chanleas Dai Commune. Women and men of all ages board the vehicles to begin the two-day journey across the Thai border, a crossing that is treacherous by all accounts. Piled on top of one other in the cabins and beds of beaten up Nissans, they lie in stacks three or four bodies high for most of the drive, covered by tight tarps. They are silent, understanding the urgency of being quiet and still regardless of the bumps and potholes the truck navigates along the route. Those at the top of the stacks consider themselves lucky. Those underneath quickly lose feeling in their limbs under the intense pressure of the limbs of others. Often they later have to be lifted out of the truck, shaken and massaged before they can walk. Though overwhelming, everyone tries to ignore the smell and feel of sweating bodies. With luck, no one become sick. With wives and husbands separated by the arms and legs of strangers, modesty disappears until the cars reach a small village near the Banteay Meanchey border. There, under the cover of night, *meekjal*¹ direct migrants out of the trucks and across kilometers of densely forested landscapes. They wade across a river, which can be up to chest-high in depth, and then run as fast as possible, sometimes to the sound of distant bullet fire from Thai police. To the *meekjal* who navigates their path, and ensures their safety once in Thailand, they pay fees of between 2,000-3,000 Thai baht.² Though a seemingly small amount (the equivalent of

¹ Literally translated as “master of the wind,” *meekjal* are middlemen/brokers. Typically they are former migrants, and they play multiple roles in the migration process: transporting workers, acting as agents for migrants, locating jobs, facilitating remittance transfer and at times ensuring safety.

² A note on currency: It is common throughout Cambodia to use both the Khmer Riel and other forms of currency, in part because when riel were introduced in 1980 Cambodians were skeptical of its power and relied heavily on alternative sources of foreign exchange (Clark 2006). Today, both informal and formal transactions (banks, ATMs, markets, moneylenders) commonly use Khmer riel (KHR) and US dollars (USD). In areas near Thailand, the Thai baht (THB) is also common; often predominate over either dollars or riel. Locals regularly shift between currencies in their references. In this dissertation I also routinely move between referring to baht, riel and dollars, retaining the currency reported by my respondents in conversation, and reporting estimated dollar equivalents using static exchange rates of 4,000 KHR and 33 THB to 1 USD, which were average exchange rates during my fieldwork.

60-90 USD), most people have to borrow from friends, moneylenders or microfinance institutions. Borrowing is costly, with interest rates between 3% and 6% per month, meaning that successful migrations and an ability to remit wages quickly become crucial.

Despite the dangers and difficulty of the cross-border journey, most residents of Chanleas Dai, a rural community in Northwest Cambodia, have made the trip at least once. Their words, collectively, form the description above. Though they speak of the actual transit across the border with varying degrees of hardship and terror, they recount their general experiences with migration as largely positive: a means to a better life, a way to support family members, “easy money”, a fun and modern lifestyle, and far better than the alternative of staying home to “watch the rice grow.” Most households have someone currently away, about to leave, or recently returned. Often these migrations begin in childhood or early adulthood, and continue in cycles through young people’s transitions into marriage and their own family creation. Though one might briefly return to Cambodia for any number of reasons (marriage, childbirth, caring for older relatives), the default is leaving the village for work elsewhere. The exception-- for the wealthy, the highly educated, the sick, the old, the unusual, the stubborn, or the disabled-- is to remain.

During my time living in and visiting Chanleas Dai I had few conversations that didn’t include a discussion of migration to Thailand, a pervasive social pattern across every village in the commune.³ Whether it was news of a relative’s recent departure, a disgruntled comment from a village or school administrator about low community participation in a recent event, or news of a returnee’s wedding or childbirth, migration was an ever-present part of village life, even for non-migrants. Its overarching presence incited ambivalence. Villagers, sometimes in the course of a short conversation, would denote their dependence on, excitement about, frustration with, and strong desire for

³ Communes (*khum*) are third tier administrative divisions in Cambodia. The largest administrative unit are provinces (*kaet*), followed by districts (*srok*), communes (*khum*), and villages (*phum*). Chanleas Dai Commune is made up of 11 distinct villages: Chanleas Dai, Ta Meak, Kna Jo, Dombrei Slap, Kok Tnaut, Ruun, Chouk Roat, Tram Kong, Preah Lean, Kambao, Rolom Svay. As reported by village chiefs, 1,683 families (7,738 individuals) were registered as living in the commune in 2010. These are somewhat different figures than reported in 2009 commune reports listed in Chapter 4.

migration. Both at the household and community level, migration was seen as an essential livelihood strategy and a desired, accepted, life-enhancing and necessary part of life. Paradoxically, it was also noted as a social problem, an undesirable pattern, a burden on families, a circle of dependence, and a testament to the underdevelopment and low education of the area. Migration was a savior and a devil, sometimes both at the same time. My dissertation is, at its heart, an exploration of these ambivalences and the rural realities behind them, aimed at shedding light on the meanings that migration has for rural families. Drawing on three years of qualitative fieldwork, my research explores the complexities of the migration decision-making process, the meanings of migration in rural households, and the disconnects that exist between economic theories of migration and the lived experiences of those in rural migrant communities. In particular I seek to explain why the terrifying journey outlined above, which is followed by periods of wage labor in difficult and insecure jobs in Thailand, is still understood as the *best* and often *only* meaningful opportunity that individuals see as leading to “development.” This explanation, developed over the course of this dissertation, holds power not only for understanding migration decision-making, but also for clarifying the potential for migration to promote livelihood improvement, either by the standard economic definitions of development or by locally-defined perspectives of improvement.

CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS DISSERTATION

Decision-Making

This dissertation is situated within a long tradition of literature seeking to better understand what drives and sustains international migrations. Migration-related decisions operate on a variety of inter-connected levels. Macro-level social and economic conditions structure specific opportunities for migration (Lewis 1954; Todaro and Maruszko 1987; Sassen 1988); government policies and incentives determine the ease of cross-border movement (Zolberg 2000); community networks facilitate information and

access to work abroad (Massey et al 1987; Massey 1990); household relationships and calculated strategies mediate and often constrain individual choices (Stark and Bloom 1985; Stark and Lucas 1988; Wolf 1992); and individuals weigh the specific costs and benefits of migration as a personal strategy to reach goals (Todaro 1969, Borjas 1989).

This nexus of decision-making is at the heart of all inquiries into the scope and consequences of migration. The processes which cause migration and the consequences of those migrations are strongly interrelated, as they are both responses to wider processes of social change (DeHaas 2008; Skeldon 2008). In other words, the motivations for migration among would-be migrants say a great deal about the impacts we can expect their migrations may have on households and communities once they leave. Moreover, the processes that incite migration are the same social and economic realities that shape how migration leads to social change. This is particularly true in terms of how migration is expected to contribute to development (Massey and Durand 1992; DeHaas 2008). As DeHaas argues, when we are considering the development related impacts of migration “it matters whether labor migration is to be seen as a desperate flight from misery by impoverished people forced to migrate or a voluntary endeavor by young, ambitious people to acquire sufficient capital to invest in their own enterprise upon return” (DeHaas 2008:3). Where migration is used as a coping strategy, it is likely that the consequences of widespread migration will be substantively different from contexts where it is primarily undertaken as a strategy of mobility. Thus understanding the factors motivating migration, how individuals make sense of their migrations and the alternatives to migration, and how social context plays a role in these decisions, is at the core of all research seeking to explain the social, economic, and demographic consequences of migration.

Migration and Development

In this dissertation, I analyze migration decision-making around areas of importance in the debates in migration and development, which generally seek to explain

the extent to which, also and how international migration can promote development. These discourses include varying, and at times contradictory, definitions of exactly what *development* is, ranging definitions based on basic economic indicators, to complex perspectives on freedoms, capabilities, and social/environmental justice. Moreover, the meanings put forth by scholars do not always resonate with views of what *development* or *improvement* means to individuals. As this work will suggest, individual and household views of “development” (*kaapiwatd*, or *karichomran*) in rural Cambodia are often disconnected from the definitions of development articulated by social and economic theories. Thus this work does not assume that rural views of development are similar to that which scholars and practitioners argue for. Rather it seeks to unpack the ways in which local goals conflict with the types of interventions and changes which scholars often refer to when they consider how migration might best lead to *development*.

Chapter 2 discusses definitional issues in more detail. However within the field of migration (as within the field of development in general) economic understandings of development are still dominant. In part, this relates to the assumed motivations for labor migration, which most scholars still view as primarily economic. As a result the bulk of studies in the field of migration and development explore the impact of migration on sending communities through economic lenses. At the macro level, they are primarily concerned to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), job creation, and other economic indicators of growth. At the individual or household level, they are most likely to reference increased food security, poverty reduction, or an increased ability to earn a living (e.g. through increased education, skills, or knowledge). Though I do not agree that these are the best, more comprehensive, or most appropriate ways to define development, they are a particularly salient as they dominate the academic and policy literature in the field of migration and development. Thus while I discuss alternative views of development and their relevance to my findings, in general when I discuss the “migration and development” literature or nexus, I refer to these economic understandings of development.

A central point in how scholars evaluate the potential for migration to successfully promote development—as defined in these traditionally economic ways—is whether the wages migrants earn abroad lead to sustainable changes in poverty/well-being, or whether they are immediately for consumption. The argument behind this focus is that for development strategies to be long term successes (again, in economic terms) they should not only increase the immediate standard of living of individuals and/or their families but also allow for sustainable reductions in poverty or increases in economic well-being in the future. Put simply, where remittances are used for consumption they are viewed to provide short-term palliatives for poverty, leading to increased dependency, whereas when they are put to use productively they are believed to stimulate more sustainable forms of growth. This type of growth could occur for example through improved agriculture, expanded production, small-scale entrepreneurship, investment in education or human capital, or to a lesser extent through increased consumption that spurs the growth of local or national markets. As a result of these dominant views of development and how it occurs, scholars and practitioners often argue for the importance of policies that would both encourage migrant remittances, and also promote greater local investment using those remittances (Catrinescu et al 2009).

As a result of this focus, the migration and development literature is dominated by quantitative studies measuring the impacts of migration and/or remittances, using data-driven outcomes to support theories about why households migrate or how migration can support economic development. Thanks to this body of work, (described in more detail in the following chapter) sociologists clearly understand many of the determinants of migration, the mechanisms by which migration influences the economic well-being of sending communities, and the constraints and limitations on the power of remittances to lead to sustained growth.

However this research also leaves us with important questions, namely an insufficient understanding of how and why families make developmentally important decisions, and how social context might mediate these decisions. This is a critical area of inquiry, as we know that the decision-making process of would-be migrants is

inextricably linked to the kinds of outcomes that those studying migration and development are most interested in. The potential that migration has to promote or sustain economic development rests on a series of individual choices: who migrates, to what extent migrants remit money home, whether households invest remittances in productive goods, how migrants educate their children, and how they use and retain their skills. And yet research tends to focus on the outcomes of these choices, neglecting a sufficient understanding of how the reasons for migration *relate* to these outcomes. This is particularly important as much research in the area of migration and development is motivated by a desire to support migration working better to *promote* development. Where we understand the outcomes of migration but not the processes by which those outcomes are enabled, we are limited in our power to suggest appropriate policies.

For example, theory and research suggest that productive investments are important in facilitating sustainable economic development (Massey et al 1998), yet we have a less clear understanding of how households perceive productive opportunities in their own communities and why they do or don't seek to invest in them (Massey and Durand 1992). Similarly, while theories suggest that household migration is a form of risk diversification and specifically a response to inadequate credit and insurance markets at home (Stark and Levhari 1982; Katz and Stark 1986; Taylor et al 1996) the majority of studies supporting this concept rely on quantitative analyses of the uses and effects of remittance spending, not on actual or perceived variations in access to credit and migration (e.g. Durand Parrado and Massey 1996; Rozelle, Taylor and DeBrauw 1999). Thus we have less information on how households perceive the relative risk of migration, or how context matters in household perceptions of risk. Likewise while we know a great deal about trends in and impacts of remittance spending (Durand, Parrado and Massey 1996; Ghosh 2006; Adams and Page 2005), we know less about how individuals defend or explain these choices in relation to their own ideas of what development, progress, or livelihood improvement means.

Through an in-depth ethnographic analysis, this dissertation sheds light on these understudied *how* and *why* questions, moving one step behind literature that examines the

impacts of migration, and instead analyzing the critical, yet neglected process of how individuals are making migration-related choices, and related, their perceptions of both migration and its alternatives. A critical component of this analysis is bringing to light the ways in which social context matters in creating and sustaining perceptions of migration and its alternatives. Decisions on migration, remittance spending, and investment, while made at the individual level, are deeply influenced and often constrained by a web of institutions including environment, local labor markets, government policies, legal systems, values and social norms. Context doesn't just matter: it is a constituent part of the process by which "what matters" is formed. Thus context remains in the foreground throughout this dissertation. In particular I use the concept of a *culture of migration* to frame how context mediates decision-making in Chanleas Dai, an area where migration is a normative social pattern.

Cultures of Migration

First explicitly defined by Massey and his colleagues (1998), the idea of a culture of migration derives from a vast array of work in Mexico noting ways that migration can transform communities (Reichert 1981; Reichert 1982; Mines 1981; Massey et al 1987) and become an explicit factor both structuring potential migration decisions, and mediating their outcomes (Massey et al 1998; Kandel and Massey 2002). Specifically, once migration patterns begin in rural communities, they often promote further migration through processes of network formation, agrarian transformation, and income redistribution (Massey 1988). As migration becomes normative within rural communities, it can also alter value systems, traditions, and individual aspirations in substantial ways, to the extent that we can speak of such areas of having powerful *cultures of migration* (Massey 1988; Massey 1990; Kandel and Massey 2002). Most generally a culture of migration can be defined as a space where long-standing and/or high rates of migration have led to the valorization of wage labor abroad, as well as the behaviors, attitudes and lifestyles associated with migration (Kandel and Massey 2002).

This concept, discussed more explicitly in Chapter 2, acknowledges that culture is dynamic, and perceptions of risk, development goals, and livelihood preferences can quickly shift during periods of social change.

Scholars of migration readily admit the importance of culture, institutions and social context in both contributing to and mitigating the impacts of migration (Massey et al 1987; Kandel and Massey 2002). And yet relatively little research incorporates the concept of cultures of migration into analyses of decision-making or the migration-development relationship. The vast majority of the work that does is focused exclusively on Mexico. Thus while scholars recognize that cultures of migration *can be* a constituent part of individual decision-making around migration, there has been less work interrogating more explicitly how context is important in terms of how migration decisions are constructed or justified, and what alternatives they are set against. In a recent article in *International Migration*, Maruja Asis and colleagues (2009) regarded this as one of the major gaps in theoretical knowledge within the field, acknowledging that cultures of migration can play a significant role in the links between migration and development, but noting that this relationship has been relatively unexplored.

My work aims to incorporate context explicitly, elucidating the dynamics of how social and environmental context mediates migration decision-making. My goal is primarily to show how individuals understand the risk and reward of leaving, staying home, and investing in different kinds of futures for themselves and their families. In doing so, this case study sheds light on what I argue are important disconnects between how we expect migration to contribute to development, and the ways in which how local environment, institutions, value systems, and perceptions of risk mediate this potential. Thus this work isn't aimed at predicting how migration will influence development outcomes in Chanleas Dai, or clarifying the impact of migration on any indicator of development. Nevertheless, I argue that understanding the process by which migrants and their families are making decisions has much to clarify in terms of the potential for migration to contribute to social change.

Contribution

This dissertation makes three specific contributions to the field of migration. First, it provides an in-depth, grounded case study on Cambodian migration to Thailand, a migration pattern that under-researched in general yet growing in importance in the Greater Mekong region. Scholars who have written reviews on international migration trends in Asia note that Cambodia is understudied (Asis et al 2009). Moreover, those who do work in Cambodia specifically note that in comparison to the relatively well-documented patterns of urban migration and trafficking/forced migration, that there is a lack of research on international labor migration from the country (Maltoni 2010). Finally, the studies that do exist on the migration experiences of Cambodians to Thailand are primarily based on household surveys (e.g. Maltoni 2010; Deelen and Vasuprasat 2010; Hing et al 2011). Thus while they offer information on general patterns of migration and remittance spending, they are less well equipped to understand the complex motivations and relationships embedded in migration processes.

The second gap this dissertation contributes to is the lack of awareness/focus in the migration literature on South-South migrations (broadly defined as migrations between developing countries), which are often between neighboring countries. South-South movement are estimated to make-up nearly half of global migrations (Ratha and Shaw 2007; Blakewell 2009), and are even more important in some regions of the world. For example in East Asia/Pacific region, an estimated 84% of migrations are between developing countries (Ratha and Shaw 2007). Yet South-South movements receive far less attention than South-North migrations, that is movements to the United States or Canada, Japan, Western Europe, or the developed Middle East (Hujo and Piper 2007; Blakewell 2009). This is important as there is some reason to believe that these movements are substantively different than South-North movements, because they tend to be lower cost, more easily financed, and less restricted as borders are often quite porous. This allows more flexibility for migrants to go and return, and also expands the accessibility of migration. These distinctions have implications who migrates, and also the consequences of migration. For example, while most migration discourses assume

that the poorest of the poor, and children are unlikely to independently migrate, this may not be true in South-South contexts (DeHaan and Yaquib 2008).

The third contribution this dissertation makes is to the literature on migration and development, described in more detail above. My work seeks to expand our understanding of why and how migrants and migrant family members make decisions, with a particular eye towards how the social and environmental context matters in decision-making. I argue that focusing on meanings and decision-making also allows us to better understand some of the disconnects that exist between theories of migration and local realities, a point I'll come return to at several points in this work.

Ambivalences and Expectations

This dissertation makes two broad, related claims about the way that migration is understood and experienced in Chanleas Dai. First, I argue that people are deeply ambivalent about migration, seeing it as both a constituent cause of insecurity and, at the same time, the only short-term solution possible for the precarious realities of rural livelihoods. Second, I argue that a significant factor in decision-making around migration is the widely held view of village-based alternatives to migration as insufficient, impossible, or too risky to be meaningful. As a result, many households continue to prioritize investment in further migrations, rather than perceiving migration as a short-term development strategy. These claims have implications for how we might expect migration to lead to development, in part because they are at odds with some general theories of how migration may best lead to development: through local and/or sustainable investment.

These arguments together highlight a disconnect between the lived realities of current and former migrants, and dominant theories/discourses in the migration and development literature. Put simply, most discussions of how migration can or does lead to development draw on neoliberal economic perspectives of migration as a bottom-up development strategy, arguing that individuals can use wage labor abroad to start or

speed motors of development. Typically this is expected to happen when migrants or their families investing their wages earned abroad in profitable ventures at home. In Chanleas Dai there are some individuals who hold similar understandings of migration---who see their migration or the migration of others in their community in terms of an investment aimed at providing an increased ability to support livelihoods at home. Yet these individuals are the exception and not the rule.

In contrast, those who I spent time with in Chanleas Dai saw few real and meaningful opportunities for productive investment in their communities. In the mainstream view, the possibility that international migration might play a part in developing village-based productivity or allow for increased development of human capital was unclear at best and absurd at worst. Explicitly, I was told over and over again that the village had no potential for income-generation. Both strategies and ambitions were directed away from the rural village as a potential place to make a living. The village might be a place to “eventually grow old”, to stay in “for now”, to return to for celebration, and for a few people to live out their lives with “enough,” but it was not a place to achieve or to grow. Common beliefs were that NGOs or factories entering into the area could perhaps shift this potential by providing wage labor, but without outside intervention, the community was not a viable place to earn “enough.” Thus while theories of economic development assume that individuals will be see real potential for profitable productive investments in their local communities, I did not find this to generally be the case.

Early in my research I began trying to understand local livelihood strategies by questioning friends and former co-workers about what was possible, profitable, and common for households to do in the village to make ends meet. Though I knew migration was common, I sought out information on what else was ideal, lucrative or simply mainstream. In particular, I was curious what migrant households did with wages saved abroad, and what potential there was to invest in local productive activities---the kinds of activities that are expressions of “migration leading to development” as it is most often defined in the scholarly literature.

I sought out Rithy⁴, a friend from the area who was at the time working with a local NGO. One of the most educated people in his village, Rithy had a 12th grade degree and was soon to begin university studies. He was one of a handful of youth who had completed school, a critical thinker, and particularly knowledgeable about village-based strategies as he was working with community advocacy groups through his NGO job. I asked him what people could do *in* the village to sustainably improve their lives if they happened upon some significant amount of money. He looked at me blankly. I thought at first he didn't understand my often mispronounced Khmer, so I tried again. He was thoughtful for a minute, smiled and said that he really didn't know, he didn't think there was much one *could* do in the village, even with a fair amount of money to invest. I made some tentative suggestions, and each one was shrugged off. Tractors might be useful, but lots of people had tractors, so it wasn't really a great strategy to earn money these days. A motorbike might be helpful if you had something to sell, but what would you sell? And to who? Land, of course, but that was expensive. Plus, with the latest flooding and droughts no one wanted to risk buying land that might turn out to produce little or nothing. The truth, he told me, is that most people don't see much possibility here in the village. He didn't really either----his job with the local NGO was a stroke of luck, and meant he didn't need to worry about having the land support him like most people. Though he would still invest in his rice fields, and probably a small vegetable garden, this was to supplement something else, not to rely on. He was one of the lucky ones with a job.

Rithy's job was enough to motivate him to stay in the village, though several of his brothers and sisters were in Thailand or had recently returned. His wife, a former migrant, was also interested in returning. Migration, I soon learned, was compelling enough that it even drew individuals away from relatively high status NGO and government jobs, just as it drew students away from education even when they had government scholarships. In several villages, local officials also sustained their families

⁴ All names have been changed

through remittances from abroad. These trends underscored both the perceived potential of migration and also the growing pessimism around village-based livelihood strategies.

Meanings and Decision-Making

In Chanleas Dai, cyclical migration to Thailand is a normative and accepted part of daily life, both for migrants and non-migrants at home. This pattern has rapidly become an important feature in the social landscape, in such a way that its presence and its impact frame decisions around production, spending, consumption and borrowing even for non-migrants. By paying attention to meanings that migration holds for families, the following chapters of this dissertation highlight how risk, development goals, and social status are related to the growing culture of migration in the area. More specifically, I argue that at the same time as migration has become a normative and quasi-compulsory livelihood strategy in my research site, village-based alternatives have increasingly become perceived as higher risk, low status, and passive alternatives for livelihood improvement. These perceptions have not been fundamentally challenged by expanded access to credit, improved infrastructure, greater education opportunities, or local agricultural development programs in the area-- all mechanisms that past theory and research suggest as being important to improve the potential for rural development and thus shape migration patterns. Despite these changes, for most individuals migration is articulated as the best (and often only) potential option for social mobility and security in the village, with village-based alternatives seen risky, boring, insufficient, or impossible.

Yet my research also highlights that there clearly are viable alternatives, many of which would be the preferred strategies of development economists and practitioners seeking to enhance the power of remittances to sustain long-term growth. Just as clearly, there are reasons why from most villagers' perspectives these strategies are understood as less powerful, less ideal, or less possible. The choices individuals make around migration and its alternatives are deeply connected to the precarious nature of local environments, the nature of uneven development in Cambodia, and the goals families are seeking to

attain--which are in turn related to the dynamic and complex ways in which *development* is defined.

The Cambodian Context

Cambodia is an ideal location to study the complexities of migration, decision-making, and rural development. Cambodia is overwhelmingly rural and agricultural, with striking levels of rural poverty. Though internal migration has always been common in Cambodia, international labor migration is a relatively new phenomenon and one that has recently grown in significance (Maltoni 2007; Chan 2009; Chem et al 2011). Yet there is little research on this trend, and even less that situates migration in the context of its potential for development (Maltoni 2007). Until recently, most studies of Cambodian migration have focused on internal movements, which make up the bulk of migration (Maltoni 2007). Scholars on migration and development in Asia note the lack of research specifically on patterns within Cambodia (Asis et al 2009) and highlight the need for more research in this geographic area.

Thailand is the most common destination for Cambodian migrants (Maltoni 2010; CSES 2009). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that in 2008 there were at least 248,000 Cambodians in Thailand and that this migration pattern will continue to grow in size (Maltoni 2010). Although approximations of migrant remittances into Cambodia vary quite widely, even conservative estimates highlight the importance of remittances on the Cambodian economy and the potential they hold for poverty reduction. World Bank data indicate that Cambodia received \$297 million dollars in remittances in 2006 (Ratha et al 2011), while IFAD data suggests nearly double that number the same year, \$559 million (Orozco 2009). Neither of these conservative estimates captures informal transfers, which form the bulk of remittances from Thailand to Cambodia (Maltoni 2010). However even the more conservative estimates show a considerable impact on the Cambodian economy, with the World Bank's figures representing 4.1% of GDP in 2006 (Maltoni 2010). With a growing rural population,

high levels of rural poverty, accessible opportunities for wage labor in Thailand and relatively porous borders there is a strong potential for migration to contribute to rural development. Indeed, preliminary research attempting to identify successful strategies for moving out of poverty in Cambodia suggests that labor migration is a primary means by which households move and stay out of poverty (Fitzgerald and So 2007).

My story

My relationship with Chanleas Dai, and with this dissertation is more complex than that of researcher or ethnographer. Since 2005, I have been connected to the community, visiting, living, and working in the commune in several different roles over time. Most of those roles were related to my involvement with PEPY, an NGO working in the area on education issues. Over time PEPY has had a variety of education-based projects in the area, but the organization began through a school construction project in Chanleas Dai in 2005. Subsequently, they began projects aimed at improved Khmer literacy, teacher training, community advocacy, and health and environmental education.

My first two trips to Chanleas Dai, in December 2005 and December 2006, were as a supporter of PEPY and the work they were doing with area primary schools. Though I was involved as a board member and volunteer with PEPY at that time, I was also a graduate student, studying in the first years of my PhD program. These trips to Cambodia offered me an intriguing new space to consider the theoretical and substantive questions I was researching at The University of Texas at Austin. During that time Cambodia was experiencing rapid economic growth and dramatic social change, with a growing youth population, an expanding urban population, and increasing mobility. Streets seemed to be redeveloped overnight, as Phnom Penh struggled to grow quickly enough to meet both the demands of a growing urban population and floods of foreign investment. I became interested in how migrations were playing a role in development and social change, particularly with respect to the rural areas where the majority of Cambodians live. When I began to conceptualize my dissertation, I planned a study of the impacts of migration on

rural communities, and how those impacts related to individual experiences of urban migration, primarily to Phnom Penh. I returned to Cambodia in June of 2007, after I was asked by PEPY's Executive Director to help manage some small projects in Phnom Penh on a short-term basis. As my plan had been to spend the summer studying Khmer in the U.S., I saw this as an ideal opportunity to learn Khmer, find a network of people able to help me with future dissertation research, and do pre-dissertation research to help guide my proposal.

During the summer months I learned a great deal about individual experiences of urban migration, and found useful contacts to facilitate my research. However I also became deeply involved in PEPY's education-based work, which was primarily taking place in rural Siem Reap province, 350 kilometers away from the capital. At that time, PEPY was working an area of Siem Reap where high numbers of families and individuals regularly migrated to Thailand for work. As I continued to work with PEPY supporting their education programs in and around Chanleas Dai it became clear that international migration was a pressing issue in rural and remote areas of the province, and growing in significance. Yet in comparison to the wealth of studies on urban migration in the country, there was almost no research at that time (2007) on Cambodian migration to Thailand. My dissertation slowly, and then rapidly, evolved as I decided to take a position working full time with PEPY in Siem Reap and began to re-conceptualize my dissertation as a case study of international migration and decision-making from Chanleas Dai.

This opportunity resonated with my interest in action-based research and my desire to contribute to the areas where I would be benefiting personally from conducting academic research. It also resonated with the interests of the community leaders, as one of the biggest barriers to keeping children in school was the pull of migration. Commune and village leaders and local school officials felt that encouraging education, at least through primary and lower secondary school, was important, but weren't sure how to best present that case to students and parents. We all felt that a better understanding of the

causes and experiences of migration would be useful as a first step towards understanding how they could present and highlight local alternatives, including education.

For the next three years, I spent much of my time staying and working in PEPY's target area of Chanleas Dai, helping to build their programs and monitoring and evaluation and eventually conducting my own fieldwork in area villages. During my time there I had the unique opportunity to have regular interactions with local officials, teachers, students, parents, former and current migrants, and NGO staff members in my dual roles of development practitioner and researcher. While all of the individuals I interacted with knew of my research interest in migration, my enrolment as a PhD student, and my dissertation topic, I was also seen more regularly as someone invested in helping to improve the community, the education system, and the general well-being of households. Although my dual role as NGO worker and researcher complicated my story, and sometimes complicated the stories I heard, it also allowed me a unique connection in terms of duration, depth, and trust.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The observations, discussions, and semi-structured interviews that inform this dissertation come from time spent in Chanleas Dai over a three year period, from September 2007-July 2010. For most of this time I was formally working with PEPY in a role that included financial oversight, strategic planning, research and evaluation, and program oversight. Thus it included attending Participatory Rural Appraisals throughout the commune and beyond,⁵ attending meetings with teachers, school support committees, the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, and NGO partners, and regular interaction with local teachers, students, parents, and school directors. My work also included conducting interviews with teachers, parents, local officials or other stakeholders about

⁵ Participatory Rural Appraisals are a participatory research tool often used in the evaluation, planning, and management of development projects. Most typically they involve gathering groups of stakeholders to share local history, brainstorm needs and challenges, map social characteristics, identify, prioritize, and analyze problems, discuss root causes of these problems, and visualize potential futures.

topics relevant to PEPY's work in education. Between September 2007-July 2010 I spent on average half of my weeks in Chanleas Dai, primarily doing work for PEPY and staying on the grounds of a local primary school. While I paid attention to discussions of migration, and often incited conversation about what it meant for people, the first two years I was largely interested in getting to know the community and the area, contributing to PEPY, understanding the dynamics of migration and daily life, and improving my Khmer language skills. I wrote fieldnotes, but I did not have a routine to speak of, and my writing was intermittent, at times a habitual practice and at times more irregular. This reflects shifting patterns in my work and life over the years, which were ever-changing, often dominated by PEPY projects, and varied as to the extent of time I spent in Chanleas Dai.

In 2009 I began a focused study; developing and translating an interview guide, selecting three study villages, meeting with local officials, and between June 2009 and May 2010, conducting 82 semi-structured interviews. I also conducted one focus group with youth migrants who had returned home for the Khmer New Year holidays, and one with similarly aged non-migrant students in 9th grade at a local secondary school. In July 2011, I returned for a brief visit and conducted seven additional interviews with moneylenders and microfinance providers. A full list of respondents and relevant characteristics is located in Appendix A.

Study Initial Stages and Village Selection

My first interviews, conducted in 2009, were with the Chanleas Dai commune chief, and ten of the eleven village chiefs of the commune, with the goals of obtaining permission to conduct research and learning about specific patterns of migration and livelihood strategies across villages.⁶ All officials consented to the study and expressed enthusiasm for the topic. These interviews included questions about the prevalence of migration in the community, perceived differences across the commune, population of

⁶ I was unable to coordinate an interview with one of the village chiefs.

the village, general livelihood strategies, and changes over time. I then used these interviews, along with ID Poor Data from the Cambodian Ministry of Planning (MoP), to select 3 villages from which to select additional interview respondents. My goal was to select areas that differed from each other as much as possible in terms of household poverty level, location, and geographic remoteness (distance to roads, schools).

The ID Poor Project was useful in this process. The project, which continues at the time of writing, is led by the Ministry of Planning in coordination with the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ). Its aim is to construct a national dataset of impoverished households, in order to allow both governments and development partners to offer services specifically to the most vulnerable, poor households. Thus its final product is a list of severely and less severely poor households, including photo ID cards for members of those households, which entitles them to specific services (health care, emergency services, etc.). NGOs and development partners are encouraged to use these designations to provide services as well, and many of the large government partners (most notably the World Food Program) have done so, using the ID Poor system to designate entitled beneficiaries of their programs. For this reason ID poor data is publicly accessible, not only at the village but also at the household level.

As part of its first year of work, ID Poor conducted assessments in Chanleas Dai in 2007. Meant to be participatory and take into account local meanings of vulnerability and poverty often not measured by household surveys, the ID Poor designation process includes a set of proxy indicators for poverty which are based mainly on easily observed and verifiable assets, but also include dependency ratios, household composition, debts, crises or shocks and other elements of vulnerability. Village representative groups are part of the process of data collection and assessment, which allows for local understandings of special circumstances to be taken into account. Two levels of poverty are defined by their criteria, *Poverty Level 1* which indicates severe distress and *Poverty level 2* which is a less severe level of poverty or insecurity. After initial designations, villagers are free to complain or argue for changes at an open meeting. Once final lists

are constructed, households designated as falling into one of the two levels of poverty are photographed and given ID cards.

I referenced ID poor data primarily to select study villages, attempting to balance geographic considerations (more vs. less remote villages) with differing levels of household poverty within the commune. Though village and commune officials stressed that there was little disparity among villages, the ID poor data shows a wide difference of poverty levels across villages. Within the commune villages ranged from 2.9%-14.8% of households designated as extremely poor, and 10.1%-53.1% of households designated as poor or extremely poor. The average across villages within the commune was 28.5% of households in poverty (designated poor or extremely poor).

The three villages I chose represented a cross-section of the commune in as many ways as possible. Geographically spread over the commune, the villages had substantively different access to primary and junior high schools, roads, and markets, and they had differing levels of household poverty. My final selection of villages included one village that is relatively remote, with levels of overall poverty close to the commune average but high levels of severe poverty, one village which is central in the commune, close to schools and roads, and has a high levels of overall, but not severe poverty, and a third which is moderately remote with substantively lower reported levels of severe and overall poverty. Though I intended the selection of villages to comparatively find differences between villages, instead I found similar experiences, perspectives, and stories across villages.

Semi-Structured Interviews

After initial interviews, village chiefs were asked if they would be willing to help introduce me to 4-5 households with experiences with migration who might be interested in speaking with me about their experiences. All officials in the three selected villages agreed, and we discussed my general goal of speaking with different kinds of people representing a diversity of men and women of different ages, migration experiences,

education, status, and socio-economic characteristics. Interviews took place over two consolidated periods of time, first in May 2009 and later between December and June 2010. This break in time allowed me to review interviews and revise the thematic guide to include new topics.

Additional potential respondents were identified using a snowball sampling method, where following an interview I would ask the respondent if he or she would be willing to introduce me to friends, relatives, and neighbors who fit certain characteristics (i.e. a former migrant who had recently returned, etc.), and many were happy to do so. After being referred, potential respondents were contacted in person by a Cambodian research assistant who explained the study, specified that it was not related to any non-profit or government organization and therefore provided no participation benefits, asked if they would be interested in participating, and if so arranged an available time. Though most of those who were approached agreed to meet with me, a handful of individuals declined, either because they were too busy or because they were not interested in sharing their experiences. Because I was interested in learning about the context of migration decisions and perceived locally-based alternatives, I interviewed a wide variety of individuals, including former and current migrants, teachers, village officials, and the parents and spouses of current migrants. I also spoke with former *meekjal*, those who helped in the transmission of remittances, NGO workers, and students considering migration as a future option. During this process I regularly referenced the characteristics of respondents of prior interviews to seek out new and different perspectives. In particular, after about three dozen interviews primarily with migrants I began seeking out non-migrant perspectives, the perspectives of wealthier or more educated households, and those who had alternative or unique migration stories, such as being among the earliest group of migrants, or migrating for a period of time, returning to the village and deciding not to go back to Thailand. My respondents ranged in age from 16 to 78, and represented a cross-section of the village to the greatest extent possible. Where I felt I needed a wider variety of experiences than I found via village chief or respondent networks, I relied on personal contacts who I knew via my work with PEPY. This proved to be a very

successful strategy, as personal introductions from those who knew me on a more personal (or professional) level tended to be warmer and more compelling, prompting trust and more openness from respondents.

Language

Though my Khmer is often mispronounced and less colloquial than I'd like, I possess a functional fluency that allowed me to conduct interviews and have informal conversations in Khmer without simultaneous translation. My Khmer study began in 2006 with a summer of language training at the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute, and was supplemented with regular Khmer lessons upon arrival in Cambodia in 2007. By 2009 I felt confident in my language abilities; however language and translation issues still proved to be challenging in a number of ways.

My Khmer level at the time of my research is best described as advanced listening and highly functional speaking. I can (and have) conducted short trainings in Khmer, can understand and participate in meetings in Khmer, and can have advanced conversations about rural development or education, but I am not a native or fluent speaker. Like most foreign language learners, I understood far more than I was able to say, at least if I wanted to be understood. This was particularly the case in Chanleas Dai, where the intonations and way of speaking were significantly different from the version of Khmer that I was most comfortable with. This was true even for Cambodians, with many Khmer visitors and NGO workers noting the difficulty they had understanding local speech in the Kralanh area. While not a different dialect, per se, the way of speaking in the area was distinct enough to make listening difficult even for a fluent speaker.

Because of this, I had research assistants present in all semi-structured interviews, both for my own assistance and for the benefit of my respondents, who often had difficulty understanding my "textbook Khmer" word choice and intonations. This also allowed me to ask questions when I encountered unfamiliar words or phrases, or needed clarification. Prior to interviews I conducted a training for research assistants on semi-

structured interview techniques and confidentiality, and we regularly debriefed interviews to discuss challenges and improvements. Research assistants also wrote daily fieldnotes.

Though I primarily worked with one research assistant fluent in English and Khmer, I also worked at times with three local PEPY staff who had limited English skills but could help me navigate differences between standard and “Chanleas Dai” Khmer. Accustomed to more foreigner friendly wording, they translated from colloquial Khmer to a more standard version, greatly assisting my ability to understand and be understood.⁷ Whenever possible, and in nearly all cases, interviews were recorded and transcribed.⁸ Where respondents felt uncomfortable using the digital recorder, I relied on handwritten notes. In keeping with accepted standards of compensating interview respondents for their time, all interview respondents were given a small packet of soap or detergent as a token of appreciation.

The Extended Case Method

This dissertation employs an extended case study framework, which is aimed at theory-building off a single case. Often used in tandem with ethnographic research, the extended case method is generally preferred for inquiries into contemporary, complex social phenomenon which are best (and often only) understood by retaining the holistic nature of real life (Yin 2009). Case studies have the unique advantage of allowing for an analysis which encompasses a variety of important contextual conditions (Yin and Davis

⁷ These young people were ideal in many respects as they knew the community well, held insider status, and were gifted interviewers as a result of their training in community work. However their known role at PEPY reinforced the perceptions that my interviews were related to the non-profit’s work. Working with a non-PEPY affiliated research assistant helped clarify to respondents and community members that this was an independent project. Largely, my efforts to distinguish between the two were to protect PEPY, not because I perceived that there was an ethical dilemma in which respondents felt compelled or coerced to participate in interviews. In contrast, it appeared that any perceived PEPY connection between my interviews and the organization led respondents to believe that the non-profit was going to start a migration-related development project (i.e. safe migration) and I was gathering information to do so. Thus I was concerned that being unclear could lead to disillusionment with the organization if a new program didn’t materialize. To mediate this, I reiterated in interviews both prior and post-interview, as well as to village officials that my interest in this subject was not related to PEPY or research for future PEPY programs, and was in no way related to their potential benefit from the organization.

⁸ I was not able to record any of the MFI or lender interviews. All other interviews were recorded.

2007) and are often used to attempt to describe the essence of a phenomenon, illuminating decisions or sets of decisions in terms of why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what results (Yin 2009). In order to analyze social phenomenon holistically, case studies attempt to be exhaustive, relying on multiple sources of evidence, and building on theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin 2009).

The case study method resonates with the goals I had in understanding migration and rural livelihoods in Cambodia. Livelihood decisions, while often simplified and measured as discreet variables in quantitative work, are inherently complex. Migration and alternative livelihood choices are frequently made at the household level, but are driven by competing desires of individuals within families. They are also mediated by social norms and values, opportunity structures, labor markets, structural conditions, power dynamics, and natural resources. To understand how migration decisions are being made in rural Cambodia necessitates a wide view that incorporates both macro-level processes, and micro-level institutions and dynamics. The extended case study strives for this type of holistic analysis by requiring an extension of the observer into the world of the participant, an extension of observations over time and space, an extension from micro-processes to macro-level forces and an extension of theory (Burawoy 2000).

Case studies, while not generalizable to populations or universes, aim to be generalizable to theoretical propositions (Yin 2009). Seeking to build on and improve existing theory, case studies “take the flaws of existing theory as points of departure” and engage in theory building through research which combines a historical or geographic context and a sensitivity to process, through a representative, revelatory, or extreme example (Yin 2009, see also Burawoy 1991). Thus this dissertation does not aim to be generalizable to the character of rural migrant communities either in Cambodia or elsewhere. Rather, it seeks to highlight instances where the realities of local situations are counter-instances to existing theory---places where what we expect to see deviates from what is occurring. In doing so, this work will expand on and add complexity to

theories which inform the ever-present debate of the power of migration to contribute to or inhibit development.

The creation of theory and interpretation of realities is not an objective process. There exists, in any kind of qualitative research a double hermeneutic (Giddens 1993), meaning that just as respondents are doing interpretive work to construct the realities they share, researchers are doing interpretive work of their own, making sense of interview data in the context of their own presuppositions and value systems (Burawoy 1991; Charmaz 2006). Just as interview “stories” are not always indicative of prior realities (Silverman 2000), any analysis is situated in time, place, culture and the positionality of the researcher (Charmaz 2006). An important role of the researcher is then to “test our assumptions about the world we study and not unwittingly reproduce these assumptions” through theory building (Charmaz 2006:19). This involves not only respect for the dignity of our respondents, even where we disagree with their perspectives (Blumer 1984), but also a call to try and deeply understand those perspectives we find surprising or disturbing (Charmaz 2006). Cognizant of my positionality and interpretive work, I tried to be aware in the research process of my own assumptions, surprises, and the moments where I caught myself becoming disappointed, frustrated, angry, or making internal judgments about things I was seeing and hearing from respondents. This was not a rare occurrence. Burawoy (1991) calls ethnographic work a “feat of empathy,” and I often felt this very viscerally, connecting with the stories and choices of my respondents on a deeply emotional level. Some interview respondents I only met once or twice, but in many other cases I attended respondents’ weddings, children’s births, or worked together with them during community projects. I commiserated with community members when NGOs came and left with broken promises, surveyed the damage of inundated rice fields with them after disastrous floods, and was present when they banded together to rebuild roads and schools. I felt connected, both to individuals and the community as a whole and wanted the best for my respondents---though admittedly my own version of the best, which was at times different from theirs. In particular, my view of the “best” included promoting the education of young people, even where the systems of education didn’t

promise a well-paid job at its conclusion. This created a conflict where I saw young people dropping out of school at young ages to migrate; often encouraged to do so by peers, parents, and social pressures. Although I see migration, when chosen, as generally positive and empowering, I see education and information as even more critical. My perspective, informed by capabilities approaches to development (e.g. Nussbaum 2011), was that education not only directly beneficial but also tended to promote other freedoms, life chances, and capabilities. In contrast while migration at young ages *could* be beneficial, it could also jeopardize or close off opportunities across a range of areas of life.⁹

My views on the importance of education are of course directly related to my own status and life experiences, and reflect the fact that I've been privileged enough to have never needed to weigh basic consumption, security, or social mobility goals against the importance of education in my own life. However these views are perhaps important to state here, as I found my own internal judgments were difficult to “turn off” during the course of my research. Thus, they clearly impacted the questions I asked, and my construction and interpretation of conversations, particularly in conversations related to youth migration, which I address in Chapter 9. Aside from attempting to be both respectful and also aware of my own judgments and positionality during the course of my research, I have also tried through the course of this text to share these judgments, admitting and acknowledging my role as an interpreter of realities by including myself as an active character in this dissertation and the stories/analysis within it.

Positionality and Limitations

A few additional aspects of my status are particularly worth noting, as they most clearly impacted my interactions. Because the most visible work I was doing in Chanleas

⁹ Nussbaum would call these concepts “fertile functionings” and “corrosive disadvantages.” In her words, fertile functionings (i.e. education) are capabilities that promote additional capabilities, where as corrosive disadvantages (i.e. dropping out of school for migration for work at a young age) are deprivations that lead to, or make one vulnerable to further deprivations (Nussbaum 2011:44)

Dai was education focused via PEPY, interviewees and villagers largely saw me as an NGO worker interested in education. This became an impossible identity to shed. Because the small NGO I worked with had a strong presence in the area, and I had a stated role within it, I was instantly recognized as a representative of that group, even after my employment with PEPY ended. I attempted to minimize this in several ways. First, both village officials and the NGO staff I was working with knew my status as a researcher and PhD student and were aware of the topic of my research. Additionally prior to each interview I explained my research goals and how this was different from the work in education that PEPY was doing nearby. Though I openly stated that I was conducting research on migration, my dual role as an NGO worker in education and a researcher interested in migration was a difficult concept for many people to grasp. They assumed that the questions I had about migration must have been education related, which of course they were in many ways.

Often my two identities worked in tandem together. My role as a development practitioner and someone who was working for an education projects in the area helped me establish the relationships necessary for people to feel comfortable sharing about irregular migration, a potentially threatening topic. Though inevitably the responses I received to my questioning were shaped by my status and embodiment as an “education development worker,” as well as a young American woman, my impression was that this served only to give me more detailed and open responses about migration patterns. Rather than being fearful that I was associated with an organization trying to find information on something illegal, or cynical about offering time to yet another researcher, I felt I was treated as a concerned ally, with the interest of the community in mind. Parents and students were open with me about their desires to migrate, the difficult opportunity costs they met with as more insecurity led to higher levels of migration in the area, the desire to keep their communities and children safe. If anything, my embodiment made people more likely to be open about the dangers and difficulties of migration and the high levels of young people leaving from their communities, as they hoped that the

NGO I was associated with would respond to these concerns with more educational support for students and parents.

The most significant area where I noticed my status shape my interactions was when I asked young people, particularly students, about their own desires to migrate. With only rare (but compelling) exceptions, current students and young people who were connected to PEPY programs hesitated to express their desires to go work in Thailand overtly, and where they did so stated that their migration aspirations were only because they wanted to support their families. However from village gossip and informal conversations with adults, I also knew that many of the same young people who expressed their desire for education and disinterest in migration to me expressed different desires to parents, peers, and teachers. Because of its association with consumption, status, modernity, and ideals of masculinity and femininity, many young people aspired to migration regardless of the economic needs for their family. However perhaps because students knew my ties to education, they rarely shared an outright desire to work abroad, linking any stated migration aspiration instead to a need to support their family's livelihoods in a more socially acceptable fashion. I perceived they were hesitant to share desires for migration in a way that might question their support for education, an understandable choice given my background and position. When I traveled to villages in more remote areas of Chanleas Dai, where young people did not know my affiliations, I received more diverse responses, which often highlighted that migration was a way to meet desires of young people for status, consumer goods, and the respect of peers. Thus I spent a great deal of time speaking with parents, teachers, young people who didn't know me, and those who knew me well in order to better understand youth desires that I perceived were often unexpressed in informal conversations and interviews with young people who participated in NGO programs I was connected with.

Problematic Domains

Aside from the technical challenges of interviewing in a foreign language, I also encountered logistic difficulties while conducting interviews, some of which have implications for the data collected. Though interviews were arranged in advance, more often than not respondents were in the rice fields, napping, at the market or otherwise absent when I appeared for previously scheduled interviews. At times, scheduled interviewees had returned to Thailand the day before, or even that very morning. In some cases, this led to interviews with a different member of the household than the originally selected respondent. Because women were more often at home than men, my interviews are slightly disproportionately with women.

In addition, the geography and culture of Khmer villages made individual private interviews at respondents' homes difficult in all but a handful of cases. Each of the villages of Chanleas Dai are clustered, with homes built in close proximity, often all but touching one another. Neighbors are acutely aware of the presence of those nearby, and often relatives will live within a few houses of one another, a line or cluster of homes making a small unit of extended kin who might cook or complete household chores together. Typically guests and friends are entertained underneath the tall stilt homes, sitting on benches or rocks in the shade of the house floor above. Social life is played out in visible ways in all respects, with most daily activities and all public or private celebrations shared among neighbors and those in close proximity. Doors or windows, where they exist are left open, and secrets are not easily kept. Domestic violence, alcoholism, poverty, wealth, indulgence, hard work, and laziness are all perceived as common knowledge, and often other household's family business is referred to nonchalantly in conversation. Whether land and geographic necessity causes this communal nature of social life, or whether communal values influence home proximity, the two lead to a space where most individual pursuits are at least visible to those nearby.

Given this context, the visible presence of a white woman asking questions, even one who has been seen around for a few years, sparked curiosity and interest of neighbors, relatives, or those passing by. In many cases during interviews family

members or friends sat a few feet away; hushing younger siblings, preparing dinner, or simply sitting and listening. In many interviews, one or two of the most vocal would chime in, adding thoughts, correcting the respondent's memory of dates, or sharing their own ideas and personal experiences. This kind of collective interviewing poses logistic as well as substantive challenges. Often strong insights or forgotten details would come from those observing the interview, and in some cases where an observer was more engaged or interested in the topics than the intended respondent, their observations and experiences became as focal as those of the respondent. In all interviews, these observers were noted, and their contributions transcribed. As these family members and friends often contributed insightful comments, their voices appear in this dissertation as well although they are not listed in the index of respondents.

Although in cases I tried to facilitate more privacy or arranging interview times when others might be busy, many people told me they felt more, not less comfortable talking to me with someone else present. Qualitative research in other Cambodian contexts has noted this cultural challenge as well (Maltoni 2010). Thus I chose to prioritize the comfort level of my respondents over controlling the interview environment more efficiently. Certainly, this type of communal interviewing has implications for my research. In several cases, it likely influenced the stories that individuals told me about their migrations, their decision making process, and the impacts of migration on their family. If a mother was present during an interview with a young man for example, he might be more likely to tell me that his migration was because he felt the need to help his family, for example whereas if he were alone he might tell me he wanted to follow his peers to Thailand simply for the experience of it. With little ability to "enforce" individual interviews when people peered around corners and into homes, I choose to deal with this methodological challenge on a case by case basis and take observers into consideration when analyzing responses.

Anonymity

All respondents with the exception of local authorities at the commune level have had their names and identifying characteristics changed, and I do not refer to the villages chosen for interview by name or the home villages of interview respondents. However I have chosen not to anonymize my site of research. I made this choice in agreement with a generally accepted principle that in ethnographic work it is desirable to disclose case locations where ethically possible, to allow readers to validate information and/or relate these observations and arguments to other relevant studies (Yin 2009). Openly stating my site of research also allowed me to conduct research in the areas where I was already connected with community members through NGO work without being concerned about the potential for deductive disclosure, that is the ease with which my readers could intuit or discover my “anonymous” research site. Moreover, I believe this choice resonates with the realities of doing research in an increasingly global and connected world, where ethnographers often have sustained and “google-able” ties to their sites of research.

OUTLINE OF THIS DISSERTATION

This dissertation is divided into two parts. In the first, (Chapters 2-4) I examine the theoretical and empirical background for this study. In Chapter 2, I summarize relevant literature in the field of migration, and position this dissertation within contemporary scholarship. In Chapter 3 I discuss the general context, significance, and scope of Cambodian migration to Thailand. In Chapter 4 I introduce Chanleas Dai and discuss the historical influences and current realities that provide the background for contemporary migration trends in this area.

In the second section (Chapter 5-9) I move from the broad contextual background of Cambodian migration to Thailand to an empirical analysis of the patterns, meanings, and contradictions that migration decisions hold for families in Chanleas Dai. In Chapter 5 I explore the decision to migrate and how migration plays a role in household livelihood strategies. In this chapter I focus specifically on understandings of ideal and possible household strategies for survival, looking at how individuals make decisions to

migrate and what alternatives they consider viable at home. In Chapter 6 I discuss decision-making around remittances, specifically exploring expenditures around home construction, the most predominant use of remittances beyond basic consumption and debt repayment. In Chapter 7 I describe the ways borrowing and credit are used in tandem as part of household strategies, arguing that household debt and the repayment of loans are fundamental to the migration decisions for many households. By analyzing how households understand and use credit in tandem with migration, I argue that the expansion of microcredit in Cambodia has further enabled a strong culture of migration. In Chapter 8 I explore youth decision-making specifically, identifying the specific constraints that compel youth migration, and narratives which encourage youth to prioritize migration over the completion of primary and secondary education. Finally, in Chapter 9 I discuss the implications of my findings for the long-term prospects for development in Chanleas Dai, and point to the implications that this case holds for other geographic areas and for general theories of migration and development.

CHAPTER 2: MIGRATION, DECISION-MAKING AND DEVELOPMENT

Literature within the study of migration has long tried to identify and clarify the determinants of migration. Over time, this literature has grown to recognize that the factors that cause migration are multi-level, vary by context, and change over time within communities. This chapter contextualizes this study by tracing the literature on migration-decision making, and then exploring the major threads of argument in the field of migration and development.

MAPPING THE DETERMINANTS OF MIGRATION

Theories of migration in the 1960's and 1970's, drew on neoclassical economic theory to explain migration decisions. Focusing almost exclusively on economic differences between sending and receiving countries, at a micro-level this perspective viewed migration choices as the outcome of a rational process of cost-benefit analysis, responding to wage gaps between sending and receiving societies (Todaro 1969; Borjas 1989; Todaro and Maruszko 1987). Though powerful in explaining variation across some migration patterns (Massey et al 1994), neoclassical models did not address temporary or cyclical migration, as they generally based calculation assumptions on lifetime earnings in destination countries. They also focused exclusively on labor markets, while ignoring other markets of importance in sending and receiving areas (Stark and Levhari 1982; Stark and Bloom 1985) and the importance of social factors which mediate individual decision-making (Mines and DeJanvry 1982, Massey et al 1987; Massey et al 1998).

In the 1980's, researchers developed a new theoretical paradigm that recognized that migration decisions are often part of household decision-making and not simply a matter of individual choice. This theoretical shift, referred to as the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) approach focused critical attention on the economic realities of rural sending areas, pointing out that imperfect or missing credit, risk, and insurance markets constrain economic possibilities and therefore impact migration decision-making

(Stark 1978; Stark 1980; Stark 1982; Taylor et al 1996; Massey et al 1998). Specifically, the NELM perspective asserts that missing credit markets stimulate migration, arguing that when credit is inaccessible for rural farmers to start or expand businesses, they may then be driven to migrate in order to loosen cash constraints (Stark 1980; Stark 1982; Taylor et al 1996; Taylor et al 2003). According to NELM theories, where financial markets are imperfect or inaccessible, migration plays an important role in allowing households to reduce risk through income diversification, specifically through sending household labor abroad (Stark and Levhari 1982; Stark and Bloom 1985; Taylor et al 1996; Taylor 1999; Massey et al 1998, Taylor et al 2003). NELM theories also highlight the importance of relative deprivation in explaining migration decisions, arguing that migrants often seek work abroad not necessarily to improve their absolute well-being, but rather to improve their position relative to some comparison group (Stark 1984; Stark and Taylor 1989; Stark and Taylor 1991).

A concurrent shift in migration research in the 1990's moved to explain and better understand the social process of migration, arguing that migration is driven by and also has the capacity to influence networks, value systems, and the social landscape of migrant communities (Massey et al 1987; Massey et al 1994; Massey et al 1993; Massey et al 1998). From this point of view, migration is a dynamic process in which webs of social ties strengthen networks, reduce migrant risk, and facilitate a process of cumulative causation in which migration becomes a self-sustaining process (Mines 1981; Stark and Levhari 1982; Massey 1987; Massey 1990; Massey et al 1998). Early U.S. research on *migration as a social process* generally centered on Mexican migration to the U.S., focused on the processes of network building, income redistribution and land consolidation which facilitated the exponential growth of migration patterns over time (Massey 1988). Based on the Mexican experience, researchers showed that as more migrants from any given community move abroad for work, networks intensify; making migration a less risky possibility for friends and family members of migrants (Massey 1990; Kandel and Massey 2002). This process of *cumulative causation*—migration perpetuating further migration—enables a number of social and cultural shifts as

migration becomes a prominent feature within communities, often resulting in migration streams taking on life and meaning independent of the factors which began their proliferation (Massey 1987; Massey 1988; Massey 1990).

Cultures of Migration

In the context of Mexican migration to the U.S., Massey and his associates argued that in rural sending areas, enduring practices of migration alter social and cultural characteristics of rural sending areas, in substantive ways such that it is appropriate to consider the presence of a “culture of migration” (Massey et al 1993; Massey et al 1998; Kandel and Massey 2002). This concept has been used in a number of ways over diverse contexts to show how areas with strong out-migration patterns come to be defined, and to some degree, structured by those migrations (Ali 2007; Horvath 2008; Pieke et al 2004). Specifically, as migration grows in prevalence and historical duration within a community, it can influence and shift value systems in dramatic ways, becoming a “referential behavior repertoire,” orienting value systems and motivating new perspectives and choices (Horvath 2008: 773, Massey et al 1993).

The concept of a culture of migration argues that widespread acts of migration can lead to choices that prioritize the act of migration in ways that cannot be explained simply by economic factors, individual rational actor motivations, or theories of household strategic response to risk. A culture of migration, for example, might lead to migration being viewed as the ideal path towards stability or mobility within society, leading to a weakening of productive practices based in sending areas (e.g. Pieke et al 2004). It might also lead to migration being understood or practiced as a rite of passage, or symbolic marker that young people desire in order to mark their own transition to adulthood (Kandel and Massey 2002), or to take part in more individualized, “modern” life strategies (Horvath et al 2008).

The first to formally define and test the concept of a culture of migration, Kandel & Massey (2002) describe cultures of migration as arising from the increased prevalence

of migration in communities, and strongly linked to the concept of cumulative causation (Massey 1990). Noting that successful migrants were widely admired for their ability to increase consumption and also their access to capital improvements, Kandel and Massey posit that as migrations become less risky and more normative through cumulative causation, cultures of migration can arise. They describe a culture of migration as occurring in the following way:

As migratory behavior extends throughout a community, it increasingly enters the calculus of conscious choice and eventually becomes normative. Young people who grow up and come of age increasingly expect to migrate internationally in the course of their lives. For young men, especially, migration becomes a rite of passage, and those who do not attempt it are seen as lazy, unenterprising, and undesirable as potential mates. In communities where international labor becomes fully integrated into the local culture, young men seeking to become adults literally do not consider other options: they assume they will migrate in preparation for marriage and that they will go abroad frequently in the course of their lives as family needs and personal circumstances change (Kandel & Massey 2005: 982).

Formally testing the concept using survey data from Zacatecas, Mexico, the authors found that children and youth's aspirations for migration were powerfully shaped by family involvement in migration, in ways consistent with the concept of a culture of migration. Specifically, the authors found that the higher involvement a young person's family had in international migration, the more he or she expressed a desire to live and work in the U.S. Moreover, in communities where more families participated in wage labor, students were less motivated to seek additional schooling in Mexico. These aspirations for migration could often be self-fulfilling prophecies. As the authors argue, young people who aspired to work in the U.S. were less likely to invest emotionally or economically in strategies that would promote socio-economic mobility within Mexico, such as schooling. Therefore their aspirations affected choices that raise the odds of actual migration—which the authors argue ultimately passes the same value of migration on to subsequent generations.

Several qualitative studies have refined and expanded upon this concept of a culture of migration in recent years. Ali (2007: 39) expanded Kandel & Massey's definition, proposing defining *cultures of migration* as more broadly "those ideas, practices and cultural artifacts that reinforce the celebration of migration and migrants. This includes beliefs, desire, symbols, myths, education, celebrations of migration in various media, and material goods." Using this definition Ali finds that cultures of migration may extend even beyond those who have relatives and family abroad. In other words, in places where migration becomes a more diffuse cultural norm, it may inspire the migrations of those even without close connections to migrant networks.

Horvath (2008) further unpacks this concept by underscoring three substantively different understandings of the concept of a culture of migration: first, the emergence of new perspectives, ideas and values which impact decision making (e.g. Massey, Goldring and Durand 1994; Massey et al 1994; Kandel & Massey 2002); second, shifts to norms and ideologies which frame the interpretation and evaluation of stability and mobility in sending societies (e.g. Pieke et al 2004; Verdery 1994); and, third, the process by which migration gains symbolic functions in sending societies, whereby it shifts from being perceived as a possible or desirable alternative to being viewed as a necessary social act, perceived as a rite of passage or essential element in the transition to adulthood (e.g. Massey, Goldring and Durand 1994; Massey et al 1994).

Compelling qualitative research across geographic contexts highlights the power and influence of each of the above understandings of a culture of migration, particularly on youth who are coming of age within such cultures (Ali 2007; Horvath 2008; Dannecker 2009; Connell 2008). Cultures of migration have been shown to substantively impact migration aspirations (Ali 2007; Dannecker 2009; Connell 2008; Kalir 2005), status and marriage markets (Ali 2007; Xiang 2001; Kalir 2005), and investment in local strategies of socio-economic mobility (Ali 2007; Connell 2008; Pieke et al 2004; Wiest 1973).

Horvath notes that cultures of migration can also be obligatory beyond their symbolic meaning as a rite of passage, but also due to the lack of meaningful alternatives

within the global labor market for youth coming of age: “they do not consider labour migration as an achievement or desirable condition; rather, they see it as the one way that they might avoid or mitigate the protracted condition they otherwise face with a floating socio-economic status in their home country” (Horvath 2008: 783).

Though the concept of a culture of migration argues that decisions are framed, structured and legitimized in powerful ways, it is not a deterministic model. Rather, accepted social norms and values structure the perceived costs and benefits of migration. As migration patterns grow stronger, these are continually reshaped, reproduced, and validated by society at large in ways that ensure continued migration.

Theoretical and empirical studies highlighting the importance of cultures of migration also do not necessary conflict with household and economic-based theories of migrant decision-making. Rather they highlight that as migration patterns persist and grow through cumulative causation and network formation, migration takes on a life of its own so to speak, becoming a social force outside of-- and often much more powerful than-- the structural economic conditions which supported the creation of original flows. These forces can orient whole communities towards migration in strong ways, where instead of being considered and calculated in terms of economic benefits, migration holds a strong *affective* pull for individuals, based on its association with status, power, ritual, or perceived inevitability (Kalir 2005). This, as Kalir (2005) argues, can lead to abrupt, gut-level decisions to leave, often unexplained by economic theories. In particular, in Kalir’s research in Ecuadorian migrant communities, where individuals are constantly confronted with wealth-related jealousy, frustration, or anger, they reported “deep feelings” that led them to quick migration decisions that simply “felt right.” To highlight to the affective nature of migration decisions within communities where a culture of migration exists, Kalir refers to a widespread “migratory disposition,” which he argues leads individuals:

“...to have their finger readily set on a metaphoric migration rifle. It is then often enough for a seemingly negligible event, which evokes an emotional (negative or positive) overflow, to make people pull the trigger. Thus, what might appear from

the outset as an abrupt and haste decision is actually only the top of the iceberg, a culmination of a lengthy process whereby the idea to migrate was knowingly, and often also involuntarily, entertained but never verbally articulated” (Kalir 2005: 188).

Theories Working Together

Neoclassical theories, New Economics perspectives, and theories suggesting the importance of migration as a social process/cultures of migration each offer important insights into how migrants make decisions, recognizing the importance of national and international processes, national economic realities, local institutions, and social norms and culture. Rather than viewing these theories in opposition to one another, they are best understood as complementing one another, together providing a more full analysis of the causes of migration within any given stream (Massey et al 1994). In example, based on a synthesis of migration theories using the case of North America, Massey et al. (1994) show that each of these theories (and others, not discussed here) hold power in explaining aspects of migration streams, an argument for looking at theories as supporting and enhancing one another rather than as competing.

These theories, taken together, also foreshadow some of the debates within the migration/development dialogue, some of which are taken up in this dissertation. For example, to what extent *does* migration allow for the diversification or capital improvement that NELM theories suggest households seek out? How are families or sending communities affected when migrants have access to higher wages abroad? How does a culture of migration influence the opportunities perceived and available for young people? A wealth of literature focuses on these questions- seeking to better understand the extent to which migration contributes to positive developments in migrant sending communities, and for migrants themselves.

MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The migration-development nexus is complex, though it is understood that migration has both development related causes and impacts (Massey 1988; Massey et al 1998). Clearly, migration can bring positive change to individuals, households, communities and nation-states, through the economic impact of higher wages and remittances sent home. However migration can also displace valuable human capital, alter value systems, threaten community cohesion, discourage productive investment and bring other unintended consequences.

In the next section of this chapter I briefly trace the general arguments in the migration and development dialogue, and explore the two specific areas of inquiry that are most commonly discussed in this literature: remittances and human capital. This simplifies what is a much more complex picture, as there is a wide body of literature discussing the cultural and social impacts of migration on households and communities, issues which are clearly important factors in understanding the general role migration has on well-being, community cohesion, gender roles, etc. However because I am attempting to point out disconnects in the way migration is expected to contribute to development as it is understood from an economic perspective, I focus on the main themes that relate to these discourses.

Macro –Theories: Development vs. Dependency

Within the literature on migration and development, a wealth of empirical and theoretical research assesses the potential for migration to contribute to development. This research can be organized into two divergent perspectives; one which sees migration as a stable aid alternative and a successful “bottom-up” development strategy, and the other which views migration as primarily leading to only greater dependency, and unlikely to produce meaningful growth on its own. A third perspective, which has attracted more attention recently, has attempted to nuance these debates, seeing the potential for migration to contribute to sustained growth as dependent on factors such as

the duration of migration, infrastructure and institutions at origin, and the regulation and government protection of migrants (Portes 2009; DeHaas 2010; Hatton and Williamson 1994). These diverging perspectives are partially explained by varying, at times conflicting, definitions of development.

The dependency tradition sees migration as an outgrowth of global inequalities inherent to the uneven process of capital development (Reichert 1981). If migration is an articulation of a pattern of dependency between core capitalist countries and the rest of the world, then changes brought about by migration only increase the cycle of dependency in a global structure of imbalanced power (Sassen 1988; Zolberg et al 1989). Though these perspectives often agree that migration brings about significant short-term benefits at the household or individual level, yet focus on the inequality that both drives migration and often grows as a result of it (e.g. Reichert 1981; 1982).

Pessimistic views highlighting structural imbalances and dependency characterized much migration research between 1970-1990 (DeHaas 2010). For example in an analysis of past studies of thirty-seven migrant communities in Mexico, Durand and Massey (1992 :25) found that researchers were surprisingly unanimous in “condemning international migration as a palliative that improves the material well-being of particular families without leading to sustained economic growth.” Taylor et al (1996: 401) report that an ILO official interviewed in the 1990’s reaffirmed the widespread view that migration was incompatible with development goals, quoting the official as noting “migration and development – nobody believes that anymore.” This perspective argued that the economic benefits migration brings could only be short-term, while at the same time migration brought about significant negative impacts in terms of loss of human capital, through “brain drains” and by diverting interest from education or local production and entrepreneurship. Framed by a viewpoint that defined development as necessarily a long-term process, this perspective validated that migration often could lead to short-term poverty reduction, but viewed the perceived long-term effects of lost productivity and human capital as problematic.

Yet recently there has been a resurgence of interest in the potential for migration to contribute to development (Newland 2007; DeHaas 2010), arguing that migration (primarily via remittances) can serve as an engine of development. The arguments for this perspective are closely associated with NELM ideas of migration as compensating for missing local capital and insurance markets. Through remittances, migrants set in motion a development dynamic--loosening production and consumption constraints on households (Durand et al. 1996; Stark & Bloom 1985) and allowing for meaningful growth. This has led to some arguing that remittances are “the new development mantra,” (Kapur 2004) hailing migrants as “heroes of development” for the cash they send back to home communities (Castles and Wise 2008).

Much of this renewed optimism focuses on the promise of circular migration, and highlights the differential ability of cyclical/circular and permanent migration to promote development at home (Portes 2009; DeHaas 2010). Circular migration, which can allow for skill transfer, and encourages productive investment at home, is seen as having more developmental potential than permanent migration, which depopulates and leads to a loss of talent in sending areas (Portes 2009). Circular migration is also more likely to occur between neighboring countries, countries where borders are porous, and where transport between sending and receiving countries is relatively cheap. These are all more characteristic of South-South migration patterns than South-North patterns.

However, the empirical evidence for the links between migration and development is still very weak (Newland 2007). Indeed at both the national and the household level, there is conflicting evidence as to how much power remittances have to mitigate poverty or to bring sustained economic improvements to households and what role social remittances or increases in human capital can play in bringing positive developments to households, individuals and communities. Much of the controversy surround the potential for migration to lead to development in sending communities

focuses on two aspects of the migration process: the uses, and power of remittances, and impacts of migration on human capital at home.¹⁰

Debating the Power of Remittances

As noted earlier, much of the development and migration debate can be understood at the level of definition. At the individual and community level there is little argument that migration can be a crucial livelihood strategy for poor families, particularly where environment or economic realities make local alternatives precarious. Across the developing world, remittances are a significant source of income, according to one source, accounting for an estimated 30-40 percent of household income in developing countries (Adams 2011). The positive economic effects of remittances at the household level are clear across contexts (Adams and Page 2005; Adams 2011). In reviews of fifty studies of the impact of migration in the developing world Adams (2011) finds that all studies show evidence that remittances reduce immediate poverty. This occurs through a variety of mechanisms. By supplementing their earnings through non-farm labor, migration allows rural families to diversify income, meet immediate consumption needs and accumulate more capital (Taylor et al 1996). Remittances can also provide crucial access to the cash economy, and are often used to mitigate shocks such as poor harvests, medical emergencies, other short-term crises (Yang and Choi 2007). Because remittances are exchanged directly into the family budget and can be used for basic subsistence needs, they can have a much more direct impact on poverty reduction at the household level than international aid (Ghosh 2006). Moreover, scholars note that remittances are the most stable of resource inflows to the poor, making them an especially important safety net and form of insurance for the poor (Kapur 2004; Ratha 2005).

The empirical argument questioning the significance of remittances in promoting development argues that while remittances are large in absolute value, at the household

¹⁰ An additional important body of work focuses on issues of “brain drain” –the process by which the most educated individuals in a community migrate, thus depriving the community of vital human resources. However during the time of my research the most educated individuals in Chanleas Dai were not typically migrating. Thus it is not a topic I take up in this dissertation.

level they are spent primarily on consumption, not productive investment, thus limiting their long-term impact. There is little controversy about the fact that most remittances are spent on consumption, rather than productive investment. Reviews of remittance spending across geographic contexts indicate that at the household level the bulk of remittances are spent on consumption, housing, and the general costs of daily living, with a lesser amount going to contribute to the income-generating projects, or productive investments etc. (Rempel and Lobdell 1978; Taylor et al 1996; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Massey et al 1987; Mines and DeJanvry 1982; Reichert 1981; Stuart and Kearney 1981; Wiest 1984). Moreover, research also shows in migrant sending communities the influx of remittances and increased access to cash has led many households in some communities to reduce or abandon altogether local production, reorganizing community production around migration (Ferran and Pessar 1991; Pieke et al 2004; Taylor and Adelman 1996). This can leave migrant households more dependent on migration with less access to local alternatives than they had before (Ferran and Pessar 1991; Stoll 2010). Together, these findings have led to the many pessimistic characterizations of international migration: as a “palliative” that improves family well-being in the short term but does not lead to economic growth (Durand and Massey 1992: 25), as a “dangerous dependence” (Stuart and Kearney 1981); and as an illness undermining development (Reichert 1981). Together these perspectives argue for a moderated view of migration as a motor for rural development, articulating that migration is capable of combating transient poverty, but not an ideal strategy for long-term economic growth (Kapur 2004).

A significantly more optimistic view, which has become more dominant in the late 90’s and 2000’s, accepts that a large portion of remittances are spent on daily and conspicuous consumption and acknowledges that migration can at times deter from local production, but argues that regardless remittances still contribute significantly to development (Dinerman 1982; Delgado Wise and Ramirez Rodrigues 2001). Research supporting this optimistic perspective shows that even when spent on consumption, remittances can have a strong multiplier effect within local communities (Durand Parrado

and Massey 1996). Because consumption in sending area is typically in the form of local food products, locally produced goods, local construction materials, and local services will make up the majority of consumption (Durand et al 1996; Durand Parrado & Massey 1996). These dollars then can generate additional employment, production, and income at the local level. In Mexico, the annual \$2 billion remitted from the U.S. for example results in an estimated national income effect of nearly \$6 billion (Durand, Parrado & Massey 1996). In another estimate using Mexico-US data, Taylor (2004) estimated that \$1 remitted into a household results directly in \$1.85 of household income. Moreover, though a large portion of remittances coming into developing countries are typically spent on consumption, smaller but significant contributions also are used for the upgrading of farm equipment and production, capital investments, and income-generating small businesses. Some research in Asia including China, Pakistan and Thailand suggests that remittances invested in farming improvements lead to increase agricultural output, and even farm modernization (Stahl 1986; Taylor, Rozelle and DeBrauw, 2003). Research in Africa points to similar conclusions, finding that over time, investment from remittances led to higher crop yields and accumulation of cattle (Lucas, 1987). Building on this body of work, optimistic perspectives argue that even when only a small portion of remittances are allocated to productive investment, these investments matter; perhaps significantly over time.

One critical problem with these community studies in general is the lack of a theoretically useful and common yardstick to measure the effects of migration on economic growth or poverty reduction (Taylor et al 1996). Village-based studies tend to focus on distinctions between remittances used for consumption versus those used in production, often employing a limited definition of productive investment which does not include spending on livestock, schooling, land etc. Moreover, this discourse again highlights the central issue of definitions. Studies also often discuss development as a static, agreed-upon concept, when there is in fact a great deal of debate on what indicators and standards and concepts best define “development”. The use of remittances for home improvement, for example, is often categorized as conspicuous consumption,

and not the kind of investment which is associated with sustainable development. Yet arguably the safety, security, and sense of well-being a nicer home can provide for families is in fact a constituent piece of both relative and absolute poverty, and development (Cohen and Conway 1998; DeHaas 2005).

Debates on Human Capital

A second critical way that migration can impact sending communities in terms of consequences for development is through its impact on human capital, broadly defined here as educational and professional skills. In addition to the direct immediate economic benefits derived from remittances, the developmentalist camp argues the experiences of migrants abroad can be understood as investments in human capital, both for migrants and their families sending communities (McKenzie 2007). For example migrants might gain skills abroad which would be put to productive use at home or lead to better health and hygiene knowledge for migrants and their families. These in turn can lead to greater productivity and human capital by leading to better health outcomes (Ghosh 2006). Moreover migrants might, via remittances, be able to invest in the education of younger generations, leading to greater future earning power of the children of migrant families. A competing hypothesis focuses on the fact that migration is both a symptom and a cause of underdevelopment, as it takes away human capital, encourages a lack of production in sending areas, and allows governments to escape their responsibilities by relying on migrant remittances (Delgado-Wise and Covarrubias 2007).

The empirical evidence shows mixed results, and appears to be highly context dependent. In some areas, studies show a strong positive connection between migrant households (or remittance receipt) and the investment in or attainment of education for migrant children (Wahba 2000; Yang 2004; Duryea et al 2005; Cox-Edwards and Ureta 2003). However studies also indicate that children with migrant parents tend to perform worse in school (Battistella and Conaco 1996), have lower enrolment (Jampaklay 2006), or have lower aspirations for higher education (Kandel and Kao 2000), pointing out that

remittances may in fact have a dual role, both contributing to the education of children left behind as well as working as a motivator for the persistence of migration patterns. Thus, migration may contribute to the development of human capital in young generations while at the same time contributing to young people's ease of access and interest in migrating. In Mexico recent research indicates that remittances from migrants to the U.S. often provide financial benefits to allow Mexican children to continue school and perform well, but also highlights that high levels of U.S. migration are associated with lower aspirations to attend university or higher education (Kandel and Kao 2000). By showing an example of an alternative route to economic mobility and connecting children to information and social networks which would facilitate their migration, parents might unwittingly increase children's likelihoods of migrating in the future by choosing migration as an alternative to the Mexican labor market.

Conclusions

With a vast wealth of empirical research to draw from, perhaps the most complete summary is that different patterns of migration, the goals migrants seek out, and the context of sending areas are critical in explaining and predicting the differential potential for migration to contribute to development (De Haas 2010). As Gubert (2005) notes, remittances and migration can be an important welfare safety net, alleviating transitory poverty, but often do not “*create* the right conditions for genuine development” (emphasis added) and significantly transform the structural causes of poverty. Part of the reason for this is that it is often the same push factors causing migration (lacking local capital markets, few investment opportunities, poor governance, a lack of political stability and poor infrastructure) that inhibit remittances from facilitating substantial long-term development (Castles and Wise 2008). As Castles and Wise argue, the migration/development optimism is based in “the idea is that some of the most exploited workers in the world can make up for the failure of mainstream development policies” (Castles and Wise 2008:7), when these failures are very often the reason for migration

itself. This view, which highlights that migration will likely serve to reinforce pre-existing development potentials but not easily shift them, points to the importance of understanding pre-existing development potentials and the variety of structural and personal reasons that individuals undertake migration.

CHAPTER 3: CAMBODIAN MIGRATION TO THAILAND

While a detailed history of Cambodia is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is difficult to begin any analysis of the social landscape of Cambodia without first referring the powerful and often gruesome history which has structured present-day social conditions. After very briefly treating the history of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime and its legacy, this chapter aims to contextualize Cambodian/Thai relations and provide an overview of current patterns and dynamics of Cambodian migration to Thailand.

An Iconic History

The two icons that most often frame images of Cambodia are the ancient temples of Angkor Wat and the modern killing fields of the Khmer Rouge regime. Indicators of the height of Khmer imperial strength and the depth of Cambodian tragedy, both occupy an important place in contemporary Cambodian society and help situate modern realities for those unfamiliar with the country.

The Angkorian complex, constructed over time between the 9th and 15th centuries, is a wonder of the modern world. Angkor Wat, the most famous of the Angkorian temples is iconic not only for the millions of tourists who enter the country each year to view it, but also for Cambodians as a symbol of national heritage. The temples are an indicator of the glory days of the Khmer Empire, which once ruled over significant parts of Southern Indochina including portions of modern day Thailand and Vietnam, and facilitated the transmission of ideas, people, and institutions between the Mekong region.¹¹ The temple complex is still vitally important today, both as a source of

¹¹ As early as the 9th century there are inscriptions suggesting that Cambodia controlled, at least briefly, parts of northeastern Thailand. Between the 13th and 19th centuries, there were consistent entanglements between the two countries, with the western provinces of Cambodia (including Siem Reap) exchanging hands several times between the Khmer and Siamese empire. As historian David Chandler (2008: 93) writes: "People, ideas, texts and institutions migrated west from Angkor to Ayudhya, where they were modified and eventually re-exported into Cambodia to survive as part of its genuine decline from the 18th century onward. The migration would have prisoners of war, including entire families, swept off to the west after successive Thai invasions of Angkor."

pride and of economic promise.¹² Over the past decade tourism, primarily organized around the Angkorian temples, has been a strong driver of Cambodia's economic growth. Today over 2.5 million visitors a year pass through the temples, with tourism responsible for bringing 1.7 billion dollars into the economy in 2010 (MoT 2010).

The Khmer Rouge regime of Choueng Ek's killing fields,¹³ in contrast, is responsible for much of the continued chronic poverty and poor infrastructure of the country. After coming to power in 1975, the Khmer Rouge set in motion the most extreme communist experiment in modern history, emptying the capital city of nearly two million people within a matter of days, and effectively ridding the country of private property, western medicine, cash-based transactions, and education (Short 2004). Historians call the resulting regime "the first 'slave state' of modern times" (Short 2004:291).

"Pol [Pot] enslaved the Cambodian people literally, by incarcerating them within a social and political structure, a 'prison without walls', as refugees would later call it, where they were required to execute without payment whatever work was assigned to them for as long as the cadres ordered it, failing which they risked punishment ranging from the withholding of rations to death. Food and clothing were, in theory, provided by the state. But there were no wages...Within time as the system grew more rigid, even barter was discouraged. Like true slaves, the inhabitants of Pol's Cambodia were deprived of all control over their own destinies—unable to decide what to eat, when to sleep, where to live or even whom to marry." (Short 2004: 291)

Estimates widely vary, but likely between 1.7-1.8 million Cambodians died during the Khmer Rouge's years of power (1975-1979) through execution, malnutrition, overwork, and disease, an estimated 30% of the population at that time (Heuveline 1998).

¹² As David Chandler (2008) points out, Cambodia is the only country to have a national ruins on its flag, one of many indications that Chandler uses to argue that due to their tumultuous recent past, Cambodians identify more closely with their distant heritage than their contemporary history.

¹³ Choeung Ek, located 17 kilometers south of Phnom Penh is one of many mass graves and former execution sites where the Khmer Rouge killed political prisoners and others during their 4 year rule. The image of the Killing Fields was made famous in the 1984 Oscar award winning film bearing its name, which was based on the true story of Dith Pran and Sidney Schanberg.

The effects of the destruction to infrastructure, human capital, trust and social relations, and political structures would last for decades.¹⁴ In 1979 the Vietnamese invaded and subsequently occupied the country, withdrawing their troops over a decade later only after Soviet support for Vietnam ended. Following the 1991 Paris Peace Accords which ended the two decades of unrest, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) entered the country to organize free and fair elections and oversee a ceasefire between warring parties within the country. Despite UNTAC presence, the early 90's were characterized by continued violence. Khmer Rouge guerilla fighters continued a degree of resistance until the late 90's, particularly in the northwestern regions of the country near the Thai border.

Discussed in the countryside as the “three years eight months and twenty days,” the Khmer Rouge's short hold on power crippled the infrastructure and human capital of the country in lasting ways. Today, schools and the education system in general are still struggling to rebuild their infrastructure, population of teachers, curriculums, and legitimacy. Hospitals and clinics are chronically short of medically trained professionals, particularly in rural areas, and a generalized atmosphere of social distrust and a culture of blame instilled by the years of Khmer Rouge rule foster distrust and corruption at all levels of government.

Khmer/Thai Connections

Over the past five years, perhaps the most publicly discussed connections between Cambodia and Thailand in the Cambodian media are political; references to the tenuous, ambivalent, at times openly hostile relationship, of words, threats, and occasional gunfire between the two countries.¹⁵ Despite this, the neighboring states share a thriving cross-

¹⁴ See Walque 2004 for an example of the lasting impacts of Khmer Rouge related to education and mortality.

¹⁵ One such highly publicized incident between the two countries involve a border dispute over the rights to Preah Vihear temple, a long-standing disagreement that intensified in 2008 and led to thousands of soldiers being placed on either side of the border. Violence further escalated in early 2011 leading to

border economy, a religion, a great number of cultural practices¹⁶ and strong links as millions of dollars in goods and thousands of people daily cross the porous border between the two neighbors (Murshid and Sokphally 2005).

The contemporary economic relationship between Thailand and Cambodia became formalized and strengthened after the adoption of a “battlefields into marketplaces” policy of the new Thai government in the 1980’s under General Chatichai Choonhavan (Richburg 1991; Murshid and Sokphally 2005). After this point formal agreements were signed and new border checkpoints were opened, opening Khmer markets to imported Thai products and allowing a freer flow of goods, services, and people between the two countries (DAN 2005). Economically Cambodia and Thailand are highly integrated. In 2003, the two countries traded upwards of 700 million dollars annually, not including the significant informal trade of the cross-border economy (DAN 2005). Thailand is a major source of imports for Cambodia, and provided 18.1% of imports in 2006, second only to Hong Kong (Ballard et al 2008). Thailand is also the third largest foreign investor in Cambodia, with over 102 million dollars in foreign investment in 2006 alone (Ballard et al 2008).

The beginning of the modern stream of Cambodian migration to Thailand can be traced back to the early 90’s, largely a consequence of economic growth and demographic changes in Thailand alongside growing push factors in Cambodia. Through the 1990’s as sustained growth and decreasing birthrates in Thailand created a need for

injuries and death on both sides. Political tensions between the two countries are have also led to diplomatic strains. In November 2009, following Cambodia’s controversial appointment of Thailand’s ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra as an economic advisor to the country and subsequent refusal to extradite him to Thailand for wanted crimes, both countries took steps to limit political and economic relations. The governments recalled their respective ambassadors and stepped back from MOU’s related to maritime boundary disputes and road development projects. With heated insults on both sides, Cambodia’s Prime Minister ordered the cancellation of all Thai grants and loans, publicly stating “anyone who dares to ask for assistance from Thailand without my permission should resign. We may be poor, but we would rather shed our blood than let you look down on us” (Sokha & O’Toole 2009 :1).

¹⁶ Many of the cultural links between the two countries begin as early as the 9th century, growing over time as the Thai and Khmer kingdoms came into continued contact with one another. Historian David Chandler (2008: 96) notes the ways in which the two cultures grew together as over time: “brought into contact with each other through wars, immigration, and a shared religion, the newly established Thai and Khmer kingdoms blended with each other and developed differently from their separate forebearers.”

imported low-skilled labor, rural Cambodians were responding to a growing youth population with few local labor opportunities and significant wage discrepancies between the two neighbors (Caouette et al 2006; Sciortino and Punpuing 2009). These factors, described in more detail below, have led to generally increasing rates of migration to Thailand since the mid 90's and 2000's (Revenga et al 2006; Maltoni 2010; Chem et al 2011). Though many of these demographic and economic shifts began much earlier, instability and violence in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period and subsequent Vietnamese occupation inhibited widespread labor migration from Cambodia until the early 90's when UNTAC entered the country¹⁷

Migrant Demand in Thailand

In the late 20th century, Thailand experienced rapid and significant economic growth, spurred by export-oriented industrialization (Hussey 1993). With annual growth rates upwards of 6-7%, Thailand was one of the fastest growing economies in the 1980's, becoming a mini-tiger¹⁸ by following the same type of export-led growth that had been so successful in neighboring Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong (Hussey 1993). In tandem with this economic growth, Thais became more educated and increasingly sought out jobs in higher skilled sectors of the economy (Guest and Jones 1996). During this time Thailand also experienced a rapid demographic transition, with rising life expectancy and decreasing fertility rates as a result of both urbanization and the increased promotion of family planning (Guest and Jones 1996; Hutaserani and Roumasset 1991). With an expanding economy but declining birthrate and low-growth among the working age population, Thailand began facing unskilled labor shortages in the 1980's (Manning

¹⁷ After the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) took over general administrative authority over the country, building infrastructure for democratic elections and beginning a move towards relative stability. For a more detailed history of Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge and UNTAC years see Chandler 2008; Widyono 2008, and Becker 1998.

¹⁸ A reference to the "Asian tiger" economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan in the 1960's-80's.

2002; Caouette et al 2006). Thai companies began to recognize a strong need for labor in low-skill sectors such as agriculture, construction, fishing and domestic work (Caouette et al 2006; Sciortono and Punpuing 2009). While these sectors, in particular agriculture, had driven the export-led growth of Thailand, the number of Thai's interested in working in these jobs began to decline, with many more interested in urban, high-skilled and more highly paid employment (Caouette et al 2006; Sciortono and Punpuing 2009).

Local Push Factors

Push factors within Cambodia are also crucial in explaining the growth of Cambodia migration to Thailand (Godfrey et al. 2001; Maltoni 2006; Fitzgerald and So 2007; Chan 2009). A country of 14.5 million in 2010, Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia, even after experiencing dramatic economic growth over the past decade. In 2004, Thailand's per capita GNP was twelve times higher than that of Cambodia (Huguet and Punpuing 2005), and over 36% of Cambodia's population lived below the poverty line, then approximately 1,800 riels (or 45 cents) per day (CSES 2004). Due to the disastrous effects of starvation, poverty, and forced labor during the Khmer rouge years and post-war baby-boom, Cambodia has a starkly skewed demographic profile. Over one-third of the population was under 15 years old in 2009 (CIA 2009) and as a result Cambodia has one of the fastest growing populations in the world (Ballard et al 2008). This growing youth population has created enormous pressure to create productive employment opportunities for young labor force entrants (Acharya 2003). According to UN statistics, the young working age population (age 15-39) between 2000-2010 was growing by 3% per year in Cambodia, in contrast to a near zero growth of the same age group in Thailand (Huguet and Punpuing 2005; Sciortino and Punpuing 2009). Although Cambodia's economy has had consistent expansion over the past decades, growth is largely concentrated in Phnom Penh in garment factories, tourism and construction investments. Thus employment, particularly in areas more distant and disconnected from the capital, has not kept pace with population growth.

This demographic profile has put increased pressure on rural areas, where subsistence farming is a primary livelihood strategy. In most rural areas, during the post-war era, land was divided evenly among rural residents, based on family size. However, as families have expanded and divided over the past three decades, many households now hold insufficient agricultural land to produce enough rice to feed a family. Increasingly, newly formed households are land-poor or landless (CSES 2004; CSES 2009). According to the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES) in 2004, landlessness among rural households was estimated at 20%, and judged to be increasing at the rate of approximately 2 percentage points per year, with this trend more pronounced among female-headed households (CSES 2004). Most rural households, unable to irrigate their land for lack of access to water, are able to plant rice and harvest only once a year, making it difficult to meet family needs with available land, and even harder to divide plots in ways that would support the needs of new families. Over the past decade, environmental pressures have also played a role in spurring out-migration from rural areas. Combinations of floods and droughts in the Tonle Sap area over the past decade have significantly affected village-based livelihood strategies, leading families to look towards wage-labor wherever they can find it in order to supplement agriculture (Maltoni 2006; Godfrey et al 2001; MoE and UNDP 2011). These push and pull factors, combined with a relatively porous border and permissive policies, have led to the growth of both managed and irregular migration from Cambodia to Thailand.

State Policies on Migration

Though Thai industries began employing migrant labor in the 1970s, there was no clear policy or government-recognized program allowing for migrant labor until 1992, when private sector pressures encouraged the government to adopt an immigration policy for unskilled foreign workers (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009; Revenga et al 2006; Martin 2007). Until that time, Thailand's policies generally prohibited the entry and employment of unskilled foreign workers, with a handful of exceptions to this general ban under

Article 17 of the Immigration Act of 1979 (Martin 2007). These exceptions eventually formed the basis for Thailand's migrant worker policy, instituted in 1992 when employers in nine provinces bordering Myanmar were allowed to register employed migrants (Martin 2007). From that point forward, the Thai government began actively promoting initiatives to curb, control and find information on the number of migrant workers within its borders, through registration and later, amnesty programs (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009; Revenga et al 2006).¹⁹ Though registration was initially limited by province and sector, driven by employer demands and pressure, worker registration programs later opened to all provinces and sectors (Martin 2007).

Opening up to foreign workers was significantly easier and cheaper than outsourcing production or paying the higher wages needed to attract Thai nationals. Migrant labor was readily available, as neighboring Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia each had steady streams of displaced or rural populations interested in work across the border. For migrant labor, employers could pay between 15% and 30% lower wages (Pholphirul et al 2010), while also allowing the kind of lean production that employers increasingly sought. With migrant workers, employers could easily expand or contract their workforce quickly, based on immediate needs. In 2000, an estimated 10% of Thailand's labor force of 34 million were migrants (Caouette et al 2006). In specific sectors, such as agriculture and marine-fisheries, the trend from Thai to migrant-dominated work was even more pronounced (Caouette et al 2006).

Though relatively simple, the registration process for foreign workers was costly and initially relied on employers to begin the process. In 2001 registration fees were 3,250 baht per worker, which included a work permit and a photo ID. Employers were also required to pay a deposit which was forfeited if the migrant disappeared. For a six-month extension, migrants could pay an additional 1,200 baht. In most cases, employers

¹⁹ On the Cambodian side, while the government neither facilitates nor overtly discourages irregular migration to Thailand, in practice it is very much tolerant of out-migration as a valve for excess labor (Revenga et al 2006), and is actively seeking out new destinations for migrant workers (Morris 2007).

deducted the cost of registration from workers' fees, typically around the sum of one month's wages (Martin 2007). In 2003 the government approved a new resolution aimed at regularizing undocumented migration. As part of this program employers were asked to report the number of migrants they required to fill necessary jobs to the Ministry of Labor. Nearly 250,000 employers responded with requests totaling 1.5 million migrants, with the bulk of the requests in agriculture, fisheries, construction and domestic services. In an attempt to begin responding to these needs, in July and August 2004 the government offered free amnesty registration, aimed at better understanding the number of total migrants in Thailand. Nearly 1.3 million migrants registered for 1 year permits with the MOI at that time (Martin 2007; Vasuprasat 2008). The most comprehensive registration effort in Thai history, an estimated 85% of migrants were believed to have registered. However, not all later completed the regularization process by applying for or receiving work permits, and many let their registration and work permits lapse after the initial first year (Martin 2007).

Despite the security and benefits of registration, migrants often choose to remain unregistered for lack of clear information, desire for mobility, and to avoid the hefty fees of the registration process, which include the costs of medical checkups, the permit itself and potential bribes or payoffs to employers along the way (Martin 2007; Revenga et al 2006). These costs could total between 3,800-7,300 Baht (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009). Most importantly, work permits tied the migrant to his or her employer. If a registered migrant wanted to leave their job, was fired, or changed locations for any reason he or she would become irregular again and would be no longer protected by the document (Vasuprasat 2008; Martin 2007).

Because of these limitations, even with continued efforts to regularize migrants and offer accessible registration, the majority of migrants in Thailand are irregular (Kusakabe and Pearson 2010; Martin 2007; See Table 3.1). Martin (2007) estimated that in 2006 there were 1.8 million migrants in Thailand, of which only 26 % were registered. Alternative figures put the number between 2 and 2.5 million (Kusakabe and Pearson 2010). The bulk of these migrants come from Myanmar, though Cambodians form a

sizable minority, an estimated 13-20% of total migrants, most of them irregular. While the ratio of registered to unregistered migrants varies significantly, based on registration campaigns and new policies, there is a general trend of growing migration since the early 90's.

Table 3.1: Number of Foreign Workers in Thailand, by Registration 1995-2005

Year	Registered	Non-Registered	Total	Percent Registered
1996	293,652	406,348	700,000	42%
1997	293,652	424,037	717,689	41%
1998	90,911	870,556	961,467	9%
1999	99,974	886,915	986,889	10%
2000	99,956	563,820	663,776	15%
2001	568,249	281,751	850,000	67%
2002	409,339	558,910	968,249	42%
2003	288,780	711,220	1,000,000	29%
2004	849,552	149,848	999,400	85%
2004	705,293	807,294	1,512,587	47%
2006	668,576	1,104,773	1,773,349	38%
2007	460,014	1,339,986	1,800,000	26%

Source: Martin 2007

Information from the Thai Ministry of Labor suggests that being registered is correlated with higher migrant wages, with salaries on average 30-50% higher for registered workers. Paitoonpong et al (2008) also found that the benefits from migration were clearly impacted by regularized status, with regular migrants having greater returns from migration. Registered migrants also tend to have better working conditions, were afforded access to health care and were allowed to enroll their children in Thai public schools for free (Reventa et al 2006).

The Scope of Khmer Migration to Thailand

While migration is notoriously difficult to measure and account for with any accuracy, an analysis of data from that Thai Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Interior, police deportation reports, Cambodian national data, and independent surveys offers a general picture of the prevalence and growing trend of Khmer migration to Thailand since the late 1990's.

Both Cambodia and Thailand attempt to measure migration through various agencies and surveys. On the sending side, the Cambodian Census (GRCC 1998; 2008) asks questions related to internal and international migration, and the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES 2004; 2007; 2009) also asks migration related questions. On the Thai side, the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Labor's migrant registration database provides some information on migrants registered by district and sector, though offers little in terms of individual characteristics and counts only those who are formally registered. Other Thai surveys, such as the 2000 Census of Housing and Population, 2003 Agricultural Census, Socio-Economic Survey also include questions on migration (Revenga et al 2006). However as the vast majority of migration to Thailand from Cambodia is informal (Revenga et al 2006; Maltoni 2010), each of these national surveys likely undercounts the real migrant population.

Various international and non-government organizations have also studied patterns of Cambodian migration to Thailand using qualitative methodologies and household surveys. Primarily conducted by the International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration and the Cambodia Development Research Institute these studies provide insights into patterns of remittance spending, migration trends, and migrant work, which give some context to migrant experiences. As they are regularly referenced in the remainder of this chapter, some basic information on the studies is given in Table 3.2. These small-scale surveys offer an in-depth analysis of characteristics of migrants and their decision-making processes, yet are often representative of only one sector or portion of a much more generalized and diverse migration pattern. Even the most extensive of the surveys mentioned above (Maltoni

2010), which involves research in two migrant sending communities and two migrant communities in Thailand, is limited by the scale and scope of its sample. The sample of migrants, concentrated in Trat and Rakyornng but mainly focused in Trat consists of 80% migrants in the fishing sector, which we know from Thai sources comprise an estimated 15% of actual migrants. Moreover migrants in this sector are qualitatively quite different from migrants in other sectors. Thus while the data below which highlights experiences based on small-scale surveys is insightful, it should not be taken as representative of all migrant experiences. The same caveats, of course apply to the case study that follows in this dissertation, which is not meant to be a representative portrait of a migrant sending community.

Table 3.2: Recent Studies of Cambodian Migration to Thailand²⁰			
Year Conducted	Org.	Study Design	Reference/Authors
2007	ILO	Interviews with 356 migrants (Burmese, Laotian and Cambodians) aged 16-34 working in manufacturing, construction, domestic and fishing sectors in Thailand. All respondents had been working continuously in Thailand for over two years and were remitting money home.	Jampaklay and Kittisuksathit 2009
2009	ILO	Interviews with 200 remittance-recipient households in Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Pursat, Koh Kong and Kampot provinces. Focus group discussions on the impact of remittances at the household and community level	Deelen and Vasuprasat 2010

²⁰ Other relevant research on Cambodian migration to Thailand worth noting focuses on migrants rights, exploitation and other forms of abuse (Robertson 2010), the economic contribution of migrant works in Thailand (Martin 2007), and inter-state cooperation for the management of migration (Vasuprasat 2008). Significant research has also been conducted on other migrant groups from the Greater Mekong region in Thailand (i.e. Pearson et al 2006). Less recently, Maltoni (2006a) conducted a study of migrant households in Prey Veng province. Other sources referenced in this chapter are primarily review or synthesis studies, mainly relying on official statistics, prior household surveys, and official interviews (Caouette et al 2006; Sciortino and Punpuing 2009; Revenga et al 2006)

2007	CDRI	Interviews with 507 households in six villages with a high incidence of migration, and focus group discussions in the same areas with return migrants.	Hing et al 2011; Chan 2009
2009	IOM	Interviews with 210 migrant interviews in Trat and Rakyornng Provinces (primarily migrants working in the fishing sector) and interviews with 302 migrant-sending household members in the Cambodian provinces of Kampong Cham and Prey Veng .	Maltoni 2010

Cambodians in Thailand

The majority of migrants in Thailand come from the Greater Mekong Sub-region, primarily Burma, Cambodia, Laos, with Cambodians representing approximately 10-13% of registered migrants.

Table 3.3: Registered Cambodian Migrants in Thailand 1998-2005					
Year	Cambodian		Total	Total for all Nationalities	% of Total, Cambodian
	Male	Female			
1998	8,418	1,074	9,492	99,974	9%
2000	6,898	1,023	7,921	99,656	8%
2001	43,216	14,340	57,556	568,249	10%
2002	28,149	8,669	36,818	408,339	9%
2003	13,976	5,699	19,675	288,780	7%
2004	73,352	31,437	104,789	814,247	13%
2005*			182,007		13%

Sources: Caouette et al 2006; *Maltoni 2006

While Table 3.3 above shows estimates for regular migrants, valid data on the scope of irregular migration is more limited. At minimum, international organizations estimate that there at least as many irregular migrants as registered migrants from Cambodia living in Thailand during most periods. Documented deportations for illegal status show some confirmation of this. In 2006 Thai immigration police documented

arrests of 196,798 Cambodian irregular migrants (Vasuprasat 2008), a significantly higher figure than the number of legally registered migrant workers the prior year. Simply adding the number of Cambodian registered workers in Thailand in 2005 reported by the Ministry of Labour to the number of irregular migrants arrested by police in that same year gives a conservative estimate of more than 280,000 Cambodians in Thailand in 2005. This which amounts to 2% of the Cambodian population at that time, and suggests that IOM estimates²¹ of at least 250,000 Cambodians in Thailand in 2008 may be underestimates, since all estimates of migration assume the numbers of Cambodians in Thailand have grown over the past decade (Hing et al 2011; Maltoni 2010).

Statistics from Cambodian surveys suggest a significantly lower estimate of migrants abroad. Data from the IPUMS sample of the 2008 Census indicates that less than one percent (.73%) of Cambodians at that time reported a previous residence abroad. The CSES in 2009, a nationally representative household survey based on the Census sampling frame finds a similar percentage (.72%) of all household members reported in the survey were currently abroad. The majority (60%) of those abroad in 2009 were currently in Thailand. Generalizing these trends to the overall population and using estimates of average family size and population from the 2008 Census allows for an extrapolated estimate of 104,400 current migrants in the whole population, a significantly lower number than Thai estimates suggest.²² There are several reasons why this might be the case. Households might be hesitant to disclose migrant household members, or no longer consider longer classify (especially permanent) migrants as current household members. These surveys will also necessarily miss households who have migrated as a family unit.

²¹ In Maltoni 2010, noted in Chapter 1

²² Authors analysis using IPUMS and CSES data obtained from the Ministry of Planning

The Character of Cambodian Migration to Thailand

Data from Thailand give little information about the individual characteristics of migrants. However qualitative research within sending communities offers some indication of the general make-up of the migrant population. In sending areas, migrant groups can be found across the socio-economic spectrum, with rich, middle class and poor families all migrating (Chan 2009; Hing et al 2011). The vast majority of migration to Thailand is irregular (Chan 2009; Hing et al 2011; Maltoni 2010). Although Cambodia does have an MOU with Thailand that would allow for legal migration, the requirements for legally going as to work total over 700 US Dollars, and would take 3-6 months to process (Chan 2009; Hing et al 2011). Both the waiting period and the high costs involved make undocumented migration a far more compelling option for would-be migrants.

Research indicates that most migrants are within the working age population (Maltoni 2010). In the IOM's household sample the average age of migrant workers from households was 27 years old. Among migrants interviewed, the average was slightly higher, at 30. However, a significant minority of migrants are children and youth under the age of eighteen (Pearson et al 2006, Maltoni 2010). Thailand's Ministry of Interior estimates that over six percent of irregular workers are children under the age of fifteen (Pholphirul et al 2010), and both qualitative and quantitative data suggest that many Cambodian migrants have first migration experiences before the age of eighteen (Pearson et al 2006, Maltoni 2010, ILO 2005). That youth make up a significant proportion of migrants reflects the demographic differences between Thailand and its neighbors, as well as the stronger pulls for migration among youth for a number of reasons (discussed in more detail in Chapter 8).

Table 3.4: Characteristics of Cambodians in Thailand compared to Non-Migrants in Cambodia, 2000		
	Cambodians in Thailand	Non-Migrants in Cambodia
Sex		
Male	48.7%	48.6%
Female	51.3%	51.4%
Sex Ratio	94.8	94.4
Age		
15-24	19.2%	22.8%
25-59	46.0%	34.8%
60-69	3.6%	3.7%
70+	3.4%	2.5%
Source: Revenga et al 2006		

Based on information from the 2000 Thailand Population and Housing Census, men and women migrated in relatively similar numbers (Revenga et al 2006). Fifty-one percent of Cambodian migrants in Thailand in 2000 were female, a number comparable to the percentage of female Cambodian non-migrants in Cambodia at that time (See Table 3.4).

More recent statistics from Thailand and qualitative evidence suggest that male migrants outnumber female migrants in most communities, as well as among official statistics of registered migrants (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009; Chan 2009; Hing et al 2011). However women still make up a sizeable portion of the migrant population, comprising 38% of registered Cambodian migrants in Thailand in 2007 (Sciortoni and Punpuing 2009) and between 30 and 55% of migrants in household surveys (Chan 2009; Hing et al 2011; Deelen and Vasuprasat 2010).

Case studies document the unfavorable working conditions of migrants. Khmer migrants, whether registered or not, typically find work in fisheries, construction and agriculture, with a sizeable minority working as domestic workers or in fish processing (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009; Caouette et al 2006). Compared to their Thai counterparts, migrants are more likely to work longer hours at lower wages, and be found in the least

attractive jobs (Revenga et al 2006). Registered migrants, however, tend to have wages that are closer to their Thai counterparts, with significant differences in reported wages between registered and unregistered migrants (Chantavanich et al 2006) Qualitative studies report that migrants daily income averages between 150 and 200 Baht, which is in line with Thai minimum wages (Maltoni 2010).

Cambodians are largely concentrated in the eastern half of the country, and in the central/Bangkok area, and the vast majority are circular migrants, going for periods of time ranging from a few months to several years and returning annually or semi-annually for festivals, celebrations or harvest (Sciortino and Punpuing 2009; Maltoni 2006). Some surveys have found that the average duration of migrants stay in Thailand is relatively long, with the majority living in Thailand more than three years, (Huguet and Punpuing 2005). However most studies highlight intentions for permanent migration are rare (Maltoni 2010). In ILO's sample, 90% of Cambodians interviewed planned to return home, though many intended on migration continually for a long period of time (Jampaklay and Kittisuksathit 2009). Surveys among return migrants report that most returnees plan to migrate again soon or very soon (Caouette et al 2006). This is often true even for those who considered their migration a failure (Caouette et al 2006). As Maltoni (2010) points out however, the desire for, or ability to, engage in circular migration may shift over time if government policies make border crossings more difficult. Moreover, as migration patterns move through stages of transnationalism in which transnational communities consolidate and solidify, the circular nature of migration may shift (e.g. Portes 2008).

Migrants typically use a *meekjal*, or middleman, to facilitate transportation across the border and often job placement. However for a minority of migrants with stronger networks, experience crossing the border, knowledge of roads and routes, and established jobs, it is possible to cross alone. The average sum paid by households to *meekjal* in Maltoni's 2009 survey was 112 USD²³. Among respondents in migrant households 39%

²³ Baht amount not reported, but typically paid in Baht

said that migrants from their household had borrowed the *meekjal* fees from moneylenders. A further 22% noted brokers or villagers provided funds, which likely means interest-based loans from friends or village-based informal lenders. Less than a quarter paid the full cost alone. In CRDI's 2007 study, focus group participants in some areas believed that *all* migrants borrowed to finance the costs of migration. In that particular community, 74% of migrants borrowed to pay *meekjal* fees, while in the rest of the migrant villages selected the percent of households borrowing averaged just over 50% (Chan 2009).

Remittances

Given that remittances are argued to be the primary means by which migration can benefit migrants and their families, it is unsurprising that the bulk of research on Cambodian migration patterns to Thailand focuses on remittance sending and use (Jampaklay and Kittisuksathit 2009; Maltoni 2010; Deelen and Vasuprasat 2011). The scope of remittances on a national level is significant. World Bank development indicators from 2009 show \$337 million in remittances coming into Cambodia, representing 3.23% of GDP in that year (World Bank 2011). Since the vast majority of remittances are transmitted informally (Maltoni 2010; Jampaklay and Kittisuksathit 2009) these numbers likely significantly underestimate the true value of migrant remittances in the Cambodian economy.

At the household level, surveys and qualitative studies highlight the importance of remittances within migrant households, but also raise questions for how remittances are contributing to the well-being of migrant households. A World Bank study of migrant-sending households in Prey Veng province in 2006 found that remittances were very important or important for 91% of households who received money from abroad (Maltoni 2006a). However less than one-third of migrant households received remittances. Researchers attributed this to the necessary repayment of *meekjal* debts (facilitated by the migrants), the high costs of living in Thailand, and the tendency for male migrants to spend a significant portion of their salaries on entertainment or establishing second

families in Thailand (Maltoni 2006a). ILO studies confirm the importance of remittances for receiving families, noting that remittances increased average household incomes significantly among migrant households (Deelen and Vasuprasat 2010).

Evidence across surveys note that remittances were most commonly used to cover basic needs and daily living expenses (Maltoni 2010; Maltoni 2006a; Deelen and Vasuprasat 2010; Chan 2009). Health expenditures and paying off loans and loan-interest were consistently of secondary importance across contexts (Maltoni 2010; Deelen and Vasuprasat 2010; Maltoni 2006a; Chan 2009). Less commonly, remittances were reportedly used for investments in education or investment in assets (Maltoni 2006a; Maltoni 2010; Deelen and Vasuprasat 2010; Chan 2009). In CDRI's survey across migrant sending communities, they found that less than 20% of remittances were used for any kind of productive use, with the bulk of these for annual fertilizer purchases, as opposed to more sustainable improvements, diversification, or asset purchase (Chan 2009).

Debt is particularly important as a remittance expense across all research to date in Cambodia, which I argue in Chapter 7 is an understudied but critically important factor for understanding migration experiences in the area. Across studies, research indicates that migrants often have to take out loans to pay middleman fees (Chan 2009, Maltoni 2010; Hing et al 2011). However debt can also spur migration. Maltoni's work in Prey Veng (2006a) highlights that debts are often associated both the use of remittances and also the decisions to migrate. In his sample, illness and disease was often the key factor leading households to go into debt and then encouraging migration in order to pay these debts. Similarly, in both Maltoni's (2010) findings and in CDRI's study, debt repayment was the most significant remittance expenditure after food and general consumption, though it's unclear to what extent debt repayments are explicitly for *meekjal* fees, and to what extent these might be longer-standing debts (Chan 2009)

Most migrants remit informally, often using an informal yet highly developed system of brokers and telephone messaging (Chan 2009; Maltoni 2010). In Maltoni's study, 93% of migrants who sent remittances reported using the phone system, which

according to migrants costs up to 25% of the total of the remittance. Other samples report lower remittance fees, but also high percentages of migrants relying on informal systems of remittance transfer (Jampaklay and Kittisuksathit 2009; Deelen and Vasuprasat 2010).

Qualitative surveys with migrants and households also underscore the disconnect between migrants and migrant households in terms of needs, remittance use, and experiences of migrants. Maltoni (2010) argues that there is a wide gap between migrants' understandings of their migration and households' understanding of the same, particularly related to how remittances are used and migrant/household needs. Maltoni found that migrants tend to underestimate the impact of health and debt interest on how remittances are used and consequently state differing needs in terms of what services they would benefit from, with households valuing investment and microfinance training/information much more than migrants.

CHAPTER 4: SITUATING CHANLEAS DAI

“In the water, crocodiles; on land, tigers”²⁴
-Khmer Proverb

Siem Reap Province, the heart of the Angkorian empires and today a tourist attraction for over 2.5 million visitors a year, can literally be translated in name as “Siam Defeated,” highlighting the area’s long and tumultuous history with its larger and more developed neighbor, Thailand.²⁵ Arguably, Siem Reap has stronger connections with and orientations to Thailand than it does to the capital of Phnom Penh, a result of both history, geography, and an uneven national development policy that has struggled to adequately develop infrastructure in rural and remote areas throughout the country. In order to situate the lives of individuals in Chanleas Dai and provide a background for the arguments that follow, this chapter explores the context of Chanleas Dai both specifically and relative to the rest of Cambodia, then traces the history of rural livelihoods within the commune to show how migration has become a prevalent livelihood strategy. Finally, it describes the general migration experiences of individuals who migrate to Thailand. Maps and photos to visually situate the area can be found in Appendix B (photos) and C (maps).

Proximity and Remoteness

In 2004 on my first visit to Siem Reap, the old Angkorian capital still felt relatively remote. With only a handful of paved roads and few western restaurants or

²⁴ This can be roughly translated to the English expression “between a rock and a hard place.”

²⁵ Siam, referring to the Kingdom of Thailand. Interestingly, there is some debate about how to interpret *Siem Reap*, (Siam flattened, or defeated), which could refer to either a Khmer or a Thai victory. Historians I spoke with note that because the name refers to an unidentified battle, of which there were many during the Angkorian period, there is no accepted or proven reference. Generally Cambodians I spoke with referred to the name as indicative of an ancient Khmer victory, but noted that Thai’s would say the opposite. In general published work on Cambodia, one can find the reference to a Khmer victory (Ray 2000) or a Thai victory (Ovesen and Trankell 2010:42).

bars, the town mainly attracted adventurous backpackers eager to take advantage of the cheap prices and laid back attitude of Southeast Asia. Infrastructure even in central Siem Reap was poor, with frequent power outages, wildly expensive intermittent internet connections, and a small, dingy airport. This quickly changed as the country experienced annual economic growth at an average of 11% between 2004 and 2007, in part driven by expansion in the tourism sector (Reyes et al 2009).²⁶ With the growing importance of foreign tourism largely centered on the temples of Angkor Wat, Siem Reap quickly blossomed into a sparkling city of modernity and western culture. Today, perfectly paved roads, large tour buses, and a “pub street” dedicated to drinking and dancing highlight the economic boom that tourism has brought to Siem Reap. The airport now has free wireless internet (not to mention a Dairy Queen), and the markets in town are covered, well lit, and clean. The multitudes of child and amputee beggars, and persistent moto drivers that I recalled from 2004 have been replaced by registered *tuk-tuk* drivers with vests signifying their official status, and well-spoken child vendors selling books, postcards, and roses throughout restaurants. Today, tourists coming only to Siem Reap town and the Angkor temples might well wonder what the Cambodian poverty story is all about. Yet while tourism has brought jobs, and much needed infrastructure to the city, weak links to rural areas mean that most of the international wealth remains in a small geographic area, where it has minimal impact on rural poverty in areas further from Siem Reap town (Fitzgerald and So 2007). Even within the town itself, many of the changes in the visibility of poverty are simply changes in visibility, not changes in poverty, a result of a series of police and Ministry enforcements and displacements which have resulted in vulnerable populations increasingly being pushed out of tourist areas (e.g. Vong 2007; Thik 2012).

Only 65 kilometers away from the towers of Angkor Wat, Chanleas Dai Commune is a stark contrast between the international wealth of Siem Reap and the rural poverty of the rest of the province. In fact, rural Siem Reap consistently ranks as one of

²⁶ In 2000, the Ministry of Tourism reported less than 500,000 annual foreign visitors. By 2010, this number had exceeded 2.5 million (MoT 2010)

the poorest, most underdeveloped areas of the country, despite its proximity to the heart of the Angkorian ruins.²⁷ Until 2009 Chanleas Dai and other areas west of the provincial capital were effectively cut off from easy access to rest of the country due to the neglect and disrepair of National Road 6, which leads from the Poipet/AranyaPratet border of Thailand to Siem Reap's city center. Travel writers called the road "something of a joke" noting the general poor quality and the frequency with which it can become impassable (Ray 2000). When I first visited Chanleas Dai in 2005, I was similarly struck by its inaccessibility and remoteness, largely due to these abysmal road conditions. At that time, National Road 6 was a wide red dirt road "paved" with rocks, sand and gravel. The combination was dusty and rough during the dry season, and muddy and dangerously slick during the rainy season. The road was nearly impassable during the annual monsoons, with motorbikes routinely toppling over in the dense mud and cars and trucks crawling at a snail's pace to try and avoid getting stuck. When they made misjudgments and ended up mired in sludge, traffic going both ways would stall until the driver and his passengers could dig and push their way out.

While the rainy season was slow, the dry season was unpredictable and at times even more dangerous. During the driest months of March and April wind would stir up dust from the road, making it impossible to see more than a few meters in front the car. These driving conditions only added to what was already a dangerous trip as unrelenting taxi drivers coming from the Poipet border sped across the rocks. Taxi drivers, always conscious of the time they would have to find a fare to return home, moved recklessly down the roads, leaving passengers (without seatbelts) to manage the discomfort the bumps and holes created in Toyota Camrys stuffed full of people.

As undeveloped as the main highway was, until recently the 8 kilometers of road from Kralanh town to Chanleas Dai was worse, with several wooden bridges, and a low-

²⁷ Based on data from 1998 Siem Reap province ranked second only to Pailin in terms of both the extent and the severity of poverty (MoP and UNWFP 2002). A UNDP multi-dimensional measure of the severity of poverty, the Human Poverty Index, in 2004 ranked Siem Reap third worst out of all provinces in terms of the extent of poverty (MoP and UNDP 2007).

lying route susceptible to floods and washouts.²⁸ During the worst flooding of the rainy season, the road was impassable for several kilometers, providing an entrepreneurial opportunity for those with tractors or larger trucks capable of transporting people and motorbikes across the road-turned-lake. Between the difficult journey and the relatively high price tag for travel, most residents of Chanleas Dai rarely, if ever make the trip to Siem Reap except for severe medical emergencies, and at times childbirth.²⁹ While Angkor Wat is often described as the heartbeat of Cambodia, its national pride and heritage, many residents of Chanleas Dai have never seen the famous temple.

Uneven Development

The juxtaposition of Siem Reap Town and neighboring Chanleas Dai exemplify national trends of uneven development. Cambodia has experienced dramatic and sustained economic growth over the past decade, with GDP per capita more than doubling from USD 285 in 1997 to USD 593 in 2007 (Chem et al 2011). Recent rates of growth have been similarly impressive; 5.5% in 2010 and expected to reach 6% in 2011 (Chem et al 2011). However the bulk of this growth is driven by sectors with weak links to the rest of the Cambodia economy, primarily the garment sector, construction and tourism (Chem et al 2011; Ballard et al 2008). In contrast, agriculture and the service sector have had slower and more erratic growth (Chem et al 2011; MoP and UNDP 2007). In particular, the agricultural sector has suffered from underinvestment, experiencing a steady decline in share of GDP since 1994 (Chem et al 2011) and registering negative growth rates at points throughout the decade (Ballard et al 2008). National rice productivity remains significantly lower than other countries in the region (MAFF 2010; Ballard et al 2008). As a result, the economic benefits of growth have not been inclusive,

²⁸ Over the period of time that I have been visiting Chanleas Dai, both of these roads have been slowly reconstructed and eventually paved. National Road 6 was completed from Siem Reap to Kralanh by mid 2009, and the road leading from Kralanh to Chanleas Dai had several bridge improvements between 2006 and 2008 and then was paved in late 2010.

²⁹ Though transport from Kralanh to Siem Reap typically cost only 10,000 riel (2.5 USD), this was a large expense for most families.

and have extended to a relatively small proportion of the population, mainly in urban areas (Ballard et al 2008; Chem et al 2011). Meanwhile, the incidence of rural poverty has remained high, social safety nets remain weak, and inequality has increased (Chem et al 2011). These trends are visually arresting in the differences between rural Chanleas Dai and Siem Reap town.

National data highlight these same trends of marginality. Table 4.1, below, presents indicators from the Cambodian Census in 2008 and highlights the differences in several measures of marginality nationally, across Siem Reap, and in Kralanh District, where Chanleas Dai is located.³⁰ Across all measures, Kralanh shows higher marginality than either national averages or averages across Siem Reap province.

Table 4.1: Development Indicators of Cambodia, Siem Reap and Kralanh, 2008			
	Cambodia	Siem Reap Province	Kralanh District
% of individuals with no schooling*	32.7	41.2	47.6
% illiterate (adults)	21.8	28.8	38.0
% with no toilet at home	64.8	72.2	87.6
% with no electricity at home	72.2	76.2	88.1
% with no radio at home	57.1	61.0	68.0
% with no access to a telephone	59.5	60.3	76.3
% of economically active population working in agriculture	73.8	74.2	91.7
Source: IPUMS sample of General Population Census of Cambodia 2008			
*measured among household members over age six			

Data specifically from Chanleas Dai (Table 4.2) offer additional indication of the socio-economic marginality of the area, highlighting the problems of food insecurity, poor health and hygiene, and challenges to education within the commune. Many of these figures should be interpreted with caution however, as these official statistics are

³⁰ Chanleas Dai is one of 10 communes within Kralanh District. With one exception, all are designated as rural (GPCC 2008)

compiled from village reports that are notorious for inaccuracy. Even population estimates vary widely from data I personally collected from village officials. The act of reporting inaccurate statistics, particularly to the government or NGOs, is widespread in Cambodia.³¹ Nevertheless, these figures offer the best commune-level data available, and offer some insight into general estimates of population, health, education, and food security among households in Chanleas Dai.

Table 4.2: Chanleas Dai Commune Level Indicators, 2009		
Population	Individuals	7,927
	Households	1,472
	Percent of households in severe poverty ³²	10.9
	Percent of households in less severe poverty	16.6
	Percent of households in poverty (severe or less severe)	27.6
	Percent of families working in agriculture	97.9
	Percent of families with household member in a public or private sector job	0.6
	Percent of families living in a home with a thatch roof	22.6
	Percent of families living in a home with a zinc roof	63.4
	Percent of families living in a home with a tiled roof	14.0
	Percent of houses with electricity	0.0
	Percent of homes with TV	51.6
	Percentage of female participation in civil society ³³	0.2
Education		
	Boys aged 6-11 not in school	12.1
	Girls aged 6-11 not in school	17.0
	Boys aged 12-14 not in school	15.3
	Girls aged 12-14 not in school	17.6

³¹ Historian Philip Short (2004:207-208) notes that this type of “transparent fiction” is common in Cambodian culture, in which where lies are deemed acceptable where truth would cause loss of face, conflict, a sacrifice of individual interest, or where an exact response is seemingly unimportant. There are also incentives for certain kinds of mis-reporting. For example government school budgets are based on the number of students enrolled in each school. At the primary level, schools receive a budget of 5,000 riel (\$1.25) from the central government per student enrolled, and this support is substantially higher at the secondary level. Thus school directors have financial incentive to report the enrollment of all school aged children in their catchment area.

³² All poverty measures listed are based on ID Poor Data.

³³ Defined as participation in in NGOs, CBOs, credit groups, women’s unions, and political parties

	Boys aged 15-17 not in school	38.9
	Girls aged 15-17 not in school	42.4
	Ratio of 6-11 year old children to number of teachers	30
	Ratio of 12-14 year old children to teachers	66
	Ratio of 6-11 year old children to primary school rooms	23
	Ratio of 12-14 year old children to secondary school rooms	115
	Adult Illiteracy (%)	24.7
	Illiteracy among 15-24 year olds	13.5
	Illiteracy among 25-45 year olds	27.0
Health		
	% of households using unsafe water sources	81.8
	% of households using a water filter	14.0
	Ratio of latrines to individuals	220
	% of births attended by a midwife	60.0
Food Security		
	% of households who are landless	3.6
	% of households who are landpoor (<1 hectare)	12.4
	2008 wet-season yield harvest (tonnes/hectare) ³⁴	1.1
	Kilograms of rice/person produced (harvested) in 2008	421
	Estimated number of kilograms of rice consumed per person annually ³⁵	200
	Average cattle/buffalo per family	2.8
	Percent of households raising pigs	44.1
	Percent of households raising chickens	74.6
<i>Source: NCDD 2009</i>		

Local Livelihoods in Chanleas Dai

Once a forested area, most of Chanleas Dai Commune was logged in the late 1980s, during the tumultuous years of Vietnamese occupation and civil war. The clear cutting left the area with low soil quality, and fewer community resources. Deforestation also meant the loss of the area's namesake, the allegedly once ubiquitous *Chanleas Dai* tree. According to village elders, the commune was named after the tall tree which looked

³⁴ Average wet-season rice yield in Siem Reap Province is significantly higher, just under 1.5 tonnes/hectare, though this is still the lowest among all provinces (MoP and UNDP 2007)

³⁵ Author estimate based on 0.55 kilograms/rice per day (a figure drawn from conversations with World Food Program representatives, see also Murshid 1998 for information on average daily rice consumption)

like a hand with several thorns attached it.³⁶ During the Pol Pot regime, the official area name was shortened to *Chap Dai*, meaning “to shake hands” which some elders argued was done as a meaningful play on words, as Pol Pot and opposition leaders allegedly shook hands once in Chanleas Dai Commune.³⁷ After the Vietnamese Occupation ended, the area was renamed Chanleas Dai, as one village elder told me, “as a means of showing our hatred for the Pol Pot regime.”

During the Vietnamese occupation private land was reallocated within the commune by village chiefs, with families receiving one half hectare of land per individual in the family. Though a few people noted that some of the most fertile land, and land closest to the road was given to family members of village officials, there was widespread consensus that land plots were given out relatively fairly based on family size at the time. This resonates with national studies that argue that when private land ownership was officially reintroduced in the late 80’s and formalized in 1989, it was done relatively egalitarian ways (Chan and Acharya 2002; Acharya 2003; So et al 2001).

Land has been central to livelihood strategies until quite recently. Historically, most households have participated in a wide variety of livelihood strategies including rice farming, vegetable planting, scavenging, fishing, and internal migration for wage labor for periods of time. Annual rice harvests during the rainy season are the most central household strategy, and with very few exceptions families relied on the yearly harvest for the bulk of their food for the year. Excess rice could be traded or sold, and families who couldn’t make it through the year on their harvest would borrow from friends, family members or more recently, moneylenders to tide them over during the lean months. Both historically and today, due to the lack of water in the area, households are able to plant only one harvest of rice per year, during the months of May through November. During

³⁶ *Chanleas* in this context can be best translated as thorn or burr, and *dai* means hand. Many of the villages within Chanleas Dai shared names associated with historical myth. *Dombrei Slap* (Dead Elephant, or The Death of the Elephant) was purportedly named when a headless wild elephant was found dead near the town outskirts. *Kbal Dombrei* (Head of the Elephant), where the head was found several days later was so named as well. However often the mythologies behind these names were disputed.

³⁷ Other elders noted that this story was nonsense, more legend than truth.

other times of year families with access to some water often grow vegetables such as eggplant, pumpkins, watermelons, cucumbers, cabbage, morning glory, onions and carrots. Others supplement income by making straw mats and baskets out of local *romchek* plants, which are then sold in Kralanh market. While these strategies are still used, village-based strategies have shifted over the past decade, as migration has become a more predominate strategy for households in the area.

Migration as a Livelihood Strategy

With weak links to the economic centers of the country, and strong geographic and historic ties to Thailand, Chanleas Dai and the surrounding areas were oriented towards economic opportunities via Thailand as soon as there was relative stability in the area. Some village elders and limited qualitative research attributes the start of these connections to the presence of returned refugees who were repatriated back to Cambodia in the early 90's, but had knowledge of and experience in Thailand.³⁸ Others attributed the start of migration simply to the newfound political stability, which allowed for a sense of security and with it, a potential for mobility. During the Vietnamese occupation villages often had to leave their land and move to nearby towns when fighting broke out, and there was little consistency or security to life. After 1991, things became relatively stable. As one village elder noted:

“[After 1991] it was the best period of time. We could earn a living, we could be happy. We were able to do whatever we wanted to do. We were proud of the government, we could lead prosperous lives. We could follow our hearts and make money doing many things. No one was forced to do anything. We easily earned enough to support our lives.”

Others noted that the interest in migration was simply a matter of geography. Chanleas Dai sits at a compelling crossroads; an intersection where quite literally, all

³⁸ Research supports that former refugees were key in the development of migration networks in the post Khmer-rouge years (Chan and So 1999)

roads lead to Thailand. The commune is cut in half by National Highway 68 which leads to a remote border crossing at Odor Meanchey, and is less than 10 kilometers from National Road 6, which leads directly to the Poipet/Arunyuprathet border. With labor opportunities in Phnom Penh over seven hours away, and opportunities in Siem Reap only moderately closer than the border, Thailand was not only proximate, but also offered significantly higher wages.

Regardless of how the connections began, village elders agree that in 1992 and 1993 *meekjal* from the outside began to routinely come into the commune offering transport and job placements. In the first years, migration was incredibly risky, and few individuals made the choice. The journey could take days or weeks, and there was little assurance of a safe or well-paid job upon arrival. Mainly men, these first migrants reported horrific experiences of spending days or weeks in the mountains walking to their destination, only to find work in insecure and dangerous sectors, either carrying strong chemical fertilizers which burned their skin, or working on fishing boats where violence and exploitation was both commonplace and impossible to escape. Because *meekjal* were relatively unknown and few people had networks across the border, it was difficult to mediate either the physical or financial risks of migration.

A wealth of research documents the way that migration patterns can exponentially grow as migration becomes less risky, and more common within communities (Massey 1990; Massey et al 1998). Throughout the late 90's and early 2000's, several factors led to increased out-migration from Chanleas Dai. First, the risks of migration decreased as migrants could travel with community members with experiences and contacts, who could offer valuable advice and protection. Second, as migrants returned home with success and savings, made visible through homes, motorbikes, clothing and jewelry, they inspired migration among others who sought the same status and wealth. Youth in particular looked to migration as a means of improving the status of themselves and their families. Finally, village livelihoods during the same period became increasingly precarious, with multiple consecutive years of flood and drought since 2000, and as a result, increasing indebtedness among households. As success stories multiplied, and

village-based strategies began to feel more insecure, more and more families and individuals looked to migration as a means of meeting basic needs, supplementing land-poor households, ensuring greater food security, or gaining access to money to purchase as nicer homes, vehicles, gold, and livestock.

By all accounts migration is a critical livelihood strategy today for most households in Chanleas Dai. Typically when I would ask, village officials would tell me that “everyone goes”---quite literally that 100% of households have someone in Thailand. Though this was clearly not the case, migration is widespread, and a central feature of life. The commune chief, though he doesn’t track migration, estimates that 60% of individuals registered as living in the area are currently in Thailand. At a household level, his estimates were higher, suggesting that perhaps 80% of families have someone in Thailand. In conversations with village officials and individuals, the latter was often repeated as a general estimate.³⁹

Despite spending a great deal of time in Chanleas Dai and knowing the reported statistics, it wasn’t until my third year working in the area that I saw and understood the extent of the exodus. That year I remained in the commune during the Khmer New Year holidays, a time when I had previously left the province. This was the most common time for migrants to return. Within the space of days, what I knew as the community expanded to several times its size, with young people I’d never seen before congregating throughout the village. An excerpt from my fieldnotes highlights the changing feel of the community:

“This is the first time I’ve seen the village alive like this. Young people are zipping around on motos, four or five of them sharing one Wave or Dream⁴⁰ as they go towards nowhere smiling and laughing. They are dressed to the nines, each day, an odd sight in a village where normally an inside out t-shirt and sarong, if that, make up the daily dress code. The youth have spiked up hair, makeup, dresses and bright red pants. They wear jewelry and show off flashy phones. Many have earrings and tattoos, even the young boys. They smoke

³⁹ While high, these estimates aren’t out of line with estimates drawn from interviews and household surveys in neighboring areas (see Hing et al 2011).

⁴⁰ The names of popular motorbike models

cigarettes, play cards in groups and gamble, and drink rice wine from nine in the morning. Usually walking down the paths I am alone, seeing a few women with children, or kids out of school. Today, this is a place of action. I didn't realize how many people were missing until they all returned."

In the next section of this dissertation I move into greater detail interrogating migration motivations, constraints, and perceived alternatives. Prior to doing so, the final section of this chapter describes the general reported experiences of migrants on their way to, and within Thailand. A basic understanding of the experiences of migrants on their way to and within Thailand is critical, as it highlights the costs, dangers, and risks associated with movement across the border.

The Forbidden Line: Crossing the Border

"We can't actually walk across the border. For us, that's the forbidden line. The *meekjal*, they have passports, so they can walk through. But not us, we are illegal." - Saly

With the exception of middlemen I spoke with who held passports, no one in the area migrated through regular/legal channels. Thus, regardless of whether they participated in Thailand's migrant worker registration program upon arrival at their place of work, their border crossings were considered illegal. Most journeys to Thailand were facilitated through local *meekjal*, who arranged transportation across the border, paid bribes to Thai brokers or Thai/Khmer police officers where necessary, found work for migrants, and facilitated their transportation to their job sites. *Meekjal* not only acted as job agents, brokers, and transporters, but also acted as go-betweens for other needs migrants had once in Thailand. *Meekjal* often facilitated the transfer of remittances, sent messages between migrant workers and families, answered questions about health, or legal registration in Thailand, and found new opportunities for workers who were cheated by unscrupulous bosses. Though some *meekjal* were reviled and distrusted, others were seen as helpful and wise guides. A former *meekjal* I spoke with, Nor, clearly considered

himself in the latter category, a wise guide and not a profit-seeking broker.⁴¹ He stressed his responsibility to “his migrants”:

“They were under my care. I felt like it was my job, well, it was like if I were a teacher and they were students in my classroom. At home, they could do whatever they wanted, but under my care I was responsible. I had to find them jobs, of course, and I was responsible for their safety. It was all guaranteed---if I didn’t find them a job, or if they ended up unemployed or caught by the police right when we got there or on the way---well I would have to pay their money back.....This happened a few times. When migrants were arrested on the way there, or if they got there and wanted to leave right away I paid them back.”

With migration so common and more middlemen knowledgeable of the routes across the border, Nor noted that he had to make sure he had a good reputation among the migrants who went with him. He knew they would pass along the word of his reliability and ensure he had future migrant customers.

“I gave them my phone number just in case they wanted to come home or send something to their relatives. Sometimes, if they worked in remote areas and they were sick they phoned me, so I would go to town and buy them medicines, or clothes, or whatever they needed and bring it to them. If they were close to the city or if they had been several times they didn’t need anyone to do things like this, but for the ones in very remote areas, or the people who were nervous, they asked me for help with these small things. They would just cover my gas and give me a little extra, maybe 50 baht or 100 baht.....I would also give them advice---I told them that it’s not like in Cambodia, where we can just take a mango, or something from the tree. In Thailand, you can’t take anything. Even though there is fruit all over where they work, I told them that if they were hungry they needed to ask their bosses to eat or take what they wanted. I was afraid they would be arrested if they were caught stealing.”

Migrations with *meekjal* were costly. Nearly all migrants had to borrow for the costs of migration, often from family members where possible and otherwise from informal moneylenders. The costs of migration ranged from 2,000-3,500 baht per person

⁴¹ Though I tried to speak with current *meekjal* both informally and formally several times, they consistently refused to speak with me. The closest I came was speaking with Nor, who had not been working as a *meekjal* for several years.

and migrants typically borrowed this entire sum, often borrowing a bit extra to cover immediate needs in Thailand. Yeut, a young man who had just watched his parents return to Thailand after a short visit home explained:

“We borrowed 7,000 Baht for [my parents] migrations. But I’m sure it’s spent already and they would have just arrived. First they have to spend 700 or 800 from the village to get to [the place where we cross], then 500 to the men who guard us. They take 500 from each person, so that’s 1,000 total. Then we pay 1,000 to the middlemen who give us food and arrange a van for us. Then 2,000 for the van to Thailand. Then the driver drops us off at a huge house---absolutely full of Khmers. From there we call our relatives to come pick us up and take us to our workplace and sometimes we have to pay something to get to our place. It’s expensive, you see!”

Some migrants were able to navigate border crossing on their own, though this was a relatively new practice, possible only for those who knew their site of work and had reliable contacts across the border. Leaving alone was also more risky, as *meekjal* offered some protection (typically via bribes) from police pursuit, and a “money back guarantee.” However going solo significantly lowered the cost of migration, and offered a more comfortable, albeit more dangerous option. The alternative of migrating with *meekjal* meant one or more days of extreme discomfort, though somewhat more protection. Vanna’s story was typical of a description of the transportation across the border:

“ We walked across the road in order to catch the truck. This was the worst part--they put us right on top of each other, just like they were loading pigs onto a truck. Except the pigs would at least have a shelf. Not us. We lay down on each other, men and women together on top of one another without a second thought about how inappropriate it was. The middlemen kicked us, and then covered us with a plastic tarp and told us to be silent. It smelled, and there was no air so it was hard to breathe and the smell just got worse and worse. Some people were heavy, so heavy it became excruciatingly painful. When we finally arrived at the workplace the people who were on the bottom were unable to move---it was like their whole body had become unconscious. We had to lift them out of the truck.”

The horror stories of travel were repeated with striking similarity across migration experiences. Even when migrants had positive, or neutral travel experiences with

meekjal, they highlighted the terror of the journey for others---and noted that for whatever reason they had simply been lucky this time around, perhaps being selected to sit in the bed of the truck, or allowed to be closest to the top of the pile of bodies in the truck. More commonly, I heard stories of aching bodies, repulsive odors, and an array of inconvenient bodily responses (vomiting, gas, urinating, defecating) that were either uncontrollable, or uncontrolled by others.

When *meekjal* were efficient and police absent, migrations were relatively fast. Migrants would leave Chanleas Dai one evening and arrive at their workplace by the next afternoon. Most commonly trucks would take migrants to the border near Malay, a small outpost in southern Banteay Meanchey province. There, migrants would follow leaders across a small river and then through forest for more than 10 kilometers. At a designated meeting spot on the Thai side of the border, trucks would await them to take them to their designated jobs in Thailand. However it wasn't uncommon for the journey to take significantly longer. As one young woman noted:

“It was a terribly hard ordeal. And there’s nothing about it that we can control--that’s predictable. If it rains it rains. If it’s slippery it’s terribly hard. I had to walk for what felt like forever. I slept in the forest and was bitten all over by mosquitoes. It wasn’t easy until I reached Thai soil. Some migrants spend 3,4, even 5 days to reach Thailand. If it’s just a day we are lucky!”

Meekjal often worked together, with large groups of migrants moving together from the Cambodian side into Thailand. In most seasons, the border crossing involved wading across a small river, fairly deep in the rainy season. Migrants described the journey as arduous:

“If it is deep, the men help the women across the river, and the men usually help carry our luggage. The *meekjal* guide us the whole way there, 2 in front, 1 in the middle and 2 in the back. We walk and sit silently while they lead the way. If they see police, we have to wait or move. If it is ok, we can move forward. All we can do is follow them.” –Saly

“We had dinner as soon as we arrived [at the crossing point], and by 7pm we began walking. There were people guarding us, but it was still terrifying. We walked from 7pm to 4am—I didn’t pack things to drink or eat so I had no food and had to drink water from the river. On the way there were some people carrying papayas and corn on the back of their bags. I was so hungry I stole some papaya to eat. I thought it was ok, because I was so hungry. The path was muddy and slippery. It wasn’t raining when we started to walk, but by the time we were a few hours in it was raining heavily. I slipped in the mud several times. And then there were moments where we had to run as fast as we could---when we passed the paved road. There were so many people and everyone was running and pushing. I thought I was going to be trampled.” –Yeut

Because their migrations were not documented legal crossings, individuals knew they could be caught by law enforcement or border patrols and sent back to Cambodia. This happened frequently. As a result, running from police, hearing warning shots or police dogs, spending several days in transit and even being captured and put in jail were all scenarios migrants were prepared for. Two young migrants’ descriptions exemplify common experiences:

“I was chased three times during the time I worked there. Each time, they failed to catch me. I knew to run---to run as fast as I possibly could. Once, I stepped on a thorn and fell onto the road. I thought I would be caught but I was near a temple and a monk saw me running. He signaled in the air with his hands and I saw what he meant---he was pointing at a tree nearby. I climbed the banana tree and hid myself in it and no one could find me.” – Chiva

“When we crossed the border the police saw us. They saw us unloading from the truck and began to chase us. Many of us were caught. So they took us out and put us in the forest and tied us for a day without giving us food or water. That night they released us, I’m still not sure why. I think the *meekjal* arranged something. Luckily, we were released and then the *meekjal* contacted our employers and we began working.”- Sinut

Often, migrants were separated during the transport, particularly if police were present and migrants had to run through the forest. As Chiva explained:

“When I go [to Thailand], it is important that I remember to write down my husband’s phone number or his boss’s information. I always try to memorize it.

Last time, I was chased three times and each time my husband and I were separated from each other. Once we were apart from each other for three days and nights.”

I was surprised at how little preparation these migrations required. Word of mouth largely facilitated *meekjal* services. During April and May, just after the Khmer New Year holidays, trucks left nearly daily, transporting back the hordes of migrants who had returned to celebrate the holidays and pay their annual visit home. At other times, trucks left weekly or semi-weekly, either picking people up directly from central locations in the village or from the larger markets in towns nearby. Migrants could call the *meekjal* themselves to arrange transportation on the next truck, or sometimes would simply show up when they heard trucks were leaving.

Transportation and getting across the border was consistently the main difficulty migrants reported. While transportation was a dangerous, risky, and often harrowing experience, once in Thailand most migrants had largely positive experiences. Veau's sentiments reflected many migrant voices: “The only difficulty I had was the long walk on the road to Thailand. But really, the rest wasn't so difficult. I was lucky to go there.”

Working Abroad

Once in Thailand those who know where they were headed, returning to old jobs simply told the *meekjal* where they need to be taken. Those without jobs were taken to places that matched what they asked to do. While the majority of individuals from Chanleas Dai worked in pineapple or potato farms not far from the border, or construction work in Bangkok, there was tremendous diversity in experiences. Migrants worked on potato, durian, orange, rambutan and pineapple farms, on rubber and sugar plantations, at fisheries and factories, selling noodles in or outside of factories, as domestic workers, on chicken and pig farms, in road construction, and on fishing boats. Those who spoke functional Thai had broader options, and were able to do more service oriented work selling in the market or on the street.

Because they found jobs through relatives and brokers, it wasn't uncommon for migrants to be unaware of where they actually worked in Thailand, typically not knowing the name of their employer and sometimes not knowing the province they were working in either. As Leat explained, they just followed the work, often not quite knowing where they were:

“If they called Van'cha, we called it Van'cha. If they called it Van Keo, we also called it Van Keo. We moved all the time and we didn't often know where we were. I didn't even know if I was in the west or the south, just that I was in Thailand.”

When they did know their locations, most reported working in Rayong, Bangkok, or Chonburi. Migrants typically were hired the day of their arrival, or within less than 24 hours, and had significant choice in their work site. Typically middleman would ask about preferences before the trip began, and offer specific information on working conditions and salaries in each of the options they had available.

“The *meejkal*...asked me whether I wanted to work in someone's home, in the farm or selling at the market. He asked what kind of job I wanted to get and I said I wanted to work in a home. So, when we arrived he found me a job in a home.”
–Srey Li

“We made decision before moving there. If you want to work for pineapple farms, they will find you pineapple bosses; if you want to work for construction sites, they will find you those bosses.” –Saly

Migrants made choices based on the information that friends, relatives and *meejkal* offered about working conditions in different sectors and areas. It was well-known for example that construction paid better, but the costs for food were often higher and the work sites were more dangerous. In contrast, agriculture was less well-paid but food and accommodation were sometimes covered by bosses. Plus working in the agriculture sector near the border “felt” more like Cambodia, alternately a drawback or an advantage depending on what individuals were looking for. Single youth often preferred

to be closer to the city, while families migrating together reported it was easier to work together near the border, particularly when they had to bring young children along. The working site decisions also dictated how much association migrants had with other Khmers. In pineapple farms, most of the workers and often the bosses were Khmer. At rubber plantations, or construction sites, the composition was different, with Thai bosses and often Burmese or Laotian workers. However migrants noted that prevalence of Khmers throughout their migration experiences. As Nor told me “you could find Cambodians in every province. Even in the center of Bangkok.” Similarly, Sopheap, who sold Chinese noodles along the streets in the outskirts of Bangkok, noted that she often felt like she was in Cambodia, just a different kind of Cambodia. “There were many Khmers - thousands or tens of thousands of Khmers were living there. I met Khmers wherever I went.”

Registration

Though the Thai government has instituted strong registration campaigns aimed at both informing about and encouraging migrant registration since 2004, relatively few of migrants from Chanleas Dai had experiences with registration. In part, this reflects that the individuals I spoke with were often away for short periods of time, and work permit registration was most beneficial for long-term workers. It is likely that longer-term migrants from the area, who perhaps return more rarely were more likely to have work permits, referred to as *bat*. For the household members and former/current migrants I spoke with, the *bat* registration was perceived as overly costly, confusing, and most importantly, limiting.

Migrants often had inconsistent information about what rights *bat* offered, what they cost, and how long they lasted. However all migrants knew that *bat* limited your mobility. By nature, the *bat* tied migrants to their workplaces, offering quasi-legal status and significant benefits in terms of security and benefits, but only as long as you were working for the employer you had registered with. Migrants felt this limited their

movement, and was thus a waste of money unless one had a very secure job with a good boss and plans to stay long-term. *Bat* were also costly, with migrants paying between 3,500-4,000 Baht for a year-long registration.⁴² It was therefore a significant investment in that particular job, a risky commitment in a situation where exploitation was common and mobility was valued.

Moreover, registration decisions were ultimately in the hands of employers, not workers. According to migrants, many bosses discouraged or limited access to the registration process, telling their workers it was a waste of money, or assuring them that pay-offs to police would mean there was no risk to their position and registration wasn't necessary. *Bat* were costly for employers as well, leading them to often justify their position against worker registration on the basis of potential worker flight. Some employers required a particular length of employment before they would register workers for *bat*. Others continually made promises to register their workers after they had gained trust, but never followed through.

Among migrants, perceptions were that employers who wouldn't pay for *bat* were stingy (they saved money) powerful (they could manipulate police and ensure protection outside of the legal system), or smart (they didn't invest in workers who might leave anyways). However some worksites, particularly factories, only employed migrants with a *bat*, alternately perceived as an inability to work outside the legal system, or indicative of a good working relationship with workers focused on retention.

Jail and Police

Where they weren't registered, migrants typically had to pay out of pocket for bribes to police for protection, often 500 baht per person per month, equivalent to two to three day's wages. This over time was significantly more costly than the costs of *bat*

⁴² Some migrants reported paying upwards of 8,000 baht, for *bat* registration. However according to the Thai government policies the costs should be 3,800 baht for all the costs of registration.

registration, and also provided very little protection from police arrests or raids. Despite requisite police payoffs it was not uncommon to be caught by police, jailed, and even deported. Arrests were so common that many people in the village knew the names of specific jails in Thailand where migrants often went. However while getting caught by police was common, it was still significant, as there were often formal or informal fees taken from migrants who were caught. Some migrants report bargaining with police about the fees for release, and others noted staying for days or weeks because of their inability to pay bribes. Whether migrants were allowed to leave or deported depended not only on their ability to pay police but also on the power of their employers. Many people I spoke with had stories of being caught by police, and simply calling their employers or *meejkal* who arranged for their release.

Regardless of whether they had to pay bribes, being caught could lead to significant vulnerability, particularly when migrants were caught early in their migrations, prior to repaying their transit debts. Those deported had to pay the costs of transport back home, in addition to whatever police bribes they paid. If they were still indebted for the costs of their migration they managed outstanding debts through the sale of assets such as livestock, or took out new loans to pay back interest on the first, and then migrated again.

Some employers reportedly used police raids as threats or retribution, to keep migrants from reporting exploitation or protesting non-payment. Several migrants had stories of being cheated out of funds due, and shared that when they asked to be paid and tried to pressure employers they were subsequently raided and arrested. Others shared their beliefs that employers planned for police raids in advance, when projects were completed and they didn't want to pay workers or continue the work contracts.

While being caught was and frightening and costly, it rarely deterred further migrations. An illustrative example, Sopheap, eighteen at the time, was arrested along with 300 other migrants on her way across the border. She told me that after being arrested and sent back to the village her whole family turned around and went right back.

“There were three hundred of us...arrested and made to walk in rows. We were also filmed on T.V. They caught us on the way to [the border crossing]. Five of us – my parents and siblings were all arrested. They sent us back to the village and then we just went right back. I wasn’t tortured or mistreated. [The police] just explained us that it is illegal to come to Thailand this way and warned us that *meeekjal* would abandon all of us in Thailand.” They told us that most middlemen and employers would cheat us. But they were wrong—we were paid whenever we worked.”

The experience of Sopheap was reiterated across the village, with others noting that arrests were frightening and costly, but not significant deterrents to future migrations. Similar findings have been reported in other interview-based research with migrants in Thailand (e.g. Sciortino and Punpuing 2009). To resist police detection, individuals had various strategies, being careful about how they dressed or styled their hair if they were in urban areas, choosing employers who were reputed to have good positions with the police, or looking for work in strategic locations far from police stations.

Conclusions

Given the tremendous hardship of the migration experience, the insecurity of work abroad, exploitation reported, the costs to paying police officers, the experiences of deportation, and the separations from family, it is easy paint a one-sided picture of migration as an undesirable last resort, or a distress response to economic need. However the way that migrants frame their decision-making process, and the perceived alternatives they have at home highlights a much more complex story, one where factors beyond economic need matter a great deal in framing and sustaining migration choices.

The following chapters investigate some of these factors; including debt, the availability of microcredit, status, household obligation, risk, and stability. In the process, I explore strategies, sorrows, disappointment, enthusiasm, and dreams of Khmer men and women who look across the Thai border for their livelihoods and their futures, who see the village life as inherently problematic who structure their lives around further migrations.

CHAPTER 5: RISK, REWARD, AND RESOURCES: SEEING THE VILLAGE AS VIABLE

“Riding a buffalo across mud is easier than swimming.”
-Khmer Proverb

Sak and Satra’s Story

Sak married young, just barely sixteen and one of the first among her friends. A decade later, she now has a family and a life that spans two countries. Her husband Satra has been migrating to Thailand since 2000, leaving for the first time not long after their wedding. Though neither of them keep count, Satra estimates that he has crossed the border somewhere between five and ten times. Several years ago, Sak became curious and anxious to work abroad herself. Their first son was old enough to be taken care of by relatives, so she decided to leave and work with Satra across the border. After only six months her mother became ill, not only unable to care for their son, but also in need of someone to attend to her. Sak returned, and hasn’t been back to Thailand since, in part because she has another small child now and no one at home to care for the children if she leaves.

I spoke with the couple together, while Satra was home on a short visit. They explained their migration choices in a way typical of Chanleas Dai migrants—a mixed articulation of need and desire for improvement. As Sak noted, it was a choice, but one constrained by lack of options. “If we stay here,” Sak noted “we don’t have work to do.” She clarified that by “work” she meant something specific: stable, secure, and adequately profitable. There was no short supply of work that was monotonous, labor intensive, necessary and not profitable in Chanleas Dai: tending the fields, cooking meals, cleaning the house, clearing the land, taking the cows out, and caring for family members. There was also work that *could* be profitable, but was highly risky: raising pigs, crop diversification, lending money out to others. Sak and Satra expressed a desire for

something else—the kind of consistency, low-risk, and high-reward that came with wage labor abroad.

Sak and Satra aren't desperate, or in any state of distress. The couple is relatively well-off, holding 4 hectares of land between them, where most households in the village have less than two. By the standards of others, they would be described as *mcheum*, or average. Even when they aren't able to harvest all of their land, they have enough to feed their family, to lead a basic life through rice farming and small supplemental strategies. Still, Sak tells me, they rely on migration because they want more than to just survive, but they don't know what to do at home that would offer them any kind of secure additional income to supplement the harvest. Originally, Satra thought that through migration he could not only support the family but also earn money to start a business. However, now their strategy now rests on sustained cyclical migration. Sak explained that this plan is more a result of a perceived lack of choices than a choice itself.

“I mean, I don't know what kind of business I could run [and be successful]. If I grow watermelons, each day I can sell four or five. But there's no guarantee. Like in Thailand there are factories that guarantee—that will always accept the products. Here, if we're in the village and we have a group growing watermelons...for example we might have a hectare of watermelons. But we don't know where to sell them. If we try to sell in Kralanh, we're competing with everyone else----they might have a motorbike full of watermelons, a van full, and I also have the same. When there's so few people buying, how can we sell our products?”

Sak and Satra still plant rice most years, though they have also rented their land out at times to others while they are away. Satra notes that the biggest difficulty, both for his family and for others in the village is the lack of water, and the corresponding insecurity of the rice harvest. “We invest a lot in our rice.” Satra isn't just speaking about time---the couple spends about 1,200,000 riel (300 USD) each year on fertilizer, sometimes more. It is always a risky investment. Last year, they didn't have enough water, and could harvest only a small percentage of the rice they'd planted. Satra isn't optimistic about this year either. “This year, I don't know what it will be. I am waiting to

see water. If water is regular.....If water is not regular, all villagers will go [to Thailand].” While he makes this statement, the reality is that Satra and Sak don’t base their migrations on the rice yield. Like most of his neighbors, Satra has been away consistently, whether good or poor harvest. Thus the couple’s household migrations are strongly related to their generalized understanding environmental distress, but not predicted by specific incidences of it.

Sak would prefer that they both live in the village, but repeats often that they just don’t know what kind of opportunities they have at home to make any kind of secure income. They have made modest attempts to find something more sustainable over the past decade. They initially used remittances for pig farming, but were unsuccessful. Later, they saved Satra’s earnings from Thailand to buy a used motorbike, which was intended to allow Satra to take cucumbers to markets in neighboring Siem Reap and Pouk districts. He tried this for several months, but with the extra money on gas, and the lack of sales, he wasn’t sure that he had made a profit. Though they had a successful cucumber harvest, they had difficulty selling enough cucumbers at a profitable price. Through these frustrations, Satra came to believe that factories were the only real solution to the environmental and economic marginality of the area. The strong desire for factories was pervasive throughout Chanleas Dai, despite the fact that there were no known investors or companies looking into the area. In explaining his desire for factories to come to the area, Satra compared his experience planting and selling cucumbers to the farm-to-market networks he had seen in Thailand. He believed that if factories were opened they would not only offer jobs, but also guarantee a market for the produce of small-scale farmers.

“In Thailand, they have factories to buy the products. They grow pineapples on hundreds of hectares. Each boss has 400 or 500 hectares, sometimes 1,000 hectares. We don’t see [the pineapples] sold in the markets, because we don’t know where they take the products to. Maybe Thailand sends those products to other countries, I don’t know. But they buy them. [Here], we don’t have a market to sell to..... If they create a factory, I will grow vegetable like cassava or corn. For example, if in Siem Reap they create a factory to process cassava, then

people will grow cassava. Then we wouldn't have to go to work in other people's countries. Going abroad is difficult, it's not our ideal. But when we stay at home we just remain poor. If we grow vegetables here, it isn't worth it. The price is cheap and they are hard to sell.....”

I asked Satra if he had capital, what he would do to improve his family's situation. He struggled to answer, thinking through things one at a time. “I'd create a business...but.... If we grow pigs, they die. We could grow vegetables...but cows will eat them. It is hard to think of what to do. I'd like a water pump to water a vegetable garden.” He then quickly changed the topic of conversation, back to the idea of factories. “Why don't they create factory in Cambodia so that there are more jobs available in Cambodia? I just wonder, what's stopping them from building something? We have a road and we have everything! What we don't have is factory.” I asked what kinds of factories he could see in Kralanh and both he and Sak became animated, shouting out ideas. “A Cassava factory. Cassava! Or corn! Cassava or corn! If there are factories, it can help us a lot.”

Seeing the Village as Viable

Sak and Satra are a typical migrant couple in many ways. They are motivated to invest in long-term options and to find more stable, secure and profitable paths for their family, yet frustrated at the lack of possibility they feel as a result of their attempts. The environmental insecurity of the area is a key part of their migration decisions, yet these choices are also clearly related to the economic marginality of the area and general lack of infrastructure. In response to what they perceive as limited and insecure alternatives for either mobility or stability at home, they increasingly rely on work abroad and have limited their reliance on livelihood strategies at home. Their experiences highlight two important points: first, that when making decisions potential migrants consider both their potential earnings and risks abroad and their potential earnings and risks at home; and second that there are strong local preferences for income-generating opportunities that are perceived as secure and stable.

Their example also highlights a critical disconnect in the literature on migration and development, and the lived experiences of individuals in Chanleas Dai. As noted in Chapter 2, migration is believed to bring about poverty reduction or community development through its potential for small-scale investment, entrepreneurship, production etc. Yet migrants and their families saw these types of ventures as both financially risky and difficult, given the recent environment distress, and the lack of accessible markets, infrastructure, and potential for profit. In contrast, they saw the strongest potential for both individual improvement and community development through wage labor and secure employment. As these weren't possible in the village, they looked elsewhere.

In remainder of this chapter I explore the meanings and perceptions of local investment (agriculture, entrepreneurship) among migrant and non-migrants in Chanleas Dai. In focusing on the perceived potentials for failure, success, or mobility by staying home, I aim to shed light on the decision-making process rural households articulate as they make choices between staying home and leaving. Specifically I highlight the widespread perceptions that village-based strategies are risky and have become more so in recent years, that village-based strategies provide little means for social mobility, and related to this, that village-based strategies have become low status as a result of the relatively low-earning power they offer. I then contrast this with an example from the non-migrant minority, offering a counter-example of how non-migrants perceive and engage with village-based strategies. As all of these arguments relate to environmental shifts over time in the commune, I begin the next section by exploring the real and perceived environmental shifts which have occurred over the past decade to make rural livelihoods feel increasingly precarious in Chanleas Dai.

Environmental Change in Cambodia and Chanleas Dai

Climate change has recently become a buzzword topic in the Cambodian development discourse, most visible in the UNDP-Cambodia's annual Human

Development Report, which centered its 2011 issue around climate change and vulnerability. In part, this focus is the result of a growing recognition that rural vulnerability is strongly influenced by relatively small climate shifts, which are already occurring throughout Cambodia (Eastham et al 2008; MoE and UNDP 2011). Temperatures across the country have risen steadily over the past fifty years (MoE 2010), rainfall patterns have shifted (Eastham et al 2008), the incidence of floods has increased (Tong and Sry 2011) and the Cambodian public is increasingly cognizant of these shifts (MoE and BBC 2011).

Though some parts of Cambodia are particularly prone to flood or drought, natural disasters are regular occurrences throughout the country. According to data from the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey in 2007, 62% of villages reported a natural disaster between 2001-2005 (Tong and Sry 2011). While the annual figures show no particular pattern in the experience of flood over this time (ranging between 7% and 15%), between 2001 and 2005 the percent of villages reporting drought increased steadily from 11% in 2001 to 34% in 2005 (Tong and Sry 2011). The Cambodian public is highly attuned to these trends (MoE and BBC 2011). In a BBC survey project with 2,401 adults respondents across all 24 provinces of Cambodia, 99% of respondents reported that in their lifetime temperatures have noticeably increased, 92% report less rain over their lifetime, and 85% note that seasons start and finish at different times than before. Moreover, 67% believe that compared to the past drought is more frequent now and 35% believe flooding is more frequent now. Nearly three quarters (74%) of farmers noted that their work had been badly affected by these changes.

Within Chanleas Dai, individuals are similarly aware of these environmental shifts, arguably more so than even in other agricultural parts of the country. The area surrounding Chanleas Dai is particularly prone to both flood and drought (MoP and UNDP 2007). In the words of one local official, this makes it one of the more “unlucky” places to reside in the country, placing area farmers in a particularly precarious relationship with the environment. Residents of Chanleas Dai widely share the perceptions of climate change found in the Ministry of Environment and BBC national

study. Though flooding and drought have always been part of the environmental cycles in the area, environmental shocks have been the rule, rather than the exception over the past decade.

Though individuals pointed to different specific years when things became noticeably worse, all attributed the shift to the mid-2000's. Before that time commune officials describe village life as "stable," noting that people had enough to eat, and typically had successful harvests. In the past decade, however the environment had begun to "fail the people" more regularly, with most farmers getting half or less of what their fields would typically yield in a good year. This often led households to borrow from moneylenders or microfinance institutions, which in turn spurred migration, as there are few reliable means of paying down debt and interest, except for wage-labor or the sale of assets.

A brief history of recent environmental shocks is illustrative. In July 2000 early heavy rains and monsoons inundated Cambodia, initially affecting the eastern part of the country and then worsening and spreading to the Tonle Sap area including Kralanh. The floods were described by aid organizations as the most devastating natural disaster to hit the country in decades, and Chanleas Dai officials noted this as a turning point, the first of many consecutive years of disaster. In 2002 the area was hit again with initial droughts and later flooding that damaged the National Road as well as harvests significantly. Between 2003 and 2006 most years farmers experienced limited rice output due to insufficient rainfall. In 2007 there was a severe drought, and the Kralanh area was again critically affected. In October of that year, the eldest son of Prime Minister Hun Sen came to Kralanh to offer condolences, survey the damage and offer emergency relief. Finally in 2009 disastrous flooding affected thousands of hectares of rice paddy throughout the Tonle Sap region. Kralanh, which sits on a flood plain, was inundated, with many families losing their entire harvest. These shocks have been particularly problematic because of their consecutive nature, meaning households have little ability to recover from one annual shock before experiencing another.

As a result of these consecutive shocks, residents of Chanleas Dai widely assert that the environment has become more unforgiving over time and they expect it to remain so.

Risk: “We are all Depending on the Sky”

The growth of migration as a primary livelihood strategy is clearly linked to increased environmental insecurity, and articulated by both individuals and local officials as a coping response. As one commune official noted, migration has increased as a direct result of environmental stress:

“Everything here---we are all depending on the sky. If there is rain, we will survive and if there is no rain, we meet with difficulties. Here it is not like in [neighboring] Pouk district, where people have irrigation systems to support their farms. There, when people can’t harvest in the rainy season, they can still plant rice in the dry season as a substitute. We can’t do the same thing. Even though farmers in our village also get help from NGOs and international organizations for crop cultivation and training, it does not help because of drought. This is the reason for our poverty...It leads people to leave their homeland to go to Thailand, to find a job that will allow their family to improve.”

When I asked about what kinds of things people could do in the village to make a living, expressions of exasperation were common: “nothing can be done in the village”, “here we just waste our time”, “why would we stay here”, and in reference to children “there’s nothing for them to do here until they are old enough to go to Thailand.” Although these statements were related to the economic vulnerability, geographic remoteness, and lack of infrastructure in the area, pessimism centered around the environment. There was a general sense that households were at the mercy of nature, which could be unpredictable and cruel, and had been both in the last decade. Even households who hadn’t directly experienced shocks themselves noted floods, drought, and a lack of rain as causes for their migration.

The generalized pessimism around village-based livelihoods spilled over into explanations of the insecurity associated with animal husbandry and livestock as well.

That animals “simply died”, and did so inexplicably more often in recent years, was often repeated to me. Though there was no evidence to suggest that disease was more of a problem than in years past, many people told me that raising chickens, pigs, ducks, and even cows was more risky these days. In part, I took these perceptions to be related as much to changing conditions in the village as they were related to awareness of more industrialized and developed techniques in Thailand, as these more modern techniques were often referenced by those who held pessimistic views about raising animals. Across the border there was more training, more medicine, and more strict hygiene practices that supported healthier animals, differences which were often noted by the migrants who had worked in those sectors. Those who told me that raising animals was more difficult now often juxtaposed the potential here with that in Thailand. For example two elder men, one a former migrant, tried to explain to me why animals died more often now. They argued that in the village animals were always sick---even when they were vaccinated--because of the lack of standards and hygiene in the area. They supported this perspective with reference to Thailand, where they raise their animals differently, then went into detail describing the tradition of veterinary medicine, the general awareness of animal husbandry, and the strict hygiene practices. In contrast, the lack of standards and education meant that in the village pigs, cows, even chickens often fell sick and died. The men argued that “even if we try, we can’t earn anything” from those strategies.

Perhaps the two the most common phrases I heard from respondents talking about village based potential strategies, or simply staying put, were “*ot mien ai twer*”, there is nothing to do (here), and “*men rok ban*”, we can’t make a living (here). The next sentences would nearly always be a reference to factories, jobs or the need for secure wage labor opportunities in the village. This underscored the fact that local perceptions of what was possible no longer centered on expanded land-based strategies, but rather on the potential for wage labor. Migrants and non-migrants shared similar perspectives:

“No one wants to just stay at home and do nothing...It is time wasting living in the village when we can harvest rice only once a year. If we are in Thailand we could earn 100,000 baht instead of just sitting here. Poverty leads us to migrate.

The places in Cambodia where there are factories, they don't need to do things like this. If there were factories here in the village, we wouldn't go to work there.”–Leakena, a non-migrant

“I will stop going there when I have enough to eat. Here I don't make a single baht, I just spend and spend. I don't know what to do in the village. I don't know what to do here, what to look for. If there were a way for me to stay here in the village, I'd do that. But I don't know any way to do that.” –Alin, a former migrant

“No one wants to work far away from home, but there is no job available here in country, in this province. Everyone wants to work in the village here, where we can stay with our children. If there was work for us to do, we would come back.”
- Salong, a former migrant

“There isn't any work for them locally, so we cannot persuade them to stay. We do not have any solutions for this problem [of migration]. If they go, at least they can earn 10,000 riel (2.5 USD) a day. If they stay, they earn nothing. They only have work to do during one season. [If they stayed] what would they sell? There are many things we can do [to make a living] but they are not possible here. Therefore, they turn in the other direction.” - Local school director, a non migrant

The quotes above reiterate the understanding that Sak and Satra have of what is possible at home. Like several of those above, many of my respondents told me they would stay in Cambodia if they “had anything to do” or “could just make ends meet.” Yet these aspirations were specific and overshadowed a more complicated desire for less financially risky, more profitable work: for regular stable jobs, and not piecemeal livelihoods. When it came down to the details of how people could make ends meet, or what “something to do” actually meant, what people expressed they wanted was the jobs they had in Thailand, in Cambodia: an opportunity to make money, with relative assurance, at home.

Importantly, migration was not only seen as a coping strategy for landless, land-poor, or indebted households. It was also understood as a primary livelihood strategy for households with far more resources, who still saw the relative risk in agriculture as substantively higher than in migration. One of the area village chiefs exemplified this attitude. Although his family held ten hectares of rice paddy, they only planted on two in

2010, after “wasting” 20,000 baht on fertilizer for a crop that was devastated in floods the year prior. This shift wasn’t for lack of income, as the family had plenty of remittances coming in from family members abroad in Thailand. Rather, it was a choice informed by several years of seeing the risk and reward of investing in rice farming. In our conversation he described migration choices through the analogy of a lottery---if people went to Thailand, they risked being exploitation and deported, which could mean coming home with nothing. However they could come also home with several thousand Thai baht, and many did. In contrast, those who stayed home were virtually guaranteed nothing. What was at stake, in his mind, was only the possibility of something more, and the potential to have more control over one’s chances. “What we earn in Thailand depends on *us*,” he argued, not on the rain.

In contrast with local livelihood strategies, migration was perceived as relatively low-risk by most of my respondents, surprisingly even those who had been cheated by employers, seen extreme forms of violence against fellow migrant workers, seen drug and alcohol abuse, and been caught and deported by police, who often took whatever savings they found on migrants as an informal fee for their illegal status before sending them home. Though migration had inherent risks, explored more in the preceding chapter, they were manageable, expected, and there were forms of resilience that could be learned to mitigate them. Most importantly, risks didn’t interfere with a long-term ability to earn. During my time in Chanleas Dai I didn’t speak with anyone who had a difficult time finding work in Thailand upon arrival. Typically they would be able to start working within 1-2 days of arriving, and if they desired to move to a different job or sector, this was relatively navigable as well. As one migrant highlighted: “[the middlemen,] they send us right away to work. We don’t have to be worried about finding a job.”

Mobility: “Here I Only Enough to Survive”

“If we work here, we don’t earn much money. We earn only enough to survive; we couldn’t afford to build a house or other things.” -Sarom

In addition to the inherent risk of village-based strategies, they were also perceived as limited in their ability to provide for social mobility. Even the most lucrative of ventures was likely to only offer small profits in addition to covering costs. Village based strategies were perceived as successful if they made a small bit of money, and failures if they lost funds or resulted in indebtedness, but never were they seen as providing the kinds of large influxes of wealth that actually improved shifted or improved status. A noodle stand, improved rice yield, a tractor, a cart, or water pump might lead to some increased cash flow, but these were unpredictable and always minimal. In contrast, migration enabled social mobility, and was the only articulated possible path of moving from less to more wealthy over time.

Research across a diverse number of geographic and economic contexts highlights how migration often leads to visible disparities in wealth within sending areas, leading to conspicuous consumption in which keeping up with neighbors, relatives, or community members can be both a primary use of remittances and also a driver for migration itself (Lipton 1980; Reichert 1982; Stark and Taylor 1991; Stark 1984; Stark and Taylor 1989). The importance of relative deprivation as a driving cause for migration is one key mechanism by which NELM theories suggest migration becomes a self-sustaining process (Stark and Taylor 1991; Stark and Taylor 1989). Similarly, in Chanleas Dai as some migrants have found success and cash abroad, households have begun to sense and respond to different wealth levels within the village. Most of my respondents acknowledged that there was a process of “Keeping up with the Joneses” occurring both within and across villages, largely a result of changes that began after a handful of successful migrations. As one young man noted: “In the past there were only small homes in the village. There were no big houses like this at all. About one or two years after people started migrating more, they began building bigger homes.”

Where feeling, looking, or being poor once characterized nearly all households, with increasing migrant success most people now perceived large differences in wealth between households. As a result, poverty, once shared by nearly everyone, has taken on

a deeper level of embarrassment and shame.⁴³ Many households with migrants explained their decisions about migration in the context of relative deprivation and shame. After first explaining their movements in terms of what was lacking in the village, many former migrants also pointed to the types of things they could do with money earned abroad: As one young woman noted, “it just feels so wrong to sit down and do nothing. We see the people near us, our neighbors are rich. They have gold to wear, they have cows. We see what they have and we want to have the same too.” There was a particular awareness about one’s status as manifest through one’s home, though motorbikes, gold, and clothing were also important expressions of wealth. Former, current, and future migrants often discussed their migration motivations in terms of what migration would purchase for them or their family:

“I am still in debt, but there is only a little bit to go. I would like to build a house as soon as my debt is paid, since now my children are older. I want to be honored and respected, like the others [who have bigger homes]. With this small house, my children can’t sleep well as it is filled with sacks of rice.” -Sinath

“I can earn enough to eat, but I don’t only want to have food to eat. I also want to improve---to be like other people who have wealth. If we want to develop, to improve our lives, and we stay here...it’s not really possible. There’s no wealth here. -Vey

“Most people want to have a big house, so people will think that we are from middle class families, people with enough, or maybe even wealthy. [Wealth]...that is power! If you are from a middle class family, families with wealth will respect you and you have more friends as well.” -Channy

A Hard-working Spirit: “Why are you staying here?”

That migration was a means to mobility, and the best option to improve one’s life was articulated by former and current migrants, those who stayed at home, and even by

⁴³ Chan and Acharya (2002) note that until recently, in most of rural Cambodia, disparities of wealth were small, with few understood as very poor or very rich. In contrast, they note that recently individuals have begun to perceive and articulate clear distinctions between the wealthy and the poor within rural communities.

those who had “failed,” returning home with little or nothing. This understanding was typically juxtaposed or explained in relation to the perceived alternative: doing nothing. In other words, even when migration didn’t actually lead to wealth or mobility, it was an effort to attain, either for oneself or for one’s family. Because it was viewed as active, in comparison to “lazy” or “passive” life in the village, it was also generally positively judged. While those who stayed behind were certainly not passive about their livelihoods, there was still a general sense that they were letting opportunities pass them by, taking what comes without seeking out more.

Vanna, a former migrant who left his job as a teacher to work abroad noted that there is strong social pressure to be working to actively improve one’s standing. “For example, if you have a smaller house, people would suggest that you go work in Thailand in order to build a bigger one....they would ask—‘why you are staying here?’ and ‘why you don’t go there to work, then you’d have a place to live and be better off.’” Migrations were a means of showing a “hard-working spirit”, “not being lazy”, and thus obtaining status, both through one’s willingness and effort, and hopefully through the real economic gains from wages abroad.

Literature that analyzes cultures of migration in other contexts notes that migration can be substantively important in terms of how societies assess individuals (Horvath 2008). Migration, and its resulting successes or failures to bring about changes in living standards is outwardly visible, and can gain symbolic function in society, soliciting reactions and judgments from neighbors and broader society (Massey et al 1994). These judgments are highly context dependent, but often glorify migrants as heroes of community or national development, raising the status of returned migrants in the eyes of their communities. In qualitative work among Ecuadorian migrants to Israel, Kalir (2005: 181) notes the “multilevel process of positive recognition and glorification of migration” in Ecuador, whereby migrants are transformed into role models, enjoying the support and envy of their peers.” Migration may also become valued socially not because of its economic contribution to households or the state, but through its status as wage labor, often considered more modern and desirable than subsistence agriculture

(Kandel and Massey 2002). Horvath's 2008 case study of rural Romanian youth highlights how the composition of social status has shifted from valuing land to valuing wage labour as migration has become more prominent. Horvath argues that prior to widespread out-migration from Romania, property and land productivity were "constitutive dimensions" of identity and a strong source of local prestige and status (Verdery 1994). Yet with more of the population away for significant periods of time and a general preference for less labor intensive economic practices (i.e. migration) farming has become both attractive and less of a symbol of local prestige and power (Horvath 2008).

In Chanleas Dai, that status of migrants and migration choices has become similarly elevated over other traditional forms of status. Particularly for youth, (discussed more in Chapter 9) wage labor is strongly preferred over the type of piecemeal work and land-based livelihoods that prior generations relied upon. Moreover, because of its inability to promote the kind of social mobility that households seek, staying in the village is often discussed as a relatively low status option. This is indicated by the way people speak about migration and its alternatives, their perceptions about choices to remain in the village, and perhaps also most clearly, the choice to migrate over other what had formerly been considered high status jobs.

Status: "If he were great, he'd have a gold necklace"

Phally has been a teacher at a local primary school for over a decade. He laughs easily and teachers with enthusiasm, one of the few teachers I met who reads storybooks in his classroom with intonation and voices. A self-described joyful person, Phally speaks quickly and passionately about how migration has changed his community, and as a result, his life, even as a non-migrant. Status, he tells me, used to be about power in the village, measured either through one's position of authority or through the amount of land

one's family held. As a teacher, even though he is only a contract teacher,⁴⁴ Phally felt that he used to hold an elevated position in the village, as teachers were relatively respected both by students and families. These days, he had the sense that even as a teacher he is looked down on, a result of his low salary. Now, status is no longer about power within the village, but rather earning power---how much money you can bring in. Not everyone perceives that as true, he knows, but it's particularly the case for the younger generations that he is trying to teach. His students make fun of him for his choice to remain in the village, teaching everyday but receiving only a low government salary, far less than what they could, and often will, make abroad.

“They look down on me – some say things like ‘you work as a teacher for a year and we can just work for a month [and make the same amount of money]’. These days, some students listen to me with respect, but the others say ‘don’t listen to him. If he was great, he would have a gold necklace and bracelet.’ I tell them not to judge by gold because knowledge is invaluable treasure. It can’t be stolen by thieves and the more time I spend [pursuing knowledge], the more I improve myself. I keep following that proverb.”

Nonetheless, the issue clearly bothers Phally. Not only does this type of disrespect (whether perceived or real) inhibit his teaching, it also evokes emotional responses: disappointment, anger, and at times even admittedly jealousy. Phally is determined to continue teaching, but he is not the only teacher to feel this way, and some have responded by leaving their roles as educators. During my time in Chanleas Dai several former teachers in the area had left their positions at schools to migrate, with more than one doing so in the middle of the school year.

While it is true that teachers could potentially make more money in Thailand, these choices were not only economic, but also related to desires and aspirations for status. Vanna, a former contract teacher who left his job to go to Thailand, noted that

⁴⁴ Contract teachers, *kru ketch sanyia*, are government appointed teachers who are not permanent civil servants as they have not completed the government training program for teachers. In rural and remote areas, contract teachers remain an integral part of the education system. In Chanleas Dai commune, every school has multiple contract teachers, and some primary schools had only contract-appointed teachers.

while he was interested in earning money abroad, much of what encouraged his migration was pressure from his peers. Because it was rare in his village to continue education past sixth grade at that time, Vanna was one of the only ones in his circle of friends who hadn't migrated in his early teens. He constantly heard stories from his friends, and watched them come back with high-tech phones, money to buy a motorbike, and new hairstyles and clothing. Their stories resonated with him, particularly when the government held his salary for several months during the school year, a common occurrence. After working for an entire year as a contract teacher, he hadn't even made as much as his friends could reportedly earn in one month. Though his parents did not condone migration, Vanna could not resist the draw that he had seen so many of his peers follow. When I asked him about his choice to migrate, Vanna noted that status and the perceptions of others were just as much a compelling issue as the potential economic benefit:

“Here, we don't think why go to Thailand, we think ‘why wouldn't you go?’ People think that migration to Thailand is cool... I did too. There are lots of reasons. [One reason is] because they have dark skin if they live in the village. As long as they live and work there [in Thailand] they can use lotions that make their skin whiter and more beautiful. Once they return to the village, people will say ‘those children are beautiful and have whiter skins or stylish hair.’”

Vanna's experience of leaving a relatively high status and waged job to migrate underscores the arguments of the preceding section; it's not only that individuals want to be able to make ends meet, and “would do *anything* in the village.” Rather, preferences for migration are strong even when individuals have steady livelihoods at home. Except for the most well-paid NGO jobs (which paid more than the average Thai wages), migration competed with nearly every village-based strategy, job, or benefit “Anything” wasn't sufficient unless it was both secure and comparable in pay to work abroad. Thus civil servants on low government salaries such as contract teachers, village and commune officials, and police officers still migrated, as did those who benefited from NGO programs such as model farmers, scholarship recipients, and women's group leaders.

Family Strategies: One of my hands carries my grandson

The perceptions of the village as an unproductive, low-profit space are amplified by the continued act of migration. Often households gave up some of the former productive practices they did in the village as a result of household migration, in a cycle that made village-based production problematic as household migration became increasingly important.⁴⁵ These shifts were often unplanned and unintentional, most commonly occurring when older generations were charged with the care of grandchildren whose parents were abroad. With the added responsibility of childcare, older generations typically found themselves without the time they once had to make mats, plant vegetable gardens, or sell homemade sweets. As grandparent caretakers of young children described:

“In the past I could grow vegetables, but now I can’t as we have to carry water from far away, and if I do that, there is no one to take care of him...It’s hard! Sometimes I can’t even drink water when I am thirsty. If I am thirsty, I have to carry him along. One of my hands carries him while another has to drink water.”
–Savy

“Before, we grew watermelons each season, after the rice harvest. Now [looking after my grandchildren] I don’t have time to do it at all as those things need to be taken care of and fertilized. I am busy with the children, so I couldn’t do anything at all.” –Lout

Even without the added care of looking after grandchildren, many people told me they felt strained or were unable to do the same kinds of supplementary activities they had done in the past without the help from children, spouses, or extended family members. Most traditional strategies relied on having multiple household members working. Someone would harvest or plant, another would take cows out to graze, while someone else stayed home and cooked and took care of the smallest children, or tended to vegetable gardens. Older generations often complained that there was little they could do themselves, with younger generations gone. At times, this meant planting less, or if there

⁴⁵ Indicative of this kind of shift, surveys of rural livelihoods and migration show that migrant households tend to cultivate less rice than their non-migrant household counterparts, net other factors (Chan 2009)

was cash to spare hiring day laborers. Although remittances typically made up for the changes in production, moving away from village-based strategies made them that much less present, reinforced, and visible to younger generations.

Counter-Examples

While there is clearly truth in the insecurity and low profit margin of village-based strategies, several counter examples highlighted the possibilities of the village, often overshadowed by migration. Both in informal conversations and in interviews, I often asked people in Chanleas Dai about non-migrants, and also, separately about those perceived as wealthy in the village. The most common responses, which connected the two, argued that those who didn't migrate were afforded this option because they already had enough. As one former migrant told me "some people don't go to Thailand. They are the people who don't want for anything. They have enough: a car, motorbike, pigs, their own business." The commonly expressed belief that the wealthy didn't migrate because of their wealth was something I was skeptical of in the context of Chanleas Dai. Both macro-level historical perspectives and local interviews with village elders suggested that in general, the disparities in wealth within the commune were relatively recent shifts. Thus it didn't seem that the trajectory of migration patterns over the past ten years could be explained by differences in wealth, as a decade ago these differences were just beginning to emerge.

During the Khmer Rouge regime, land was collectivized, often brutally and whatever assets, land or wealth households had were given to "angka", the faceless, nameless ruling body of the Khmer Rouge (Short 2004). Following the Vietnamese occupation land began to be informally privatized again, though this privatization was only institutionalized in 1989. Even at that time few rural households had any private or personal assets to speak of, a result of the extreme form of communism and collectivization that characterized rural life under Pol Pot. Historian Philip Short

highlights the extremes of this collectivization during the Khmer Rouge period, which stopped short at nothing to ensure communal control over all resources.

“No longer could they get by with the produce of their fruit trees and the vegetable plots beside their houses because now, like everything else, these were communally owned. Their carts and oxen were seized. So were private grain stocks, fish-nets, bicycles and anything else which might set the individual apart from the mass. In many villages, the larger homes...were dismantled to provide wood for the new communal dining halls, and uniform, smaller huts, barely big enough to sleep in, built in their place.” (Short 2004: 345)

A village elder confirmed this as his reality during the Pol Pot years, describing a complete lack of freedom and personal property:

“We were assigned to do their tasks. We couldn’t do anything else. We didn’t dare to place even a plate or spoon in our house. We had only our body. Pol Pot collected all our belongings..... I ate with a spoon and plate, but soon after meals, everything was collected. They cooked us rice and we ate at the communal house. If you gave a birth to a child, you were given a few plates and spoons but those were also collected afterward.”

Thus village elders noted that after the Pol Pot regime officially ended in 1979, and through UNTAC’s entry in 1991, all households had similar minimal ownership over assets, and land that was redistributed on the basis of family size. Very few people had any education or training to speak of. Put simply, everyone was desperately poor, having suffered the same atrocities, abuse and insecurity. Thus the distinctions between wealthy and poor during my fieldwork were arguably a result of demographics, decisions, work and luck over the past twenty years, with disparities in wealth primarily arising over the past decade. Given the recency of perceived inequalities, and the fact that migration and income inequalities had risen over the same period of time, I was curious how the wealthy defined their success, how migration played a role, and what alternative livelihoods they employed where it didn’t. After meeting with so many people who felt

they couldn't make ends meet without crossing the border, I began seeking out those who had.

Romdoh's Story: Small Drops

Romdoh's family was one of the wealthiest in one of my study villages, by the views of several people in the area. I met him late in the afternoon and spoke with him as his children were boiling water and washing dishes nearby underneath their modest wooden house. Though his house wasn't particularly high, and there was no concrete floor or beautifully tiled roof as I'd seen elsewhere, he was clearly was an example of having *krop* (enough). All of his children were currently studying in upper secondary school, a significant expense, and Romdoh's family had a rice mill, more than ten hectares of land, and two different converted *koyans* (tractors).

In many ways, Romdoh's experiences and perceptions were similar to other wealthy (typically non-migrant) families I spoke with. These families were believed to not migrate because they were wealthy. Because they had more ability to support themselves, they didn't need to leave or send children away. However while others considered him wealthy, Romdoh saw his family as poor, just as poor as others, and surrounded by the same difficulty, risk, and hardship if not more.

“We have so much work-- unlike others who only have one profession [as a migrant laborer]. They have it easier.... Some families they don't want their whole family to be surrounded by problems like my family's situation. For me, I could never find one quick and easy solution, or way. I've always been poor.”

Though others had indicated to me that Romdoh's family was a non-migrant household that wanted for nothing, Romdoh had both migrated and borrowed in the past, neither of which were expected of “wealthy” families. Yet his experiences with each process were quite different than the norm. His first and only trip abroad was in 1992 just before the elections, when there were still Khmer refugees throughout Thailand and migration was both risky and relatively uncommon. Unlike most of the migrants I spoke with who had early migration experiences, he didn't borrow from others for the *meekjal*

costs associated with migration but rather used saved profits from pig farming and migrated free of debt. He found a job carrying something he was told was fertilizer, at a shipyard where he was paid based on the number of bags he carried. He soon found the job to be too hazardous. “I would put the fertilizer on the top of my head, but then my hair would become curly and my head became very hot. It was a new type of fertilizer and it was hot like burning coal.” Romdoh was discouraged not only by the work, but also by how much everything cost. Like many migrants with task-based pay would tell me, the harder he worked to make money, the hungrier he was, and therefore the more he ate and spent. “I wanted to earn money and send the money home, but the thing was, it couldn’t happen....It was very tiring. Even though I could earn a lot of money, I also spent a lot. The harder I worked, the more I earned, but also the more I spent.” Interested in finding a less difficult job, Romdoh left his initial employer after only two months and was caught by police as he attempted to find a new workplace. He was jailed for 14 days, which he considers a turning point in his thinking about migration.

“When I was in jail, there was a guard who spoke Khmer and asked me, ‘You came to my country to work, do you have farming lands in your country?’ and I said ‘Yes, I do.’ Then he asked me, ‘how many hectares of rice fields do you have?’ I said ‘I only have 3 hectares.’ The guard said, ‘if you already have 3 hectares of rice fields, you don’t need to go to work in another country. You will get hurt, cheated. If you stay in your country and plant vegetables and fruit, you will survive. You don’t have to come here.’ And then I realized it was true so I stopped going there for good. I started thinking I should manage my life by myself. He told me not to go there; just be here [in Cambodia] and farm and plant vegetables...So I started thinking like this.”

Romdoh never imagined that his family would be wealthy---“we didn’t have big ambitions,” he noted. But as they kept working they began to be more and more productive. Romdoh’s strategy was to buy up land whenever he had the funds. Over the past 15 years, he notes that many people have wanted to sell their land, either because they needed money to repay debts or because they began to solely rely on migration as a strategy. Though he started with only one hectare of rice fields as a young man, today his family has over ten hectares of productive land. “We bought them gradually. We didn’t

plan it. We only bought...like when we had enough money to buy one hectare, we bought it. Sometimes, people only sold a half hectare of land; we also bought it.”

In addition to his fields, Romdoh’s family employs a wide variety of livelihood strategies. He owns a tractor for carrying soil, which he rents out whenever people need or ask. Sometimes they rent it out 50-100 times in a month, others not at all. He also has cows, pigs, chickens that he sometimes sells. The family owns a rice mill, where he keeps the extruded rice husks leftover from when people come to use it, and uses those husks to feed the chickens and pigs. Romdoh knows that his livelihood strategy is different from the general strategies of his neighbors.

“I am always working, doing this and that. For them (migrants), they only do one thing. When they want to sleep, they sleep. When they go to work, they work. For me, I have no free time. But I’ve gotten used to it, now it’s just habit. I don’t ever really have much energy, but I just do things little by little without stopping.”

He never gets more than a few thousand baht of profit at a time from any of his enterprises. But it adds up. He contrasts this to the migrant perspective, which holds out hope for a large amount of money quickly. He knows that they see this as secure, but he shared that he felt more secure making a little bit of extra cash through many different avenues.

“I only like to have small businesses...when I was studying, my teacher taught me the proverb “small drops fill a container”. And I can see that after a while, it can happen. I don't want big things. I want small small things.”

Romdoh does well with his small drops. Things vary month to month, year to year and he never really keeps track of his income. But typically he saves on average around 100,000 riel (\$25) per month. That’s after he has spent on everything the family needs for the month, including school fees, food, transportation, etc. Yet his strategies and his savings don’t insulate him from the insecurity of the environment. After a year where he lost most of his rice harvest, Romdoh found that he couldn’t make enough cash on the side to pay for his children’s school fees and the general needs of his family. To

smooth the household consumption he borrowed money from an area microfinance institution (MFI), then struggled to repay the loans using the same methods he had used in the past---anything and everything, bit by bit.

“Only my wife and I knew about this. The kids never knew how we were in debt with anybody because as parents, if we let them know such things they might become break down in their study, they might feel obligated to help somehow. So we never let them know it, even after we paid the debt, we never let anybody know until I just told you in this interview. Even in this village, only the village leaders knew about it.⁴⁶ Other than that, no one knows.”

Romdoh went onto explain how in the area children often felt responsible for the debts of their parents, feeling unspoken pressure to quit school or work to help contribute when the family was in need or indebted.

“Sometimes, for some children, especially here when they knew their parents are in a little trouble, they also quit studying. There are some people like that, like our neighbors... if parents are sick, or if they are in debt, then the kids quit studying and go to work to help the parents. For me, when I was in debt, I didn't let my kids know about that. I only let the people who needed to sign the papers know about that and then I solved the problem by myself.”

Romdoh is careful about encouraging his children's education and so far none of his children have ever approached him about going to Thailand. He assumes they have some desire to go, or get pressure, but so far they haven't asked him to leave. “People gossip about it,” he told me “the fact that my kids are in school still. They say ‘what do they study for, when you can go to Thailand and earn so much.’ I don't really care. They say what they want to say. It's their story. My story is that if my kids study, they have opportunities.” Like most families I spoke with, Romdoh doesn't strategize with his kids about their future plans or job prospects, about whether they want to go to university or not. When I asked Romdoh what they planned to do when they finished 12th grade, he responded:

⁴⁶ Village officials are typically required to be a signatory on loans from microfinance institutions.

“I don’t know. I never asked them. What they think they want to do is their own choices. Even if they want to continue to study after finishing grade 12, I still won’t say anything. I won’t stop them...No one told me anything yet because they haven’t reached anything yet. It’s like we are swimming in the ocean and we haven’t reached the shore yet. So we haven’t said anything yet.”

However Romdoh explicitly noted that he doesn’t want his children to migrate. To him, the life of a migrant was easier, though less stable and wise.

“It’s just that... It’s not like I don’t want them to do business and work, but I want them to know the way we start from small things. Going to Thailand people can earn a lot of money like 10,000-20,000 baht. We can’t earn that kind of money unless we go to Thailand. But there, even if we can earn, there’s nothing left [for us here], so it’s all for what? I don’t want that. I want them to earn little by little so that they know how hard it is to earn money. I want them to know that.”

At the end of our interview, Romdoh surprised me, by profusely thanking me for the opportunity to share. Not only was he glad to share the ideas, and reconsider his life in context, he also felt grateful to have an opportunity to share his past with his children, who had been milling around the house while we spoke. He was glad to finally tell them that he had borrowed money to support their family, and wanted them to know that he hid that fact to ensure they wouldn’t feel pressure to drop out of school. As he said this, he spoke intentionally and slowly, looking at me, but addressing his children who at that point in the interview were cooking a few meters away. I found it to be an incredibly powerful moment, not only validating that sometimes research can be beneficial to respondents, but also highlighting the lack of a culture of sharing within families in this context. Prior to this conversation I’d been desperately trying (and failing) to have in-depth conversations about parental pressure for migration with youth and parents. This conversation highlighted that many of the expectations put on parents and youth were unspoken, through models and norms which may not even represent attitudes and beliefs of the family members involved. Romdoh’s perception that simply openly being in debt would encourage his children to quit school, despite his strong personal support for their education pointed to the power of unspoken norms and expectations in directing decision-

making, blurring the line between external and internalized pressures. This will be taken up more directly in Chapter 8.

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that most individuals in Chanleas Dai perceive local livelihood strategies as high-risk, low-profit, and low-status, perceptions that are further amplified as out-migration increases. Rather than understanding migration as a short-term coping strategy, or a long-term investment strategy, most people value and seek out migration because it allows for the retreat from undesirable, less profitable, and risky local investment. Thus rather than being used to *mediate* the risk of investing at home, migration is primarily understood as an opportunity to *replace* investment at home. These strategies are not specific responses to any one environmental shock, but are rather they are tied to a growing belief that the environment (both natural and economic) is unreliable. This belief is coupled with a growing desire for social mobility, and higher status through wealth. However the counter-example offered highlights that some individuals, and often wealthier households, have been successful using local strategies not only to make ends meet but also to attain profit, land and assets. This complicates the oft-cited local understanding that “nothing is possible in the village” and suggests that at least in the case of moderate or wealthier households, the *preferences* of individuals for how they make ends meet is also relevant to how migration is valorized over local alternatives.

CHAPTER 6: HOME AS DEVELOPMENT

*“A bird in your hand is much better than ten birds in the tree”
-Khmer Proverb*

Sambath is a man who rarely sits still. We spoke several times and during each interaction his hands remained busy while he spoke; working on a motorbike, organizing notebooks, or fixing some piece of machinery. He lives with his sister in a concrete house near the center of the commune, where I initially met the two early in the rainy season, on the first day that the skies opened up into a monsoon downpour that lasted for hours. Intending only to set up an interview, we ended up chatting extensively, as they refused to let me leave during the worst of the downpour.

The siblings run an informal money transfer business that helps migrants remit back to family members at home. They started in 1999, when Sambath was himself a migrant in Thailand and realized both the need for, and potential profit of such an enterprise. Initially starting small, over the past ten years they have developed an extensive money transfer network. Migrants in Thailand are given his phone number by area *meekjal* or family members, and call when they want to send money home, specifying an amount and a recipient in the area. Sambath responds with a specific bank account number, one easiest to access given where those individuals are. Then, either the migrant caller or his/her their boss will take the money and make a deposit into the account. Sambath has relatives who regularly check the amounts in the Thai banks on his behalf and transmit information back to him via phone or text. As soon as the deposit is confirmed in the Thai accounts, Sambath contacts the specific family members and they come to collect them the remittance, minus a generous deduction for his own services. For each 10,000 baht transferred, Sambath takes 350 baht as a fee for service. My face must have betrayed a surprise at the cost of such a transfer, as he quickly told me that a

3.5% fee is significantly less than others in the area, affirming that he isn't simply a profit seeker.⁴⁷

Sambath keeps meticulous records of everything in small ledger books noting the amounts of money in each account, transfer amounts, and recipients. He is careful, telling me that corruption or speculation of dishonesty could bury his business, and he needs proof of every transaction to ensure a continued strong reputation, particularly since other people have started to copy his model. He showed me the books, neatly recorded with each transfer, though he never keeps records past the last month or so. Each month he and his sister handle a minimum of 500,000 baht (approx. 15,000 USD) in remittances though some of that money goes to households farther from Chanleas Dai as well. Most days they have two or three transfers, nearly always topping one hundred transfers in a month. On average, remittances are 6,000-10,000 baht, which is about what the average migrant can save over a period of two to four months. Prior to *Pcheum Ben* and Khmer New Year holidays, when migrants send larger gifts for annual celebrations, the amounts are significantly higher. In just two days last year before *Pcheum Ben*, Sambath received 200,000 baht (approx. 6,000 USD) In the past, business was even better, with upwards of 1 million baht (approx. 30,000 USD) moving through their small house. Now, as other money transfer businesses have sprung up doing the same, they receive only half of what they used to get. Still, they remain both busy and profitable. Sambath's sister tells me that they are so busy that it's hard sometimes to eat or go to the bathroom. They want to make sure they can pick up whenever the phone rings.

Remittances, Migration and Development

The fact that upwards of 15,000 USD per month flows into the area surrounding Chanleas Dai makes it a unique rural space. Though it is still characterized by marginality, low levels of infrastructure, environmental distress, and a history of

⁴⁷ Other qualitative studies suggest that migrants pay upwards of 4-5% for similar telephone services in other areas (Chan 2009)

generalized poverty, it also has a significant and growing source of wealth, one uncommon in rural Cambodia. As discussed in Chapter 2, remittances are a central focus of the migration and development literature. Remittance, in particular the extent to which remittances are used for productive investments, are the chief means by which scholars suggest that migration can promote long-term economic growth. As a result, empirical research often attempts to discern how particular migrant communities are using remittances, in particular the degree to which remittances are invested in productive enterprises or livelihood strategies. This dominant focus on *how* remittances are used in migrant communities however obscures a similarly essential question—that is *why* they are being used in such ways. For example while a vast amount of research focuses on the degree to which migrant households are using remittances for “productive investments” (versus used for consumption or other expenditures), less attention is often paid to why and how households are making spending choices with respect to newly accessible capital.

As this chapter describes, in Chanleas Dai the bulk of households use remittances for daily consumption, home construction, debt-repayment, and the purchase of other durable goods (motorbikes, cell phones etc.). These expenditures, which are desired, valued, and often necessary, are a key part of migrants’ positive view of their experiences abroad. However both current and former migrants also regularly noted that their migrations did not lead to any increased security or ability to sustainably improve livelihoods in the village. That is, nothing changed in their ability (or inability, as was most often the case) to make ends meet at home. While this fact didn’t inhibit migrants from viewing their migrations as positive, they did point out that the dependence they had on migration to bring about financial gains, stability, and mobility was problematic.

Here, development scholars and migrants share both an ideal of what development goals should be, and also a recognition of the real challenges to reaching that goal. Each articulate that *development*, at its best, is long term, and involves improving what is local. Migrants, in their words, want to be able “to do anything that’s profitable” at home, and argue that if they could make a decent living, doing just about

anything locally, they would. This idea, of course is exactly what is ideal in the migration and development discourse---migrants who earn, remit, and invest their wages back into village-based production. In the eyes of those in Chanleas Dai, it is clear why this ideal isn't becoming a reality. Where individuals aren't investing in sustainable productive livelihood strategies at home it's either because they can't, because it's financially risky, or because it is so low-profit that the investment opportunity is not a meaningful alternative.

In this chapter and in parts of the chapter that follows I explore decision-making around remittance spending, in particular the use of migrant remittances for home construction. I focus on home construction for two reasons, first because it is centrally significant as a goal among nearly all migrant households. Home construction and home renovation is a primary use of remittances, and also a *goal* often motivating individual migrations. Thus homes are a central part of the migration story in Chanleas Dai. Second, I focus on home construction because it is an important example of the disconnects I have suggested earlier. In this chapter I argue that an analysis of decision-making around expenditures on home highlights and offers a way to understand two main disconnects in the field of migration, one related to definitions and the other related to investment potential.

First, the priority placed on home construction highlights that local understandings of development are often quite different from those articulated by scholars and practitioners. Although there is some debate on the extent to which homes are considered "productive investments," (Conway and Cohen 1998), much research characterizes investments in housing upgrades as unproductive, or consumption (e.g. Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Reichert 1981). Where housing is viewed as a positive use of remittances, it is seen as such for only its potential to create multiplier effects on the local economy (i.e. Taylor 1999; Taylor et al 1996). This dominant perspective, which De Haas (2005) suggests is one of the main "myths" about migration and development, argues that it is problematic that remittances are spent mainly on houses, and other consumer goods while investment in productive, income-generating activities is rare. An

opposing view, which I explore in greater detail in this chapter, is that housing and consumption are important improvements in well-being, characteristic of “development” as they can expand freedom of choice and the actual capabilities of individuals (DeHaas 2005; Conway and Cohen 1998).

Second, I argue that the use of remittances on home construction and other consumption goods also highlights a disconnect in the migration and development literature---the often unstated assumption that in remote and rural migrant communities there *are* always real and viable investment alternatives to increased consumption. In contrast, I argue that given the structural locational of Chanleas Dai, its history of environment distress, and the weak links between the area and city centers, households perceive few wise locations to invest significant sums of money other than housing. This builds on the argument made in the previous chapter by highlighting the low-profit, and environmental insecurity associated with the kinds of “productive” investments that scholars often associate with allowing migration to contribute to development: land, agriculture inputs, and small-scale entrepreneurship.

In offering a more nuanced view of household decision-making for home construction, an investment typically perceived as “problematic” for allowing migration to lead to sustainable development, this type of analysis to allows for an expanded understanding of migration and development, moving from a narrow on factors which best promote development to a wider view of the context which influences and frames these choices.

Sopheap’s Story

I first met Sopheap, a twenty-three-year-old former migrant, while interviewing her grandmother, Sinoun. Sinoun is a village elder and one of the people I was directed to in order to learn about the history of Chanleas Dai. After tracing some of the historical shifts within the village, the topic turned towards migration and Sinoun mentioned that her granddaughter, who used to live with her and was sitting nearby, had recently migrated as well. In fact, all of her children and grandchildren have migrated there at one

point or another. Sopheap soon joined our conversation, and after introducing ourselves I realized I knew her family quite well, having worked in the past with her sister on a PEPY project. Sopheap looked nearly identical to her sister, with wide cheekbones and strong angular face.

Like many others I spoke with, Sopheap first framed her migration in terms of an opportunity for employment. However secondarily she related it to the ability to purchase a home. “I’ve been in Thailand for four years,” she told me. “Over there, there are plenty of jobs, and it’s much more developed, compared to Cambodia. It’s easy to work and get money to build a house.” When I asked what she meant she described how her migration had allowed her to purchase a home for her husband and their child, separate from her extended family. Prior to having her own home, Sopheap, her husband and their young daughter had stayed with Sinoun. Their new house was second-hand, so to speak, purchased from a neighbor who was constructing a new home and was selling their old house. Sopheap bought the thatch building for 40,000 baht, roughly 1,200 USD. As we spoke she pointed it out to me--- a large but simple frame, stilted high nearby. They paid for part of the home with savings, but also had to borrow money. Beneath Sopheap’s home are stacks piled high of wooden planks. When I asked about the wood, she told me that it is for her sister, who is in Thailand and has been saving money and purchasing materials for the new house she will construct once she has enough.

Sopheap first migrated when she was just barely eighteen, dropping out of school and leaving for Thailand towards the end of her seventh grade year. Because she started school late, Sopheap was old for her grade, but as she was both poor and academically gifted, she was offered a government scholarship to attend lower secondary school. The scholarship began to support school fees in seventh grade, and would be expended through the completion of secondary school, barring poor performance. Despite the cash incentives the scholarship offered (sixty dollars, three times a year), it was not enough to incentivize Sopheap to continue her studies. Her parents had been back and forth to Thailand several times, and at the time she made her decision to drop out, her parents had been away consistently for two years working. After deciding to quit school, Sopheap

joined the rest of them and her siblings in Thailand. Only her youngest sister, who was continuing her primary education at that point, stayed in the village with their grandmother. When asked why she went to Thailand, Sopheap shared that her main desire was to earn money for a home. In part, this was influenced by her appreciation for her grandmother's recently constructed home---a concrete house with a finely finished wooden deck costing 200,000 Baht (approx. 6,000 USD). Sopheap's grandmother had sold one and a half hectares of land, and used remittances from her children and grandchildren abroad to finance the construction, and it was an inspiration for Sopheap of what was possible.

When we met, Sopheap had moved back to take care of her ailing mother, who had problems with her legs and recently returned home for medical treatment which ended in surgery. With no savings and already indebted for the costs of her home and her migration, Sopheap had to borrow extensively for her mother's treatments. The family is still deeply indebted, relying on remittances from Sopheap's husband, still in Thailand, to help pay off debts for both the house and her mother's health. Sopheap has loans from several microfinance organizations and individuals in the area, and has debts in riel, baht and dollars. In total, she still owes about 2,000 dollars, 100,000 baht, (approx. 3,000 USD) and a few hundred thousand riel, though she's not exactly sure (200,000 riel is 50 USD).⁴⁸ Her interest payments alone come to more than 100 dollars per month, which means that sometimes she borrows other people's money at the end of the month in order to make interest payments. Because of these debts, she says, she can't do anything but use remittances to pay interest rates. "I can't do anything with money these days. I just have to pay down the debt whenever I get anything. There's never enough to do anything else." She laughs, but with a seriousness as she tells me how she sometimes borrows from one place to pay for the other. Often, she uses her new home for collateral.

Sopheap's husband will probably come back for a visit during Khmer New Year, though right now all that is keeping them from even greater indebtedness are his regular

⁴⁸ Both microfinance organizations and moneylenders typically will offer loans in Baht, Dollars or Riel, according to the preference of the borrower. Repayments must then be given in the same currency.

remittances. “It’s hard to be away from my husband, with one of us out of the country. He calls me almost every day, (with a laugh) usually at night. He wants to talk to me, to talk to our child, his parents.” She believes that once he comes back she will return with him, though she hasn’t figured out the logistics of her daughter’s care while she’s away. With her mother sick, no one can take care of her daughter if she is away, so she is contemplating taking the girl. Neither option is ideal, but she doesn’t see staying as an option either. Their debts are out of control, and there simply aren’t options for well-paid jobs locally.

“Wealthy people [in the village] don’t migrate because they have jobs to do.....for me, once I finish collecting rice I have to go to Thailand to work. I have a low level of education now, once you have a low level of education, no one will employ you..... I’d rather work here [in the village] if I have the choice, if there were jobs available. I would do anything, but there’s nothing here.”

Goals and Spending

Sopheap’s story highlights themes from the preceding chapter: the village is perceived as offering “nothing” in terms of opportunities, and instead of considering small-scale livelihood options, there is an emphasis on the desire for a job and regular employment. Her story also exemplifies important themes related to spending and remittances: first, that migration is often explicitly related to purchasing goals; second, that microcredit loans and the sale of land often supplement migrant remittances to finance the purchase of goods; and third, that debt can both spur migration and ensure its continuation, a theme addressed more explicitly in the next two chapters. Sopheap’s story also highlights that education, even when supported and understood as important, often doesn’t compete against the draw of migration, a topic that will be discussed more in Chapter 8.

The ways that individuals use remittances are closely linked to how they articulate the reasons for, or goals of their migration, and also a response to the opportunities they have for investment and mobility. As noted in Chapter 2, for some households, migration

is an acute response to distress: indebtedness, sickness of a family member, natural disaster or some combination of these factors. For such families, migration provides a necessary means of making ends meet from day to day, paying back debts, and typically little else. However for a significant number of individuals, like Sopheap, either initially or at some point later migration is explicitly undertaken to allow for social mobility, which is perceived as impossible, risky, or difficult to attain through work in the village. In the words of several respondents, in the village, *maroah ban* (one can survive) but achieve little more. For these families, the goals of migration are migration are often related to mobility, and focused around homes, motorbikes, or other items.

In Chanleas Dai, often loans are taken in advance to pay for these goods/improvements, and then migration is undertaken by one or more family members to support loan repayment, which I define here through the concept of *migra-loans*, or loans taken in the village for the purchase of durable goods or home construction/repair with the explicit intention of being paid back via remittances from household members away. Beyond debt-repayment and household consumption, the most widespread and significant use of remittances is in home construction (or the repayment of debt for home construction), where even the most impoverished families (by their own definitions) will prioritize remittance and *migra-loan* use for home improvement at the expense of education/training, retaining land, or entrepreneurial/agricultural investment.⁴⁹ Like Sopheap's family, many migrant households who finance home expenditures through debt end up tying themselves into migration patterns, the only way to earn cash with which to pay down loans. In the next section of this chapter I discuss the meanings of home-building for migrants and their families, using this as an example by which we can better understand decision-making around remittance use, borrowing, and their links to a culture of migration. In the following chapter I return to the concept of *migra-loans* and

⁴⁹ That home construction is one of the primary uses of remittances has been documented by several qualitative studies in migrant communities around the world. A wealth of research in migrant communities highlights the same finding, showing that home building is one of the primary uses of remittance income as migration patterns begin, and often are explicitly motivating reasons for motivators (Massey et al 1998, Lopez 2010)

describe how migration and credit are understood and used in tandem and the implications this has for the debates of migration and development.

Building Home

Most of the villages of Chanleas Dai are constructed with homes in close proximity to one another. Though there is some variation, in general homes are close together and concentrated, with rice paddies along the perimeter of villages and roads cutting centrally through the smattering of homes. Cow excrement, palm leaves, extruded rice husks and plastic litter the roads, which are a mix of sand, red clay and rocky rubble. Bicycles and motorbikes kick up dust from the road, and the greenest of trees are covered in a fine brown soot for most of the dry season. Paddy fields surround the village, bright green during the monsoon months, and a barren straw color from December to May.

Along the road are houses, where an extended family might house two or three generations. Most homes in the area follow the Khmer traditional style, which valorizes height. The ideal house looks like it is standing on stilts, with strong wooden beams raising the house several meters in the air. The highest might be raised four or five meters, with most at around two meters from the ground. This protects the home from potential flooding during the annual monsoon but also allows for shade, a place for animals to be kept, and a maximization of land space. The even more ideal raised home would have a concrete first floor, a place to stay cool in the months of unbearable heat.

Because most families can't afford materials for concrete and bricks to build this type of two-story home, they typically begin with the second story first, constructing a tall raised one room structure that allows more room for family members to congregate below while also allowing for the possibility that one day they might have enough money saved to put walls to the downstairs level, creating a more "proper" and elegant home. Though nearly all raised, the homes vary greatly (see Appendix B). The most costly are built with concrete and brick on bottom and dark wood on top, with tiled roofs, wooden shutters and pie-crust trimmings atop the roof. Painted with trimmings of deep blues and

reds, they mirror the colors of the Cambodian flag. Some lack the concrete bottom, and instead have low wooden tables on the open bottom floor where they can welcome visitors and share meals. Families without the means for homes like these have more simple wooden structures, still raised but perhaps less high, with zinc roofing. The poorest have homes made from broken slates of wood mixed with thatch and straw, walls which are partially complete or non-existent. Roofs are typically made from dried leaves of the *romchek* plant, a thick-spined bush that can be dried and woven into housing material.

In the past ten years the homes of Chanleas Dai have changed significantly, going from largely straw, thatch and older wood to larger and higher wooden and concrete homes. These changes are primarily linked to migration, though a few families, particularly those with salaried jobs, have been able to build newer and nicer homes through local efforts.⁵⁰ Individuals regard taller, stronger, and larger homes as being critical for safety and security, making it possible to sleep well, to protect one's family from rain, wind and heat, to be able to securely store family possessions. Homes also provided a level of comfort, an area for social congregation, and a place for family meals. Beyond these obvious functions, improvements to homes were also regarded as important for the safety of children and older generations.

However homes were also referenced as important through their representation of wealth and status, as proof of successful migrations which bring pride to family members, and as general indicators of *kaapiwatd*: development, or progress. Tall, wooden or concrete homes are the important indicators of social status, wealth, modernity, and development in the area, and thus a priority for migrants and their families. Largely a result of the growth of migrant remittances and more available cash, the move towards for a nicer and larger home is certainly the most visually arresting trend in the past decade. It was also repeatedly described as the defining measure of how the area had developed or improved over time.

⁵⁰ For example teachers, school or other local officials, or those with family members who work with non-profit organizations.

Home as Development

Homes are central to individual understandings of what *development* is in Chanleas Dai. When I asked village officials what they wanted for their community, or to describe what “development” is, they could nearly recite the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and one actually did. Development as a *prospective* goal for the community was described by officials with reference to health, education, food security, and infrastructure. This was also somewhat true throughout the village, though a stronger focus for most people was the association of development with infrastructure and jobs (rather than health and education).

However when I asked anyone how *had* the community developed, changed, or progressed over time, both officials and non-officials referred to changes in homes. Whether I was speaking about the village in general, or an individual household situation, homes were a primary landmark by which status, development, or progress was measured. A young woman’s response to my question about whether migrants are better off after going to Thailand reflects this understanding. “Yes, they’re better off. In the past there were only small houses in the village, but now things have gradually changed.” Consistently, my questions about change over time, development, progress, getting better, or improvement were answered with reference to homes. This was curious to me, as often these responses would be within weeks of other important developments: road improvement, a school opening, improvements to the health center, agriculture programs, latrine construction etc. Over the time that I had been visiting Chanleas Dai I had personally witnessed dramatic improvements at a community level: a funded low-cost health center, the construction of five schools including a new lower secondary school, improvements to the pagoda, a paved national road, bridge improvements, and many other visible indications of change. Yet perceptions of how the village had changed over time centered almost exclusively through the description of housing.

Development was characterized as evident through housing improvements, even when it came at the expense of land sale. In speaking with a 74 year old village elder, I asked about migration and if migration usually led to households being better off. “Yes,

of course. They often build big houses with their savings or land sale,” speaking of the dozens of individuals who supplemented their remittances with the sale of rice fields in order to finance the construction of new homes. Though he later pointed out that sometimes people who sold their land faced worse conditions, as they had no safety nets, his first understanding of development as being tied to home improvement (and not land loss or gain) highlighted a generalized attitude towards home improvement as indicative of progress.

Beyond a sign of family progress or development, homes also symbolized status and objective wealth. The importance that families gave to wealth and status could hardly be overestimated. Though individuals often fought to be *designated* as “poor” by government and non-profit partners in order to receive benefits, to be actually *seen* as poor by others was strongly associated with shame. Despite the fact that individuals explained their poverty as out of their control (a result of illness, spendthrift or lazy spouses, corruption, being cheated, etc.) extreme poverty was regardless tied to strong emotions and shame.

My conversation with Saly, a thirty-nine year old mother and former migrant, is particularly illustrative of the shame often associated with poverty, and how building a nicer home can be a means of minimizing shame and internalized perceptions of poverty. Saly explained her recent house construction as a gift to her children. “This way they can concentrate at school on their studies, without having to worry about children teasing them or bothering them because they are poor and their house isn’t so nice.” Though Saly and her husband both enjoyed part-time salaried jobs, very rare and desirable within the village, she was still overwhelmingly concerned with how her status and wealth, expressed in the form of her house, might affect her status and the status of her children. In speaking about the situation of her family prior to her work abroad, Saly began crying profusely, her eyes reddening as soon as I asked what her family situation was like in 2007 before she migrated to Thailand. “We were so very poor, it was terrible, and they all looked down on us. We were so very poor. Our house was so small.” For Saly, a nicer home allowed her to hold her head high in the village, to feel like her children were

taken care of and supported, and to improve the well-being of her family, albeit in ways that aren't entirely quantifiable.

This sentiment was reiterated often by others. Homes were important investments to strive for, as the indicator of status that mattered most not only for others but for one's sense of self-worth. In the words of Vanna:

“If they have money, but they don't have a house, they will feel like they are poor. If they have a house or a nice place to stay, even if they don't have food to eat, they feel like they will be able to find ways to work or make a living. So, a house is the fundamental need.”

While some researchers have viewed the construction of large and costly homes as frivolous, or examples of conspicuous consumption, there is some support for the fact that these investments may not only be economically wise (a suggestion discussed in more detail momentarily), but also that they may generate “moral capital” that is useful in other important ways for survival and mobility in the village. For example in a study of rural poverty in America, Jennifer Sherman argues that the among rural poor, particularly those in small, tight-knit communities where there is less diversity, social norms tend to be more rigid, making it important for the poor to make choices that are not only optimizing their financial position, but also optimizing their “moral” position (Sherman 2006). Through coping behaviors that are seen as having more “moral worth,” individuals can accomplish distinctions between themselves even without significant economic capital (Bourdieu 1991). This moral worth is not only related to an individual's reputation, it has repercussions in terms of being offered access to jobs, social networks, or charity and assistance. In Sherman's research, families whose coping strategies that were not “morally adequate according to local norms” (893) suffered not only diminished self-esteem but also censure at the community level that further affected their chances at escaping poverty. In Chanleas Dai the “fundamental need” of an appropriate home, while it rarely factors into mainstream development discourses, is the primary indicator of individual status and community development. Through homes, individuals feel they escape being looked down on for being poor, being judged, and being gossiped about in

negative ways. The impacts of home construction, provide real changes in well-being, that give back on a daily basis not only to individuals but also to their current and future families.

Homes also have other important moral and financial functions. First, homes can provide financial security. In an area where theft is still a threat, and savings accounts uncommon, homes are a real means of financial security. They can be used for collateral on future loans, can be passed on through generations, and wooden slats can be taken down and sold and then reconstructed in part if need be. Second, homes provide physical security and greater comfort. Cambodian rural environments can be incredibly harsh. In the dry season temperatures regularly rise above 40 degrees Celsius, and where there is wind nearly everything is covered in a fine layer of dirt. In the rainy season monsoons are routine, with heavy winds that come with little warning. A comfortable home can be a way of mediating the everyday, consistent, and powerful discomfort brought about by the natural environment.

Finally, homes are a way to express care, concern, and responsibility for both children and older generations. Some individuals specifically expressed home construction as a means of easing migration cycles, particularly the separation between parents and children. A nicer home could house children and older generations comfortably, allowing migrants go back to Thailand with more confidence as to the well-being of the family they are leaving behind. One young mother confided in me that she was nervous going back to Thailand and leaving her young six-month-old daughter with her mother-in-law. That anxiety was one reason she was glad that they had improved their house while she was back. With a safe house that had better walls and less dangerous wooden slats, she felt like she was being a more responsible mother when she left for Thailand.

Home: An Investment in Migration

Migrants and their families also argued that their decisions to invest in nicer homes were related to the lack of similarly beneficial alternatives. Land, for example was something that many migrant households could have purchased with remittances, yet rarely did. Similarly, migrant households rarely purchased tractors, paid for high school education fees of children, or started small businesses with money earned abroad. As the previous chapter argues, most people in Chanleas Dai believed that these ventures were high-risk, low-profit, and therefore not wise investments. These beliefs were well-founded, based on recent experiences of environmental distress, and the general marginality and remoteness of the area.

The distinction between investments in home versus other alternatives was underscored by the way that individuals spoke about the feasibility, and costs involved in pricey homes versus other substantial investments. Whereas I was generally told that households could earn, over time through migration, enough money to finance an expensive home (on average 100,000 baht, or \$3,000 USD), in contrast tractors, rice mills, enough chickens or pigs to start a farm, land, and other productive investments were described as unmanageable. In actuality, homes were actually similarly priced to, or more expensive than most of these investments, but they weren't articulated as such. A village chief, whose opinions were representative of several responses I had to such questions, shook his head when I asked if was common to purchase tractors, land, or rice mills with remittances. "We can't. It's too expensive. What [migrants] earn isn't enough to buy a tractor." He estimated that a tractor cost around 2,000 USD, a price repeated to me several times, and significantly lower than the cost of the typical home. Similarly, land was seen as "impossible to buy now" at the price of 60,000 baht per hectare, far less than the average home. Although homes were recognized as expensive, they were described as manageable expenditures, through asset or land sale, migration, loans or some combination.

In reality, homes, tractors, rice mills and other large purchases were all *possible* through migration, some were just regarded as preferable investments, justifying the costs. Homes were valued, and offered immediate, long-lasting and known rewards. Though expensive, they were sound investments in providing for the security, happiness and safety of non-migrant family members, in a strategy that sees migration as a primary way of life. Assuming that the current cycle of dependency on remittances from Thailand would continue, most families articulated that homes were what they thought would be useful and wise investments: a place for those who couldn't go to be comfortable and well-respected. Thus in addition to its use for safety and security, and its meaning as a consumer good and symbol of wealth, I argue that the prevalence of home construction in Chanleas Dai is related to the structural and environmental position of the area. In a situation where agriculture-based ventures are financially risky, and where small businesses have consistently struggled (and often failed), households rightly perceive few alternative ways to improve their lives.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored meanings and decision-making around the uses of remittances for home construction in Chanleas Dai. By focusing how meanings of homes are tied to local understandings of status, development, progress, and security, I argue that spending on housing reflects two realities things. First, this type of spending reflects a particular understanding of development; one focused on raising everyday standards of living, not feeling (or being seen as) living in poverty, having things that are tangible and financially secure, and recognizing the importance of the care of family members. Second, remittances used primarily for housing reflects the lack of perceived alternative ways that money could be used in similarly valued and profitable ways, which is directly related to the broader structural position of Chanleas Dai. The environmental distress and economic marginality of the area, described in the previous chapter, are key in shaping both the real and the perceived choices of migrant households. Given the recurrence of

floods and droughts, low productivity of agricultural ventures, distance from markets, lack of insurance, poor roads, lack of electricity, and difficulty accessing water, most people perceived only a small chance of success with the other ventures they might invest in with large sums of money.

This “lack of better options”, which was a central factor shaping both migration choices and the uses of remittances, again in part explains why neoliberal theories of how migration *can* promote development do not manifest in reality. Theories of migration and development, which are often context free, suggest that with additional capital migrants can become small-scale entrepreneurs, invest in productive ventures, and in doing so sustainably increase their ability to make a living over time. This neoliberal idea of migration as a form of self-help, where wealth begets wealth, however assumes that all local economies are similarly situated to take advantage of wages earned abroad. This clearly is not the case. Marginalized rural and remote areas, many of which have immense environmental challenges, are often places where investment is generally unattractive, and low-profit. Migration alone, even where it is successful, is unlikely to shift these environments. This relates to an earlier stated point; that the impacts migration has are clearly related to its causes. In Chanleas Dai, where the causes of migration are primarily to cope with relatively few possibilities to make a living at home, it makes sense that migrants households aren’t spending hard-won remittances to invest in the kinds of livelihoods that failed them in the first place.

CHAPTER 7: MIGRA LOANS: BORROWING ACROSS BORDERS

*"The tiger depends on the forest; the forest depends on the tiger."
-Khmer Proverb*

While individuals privileged home building over other types of investments, even successful migrations didn't always allow for immediate home construction, as these investments were costly. Therefore instead of postponing their purchase or saving over time, migrant households desiring home improvement often sold assets and/or borrowed to finance the difference. As Vanna explained:

Like I said, in the village, a house is considered to be the most important thing. So if a family can afford only half of the full price of the house [after migrating], they will borrow to finance the rest. Another problem is house competition. For example let's say two families migrate to Thailand at the same time. One of them returns to the village and builds a house. The other didn't save enough and can't afford a house, so they will be jealous. But they can get their house built without having enough money - they just borrow however much they are missing. Once the house is built, they go back to work in Thailand to pay for the loan. Part of the reason...well there is a belief in the countryside that is superstitious, not really scientific, but some people believe in it. People in the village say that if there is a bigger house near your house it is a problem. It's like a spell or a curse. Some people who have small homes will think that they are unhealthy, because the bigger homes have put a curse on them to remain poor.

The superstition surrounding "house competition" wasn't commonly articulated to me, and even as he told me about the idea Vanna was dismissive about its importance. But home construction as a driver for migration, and as the primary indicator of successful migration was often repeated by both migrants and non-migrants. Moreover, the experience Vanna described of home purchasing, migration, and borrowing was one of the most common themes throughout my interviews. Similar to Sopheap's case, homes and other durable goods were often financed through some combination of migrant remittances/savings, asset/land sale, and loans. These loans, which I refer to as *migra-loans* were planned explicitly to be paid back through migration and taken out from

formal microfinance (MFI) providers and informal moneylenders regularly. This chapter specifically explores the practices of taking *migra-loans* and the related individual perceptions around borrowing and newly available microcredit. Though on the surface borrowing may seem tangential to acts of migration, loans, debt, and microcredit are an influential aspect of the culture of migration that mediates decision-making in Chanleas Dai. This works in two related ways. As credit has become more accessible it has enabled migrations for a greater number of individuals, who can access lower-interest loans to finance migration. In tandem, the possibility of migration allows for low-risk use of credit. In other words, because work abroad was readily available individuals felt it would be easy to earn enough to repay loans. As a result, expanded access to credit allows for, drives, and often ensures the continuation migration in Chanleas Dai.

The existence and prevalence of *migra-loans* for homes and other purchase was surprising to me when I first encountered the process in my fieldwork. My original interview guide didn't ask about debt, borrowing, or credit, except regarding *meekjal* fees and how households afforded them. After only a handful of interviews however, I realized that debt was a powerful factor in migration decisions. In fact, one of the most commonly articulated reasons for migration was being in debt. While often initial debts were taken out because of distress—either to treat illness or as a response to drought/flood, other kinds of debts were common as well. As I probed more in my interviews, I discovered that borrowing was also often explicitly tied to migration in a more intentional way—rather than needing to migrate because of indebtedness, households often borrowed for a desired improvement or item with the explicit understanding that migration (either theirs, or someone else's in the household) would be used to pay back the loan. Some of these loans were from local moneylenders, others through microfinance institutions in nearby Kralanh. Not only were remittances often directed exclusively to pay down debts, as in Sopheap's case, but many family members also considered loans as advances on remittance payments. This was surprising to me as it didn't seem to fit with either stated MFI goals or the relationship I assumed between credit and migration.

In this chapter I discuss how credit plays into migration decision-making, in ways that are theoretically interesting both because of the accepted theoretical relationship between migration and access to credit, and also given economic theories of how expanded credit is expected to enable poverty reduction through village-based entrepreneurship. After discussing briefly the recent expansion of credit in the area, I describe the ways credit is used and understood as part of migration strategies and goals, arguing that *migra-loans* are centrally related to the culture of migration in Chanleas Dai. Finally, I highlight how the credit-migration relationship in the area illustrates disconnects between the expectations of how both migration and microfinance can (or will) lead to development, and the realities of how these strategies are used.

Credit: A Background

The suggestion that access to credit is key to developing rural areas has been articulated by development economists since the 1950's (Pulley 1989). The arguments for access to credit as a key factor in promoting poverty reduction have gained increasing traction in the past two decades through the development of microfinance programs. Microcredit,⁵¹ which refers to small-scale loans typically targeted towards the poor, began on a large scale in the 1970's in Bangladesh through the efforts of Muhammad Yunus and the now infamous Grameen Bank. Quickly regarded as a successful home-grown and sustainable solution to rural poverty, microfinance projects aimed at expanding access to credit and other banking services for the rural poor have gained tremendous traction across the developing world (Morduch 2000; Yunus 2003; Roy 2010). The arguments for the power of microcredit to enable sustained livelihood

⁵¹ Microfinance and microcredit are often used interchangeably, however they are substantively different. Microfinance encompasses a range of financial services targeted at the poor including services such as credit, savings, insurance, and money transfer. Microcredit refers specifically to loans, and is one type of service provided among microfinance institutions. Though there is no universal definition, microcredit typically differentiates itself from other types of loans through its adherence to one or more of the following criteria: a focused target on loan provision for the poor, low-interest rates (relative to informally available loans), or small loan amounts. In reality, microfinance institutions vary dramatically in their adherence to these criteria. Throughout this dissertation, I refer to microfinance when discussing the sector, and microcredit when specifically referencing loans from microfinance institutions.

improvement follows in a similar vein to the arguments supporting migration and remittances as a successful development strategy. Both provide much-needed cash in the hands of the poor, with the potential (more explicit in the case of microcredit) to provide capital for productive investments, which might lead to sustainable improvements for households (Montgomery and Weiss 2005). The key to microcredit success is understood through its ability not to finance low-interest durable goods or consumption needs, but rather to allow for the gradual accumulation of returns through self-employment (Ahlin and Jiang 2008). Proponents of microcredit highlight the entrepreneurial solutions of loan groups and borrowers, many of whom invest in small businesses, livestock, or training which allows them to expand small businesses, save, and break a cycle of poverty (Yunus 1998; Yunus 2003). Credit has also been understood as mitigating risk, which allows both poorer and middle class households in developing countries greater income security, as greater access to credit allows households to absorb shocks in income without compensating by changing their consumption patterns (Eswaran and Kotwal 1990).

Accepted theories of migration have historically placed migration and access to low-cost credit in an opposing relationship. New Economics of Labor Migration theories discussed in Chapter 2 point to a lack of available credit markets as one of the push factors propelling out-migration (Stark 1980; Stark 1982; Taylor et al 1996; Massey et al 1998; Taylor et al 2003). According to this theory, individual migration decisions are part of a household strategy aimed at diversifying incomes and reducing risk in response to undeveloped credit and insurance markets in home countries (Stark and Levhari 1982; Stark and Bloom 1985; Taylor et al 1996; Taylor 1999; Massey et al 1998, Taylor et al 2003). This can occur for example when credit is inaccessible for small farmers in rural areas to start new businesses or expand on livelihood strategies, they may then be driven to migrate in order to loosen cash constraints. According to NELM theories, where markets are imperfect or inaccessible, migration plays an important role in allowing households to reduce risk by diversify income sources via labor abroad (Stark and Levhari 1982; Stark and Bloom 1985; Taylor et al 1996; Taylor 1999; Massey et al 1998,

Taylor et al 2003). Thus NELM research suggests that if governments or communities are interested in reducing out-migration, they could do so by enabling greater access to credit (Taylor et al 1996; Taylor 2003; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002; Rozelle, Taylor and DeBrauw 1999).

Both theories of migration, and the general goals of microfinance would predict that as credit becomes more easily accessible, households should have greater power to make a living at home, lower risk, and thus less need to migrate. In Chanleas Dai, however, credit is not seen as allowing for expanded livelihoods at home. Rather, it is seen as supporting household strategies centered around migration. Moreover, credit, rather than being understood as mitigating risk, is often perceived as both highly risky, and a cause, not an alleviator of poverty.⁵²

Credit in Chanleas Dai Prior to MFI Expansion

Borrowing has been a part of household strategies for as long as village elders can remember, a constituent part of agrarian life to help families negotiate agricultural cycles. Both prior to and post Khmer Rouge, households would often borrow from friends, relatives, or wealthier families in the village without paying interest, on the basis of trust and shared ties. A village elder described:

“If we knew each other, and trusted each other we could borrow money. Borrow, I mean, not lend with interest. For example, if you needed rice grains or seed, you could borrow 10 cans of rice and once you were able to repay, you just re-paid 10 cans of rice. Today you can’t do that any longer. If you borrow 10 cans of rice, you are expected to re-pay 20 – 40 cans.”

In the years following the Vietnamese occupation and then UNTAC entry in the country, lending with interest gradually became more common, due to the growing cash economy. Moneylending as a practice grew through networks, as those who worked in

⁵² This understanding of credit, as exacerbating and not mediating risk, has been reported in other qualitative work in Cambodia (see Fitzgerald and So 2007, Tong et al 2011).

markets or as entrepreneurs and had access to cash began lending to those they knew. As these loans were personally risky for lenders, interest rates were high, a minimum of 10% per month, and directly related to one's status, perceived ability to repay, connection to the lender, and reputation in the area. Thus the most desperate individuals had the highest interest rates, which even for a relatively networked and trusted borrower were exorbitant.

Through the 1990's and early 2000's, households in Chanleas Dai relied on market-based moneylenders and informal loans mainly for consumption smoothing, illness, and small-scale agriculture inputs, borrowing from moneylenders only when they exhausted the networks of friends and relatives who might loan them money at more reasonable rates, or without interest. Though some migrants used informal loans to finance migration, this was relatively rare, both because migration was still relatively uncommon and also because of the high interest rates charged by moneylenders, still commonly between 10% and 20% per month in 2000. Migration was not yet well-established and still had a less known character, giving households less confidence in borrowing at such high rates for the migration of family members. The early migrants I spoke with who had borrowed for migration reported being indebted for several years due to the usurious interest rates they initially committed to with informal lenders.

MFI Entry and Increased Access

Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) first came to the Chanleas Dai area in 2000, when ACLEDA opened the first MFI branch office in Kralanh, a town just 8 kilometers away from the commune center.⁵³ In 2002 a second MFI followed, and by 2010 there were eight MFIs operating in the area with several others planning sub-branch offices. According to one branch manager, the Kralanh area is one of the more competitive MFI areas of the country. He noted that although many provincial towns have significantly more MFI operators, the population of the area is relatively small for the number of loan

operators, a fact he attributes to the proximity to two national highways, which means increased opportunities for business in the area.

The growth of the microfinance sector in Kralanh and in Cambodia more generally has led to dramatic shifts in both informal and formal borrowing. Moneylenders and other sources of informal credit are still widely available and commonly used, but have been impacted by MFI competition, resulting in dramatically declining interest rates.⁵⁴ Moreover, the growing presence of MFI's, and their personal and ever-present marketing campaigns have successfully shifted perceptions of borrowing in ways that impact credit more generally. Rather than being singularly defined as a shameful act of poverty, borrowing is increasingly understood in a more positive light as an active way of improving one's life. This expansion and the resulting shifts, described in more detail below, have had importance for the way that households view and use credit, particularly with respect to migration.

Interest Rates and the Changing Character of Loans

Since MFI's have entered the market in Kralanh, both MFI and moneylender interest rates have dropped substantially, reflecting national trends in MFI interest rates. Over the past decade MFI interest rates in Cambodia have dropped from a national average of 5% per month in 2000 to an average of 2.5% per month in 2009 (CMA 2009). In Kralanh, MFI interest rates over time have mirrored this general trend. Today, the average MFI borrower in Chanleas Dai pays 3% monthly interest on loans, sometimes less.

Similarly significant decreases have occurred in the informal loan sector, a result of both the increase in formal institutions offering loans, and a growing pool of moneylenders. By 2010, formal loans in Kralanh were only moderately lower than

⁵⁴ In discussing the credit markets in the area I refer only to interest-based moneylending and MFI loans. These comprise the bulk of the credit market, and are also the types of credit which are linked to migration, which is the main interest in this dissertation. For a more in-depth look at alternative sources of credit in rural Cambodia, all of which are also present to varying extents in Chanleas Dai, see Phlong 2009.

moneylender rates, which had reduced from averaging above 10% per month in 2000 to an average of 5% per month in 2009. Some market-based moneylenders offered rates as low as 3% in 2010, the same rate offered by microfinance institutions.

MFI and moneylender loans still retain important differences in character. MFIs are significantly more restrictive, lending for only specific purposes (notably, not migration or illness), requiring monthly interest payments beginning immediately after taking the loan, and requiring full payment over a specific period. MFI loans also take several days at minimum to process and require collateral, assessments, and the signature of co-signers and a village authority. In contrast, moneylenders offer immediate cash at any time of day or night, privacy, little or no collateral, no restrictions on loan use, and very flexible repayment schedules. Because of these differences, MFI and informal loans are used differently and strategically to meet the differential needs of borrowers. Those who have more collateral and have a more reliable stream of income are more likely to access MFI loans, whereas those with fewer assets or who desire more flexibility in repayment will seek out moneylenders. Villagers access both MFI loans and informal credit regularly, and often have several loans out at any given time with multiple lenders in both the formal and informal sector.⁵⁵

Shifting Meanings of Borrowing

Alongside changes in interest rates, which have expanded the availability of credit and reduced fears of borrowing, there have also been the beginnings of substantive cultural shifts around borrowing as a result of MFI entry and expansion. In the past, borrowing has been seen as a shameful and embarrassing act, something hidden from friends, neighbors and even at times family members. As one respondent explained: “To borrow is to show that you need money, to confirm your poverty.” Being perceived as poor incites shame, thus so does openly borrowing from others. In response, the informal

⁵⁵ Other studies of indebtedness in Cambodia support that most rural households hold debts, often with multiple outstanding loans at one point in time (Chan and Acharya 2002)

lending sector has traditionally been exceedingly private, with loans made quickly, with no evaluation, co-signer, or village authority signatures necessary, and with a general sense of discretion.

By contrast, MFI's have actively challenged the connections between borrowing and poverty or shame. These cultural challenges have been necessary to some degree, as the MFI industry, bureaucratic and not based on personal connections, seeks to grow and expand their target areas. To do so they have had to minimize risk through processes of evaluation, assessment, and using groups and co-signers, each making the loan process more visible. Prior to offering first loans MFI officers, well known in the village, come to evaluate homes and land, speak with village authorities, and help locate co-signers often in addition to spouses or village authorities. Post-loan, some loan officers also regularly come to check in with families or collect monthly interest payments in-person. MFI's have also organized and promoted group loans, where multiple individuals come together to borrow, with joint liability for loans. Village chiefs and households who have taken loans in the past will even post stickers on their homes, or post brochures or advertisements for specific MFI institutions. As a result MFI loans are visible and known, not only to local authorities but also to extended family, neighbors, and-- thanks to a never-ending cycle of village gossip---practically anyone who is interested.

Moreover, MFIs have actively worked to facilitate a different view of borrowing, advocating for loans as not a signal of poverty, but rather a means of taking initiative to improve one's life. In an illustrative example ACLEDA, the largest microfinance provider in Cambodia, has as its logo the hongbird, a mythic creature symbolic of prosperity (Clark 2006). Similarly focusing on the success possible through borrowing, the typical MFI literature, brochure, or sign will show a proud farmer, or smiling small business owners, images of success and achievement. Making the connection between borrowing and prosperity (as opposed to poverty) is of course the central tenant of the MFI industry globally, that borrowing can be more than a last resort, but actually a strategy to improve lives.

Expanded Credit, Expected Implications

The entry of MFIs into the Chanleas Dai area has resulted in easier, cheaper, and more socially acceptable borrowing not only through MFI's but also through informal moneylenders. Both moneylenders and MFI's reported consistently expanding loan portfolios over the past decade, even though competition has increased. A local village chief estimated that over 100 families, roughly half of those in his village, currently had outstanding MFI loans.⁵⁶ "Everyone is borrowing. It's quite consistent," he shared. "They come every day for signatures." This estimation did not take into account informal loans, which required no signatures but were equally, if not more pervasive.

Given theories of New Economics of Labor Migration suggesting that access to credit is a fundamental cause of out-migration, we might expect that as access to credit in Chanleas Dai has increased it would turn individuals away from Thailand, allowing a new or increased ability to make ends meet at home through consumption smoothing or productive investment. By all accounts, this has not happened. Though both MFIs and moneylenders report increasing borrowing, and lower interest rates, expanded access to credit has not turned most households away from their primary livelihood strategy—migration. Instead, borrowing often works in tandem with migration and is widely understood in Chanleas Dai as a means of supplementing migration to improve livelihoods. This relationship is deeply related to the strong culture of migration in the area. Through migrant success abroad, and the resulting widening disparities in wealth within the village, relative deprivation has become a motivator not only for migration, but also for borrowing as a supplement to migration strategies. Moreover, many households note that low-interest loans have enabled migrations, not deterred them.

Borrowing and Migration: Pathways and Possibilities

Credit and migration are connected in Chanleas Dai in three distinct, though related ways. First, debt can initially compel the migration of household members. Most

⁵⁶ As part of standard MFI practice, spouses, insurers, and the local village chief have to sign off on every loan

commonly the result of either illness or failed productive investments, many households reported experiences of being indebtedness to a point of distress, unable to repay loan principals or interest payments through local strategies. Because migration was regarded as relatively low-risk it was preferable to asset sale or legal intervention.⁵⁷ Youth particularly noted family pressure to migrate as a result of indebtedness, often quitting school to migrate at young ages as a result of household debt.

Second, migrants themselves or migrant household heads often had to borrow for the costs associated with migration. Migration with a *meekjal* cost between 2,000 and 3,000 baht (roughly 60-90 USD), depending on the destination and what services the *meekjal* offered (job placement, transport to job site, etc.). Though seemingly small, and significantly lower than the costs of migrations in decades prior, these costs often required borrowing, either from family members or from moneylenders.⁵⁸ With more easily available and low cost financing, even the most destitute of individuals were typically able to borrow for the costs of migration.

Third, households often took out loans with the explicit intention of repaying via their own migration or the migration of a family member. These loans, which I term *migra-loans*, are distinct in that they are intentionally taken out for an expense that households do not expect to be able to repay through local strategies. Most commonly for homes, motorbikes, or similarly large purchases, borrowers understand these loans as an advance on the remittances they expect to obtain through their own or a family member's migration. At times migra-loans were taken by the future migrant, but more often these were taken by household heads who either had family members already away and remitting, or expected to have family members leave very soon. At times this type of loan was also used to either explicitly coerce or tacitly pressure family members

⁵⁷ Debt as a push factor for migration has been reported elsewhere in Cambodia (Maltoni 2010), and also in other contexts (Mosse et al 2002; Thieme and Wyss 2005).

⁵⁸ The prevalence of migrant households borrowing to pay for transportation/broker costs has been identified in other household surveys of migration in Cambodia. In 2007 CDRI conducted a study of 507 households in six villages with a high incidence of migration. Researchers noted that approximately half of migrants had to take out loans to finance migration, though in some communities this was as high as 74% (Chan 2009).

uninterested in migrating to leave. Migra-loans were common among my respondents, and often seen as the best or only way to wisely utilize newly available MFI credit. With a perceived (and usually real) ability to successfully make money through migration, household members were able to feel comfortable borrowing sums of money that would be impossible to repay through village-based work. Moreover, MFI loans were a means of “making cake without flour” as one respondent put it; ensuring that families were able to make the purchases they wanted without having to first save enough to obtain them. Another woman noted this as a preferable strategy to ensure the act of saving, noting that it “kept the beer money small” a reference not only to the tendency of her husband to use extra cash around the house for alcohol, but more generally implying her preference to have help saving small amounts of money over time through loans.⁵⁹

In contrast, loans were *not* seen as capital best used to start local microenterprise, expand agriculture or invest in income generating activities. In part, this was related to the strong preference for migration already established in the village. Related, it was also a reflection of the predominate local perspective on village-based livelihood strategies: high-risk, boring, passive, unprofitable, and low status. With the frequency of environmental distress, the distance from markets, the low profit typical attained through animal husbandry and agriculture, and the risk perceived to be involved in rice intensification or crop diversification, there were few households who saw credit as opening new doors for profit at home. In contrast, most people in the village saw village-based livelihood strategies, regardless of how they were financed as impossible, or unwise.

Because it was difficult to make a consistent profit through local livelihood strategies, holding a loan was regarded as a liability, not an opportunity. As a result, loans were often seen as necessitating migration. A former migrant characterized the connections in this way: “The biggest problem is we can’t make a living here...If we don’t earn enough, our only choice is to borrow money from private banks, and then how

⁵⁹ Though savings accounts were offered at a bank eight kilometers away, it was very rare among those in the village to hold savings accounts.

can we pay it back? So we migrate.” A non-migrant, non-borrower respondent put it more simply: “we can manage in the village if we’re not in debt. If we are in debt though, there’s no way.” Notably, I found that very few of my non-migrant respondents had borrowed money, and those that did had family members with other salaried jobs (with NGOs, or as civil servants). Because migration was the normative livelihood choice, those who stayed were strategic in their choice to remain at home and did not want to risk being “forced” into leaving through debt. Non-migrants often had successful household strategies that admittedly could have been expanded through credit and successfully repaid, but they didn’t want to risk being indebted. Were something to happen-- an adverse shock, sickness, or something else—they felt that their only option if indebted would be to leave for Thailand or encourage someone else in their family to do so---something they explicitly did not want.

The three ways that I describe migrant households using credit are not unrelated, and often households experienced two or even all three of these credit/migration connections at once, or over a short period of time.⁶⁰ For example migra-loans taken intentionally and enthusiastically could become problematic debts that compelled the migration of additional family members. Conversely an informal loan for the costs of a household member’s migration could be quickly repaid, leading family members to see the potential of remittances and take larger MFI loans shortly thereafter. The following individual cases offer examples of the typical connections between migration and credit, and offer some insight into the predominate relationships between migration and credit in Chanleas Dai.

⁶⁰ These general connections between credit and migration are also evident in survey research documenting the use of remittances among migrant households in Cambodia. In the IOM’s household survey, 68% of migrant households receiving remittances noted that debt was a primary use of migrant remittances, accounting for nearly a third of remittance spending (Maltoni 2010).⁶⁰ In CDRI’s 2007 study, Chan (2009) found that households reported 14% of remittances from Thailand going to debt repayment. Deelen and Vasuprasat (2010) in a study of 200 remittance-recipient households five provinces, found slightly lower levels, noting that 10% of remittances were used to repay debts. Notably, this was a higher number than the amount of remittances used for productive investment.

Maly's Story

Maly is 46, and has five children. Only her youngest son is currently in the village, while the rest are living and working in Thailand. When I met Maly I had been intending to speak with one of her sons. However when I arrived the day of the scheduled interview, I found he had taken a taxi that morning to Bangkok with his older brother. The boys were anxious to leave, Maly told me, because they needed to make money to pay off the monthly interest on her debts. "We owe so much--- so they have to go back...earn money soon so we can pay the interest rates. People were leaving this morning, so they left with them too." The debt Maly refers to is actually two separate loans, one she took out the month prior from a local moneylender for 30,000 Baht (approx. 900 USD) which she used to purchase a new Dream 2010 motorbike, and another for 5,000 Baht (approx. 150 USD) that she took out this morning to cover the cost of her sons' migration. Her sons were the driving force behind the motorbike purchase, pressuring Maly to take out a loan that would allow them to buy the bike over their recent trip home during Khmer New Year. "I asked why they needed to buy such an expensive motorbike, but they just told me not to worry, they would go to work in Thailand to pay the loan. They wanted it so much, and I felt bad for them, so I borrowed the money." Maly's husband is gone too, working on a short project for his sister in Siem Reap and then probably will return to Thailand and join his sons as well. The motorbike, while they are all across the border, sits polished at the top of the stilt house. Maly is afraid someone will steal it, so she asked men from the village this morning to lift it onto the platforms of the house. She won't drive it, she tells me, not only because she doesn't know how to drive a motorbike but also because she has nowhere to go. She used to grow vegetables and make mats to sell in the markets, but these days she stays in the village taking care of her youngest child, still in school, and also her one-year-old grandchild, whose parents are across the border. Maly isn't concerned about repaying the loan, though she admits she isn't happy to be indebted for so long. "We will gradually pay it back, little by little. But I need them to go work hard." Because of the loan, she

encouraged them to go to Bangkok this trip to work in construction, where salaries were higher than in the agricultural job they had previously had just across the border.

Maly considers her family to be very poor. If her sons and daughter don't send her remittances regularly, she doesn't have enough resources to pay for her son's school fees or purchase food for the two of them. Their only means of making a living in the village is the annual rice yield, which has been nearly halved in recent years due to drought and flood. She often resorts to selling her rice stocks for other daily needs, and acknowledges that even with the remittances that her family sends home, it can sometimes be hard to make ends meet. Without migration as an option for her family, Maly understood she would never have been able to take out such a large loan. However her sons willingness to migrate, the examples of success she has seen in her community, and her confidence in their ability to be successful over time together allowed her to feel confident taking out the loan.

Maly's story is one of the more explicit examples of loans used for consumption purpose intentionally financed through migration. However it was not uncommon in its character, or the way that Maly perceived migration and borrowing as mutually enabling. While in Maly's case it was children pushing parents to borrow and promising to repay debts through migration, a more typical example, highlighted through the story of Thy, worked in the opposite direction.

Thy's Story

Thy first went to Thailand when he was seventeen, and was there nearly a year before returning home for a short visit. I met him just a few weeks after he had come home, and later learned that he returned to Thailand shortly after our conversation. Thy's life had been influenced by migration since he could remember, with both his parents away for varying periods of time since he was four years old. Often, they migrated together leaving Thy and his older brother and sister to stay with relatives in another part of the village. When his older sister was old enough, she went with them as well. About

five years ago both of his parents returned abruptly. His father had become severely ill in Thailand, and the couple returned home seeking treatment for him. Just after their return, before they could even find out the cause of his illness, he passed away.

Soon after his father's death, Thy's mother returned to Thailand with his older brother, taking out a loan from moneylenders in the village for their migration. His sister had not returned home, and was still working abroad. After several years, Thy's mother and brother returned home and took out a loan to build a new home, something his mother had wanted for many years. With the help of extended family, they built the house in only five days. The costs were enormous. They first purchased new land for the building, which took all of the 12,000 baht they had saved from work abroad. In addition house itself cost more than 100,000 baht. For these costs, they borrowed 14,000 baht from family members with interest and the rest from an MFI in Kralanh. At that time, Thy was still in school, but as soon as his mother borrowed for their home he began to feel pressure to leave for Thailand. His mother kept saying that she was feeling too old to migrate. This made Thy's older brother anxious, aware that if his mother didn't migrate there would be fewer salaries available to pay back their debts. Concerned about the interest rates if they couldn't make regular payments, and critical of Thy's desire to stay in school for what he viewed as an education that would lead nowhere, he continually pressured his brother to go to Thailand with him. Thy finally relented and left in the middle of his 7th grade school year, migrating with his brother only a few days after dropping out of school. Only a year later, their home debts are all repaid, Thy's mother told me, thanks to the children's hard work abroad. With the home debts repaid they have now taken out a second loan, this time 20,000 baht for a secondhand motorbike. She expects they will pay it back relatively soon, as young people can work fast, and early quickly abroad.

Migra-Loans and Microfinance

The experiences of Maly and Thy were not exceptional in my fieldwork. Migrants often shared expectations of being consistently indebted. Being unintentionally overindebted was regarded as problematic, but migra-loans were often regarded as strategic low-risk investments, particularly for parents with children coming of age as “young people can earn fast over there.” Remittances were consistently used to repay debts, and debt often structured and sustained migration patterns even where migrations were not originally taken due to indebtedness. Many of those I spoke with utilized both informal (moneylender) loans and MFI loans, using the different types of credit in distinct ways. MFI loans were used to finance larger investments such as homes, motorbikes, and agricultural purchases, where informal loans were used to specifically finance migration, MFI interest payments, or health treatments. In general, these distinctions are because of the limitations built into MFI loans.

Microfinance providers clearly do not intend MFI loans to finance migration or for loans to be paid back through work abroad. Their policies expressly prohibit loans to finance illegal or dangerous activities,⁶¹ and most policies also expressly support local livelihoods in their target areas, for example requiring that the borrower be a permanent resident of the area, and/or that loans be used for productive investments. Moreover, MFIs, while they vary in their stated mission, all assert an interest in sustainable development, local livelihoods and investing in micro and small businesses. Thus loans for distress (such as illness or injury) are not granted. Every MFI provider I spoke with either confirmed or implied that their policies would not support financing migration.⁶² Reaffirming their compliance with internal policies and best practices, MFI staff made

⁶¹ Nearly all migration from Chanleas Dai is irregular, though some individuals register for working permits with the Thai government upon arrival. The act of migration is also inherently dangerous, despite the fact that those in Chanleas Dai do not always speak about it as such. In 2012 a human rights group reported that Thai soldiers killed at least thirteen Cambodian migrants in the first three months of the year as they were crossing the border (Kuntheart 2012).

⁶² Several MFI providers refused to explicitly share their policies with me. This is not uncommon in the MFI industry. One provider noted that the secrecy around policies and interest rates is related to fears of competition. That said my impression was that there was also a general sense of secrecy because of the growing controversy around microfinance in general. In Cambodia several recent reports have questioned whether microfinance is a good thing for the rural poor, noting the prevalence of overindebtedness.

clear that they never explicitly or knowingly gave loans for migration, yet each staff member I spoke with also underscored that regardless, this happened with some regularity.

Moreover, MFI providers in the area also openly acknowledged the importance of migration in allowing for borrowers to utilize their services. Several noted that migration was the most stable and low-risk means of repayment for their rural clients. As one manager noted: “Certainly, a lot of people are doing that [i.e. borrowing and then migrating]. There are no jobs here, no work to do, so they borrow money and go to Thailand....it’s not a problem for us, since they all pay back their loans.” MFI staff also admitted that microcredit loans were also often paid back by family members abroad and the remittances of sons, daughters, or brothers and sisters in Thailand, noting this as a “successful” strategy of loan repayment.

This was particularly important, one branch manager noted, since it was not uncommon for small businesses by rural farmers to fail. With limited training, resources, and markets, it was often difficult for the small-scale businesses people borrowed for to make enough, regularly, to repay loans. Though MFIs in the area told me they rarely had repayment problems, they knew that many of their loans were eventually repaid via migrations even when a small business was the original intent. As branch officials at two MFI’s noted:

“Often, someone will borrow money for a small business venture---livestock or agriculture, or something like that. Then if they are unsuccessful, they have to migrate in order to pay the loan back. It happens like this often”

“It’s not like they tell us they are going, but the loan officers know. They pass the house and it’s all boarded up, the whole family has left. But it’s not a problem for us, as long as they pay back their loans. What’s important is that the money comes back. Everything else, after we decide to lend, it’s beyond our control...It’s not the ideal situation of course, but we can’t control it. And after we’ve made the loan the only issue is whether they can pay back the money, and of course they can.”

Looking at how this informs our understanding of microcredit, these findings suggest the need to further evaluate MFI practices in the context of development goals. Migration-financed repayment of MFI loans is not inherently problematic where migration is successful and safe. But this is certainly not always the case. Where credit is extended for large-scale loans, and the potential to earn money back via migration is threatened, the resulting over indebtedness could significantly increase households' vulnerability and poverty.⁶³ Moreover, MFI lending where repayment is primarily financed by remittances may not be in line with the goals that microfinance providers (and their development partners/international donors) are seeking to attain. To the extent that microcredit and migration are used in tandem in other areas, this is a ripe area for future research.

Migra-Loans and Migration

These links also pose both theoretical and practical questions in the field of migration. The ways that credit and migration are used in tandem in Chanleas Dai underscore a weakness of the migration and development literature to date: its tendency to artificially separate migration and its determinants from a more general process of social and economic change (DeHaas 2010). For example, past research drawing on new economics of labor migration theories suggest that as access to credit expands in rural migrant sending areas, local investment will increase and thus curb migration patterns (Taylor et al. 1996; Taylor et al. 2003; Massey, Durand and Malone 2002; Rozelle, Taylor and DeBrauw 1999). Yet as we see in Chanleas Dai, the factors shaping decisions to migrate are the same factors which encourage credit to be used for further migrations, and explicitly not for local investment. The risk of local production makes migration desirable and local investment less so. Thus even when access to credit shifts, it doesn't

⁶³ Stoll (2010) argues that this is in fact occurring among the Ixil in Guatemala, who borrow money to migrate and often struggle to repay loans when migration fails, resulting in increasing vulnerability, asset sale, and land loss. As Stoll refers to this as “a chain of exploitation that may suck more value from the sending population than it returns.”

shift the factors which encourage individuals to value alternatives abroad over locally based livelihoods.

While little formal research has highlighted these kinds of connections between microcredit (or expanded access to credit) and migration, there are strong indications that this pattern is relevant beyond Chanleas Dai and Cambodia. In particular, research in the field of microfinance recognizes that borrowers often rely on household members with salaries, including internal and international migrants, to repay loans (Taylor 2011, Duffy-Tumaszc 2009, Karim 2011). In Cambodia Chan and So (1999) note that in the late 1990's as patterns of migration became more prevalent in border areas many poor villagers used NGO credit schemes to finance trips to Thailand, which was clearly not the purpose of the credit program. Further afield, Stoll (2010:1) argues that among the Ixil in Guatemala microfinance has become a "motor of migration," both enabling and requiring international migrations to the United States. In Andhra Pradesh, India, Taylor (2011) argues that microfinance forces the most vulnerable deeper into contract labor, with the "compulsions of indebtedness" serving as "primary motivation for migration of all forms" (497). Similarly, in Senegal Duffy-Tumaszc (2009) describes how households regularly use micro-credit as a cash advance on forthcoming remittances from relatives living abroad. In this context she suggests that micro-credit is not seen as a source of cheap credit for business expansion but rather a means of sustain the household in the context of uneven remittance payments. Thus spanning a variety of contexts there is evidence to suggest that migration and microfinance can become mutually enabling processes. In the next section of this chapter I theorize why migra-loans have become prevalent in Chanleas Dai, pointing out why New Economics assumptions may be bounded in space and time, less relevant in places like Chanleas Dai than in other contexts. However it is useful to first consider alternative explanations, which could explain the complementary relationship between migration and credit but still align with theoretical assumptions about credit as a driving factor causing out-migration.

Is Microcredit Insufficient?

One way that NELM theorists might explain the mutually enabling relationship between credit and migration in Chanleas Dai is by arguing that current MFI and moneylender credit are still insufficiently low-cost, or insufficiently accessible. Thus credit access is still inadequate to allow for the kind of low-risk borrowing needed to promote local investment. There is some support for this argument. Those studying microfinance have found that MFI loans often do not reach the poorest households, even in areas of high MFI penetration (Coleman 2006; Hulme and Mosley 1996; Mosley and Hulme 1998; Conning 1999; Lapenu and Zeller 2001). In Chanleas Dai this is also the case. MFI loans typically require collateral and assets of value equal to or greater than the size of the loan, making it difficult for those with fewer assets to access formal loans of any significant amount.

Moreover, it may be even where households can access low-cost credit, the constraints of microfinance make it less appropriate for the types of agricultural production rural households seek out. For example on the basis of research in Bangladesh, Pellegrina (2011) suggests that MFI loans are ill-suited for agricultural inputs for rural farmers where loan contracts are routinized and inflexible. Similarly, in Cambodia while MFI credit is lower cost than most informal credit, MFIs require regular interest payments that start immediately after the loan, making loans poorly suited for the kinds of long-term investments in rice production, animal husbandry, rice intensification and crop diversification that rural farmers are most likely to want to invest in. Where would-be migrants are excluded from MFI credit markets, or seek investments that are difficult under MFI restriction, they are effectively limited to higher-interest informal loans. These loans may be too costly in terms of interest requirements to effectively promote low-risk local investment.

Finally, NELM scholars might point to microfinance as insufficient because interest rates remain high despite their downward trend, leading to vulnerability where microenterprises fail. Moreover, there are few checks on overindebtedness, meaning households can easily use the same assets for collateral with multiple MFIs. In situations

where households hold multiple debts they are unable to repay, or experience business failure, they may be required to sell of income-generating assets, leaving them in more cash-constrained positions after accessing credit (e.g. Mosely 2001, Phlong 2009, Bateman and Chang 2009; Karim 2011). Where interest rates or levels of overindebtedness are excessively high, households may be no more able to use credit towards productive investments than they are where credit is nonexistent.

The above suggests that even though credit has become widely accessible, at lower-interest rates throughout the rural population, it may not be the kind of low-cost, credit that NELM theorizes would contribute to rural development in sufficient ways to impact migration. It may also be that because the area still lacks crop insurance, futures markets or adequate mechanisms for savings, households still have strong incentives to migrate, despite accessible credit. It is possible that these inadequacies are important in explaining part of the migration/credit relationship in Chanleas Dai. However my work points to an alternative explanation that resonates more powerfully with the lived experiences of those in Chanleas Dai.

Alternative Explanations: Risk and Reward of Local Investment

While the nature of MFI reach and efficacy may be important in understanding the potential for expanded credit to impact migration patterns, my work suggests that the social context is equally important in mediating the desire for local investment, through either credit or savings. Specifically I argue that NELM understandings of credit as a driving force rest on assumptions that may be relevant only for a portion of migrant communities, those where rural households perceive meaningful, profitable, high-status and low-risk opportunities for local investment.

Residents of Chanleas Dai express both pessimism about and distaste for financial investment in local livelihood strategies, which are seen as high-risk and low-reward in comparison to migration. Individuals defend these perceptions by pointing out the insecurity the environment, the lack of stable, secure markets for local products, and the

relatively low profits that even the most successful local strategy can bring in. Because of the potential for flood, drought, crop loss, animal death, and land conflicts, credit put to use for local investment is understood as inviting, not mediating household risk and vulnerability.⁶⁴

In comparison, migration is clearly high reward, and perceived as relatively stable. Migrants can earn between 150 and 300 baht per day in Thailand (approx. 5-10 USD) meaning a couple can typically save 10,000 baht (approx. 300 USD) in a month or two abroad. This potential profit is significantly higher than even the most lucrative local opportunity. Moreover, despite the inherent risks of irregular migration, those in Chanleas Dai have developed successful strategies over time to mediate much of the risk of irregular migrations. Migrants and their families feel optimistic about their ability to find and keep a job, avoid, and avoid being cheated by employers. In addition to feeling in control over the jobs they can access, they have a clear sense of expected salaries, and how much average workers in each sector can save over time. Therefore loans are perceived as a relatively unproblematic for households with migrant members.

Put more simply, in Chanleas Dai the expansion of low-cost credit has not been matched with adequate opportunities to use credit in low-risk, consistently profitable ways. Thus the best perceived use of newly available credit is to supplement the most successful, stable, and desirable strategy—migration. The strong preferences for continued migration in Chanleas Dai are also related to the culture of migration that has developed in the area, which is partially a consequence of the limited local potential for profitable and secure economic activities. Over time migration has become imbued with meaning beyond its economic promise, associated with status, modernity, filial responsibility, and idealized versions of both masculinity and femininity. Young men are seen as model sons by leaving the education system from a young age to financially support their families, and young migrant women are described as more beautiful and desirable because of their ability to work indoors or in the shade and thus attain whiter skin. Moreover the regular salary, working hours and days off, ability to participate in a

⁶⁴ See Fitzgerald and Sovannarith 2007 for examples of this perception in other areas of rural Cambodia.

consumer marketplace, and the simple experience of being in the “more modern” world of Thailand all contribute to an increased status of migrant workers. In contrast young people who stay at home and/or in school, particularly young men, report feeling looked down on because of their choice to stay at home. Thus the lack of interest in local economic activity is also strongly related to a growing interest in a particular kind of lifestyle, one accessed easily through wage labor abroad and impossible to attain in the village.

In this way the migration process itself is critical in understanding how context mediates interest in local investment and thus the relationship between credit and migration in Chanleas Dai. Those studying cultures of migration note the dynamic ways that local preferences, norms, value systems and indicators of status can be shaped by acts of migration (Reichert 1982; Massey et al. 1987, Kandel and Massey 2002, Cohen 2004, Ali 2007). Theories of cumulative causation suggest that over time migration can become self-sustaining (Massey 1990). This occurs as “each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made” (Massey et al. 1998:45). Often these shifts can mean that the key driving factors for early migrations are substantively different from those which motivate later migrations within the same community. As migration becomes normative over time it can be seen as a rite of passage, a status marker, or way to participate in consumer lifestyle (Reichert 1982; Massey et al. 1998; Kandel and Massey 2002). As a result, in areas where migration has become a dominant or normative livelihood strategy even once credit becomes available it may not curb migration because a strong culture of migration is already firmly established. In other words, the pull of migration as a high-status, “modern” alternative to village life may hold such strong desirability that regardless of the potential for local investment, it is devalued. Instead, in such areas expanded credit markets may serve primarily to expand or supplement, not to counter, migration as a livelihood strategy.

Conclusions

The stories and discussion presented here unpack the multitude of ways in which credit and migration decisions interact in developmentally important ways, through what I argue is a mutually enabling process made possible within a strong culture of migration. In Chanleas Dai, the increased accessibility of credit, at least in the short term, is not serving to stem migration, but rather serving to supplement and facilitate it as a livelihood strategy. Though it is likely that same processes of relative deprivation, increased conspicuous consumption, and increased valorization of migration would likely occur even in the absence of credit expansion, I argue that in this context easily accessible credit actually bolsters this process. Lower interest rates make it possible for even the most destitute of households to borrow for middleman fees. Moreover, the potential to pay back loans via migration of both individuals and family members actually prompts households to take out loans that would otherwise not be possible. Thus loans that would have once been seen as impossible or too risky to seek out are given and taken with ease, and migrations that would once have been difficult to begin are easily financed. The migration streams from Chanleas Dai to Thailand are then inextricably linked to the increasingly accessible flow of loans by both informal lenders and microfinance institutions.

A particularly important impact of the *migra-loan* trend in Chanleas Dai is its impact on encouraging youth migration. In the next chapter I interrogate youth decision-making around migration, exploring to what extent we can understand *migra-loans* and the relationship between borrowing and migration as encouraging youth migration.

CHAPTER 8: UNTIL I GO TO THAILAND

*“Knowing is not better than willingness”
-Khmer Proverb*

In 2009 I sat with the school director of Chap Thmei⁶⁵ one of the primary schools in the Chanleas Dai educational cluster.⁶⁶ “At the beginning of the school year, we had 67 sixth grade students,” he told me. “Now, only 34 will graduate.” He pushed his fingers into his temples as he described the increasing numbers of 4th, 5th, and 6th graders who had quit school after Khmer New Year to follow their friends to Thailand for work. Some of them didn’t even tell their parents, he told me with a grimace. Their fathers had to come to the school asking teachers where their children went. Later, they found out that the students had borrowed money from several different people for fees to pay the *meeekjal* who would transport them across the Thai border. Their parents would be held responsible for their debts. He continued:

“I think we are going to be soon a forgotten village. There is no one left but the very old and the children. How can we continue to develop like this? We have the World Food Program school breakfasts, we have teachers who come to school, we love the students, we have enough classrooms, but still students go to Thailand instead.”

The school director considered the growing trend of student migration as central to the education challenges he faced at his school, attributing the pattern to the generalized poverty within the village, a lack of school scholarships, and few job opportunities or alternatives in the area. Local officials, teachers, and non-profit workers throughout the commune reiterated his concern --that widespread migration of youth

⁶⁵ Name changed

⁶⁶ As part of MoEYS policies, primary schools were grouped into clusters, for the purposes of information exchange, training, and administration.

would inhibit development in the community. Viewing migration as a “problem,” albeit an inevitable one, community members both within and outside of the education sector lamented the fact that their villages and schools were being drained of young people. In contrast, young people would share with wide eyes their hopes of someday visiting Thailand and those who recently returned would share how proud they felt to support their families, the excitement of life abroad, and the relative lack of opportunity to build a future in the village.

These contradictory voices underscore critical questions in the field of migration and development: how does migration allow for or inhibit the development of human capital in sending areas? And underlying this question, what factors structure, mitigate and constrain youth aspirations for migration? Based on interviews and focus group discussions with current, former, aspiring and non-aspiring migrant youth, this chapter explores youth migration in Chanleas Dai, focused on expanding our understanding of how youth migration motivations arise within the context of a strong culture of migration. By describing how youth view migration choices in comparison with alternative education and livelihood opportunities at home, I explore how a strong culture of migration, coupled with the increasing problem of rural debt, shapes and mediates potential futures for young people.

The Cambodian context offers a unique space to consider how a culture of migration influences youth decision-making, and the impacts this has on the potential for development in migrant sending areas, particularly those in the Global South. The vast majority of literature discussing cultures of migration focuses on Mexican migration to the United States.⁶⁷ In contrast, the Cambodian case reveals crucial distinctions in how cultures of migration can frame youth decision-making around education and the alternative of work abroad. Specifically, I argue that in the context of a weak education system, strong cultural norms supporting child participation in economic life, and high levels of household indebtedness, young people feel compelled towards migration in

⁶⁷ Notable exceptions include Ali 2007; Connell 2008; Horvath 2008; and Kalir 2005

ways that are substantively different, and more constraining, than the migration motivations of youth in other contexts.

The first section of the chapter contextualizes my study by discussing the links between international migration, human capital, cultures of migration, and youth, exploring why the area where these intersect is an important, yet relatively neglected point of inquiry. I then share the stories of several youth migrants, highlighting the various meanings that migration holds for rural youth, the constraining factors arising out of a culture of migration that promote migration over other alternatives, and the competing narratives around pursuing education as an alternative to migration.

Youth Migration

As discussed in Chapter 2, human capital is one mechanism through which migration is expected to contribute to development at home, in part through increased investments in education by the children of migrant parents.⁶⁸ However, evidence suggests two contrary patterns related to migration and human capital. While migration can allow for greater household income to invest in education, it also sets a powerful example for youth, such that they may value or aspire to migration over other viable alternatives. Moreover, though remittances may allow for increased education attainment, in at least some contexts, a strong culture of migration has been shown to substantially mitigate the likelihood of youth investment in education.

Relatively little research inquires directly into either youth migration patterns, or youth aspirations for migration within migrant sending communities. Yet the migration of children and youth is a critically important phenomenon, particularly with respect to the migration and development dialogue (Tienda et al 2007). Young people under the age of twenty represent an estimated 18% of all international migrants from developing countries, yet very little research focuses specifically on the unique challenges of youth

⁶⁸ In this chapter I do not discuss migrant skills gained abroad and put to use back home, which is another significant thread of discussion in the migration/human-capital dialogue.

and child migration (UNICEF 2010). Though many young people are migrating with families, a significant number of youth are labor migrants (McKenzie 2007). For these young people, in some contexts migrating independently as early as age 13-15, migration choices are often made at a crossroads where continued education is a viable competing alternative. At this time of transition, choices to continue or stop participating in formal education can reduce or expand life choices to a significant degree. Thus, the large-scale migration of young people can alter the human capital landscape of a village dramatically. Where youth are making choices between education and migration specifically, their choices and processes of decision-making are critical to focus on as areas of research.

Research globally highlights the relationship between economic development and education (Schultz 1961; Rao 1964; Lee and Psachaopoulos 1979; Psacharopoulos and Woodhall 1985), highlighting the importance of education as means of increasing income (Mincer 1972; Blaug 1972; Jencks et al 1979), facilitating higher agricultural output (Lockheed et al 1980; Hayami and Ruttan 1970), reducing fertility (Cochrane 1988; Jeffrey and Basu 1996), improving health, hygiene and nutrition behaviors (Colclough 1982), improving income inequality (Tilak 1989), and facilitating other attitudinal changes which are related to economic development (Colclough 1982). Thus education is universally recognized and firmly established as means of escaping from or remaining out of poverty (Tilak 2002). Recent research also highlights that it is not only primary schooling but also secondary education that is important for poverty reduction, improved health outcomes, and economic growth (Tilak 2005).

In Cambodia empirical research, while limited, supports the same finding, showing that education matters in terms of wage labor and farm productivity, as well as the likelihood of being poor in the future. Findings from the 2004 Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey suggest that education is related to increased farm productivity and greater household consumption in rural Cambodia, that these returns are substantively and statistically significant, and that they increase over time (World Bank 2006). Consistent with prior national surveys, the CSES also shows that the likelihood of being

poor significantly falls with the completion of each successive level of schooling, and that parent education has a significant effect on children's education attainment (World Bank 2005). Moreover, adult employee wages for salaried employees are also significantly positively related to higher levels of education (CSES 2004). Others have noted that in the Cambodian context education is significant in predicting better child health outcomes (Miller and Rodgers 2009), higher household expenditures, and increased levels of schooling for children (Fujii and Ear 2002). With such significant positive returns to education, it is developmentally important to understand the context of rural youth migration decisions. Yet there is relatively little research on youth migration motivations, in part because the experience of youth migration is often quickly subsumed under the category of "trafficking", or focused on exploitation, thus motivation, or agency, are disregarded.⁶⁹

However we know that in communities where migration is common, young people often have strong migration aspirations from an early age (IOM 2011; Horvath 2008; Kandel and Massey 2002; Kandel and Kao 2000). These aspirations are amplified within strong cultures of migration, which can be particularly powerful for youth where migration becomes perceived as a critical step in the transition to adulthood (e.g. Kandel and Massey 2002). Where migration is normative it can structure, valorize and legitimize further migrations in powerful ways. This is not to say that migrations are *determined* within strong cultures of migration, but rather, that like all social processes, migration patterns are often reproduced and validated by society in such a way that individuals are orientated towards particular paths of action.

In this chapter I show how social context shapes and mediates youth decision-making in Chanleas Dai. In doing so, I focus not only on the generalized valorization of migration and related pessimistic concern about village-based strategies described in Chapter 5, but also on the specific constraints that often make migration feel obligatory specifically for young people: namely household debt, cultural norms around youth

⁶⁹ Pearson 2006 is an example of this type of work in the Greater Mekong Subregion.

participation in the household economy, and a lack of meaningful alternatives through education.

General Trends and Prevalence

Empirical studies on migration in Cambodia highlight that a significant portion of migrants to Thailand experience their first migration during youth (Jampaklay and Kittisuksathit 2009), and that migration is common among children and young people in migrant sending regions (ILO 2005; Morris 2007; Acharya 2003). For example in a household survey in Banteay Meanchey province, just east of the Thai border and only fifteen kilometers west of Chanleas Dai, twenty-eight percent of randomly sampled youth had prior experience working in Thailand. The same survey found that there has been a nine-fold increase in the number of school dropouts in the past five years, which the researchers related to the increasing prevalence of migration to Thailand. Youth reported that the top two factors leading them to leave school were parents needing help with work and parents specifically asking them to leave school, presumably also for work abroad or at home.

In Chanleas Dai, recent school drop-out rates offer a general indicator of the prevalence of youth migration. Until recently it has been relatively rare for young people in the area to move past 6th grade. To do so meant an 8-20 kilometer commute to the local secondary school, on an unpaved road that was particularly unforgiving to bicycle tires. Moreover, school was costly, as teachers routinely collected informal fees for required tests, extra classes, and attendance. In 2009, the government constructed a lower secondary school, at the center of the commune, within walking distance or a short bike ride for most students. PEPY, the organization I worked with also began supplementary classes and projects at this site, including a Khmer library, English classes, XO computer-based “creative learning classes” and various other projects. Though over one hundred students enrolled in 7th grade in 2009, in April 2010 only two thirds of those returned to 8th grade. With one exception, the principal reported that they had all left school to

migrate to Thailand. As reported by school principals, most who finished 6th grade but did not continue on to lower secondary school were also in Thailand working.

Though school attendance and drop-out rates are notoriously manipulated by school directors to improve their numbers and/or seek greater national funding, I obtained valid recent statistics from one primary and two lower secondary school through NGO staff and teachers in the area.⁷⁰ I asked not only about dropout rates, but also the reason given for the student's drop out, which teachers nearly always knew. Table 8.1, below shows the drop-out rates for each grade from the start of the school year in October 2010 and its completion in July 2011, with the percentage of students who reported migration to Thailand as the cause for dropping out. Though very high, this number likely underestimates the importance of migration, as for several students, the alternative reasons reported were also, albeit indirectly. For example, several students noted they were needed at home to take care of younger siblings or older grandparents, as their parents were in Thailand. It should also be noted that this school has significantly higher enrolment and retention rates than lower secondary schools in nearby communes, as a result of of PEPY's NGO programming. Other nearby schools with similar populations had a starting Grade 7 enrollment that was less than 30% of the enrollment at Chanleas Dai Lower Secondary, and one nearby secondary school was in danger of closing as a result of migration patterns and attrition.

Table 8.1: Chanleas Dai Lower Secondary Drop-Outs, October 2010- July 2011				
	Year Start	Year End	Drop-Outs	% of drop-outs reporting migration as cause
Grade 9	45	35	10	90%
Grade 8	76	55	20	70%
Grade 7	117	77	40	65%

⁷⁰ At others, school directors gave statistics that were blatantly wrong, either noting that no students had dropped out, or that only one or two had. Based on discussions with teachers and my own observations this was clearly incorrect. There are understandable reasons for this dishonesty, as school budgets are given by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport on the basis of the reported numbers of enrolled and retained students. Thus school directors have incentives to inflate attendance and enrollment figures, and do so regularly.

Statistics from the primary school (Grades 1-6) indicated lower numbers of out-migration among students but still noted migration as being the primary reason for drop-outs. One area primary school reported that all students who dropped out had migrated to Thailand. At another school, dropout rates for each grade were between 15-25%, meaning that a roughly one in four to five students didn't complete the school year. Approximately half of the students who had dropped out in each grade had done so to migrate to Thailand, typically with family members. Moreover, often students would finish out the year and then migrate, a pattern that teachers noted was common and led to generally shrinking class sizes over the course of primary and secondary school (notable in Table 8.1 also).

Youth Aspirations

As I spoke with young people about Thailand, I found that migration holds a variety of diverse and often contradictory meanings for youth. Most commonly, youth told me they “had to go”, that there was “nothing for me here”, that “poverty” or “my family’s situation” “made me go”. Yet underneath the oft-cited primary motivation of chronic household poverty, youth shared a wealth of factors that prompted their migrations. Often in the course of our conversations they admitted that these secondary factors were as or more important than the catch-all “poverty” reasoning that was most often given as the impetus for migration. They also articulated a contradictory love/hate relationship with their own migration experiences.

Migration was “a last resort,” but also “a lucky opportunity”; the “best way to wealth,” but also “the only thing we can do here”; a “way to support the family” and also a “way to be on my own,” an “alternative to boredom,” a “chance to live an exciting life,” “the way we become beautiful,” a “dangerous risk” and also “an easy life,” complete with working hours and days off. Often, it was all of the above within a single conversation. As one teenage migrant put it, going to Thailand is “half easy, half difficult; half fun, half terrible.” Though the tension between wanting to remain in the village and the draw of

migration pulled differently for each person I spoke with, there was a consistency in the way that most youth visualized their future: Thailand.

In order to show the diverse and ambivalent meanings that migration holds for young people, in the next section of this chapter I share pieces of the migration stories from youth from Chanleas Dai.⁷¹ Their contradictory justifications, family situations, dreams and migration experiences represent both the thematic similarities and unique voices I came across during my research. Each show, in a slightly different way, the way that individual desires mix with external constraints, including family expectations, household debt, a lack of viable alternatives, and pressures for social mobility via migration. By exploring how youth view opportunities abroad in relation to alternative education and livelihood strategies, I show how a strong culture of migration shapes and mitigates potential futures for young people. I further argue that this culture of migration shapes the potential for development in Chanleas Dai, as young people are encouraged towards and then become invested in future migrations rather than village-based alternatives.

Phia's Story

Phia a 16-year-old, first migrated when she was eleven or twelve, alongside her parents who were working in the construction industry. She has been back and forth several times since and plans to return shortly. Our conversation was typical of the way young people described migration decisions: full of contradiction and a complex mix of individual desires and family pressures.

I lived with my parents here in the village, but they wanted to go to Thailand and so I stayed with my grandmother for a bit and they went first. There was nothing for us here, so they left....The first two or three times [that I went to Thailand] I wanted to go there myself, but then I didn't want to go back. That's when my parents asked me to go, encouraged it again. I felt bad. I knew it was unfair; I was living in the

⁷¹ The two young people highlighted, Sinut and Phia are each former migrants who were on "breaks" back at home, and planned to return soon.

village while my parents were out working hard under the sun. I was eating and sleeping and doing nothing else, living happily. It wasn't right. So, I decided to go back too...I had no choice and I needed money to buy food to eat....Every year I would tell my parents that I wanted to register for school. Each time I saw people riding their bikes to schools, I was a little disappointed in myself. I always dreamed of getting a high education and then going to work in some business or organization. Mostly I feel unlucky----because I didn't have the chance to finish my studies and had to take care of my younger brothers and sisters.”

Phia has migrated both with her family and alone, and has worked alongside relatives close to the border, with her parents in Bangkok, and also by herself in the tourism industry in Pattaya, working as a cleaner in an upscale hotel. She's also been to school, though intermittently. In the past, whenever she has returned for periods of time to the village she will join classes, though she thinks she is too old for this now. Phia's initial justification of her migration highlights several important themes, which each were common among young people I spoke with: a strong curiosity about Thailand, a perceived lack of opportunities for work in the village, and an internalized accepted obligation to contribute to the household economy.

Someday You'll go to Thailand too

In Cambodia, most children are involved in productive work from the age of ten or younger (World Bank 2005; UCW 2006; Chan and Acharya 2002) and within households there is a tacit understanding that children have a responsibility to help their parents make ends meet. Whether spoken or not, young people in Chanleas Dai are clearly expected to contribute to the household economy, in whatever ways their particular household makes ends meet, most often helping with farming, taking cows out to graze, or looking after younger siblings or household work while parents are away at the fields or markets. Cultural expectations and social norms around children's expected contributions hold considerable power in influencing youth decisions when parents suggest or encourage migration. It is not uncommon for parents to exert pressure on children, either explicitly or tacitly, to support both stability and social mobility for the

family. As Veau, the parent of a young migrant, noted parents often “wish their children grew up faster” so they could start contributing to the household economy sooner. Though youth were often hesitant to directly express to me that their own migrations were the result of parental pressure, when I asked about the reasons that other young people migrated, the most common response referenced parents’ desires. For their part, parents admittedly encouraged migration, though this was not perceived as exerting undue influence or power, but rather an acknowledgement of the household’s situation and young people’s responsibilities within it. Savy, the mother of several migrant youth who noted she was happy with her school-age children migrating for work, expressed a typical justification for supporting her children’s desires to migrate:

“I don’t force them to go. If they want to go, I will let them go. It depends on them, as I can’t give them any money. They can make their own decisions. If they want to make money, they can go. If they don’t want to make money, they can stay in the village. I don’t say anything at all.”

Yet parents’ opinions mattered a great deal, and most youth migrants reported some kind of perceived family pressure to migrate, though often indirect. In contrast, those who stayed in school often reported their parents explicitly not allowing them to migrate. Where parents exerted influence, in either direction, they were typically successful, a reflection on the traditional family hierarchy still present in most of rural Cambodia. Most social structures in Cambodia have strong and well-understood hierarchies built into them, with power dynamics and expectations a direct reflection of one’s position in family, institutional, or social hierarchies (Jacobsen 2008).

Sobin, a primary school teacher, noted that these influences are understood even when, and perhaps especially when, unspoken. For Sobin, the culture of rural Cambodia and the low perceived value of education within it means that a parent’s expressed neutral position is a tacit push for children to leave school and migrate. Valuing education over work and household contribution is simply not the norm. Therefore saying nothing, he believed, is just as effective as explicitly encouraging youth to go. Moreover, when other

influences were openly encouraging youth migration, parents didn't need to pressure youth overtly, since that culture, which parents are highly attuned to, pushes them towards Thailand. He noted: "some people say things [to students] like why do you want to study while your parents are working hard in Thailand, working hard for you? [Hearing that], of course they want to go." Moreover, Sobin argued, many parents show their tacit support for migration through a clear example: their absence. He estimated forty percent of students in primary schools in the area have one or more parents abroad in Thailand and are in the care of extended family.⁷²

One particular exchange highlighted just how common it was for youth to be oriented towards Thailand by parents even from a young age. I was visiting with Sami, nineteen and a nursing mother, as she rocked her 6-month-old daughter Mao to sleep. Sami had been to Thailand once, when she was just a teenager but her husband, who works for a local NGO is against her going again. "He says I have to choose between him and Thailand. But I think maybe sometime I will still go." She laughs as if she's joking, but her comments underscore the strength of her interest and her expectation. The conversation was interrupted for a moment, as the baby gurgled and spit and Sami picked her up and held her. "Sometimes," she smiled looking more at her daughter than me "sometimes, I sing her to sleep...[by singing] Mao, you will go to Thailand too when you grow up someday."

That parents suggest, encourage, and influence migration decisions is not unique to the Cambodian context. Research with transnational families in the United States suggests that adults have considerable influence over when and how children migrate (Orellana et al 2002). Moreover, research suggests that families are often strategizing collectively through seeking out migration opportunities either with or explicitly for their children (Orellana et al 2002). While traditional western views minimize (and rightfully, problematize) the collective interests of families as a category of analysis, collective

⁷²These estimates, or ones close to it were repeated by other teachers and NGO workers. Past research in Cambodia research supports that the physical presence of adult parents in the household increases children's propensity to attend school (World Bank 2005).

connections and the improvement of a family's future position as a unit is often vitally important in understanding how parents exert influence (Orellana et al 2002). As Orellana et al (2002: 587) note: "Sometimes families may temporarily neglect the needs or presumed needs of their children (or, in the eyes of some observers, appear to be neglectful) in order to open up possibilities for their futures." In the context of Chanleas Dai, parents perceive few options for young people beyond Thailand, thus their influences are to promote alternatives which will bring more collective status, mobility, wealth, and security to households.

People here are Ambitious

Alongside Phia's desire to contribute to the family economy, (and her guilt when she was not) she also had individual aspirations of her own which made migration valuable, aimed at reducing both real and imagined relative status vis-à-vis friends and neighbors. These centered on both economic potentials and non-economic intangibles. Phia planned to return to Thailand again shortly, explaining to me "[If] we work here, we can't earn almost anything. I mean we can earn enough to survive; but we can't afford buying houses or other things....People here are ambitious – we want to have more."

Phia's perception of ambition as central to "the way people are" in the area was stressed frequently by young people, with numerous references to the common desires of youth to "be as rich as others"; "avoid being looked down on"; "have cool things"; "show off"; "buy expensive things"; "build a big house"; and "have as much as others have". These ambitions were only attainable through migration.⁷³ However like most research

⁷³ These stated desires are in relatively strong contrast to traditional conceptions of Khmer culture. In 2000, the historian Philip Short wrote: "Theravada Buddhism never placed much value on the acquisition and consumption of wealth. [Former King] Sihanouk has recounted the experience of an American aid expert in the 1950s who convinced a group of villagers to use chemical fertilizer, promising it would enable them to double rice production: 'Sure enough, at harvest time, the yield was doubled. Everyone was delighted...[But] when the official came back [the following year] he was horrified to find that each peasant had cultivated only half his land. 'Why,' said the peasants 'cultivate the entire area when you can get just as much by cultivating half?'"... Once the peasant farmers he employed had earned enough for the year, they stopped work, and neither blandishments nor the promise of more money could make them start again. 'From their point of view it was logical...Once they had paid their family's expenses—seed for the

that explores the consequences of a dominant culture of migration, my discussions with youth highlight that migration is valued both for its potential to bring economic gain as well as its non-quantifiable social benefits. Ambition was not only about money, but also about worldliness, status, and accessing a more modern life and exciting. Though Phia at one point in our conversation told me that all she wanted was to stay in the village, and that she “never experienced happiness” in Thailand, for most of our discussion she was excited and animated describing her lifestyle abroad.

“It was so exciting that I almost forgot Cambodia. There were big supermarkets like I’ve never seen. We had jobs, so we always had money in our pockets. With 20 baht we could buy whatever we liked-- a cup of ice cream or a piece of cake. I always had 1,000 baht each time I went to the markets. I sometimes spent all the money in one day. I saw beautiful clothes and foods, so I bought things. In the past I had no money for expensive things like jewelry, but now I have many things. In Thailand we can do whatever we want. Now, when I think about farming, I’m just so tired. City life is so exciting.”

Phia was clearly proud of the things she could purchase with her wages, noting that now she “had money to spend” and had “expensive clothing and jewelry like everyone else.” She was animated, admitting that she often spent everything she earned quickly, and talked at length about the stylish things she could find in the markets and streets. Across the village young people typically returned home with trendy Thai haircuts, cell phones, stylish clothing, jewelry, piercings, and at times large tattoos. Many (by their own description) had whiter skin than before, an indication of beauty and status attained by virtue of working and living in the shade.⁷⁴ When migrant youth returned, they provided a compelling example for their peers, a visually stunning

next planting; fertilizer; clothing; offerings to the monks; school fees for the children—what would they spend it on? There was nothing more they wanted (Short 2004: 295). To what extent this is a valid interpretation of Khmer culture is arguable, however Short’s interpretation mirrors the way that village elders described life from the early 90’s to around 2004, when migration began growing more exponentially and influxes of migrant wealth led to greater perceptions of disparity and relative deprivation

⁷⁴ Pale or light skin color is often associated with beauty in Cambodian culture, but also is a symbol of wealth and status, as it is linked to work indoors, and thus distinguishes those with higher status jobs from those working in agriculture.

different potential future. Non-migrant young people described their migrating peers with hints of awe and respect. Srey Chen, a twenty-two year old non-migrant, comes from a family where no one works in Thailand, a result of her parent's strong will against it. Both Srey Chen and her older brother have had migration aspirations, and her brother once even packed his things and called a *meekjal*. However their mother pleaded with him not to leave, and after a sleepless night, he decided to stay. Srey Chen never went so far as to pack her bags, but when she talks about Thailand her eyes tilt down and her words become soft : “[migrants], they have money, they get to play and hang out at night, and they're beautiful too. If they work inside in the factory, their skin is so light when they come back, you see them so beautiful with money, and you want it too.”

While home, migrant youth complained about the boring, unexciting food, the lack of things to do, the dust and dirt, the distance to the market, and the lack of friends and young people around. As one young man put it: “It's so silent here. And here it's so dusty that I can't wear my nice clothes, because they get too dirty.” Often young people reported feeling ill at ease in the village, unsure of how to comport themselves after having been in such a different environment. Parents noticed as well, remarking that their migrant children often didn't know what to do in the village, and didn't like to remain at home very long before returning.

Similarly, Phia plans to return shortly, ostensibly to help her family earn money for a new wooden home, though she admits that in part it's simply that she wouldn't know what else to do. She's missed too much school for that to be an option and she wouldn't know how to make a living in the village. Thailand is what she knows best, in some ways, all she feels comfortable with. She thinks migration has been good for her family, and explicitly tells me they are better off. Yet she recognizes that she has given something up, though I wondered if she was saying this only for my benefit, knowing of my role in PEPY's education programs. “We earn money in Thailand, but we are illiterate in return....Nothing is good about migrating to Thailand, except money. We learn nothing.”

Debts and Headaches

Research to date focusing on youth and cultures of migration affirms that even within areas with a strong migration tradition, where dispositions are shaped by the overarching presence of migration, youth exhibit agency to resist migratory pressures.⁷⁵ Individual agency is also clearly expressed by young people in Chanleas Dai, with a substantial minority choosing to remain in school or simply to stay in the village despite the pull of peers and “the modern life”, and often at the exasperation of family members seeking extra income.⁷⁶ Yet a complicating factor for many youth is debt; either theirs individually or that of their family.⁷⁷ In Chanleas Dai, debt necessarily compels migration, as there is little secure potential to earn the kind of regular income that monthly (or even annual) interest payments require, except via wage labor abroad or the sale of assets, typically a last resort.

As discussed in the previous chapter, many households in Chanleas Dai are indebted, either to village-based moneylenders, microfinance institutions, or both.⁷⁸ For some, indebtedness is a result of agricultural shock, illness, or failed migrations. However in recent years household loans have also grown increasingly common for home construction/renovation and the purchase of motorbikes. These purchases are related to a desire for social mobility; spurred by visible migrant successes and the sense that household remittances will be relatively secure sources of income to repay loans. They have been made possible through the rapid expansion of microcredit throughout Cambodia over the past decade, in a context that Bateman (2010) calls the ideal example of a “microfinance saturated country.” In Chanleas Dai, these newly accessible loans are

⁷⁵ In a similar vein, research supports that child and youth migration decisions are also expressions of agency, rather than passive decisions made by parents and forced on young people (See Iverson 2002)

⁷⁶ This had particularly shifted in recent years through the construction of a new secondary school in the village and strong NGO programming aimed at young people.

⁷⁷ Young people cannot typically borrow either formally or informally until they have families of their own. Yet some youth had loans they understood as their responsibility, for purchases they wanted and persuaded their parents to borrow for on their behalf.

⁷⁸ Chanleas Dai is no outlier in this respect, high levels of household indebtedness are common throughout Cambodian rural areas (Chan and Acharya 2002)

typically taken with the explicit intention of being repaid through the migration of one or more household members, most often youth.

Whether indebtedness is a result of a shock or failures, or an intentional choice to build a home, household debt leads to tremendous pressure on young people to migrate. Parents, when discussing these types of loans, not uncommonly 100,000-200,000 baht (3,000-6,000 USD) note that “young people can earn money fast over there” such that there is little concern about holding large amounts of debt. Many youth migrants I spoke with noted that household debt played a role in their migration in some way, whether spurring their initial migration, or serving to sustain it later on. Chanleas Dai’s culture of migration arguably sustains and enables rural indebtedness, as households begin and continue borrowing in ways that would be impossible relying only on village-based strategies. When village-based strategies (or migrations) fail and households are driven to borrow or unable to repay current debts, migration is considered the only viable option to regain wealth, or to guard against land or asset sale.

This then also shifts the opportunity for youth agency- constraining choice such that young people feel compelled towards migration in powerful ways, related not only to peer or status pressures but also to household obligations. One young man noted that even being at home for a short break made him anxious, knowing the debts of his mother continued to rack up interest while he spent time at home without a wage. “I can’t sleep well here. I always have a headache when I think of [our debt].” Another young woman, commenting on how her spending habits in Thailand have led to an initial migration debt spiraling out of control, noted that she felt like she would be migrating forever, “paying back debts until my head is bald.”

Parents often encouraged children to migrate to repay household debts, sometimes subtly, at other times more explicitly. Leat, in her mid-40’s has three children, all of whom are now in Thailand. The family has two hectares of land, but with the high costs of fertilizer and two years out of the past three where drought and flood led to crop failure, she went to Thailand a few years ago to repay her debts, alongside her husband and oldest son. Once they had paid back loans and saved a bit, they returned home and

constructed a new house, costing in total more than 100,000 baht (3,000 USD). Half was paid through saved migration money and the sale of two prize cows, and Leat borrowed the rest, an advance on the remittances she knew her children would quickly earn. Leat encouraged their two daughters to go to Thailand with the rest of the family to help repay the loan more quickly. While the younger daughter complied, the oldest fought her mother, continuing to ride her bike to the lower secondary school each day. Leat gave several *tsks* when she told me about her strong-willed oldest daughter and her aspirations for education. In this case, Leat eventually got her way. After a period of time, and explicit pressure from the family, her older daughter left school and followed the rest of the family abroad. With several sets of hands working and earning, they repaid their initial debts quickly. Leat, now back in the village permanently, has continued to borrow, “for this and that” she says, including additions to the home, several pigs, and food. Her children and her husband continue to remit money home to repay the principal and interest rates on her loans.

Even when debt doesn’t specifically compel migration, it often ensured its continuation. Sinut, in his mid-twenties, is younger than me but jokes that his face looks so much older than mine. It’s true that his face shows more stress and years in the sun than it should for his age. He smiled as he told me “I think I look old because I’m always carrying heavy things. That work, it’s like it sits on my face.” While he is being literal, Sinut also carries a metaphorical burden of debt. He has migrated more times than he remembers, beginning when he stopped schooling in Grade 5 and migrated only weeks after. Overage for his grade, he thinks he was sixteen or so at the time. He acknowledges that there was an implicit assumption that his family expected him to migrate once he was old enough to earn, but also tells me that it was something he wanted for himself. “It’s both, he said. “When we see others earning money, we want to earn some money too.” Shortly after Sinut started migrating alongside his brothers and sisters, his parents built a new house, primarily financed through two loans; one informal loan mortgaging their rice fields for cash to a local moneylender and another through a microfinance institution in Kralanh. Building their home ensured Sinut’s continued migration, as he

understood that repaying the debts depended on his and his siblings work abroad. “If we don’t go to work in Thailand, we will become slaves”⁷⁹ ...These days we’re all borrowing. And then there’s nowhere to earn, only in Thailand.”

Recent increases in large-scale household borrowing are related to patterns of migration, but are also influenced by the growing ease of borrowing in the area, through the recent and rapid expansion of Cambodia’s microfinance sector. Area microfinance organizations, actively seeking portfolio expansion, encourage household borrowing, regardless of how funds are repaid. While unable to explicitly encourage the migration of *borrowers* as a debt-repayment scheme for loans, loan officers considered the migration of borrowers’ children a “successful strategy” for loan repayment. One sub-branch manager of an area MFI reported that in one of the villages in the commune 70% of his borrowers had children working in Thailand to help repay loans, noting this as a positive example of strategic borrowing.

Like the vast majority of others in the community, Sinut has no intention of living and settling in Thailand. “I’d be homesick,” he says. “I’d miss the fields, my parents, everything.” Yet he imagines he will keep going for the rest of his life. “I suppose I’ll go until I can’t work anymore, (laughs) then, I’ll have to stop.” Yet he clearly appreciates the ease of life abroad. He spoke at length about the running water, the electricity, the lack of need to cut firewood, the cleanliness, the feeling of participating in something modern, and the general simplicity of life. Even after nearly a decade of travel between Thailand and Cambodia, he still spoke as if he could hardly believe the difference between his experiences abroad and the current realities he saw around him in the village. “Every vegetable is available in every season ...there is shade everywhere and you can get everything you need no matter where you are. The rural areas are just like the cities.”

While his wife used to make mats and grow vegetables, now they just rely on the harvest and Sinut’s work abroad. In her option, the other small, piecemeal work she used to do doesn’t seem profitable enough to be worth the work. The family holds just half a

⁷⁹ A reference to the potential loss of land if he cannot pay back loans

hectare of rice fields, and after eight years abroad, Sinut still has only the most basic equipment for farming, no food security for his family in the village, no toilet or water filter, and relies on pump water from about a kilometer away. But he feels migration is improving his life. Just on his last return home, this month bought a 1,600 dollar motorbike—a Honda Dream 2010. When I asked what it was for he smiled and told me “To ride. To go to the market, or to go around the village”. Sinut says he’s saved for a long time for this---when he goes to Thailand his folks will keep the motorbike at the house for him.

I’ll keep studying and then I’ll go to Thailand

A further issue constraining the perceived choices of young people is the context of Cambodia’s education system. Two diverging narratives, both affected by migration, framed discourses around education among young people in Chanleas Dai and their parents. The first highlighted the promise of education, but the difficulties in achieving it; pointing to the high cost of schooling, the difficulty of success on national exams, and the competing needs families had for youth to work, pay back debts, or help out around the house. Education was considered valuable, but not accessible given the high costs, and the rest of the demands of daily life, particularly debt. A second, competing narrative, (one less commonly articulated outright), viewed education as yet another non-viable strategy, promoted by governments and NGO’s but of no use in actually providing for mobility or leading to jobs. These discourses focused on the low quality of teaching and the lack of available jobs even for those who did complete education. They also highlighted that few jobs were as lucrative as work abroad.

Looking at examples of graduates from the village, there was some truth in both narratives. Clearly education was associated with the ability to get a job. Those with jobs in Siem Reap or in the village with schools or NGOs held at least 9th grade certificates, if not 12th grade degrees. Most government posts required higher education, and it was difficult obtain one of the few paying jobs in the district without some level of

education. Yet while those with jobs typically had credentials, credentials didn't mean immediate or ideal jobs. Twelfth grade graduates of the local high school often completed their education and returned to the village jobless, remaining so for months, and at times years. Most commonly, they were aspiring teachers, but it was nearly impossible to pass the national teacher exam and several students had tried and failed multiple times. While higher skills did lead to a wider option of jobs, the links to finding and attaining those jobs were elusive, slow, and often costly. Moreover, even the jobs one *could* get with education in the area didn't compete in terms of salary with what one could make doing manual labor across the border. As one 6th teacher lamented, his drop-out students, without a primary education could make more money in a month than he could after ten years as a teacher.

Thus while education was understood as desirable and a means towards long-term mobility, it was simultaneously regarded as a risky, problematic investment.⁸⁰ Together, these two narratives structured most decisions prioritizing migration over continued education. Even students who described themselves as motivated to achieve a high education and those with NGO or government scholarships often chose to migrate rather than complete a lower or upper secondary degree. Where students did continue their education, there was often a sense that this was simply delaying the inevitable. Sary, one of the three young people studying in high school in her village shared with me her dreams for the future. "I really want to continue my education" she began. "It is important for me and I love studying. I'll study until I finish grade 12, and then I'll go to Thailand." Her mother, who had just expressed her frustration to me that her daughter was still pursuing her education, nodded approvingly.

Many youth migrants recognized that dropping out of school limited their choices, at times expressing regret. One young man, who dropped out in 7th grade, returned home and told his teacher he had chosen the wrong path, "trading fun for his future" as reported

⁸⁰ International discourses mirror the competing narratives above and highlight the problematic nature of the relationship between education and labor opportunities: that job creation requires high skilled individuals yet that high skills won't become valuable until they are complemented by expanded, decent job opportunities. (See Morris 2007 for an example of this type of discourse).

by his teacher. The teacher tried to convince him to return to school, but the student felt it was too late, as he was too old for his grade now and had missed too much. Another young woman, Serei, who had reached 9th grade before dropping out put it this way

“[migration] is cool, but just for a short time. When we study, it’s for a long time. When we finally get to do something, it is really something. It’s like a plant. The ones who go to Thailand is like planting morning glory, or spinach where we get a quick result but it’s finished quickly. For the ones who study, it’s like planting a mango tree. When it grows up, it becomes fruitful. Even if we don’t water it, it still provides.”

Certainly, the problem of school attrition is not only present in migrant communities. Primary and secondary school attrition is common across rural Cambodia,⁸¹ and work, either at home, in another province, or abroad often pulls children away from school.⁸² Yet the decision-making frames around completing school vs. work in communities where migration is a viable, common alternative is substantively different in several important ways. Research in Cambodia increasingly shows that in rural communities young people can and often do participate in both household/agricultural work and schooling together successfully (Kana et al 2010). Thus as quality of education improves and incentives to complete education increase, we might expect to see higher levels of school retention, without problematic trade-offs to children’s ability to contribute to the household economy. In other words, where they are incentivized to both complete school and contribute to household work, children often manage to do both with relative success. Yet this navigation is near impossible when work expectations are abroad.

Moreover, the potential for social mobility through migration and the status associated with work abroad substantively change the perceived trade-off of education,

⁸¹ National data from CSES in 2004 indicate that while school enrolment has increased since the 90’s, rates of primarily and lower secondary enrolment remain low, at 76 percent and 16.4 percent respectively (Kim 2009).

⁸² In both 1999 and 2004 children’s work activities were the most frequent reason for non-attendance (Kim 2009).

and clearly matter to young people. Where uneducated youth can make a higher salary than the typical high school or college graduate in Siem Reap, there is little incentive to invest time and resources into formal education.

Increased disparities of wealth within the village and the resulting feelings of relative deprivation also matter, not only for youth but also for parents and the way they orient and promote particular choices for their children. That relative deprivation matters for education has been empirically verified through the World Bank's 2005 finding that in Cambodia school drop-out rates are higher in communes with higher levels of inequality (World Bank 2005).

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that social context shapes youth decision-making in Chanleas Dai, not only through the generalized valorization of migration, but also through specific social, cultural and economic constraints youth perceive as obligating migration; namely household debt, cultural expectations around child contribution to the household economy, and a lack of meaningful alternatives through education. These findings complicate common perceptions and expectations of how households seek to invest in children through education. In 1998, Basu and Van published an article in the *American Economic Review* hypothesizing what they called the "luxury axiom" according to which parents send their children to work only if poverty forces them to do so, and when given the choice would always opt for educating their children. As they note:

“children's leisure or, more precisely, *nonwork* is a luxury good in the household's consumption in the sense that a poor household cannot afford to consume this good but it does so as soon as the household income rises sufficiently.” (Basu and Van 1998: 415)

International organizations in Cambodia suggest that parents use a similar rational calculus of decision-making:

Even if parents are in favor of educating their children, their decisions are likely to be influenced by the given labor market returns to education. When making choices, parents also consider the relationship between education outcomes (e.g. years of education completed) and schooling time, as well as the supply and quality of school inputs...Parents must finally adjust their choices to what the household can afford at a given point in time, *particularly if access to credit is limited*. (World Bank 2005: 50, emphasis added)

When I began my research, I expected to find a similar pattern with regards to youth migration in Chanleas Dai. I assumed that children would migrate only when it was necessary for the survival of their family, and that adult migration likely was used as a strategy to promote education or opportunities for younger generations. What I found was a much more complex and nuanced picture, one in which children's dreams and desires, consumption and debt, parent's networks and past migrations, peer pressure, education quality, and environmental realities encouraged the sustained migration of young people. Poverty, and its counter of *krop* (enough, sufficiency) were self-defined, relative, and significantly influenced by migration. Moreover, instead of credit allowing access to education and consumption smoothing to allow youth to remain in school (an expectation implied by the World Bank quote above), credit access often spurred the migration of young people, encouraged to migrate to pay back household debts.

These findings resonate with recent research on child work and schooling in Cambodia. Kim (2009) notes that while child work is common across Cambodia, children from wealthier households began working at earlier ages than those in the lowest wealth quintiles. Moreover, households with more land were more likely to have higher rates of child work. Kim argues that with reference to the child work and poverty discourses, this suggests a disconnect between the "conventional wisdom"⁸³ of policy makers and the realities of rural families, arguing that Cambodian policy makers overestimate the extent to which child work or child labor is driven by poverty.

My work suggests a similar disconnect. While youth migration is at times a response to severe distress and poverty, the argument that youth migration is obligated

⁸³ Galbraith 1958

primarily by poverty simplifies a much more nuanced and complex reality. Rather, as I have shown in this chapter, youth migration is linked to a web of social expectations, cultural norms, and individual desires. Young people express strong ambivalences towards migration, pointing out the benefits they enjoy while abroad but also the perceived lack of alternatives they have beyond Thailand. Most articulate that their migration choices were constrained, not by an objective level of poverty but by a web of interconnected orientations: their individual desires for money, status and a more modern life; the social expectations of parents around contributing to the household economy whether for survival, stability, or social mobility; the anxiety around increasingly common household debts; and perceptions about a lack of meaningful alternatives through education or village-based production. The availability of migrant remittances and “easy money” from short-term work in Thailand strengthens this disposition, leading to strong pressures for consumer goods, the accumulation of family debt and parental encouragement of youth migration to help pay for debt principals and interest, possible only through migration. Even where alternatives may be present and possible, they are perceived as temporary, risky, or less ideal because of the social and cultural context around education, child work, and debt.

Thus beyond the compelling draw of modern life and valorization of wage labor abroad, youth often migrate in the context of very constrained alternatives. As livelihoods have become more precarious in the village, migration is seen as the least risky alternative. At the same time, as migrations are successful, feelings of relative deprivation and desire for social mobility via migration encourage continued migration, and often continued borrowing. This culture of migration has implications not only for the persistence of migration patterns but also for the potential that migration has to contribute to the development of human capital in migrant sending areas.

Certainly, human capital is not built exclusively through formal education. Migration could, and in some ways certainly is building the human capital of adult and youth migrants alike. While working in Thailand, most people acknowledged that they have learned new skills, many of which are relevant in their home communities. Often

young people learn Thai to a functional fluency, and can use this skill to gain better positions and jobs within Thailand or in border areas of Cambodia. Many also learn practical skills such as pig farming, pineapple planting, or cooking which can then be used in the future in different capacities. Yet these skills are valuable for sending communities only in as much as they are recognized and put to use upon return. During my fieldwork I saw rare examples of this among young people. In an insightful example, during a focus group discussion with teenage migrants home for the Khmer New Year holiday, I asked six young people to describe to me some of the skills they had learned in Thailand during their time there. “I haven’t learned anything” one girl told me. When I probed about the work she had been doing, and asked if any of these skills were new to her, she admitted that there were things she had learned. “But nothing that would be any use here,” she countered. “Even if it’s the same thing, that I could do here, it’s not possible to make a living doing anything here.” Her friend, a young man who had returned from a year working as a cement mixer in Bangkok countered that he had learned some new things. “Before, I didn’t know how to dance or how to *dahling* (hang out, or play). I didn’t know how to drink either. Now I know,” he laughed, and instigated a fit of giggles from his peers. The extent to which young people see little meaning or potential in the skills they have learned, besides to dance and *dahling*, highlights their focus on migration as an end in itself, not a means to any kind of alternate end.

CHAPTER 9: LOOKING ELSEWHERE

“If you plant mangoes, you cannot get papayas”
-Khmer Proverb

In Chanleas Dai both migrants and non-migrants are continually negotiating migration choices: to go or to stay, when and for how long, how to spend remittances or migra-loans, how to justify remaining at home, and how to ensure that household goals are met either through migration or some alternative. Within these discourses, migration is generally valued beyond its economic potential for a complex web of reasons: the perceptions of the village as a non-productive and relatively risky space for investment, a culture of migration that confers status and position to migrants, a widening gap between wealthier and poorer households that incites shame and leads to increased desire for consumption, a growing access to credit allowing for (and explicitly encouraging) this type of consumption but requiring wage labor to sustain it, and a strong desire for wage labor, to the point that doing nothing is often preferable to the types of small-scale piecemeal livelihoods tradition to the area.

Given these perceptions and goals, the most feasible livelihood strategies are perceived as *elsewhere*; that is, anywhere besides the village. In the case of Chanleas Dai, that *elsewhere* is Thailand. In the case of other similar rural communities around the country, it is Phnom Penh, Vietnam, or the garment factories of in Kandal and Takeo. While Chanleas Dai is relatively exceptional in the scope of its migration, its experiences of environmental distress and in its relative remoteness to urban centers, I expect that it is an illustrative example representing a multitude of similar communities both within and outside of Cambodia, particularly those characterized by low levels of infrastructure, economic or environmental marginality, weak education systems, and poor infrastructure.

While explicitly and solely about Chanleas Dai then, this dissertation is not only the story of one community’s culture of migration. Rather, it is a story of how migrants and non-migrants are influenced by both the local and the global as they seek out security and status in communities where local livelihoods are precarious. By highlighting

migrant and non-migrant perceptions of education, investment, consumption and borrowing, I have argued that social context is critical in understanding how migration decision-making. When migrants make choices; about migration, about consumption, about productive investment or education etc., they consider not only the risk, insecurity, status, and reward of leaving, but also the risk, insecurity, status, and reward of local alternatives. This can vary dramatically over both space and time, and can be quite dynamic. However better accounting for the role of context in mediating decision-making is critical we want to better understand either migration choices or the impacts of migration on development.

In my introduction I stated that this case study sought to explore situations where the realities of local experiences are contrary to what existing theory would predict. In this concluding chapter I return to this idea, clarifying some of the disconnects between theory and the lived experiences of migrants in Chanleas Dai, and using these disconnects to argue that a more complete understanding of decision-making processes is important in understanding the potential for development in migrant communities.

Present, Perceived, Preferred Alternatives

Much work focused on migration and development makes arguments and recommendations which build on the assumption that households will see their rural communities as places able to support and sustain productive investments. Thus typical recommendations from both academics and policy makers focus on making migration work for development through improving the quality of institutions, based on the belief that the best way for governments to ensure growth through migration is to ensure that a greater proportion of remittances are channelled effectively back to local investment (Catrinescu et al 2009). In Maltoni's (2010) report on Cambodian migration for example, the policy recommendation highlights that governments could improve the situation of migrant workers by focusing on legalizing the status of temporary migrants, giving access to formal banking channels and improving economic and business environment at home.

Where migrants can retain more of their earned income, and more easily put it to use *productively* at home, migration will have more lasting positive impacts on households and communities. Similarly, Hing et al (2011) recommend agricultural assistance (rice intensification, crop diversification), strengthening public services, development assistance and microfinance services for areas of high migration.

Hopefully the work of the preceding chapters has led readers to problematize the simplicity of some of these recommendations for places like Chanleas Dai, based on how they resonate with migrant and non-migrant perspectives, and how relevant they are for remote or environmentally distressed areas. Certainly legalizing the status of workers and improving financial services such that migrants can retain greater portions of their wages can mediate some of the inherent vulnerabilities and risks of irregular migration. Yet the efficacy of programs aimed at expanding access to formal banking services, or improving economic and business opportunities at home will only be as effective at encouraging productive investment in as much as they line up with household preferences, perceptions of risk, and the realities of resource, land access, and environmental patterns. This isn't to suggest that the above are poor policies, but rather to suggest that programs which simply seek to make local productive investment easier (small-scale agriculture training, microfinance, etc.) without challenging the risk, low-profit, or low status involved in these pursuits are unlikely to sufficiently challenge local distaste for them.

Put simply, migration and remittance spending decisions are intimately connected to the alternatives present, perceived, and preferred for individuals at home. Policies tend to focus on the former, shifting what options are present without being adequately concerned with how new alternatives are perceived and preferred. This is a critical area for reflection as there is evidence of migrant sending communities around the globe similar to Chanleas Dai in their character, where there is a local consensus that investing in that which is local is impossible, worthless, or unwise. In a study of Cape Verde, Carling and Akesson (2009) note the general local perception of “nothingness” of the homeland, a result of environmental “god-given conditions” that made upward mobility impossible. In that context, the authors argue that migration decision-making

“was not about possibilities for ‘making it’ in Cape Verde. On the contrary, it was presented as a choice between settling with modesty, within the limits permitted by the land, and yearning for what is seen as impossible on the islands.” Kalir (2005:176) writes about similar sentiments in Ecuador, discussing the “prevailing consensus about the hopeless situation of their country” a sentiment that was not based only on a harsh economic condition, but rather informed by the sense of relative deprivation and the material benchmarks set by former successful migrants.

Hope, hopelessness, and the potential reward perceived in migration alternatives will necessarily mediate any policy initiative aimed at discouraging migration, mediating vulnerability, and/or encouraging local investment and production. Over the course of my time in Chanleas Dai I encountered several compelling examples of this type of conflict, where policy or aid initiatives aimed at development intersected with local perceptions that problematized the intended outputs of those initiatives. In each case, what our theories of migration or development might have assumed was strongly mediated by the culture of migration present in the area.

Credit: Risky Business

Credit is the area of disconnect which I have discussed most extensively in this work. Microcredit in rural Cambodia is widely touted by NGOs, government, and microfinance organizations as a livelihood enhancing tool, meant to provide households with greater opportunities to expand production or to diversify income sources through entrepreneurship. Moreover well-accepted theories of migration argue that expanding access to credit within migrant sending areas will likely mediate the need for out-migration. Yet whereas microfinance institutions, migration theories, and policymakers expect credit to expand the potential of local investment and entrepreneurship, my data suggest that individuals in Chanleas Dai see credit as primarily of use in *supporting* migration-based strategies, and perceive borrowing as highly risky when it is not accompanied by the migration of a household member. Though the number of MFIs in

the area and their loan portfolios have risen consistently over the past ten years, this has done little to encourage households in Chanleas Dai to invest in local production instead of migration. In contrast MFI saturation and migration rates have risen in tandem according to local officials. As these chapters have shown, this has led to many households putting migration and borrowing to use as complementary livelihood strategies. Rather than being perceived both as diversification or investment strategies, both migration and borrowing are seen as strategies of coping with a lack of local alternatives, with one often requiring the other.

Perhaps the best way to understand why credit and migration have grown to be mutually enabling processes, rather than supplements as some theories would suggest, is in terms of relative risk. Migrant sending areas vary dramatically in terms of their infrastructure, environmental factors, demographics, culture, value systems, and labor markets, all of which organize the decisional context within which households choose livelihood strategies. In some areas, investing in what is local, regardless of credit access or infrastructure is far more of a gamble than the inherent risk of work abroad. Others have made this point explicitly as well:

“What seems essential is that remittances, just like any other source of additional income, potentially give migrants, households and communities greater freedom to concentrate their activities and to allocate investments to those economic sectors and places that they perceive as most stable and profitable. Thus, depending on the specific development context at the sending end, remittances may enable households to retreat from, just as much as to invest in, local economic activities.... Under unfavorable conditions remittances may hardly lead to investment and development, but instead to a retreat of migrants and their families from social and economic activities in the sending countries simply because remittances give them the freedom to do so (De Haas 2005: 1275).”

In Chanleas Dai, my evidence suggests that migration has allowed for a retreat from local economic activities, as migration is understood as more stable and profitable than that which is based on land, education or local markets. Scholars of rural development and those studying the peasant economy have long argued that rural

households are risk averse, and as a corollary, that the differential risk of particular investments or strategies will have an impact on their likelihood of being used (Binswanger and Sillers 1983; Katz and Stark 1986). In many cases, this means that strategies which might be perceived as lower risk, such as wage labor, might be chosen by individuals or households even when they are not as profitable in the long run as higher risk options, such as entrepreneurship or crop diversification (Morduch 1994). Yet these lessons have not been adequately incorporated into the policy prescriptions, and theories of migration and development, which often implicitly suggest that migrants will make productive investments in village based strategies, without adequately problematizing how and to what extent local investments are understood as stable, risky, or meeting local development goals.

This disconnect is particularly apparent in the oft-repeated suggestion that expanding access to credit could serve to stem migration. For example Rozelle, Taylor and DeBrauw (1999) suggest that reforming the formal rural credit sector may mitigate household members' propensity to migrate, in particular as credit would allow alternative means of financing farm investments (see Massey Durand and Malone 2002; Taylor et al 1996 for similar suggestions). This type of recommendation rests on the assumption that farm investments are a household goal, and also that the combination of loans and local investment is a low-risk strategy, relative to migration. Certainly there are many places where this assumption may be correct. However there are also many areas where these assumptions may be critically flawed, either because of environmental factors, a lack of markets, a culture which valorizes wage labor over piecemeal livelihood strategies, or the limitations of credit programs themselves. In fact, a growing body of evidence in the field of microfinance suggests that the poor will be most likely to borrow for coping or protection, given the insecurities they perceive around borrowing for future based investments (Hulme and Mosely 1996; Khandker 2005). Connecting these two fields of study offers compelling evidence that the connections between access to credit and migration are strongly mediated by context.

My research highlights that in Chanleas Dai, rather than being perceived as a strategy to mitigate risk, credit is understood as often increasing household risk and vulnerability.⁸⁴ Moreover, my work suggests that individuals largely use and understand both credit and migration as means towards something other than local production and investment, in part because of the inherent risk perceived in any kind of village-based investment and also because of the status afforded to migration. In this case, understanding the relationship of either microcredit or migration to livelihood improvement requires a nuanced analysis of decision-making, based on both the opportunity structure around local production, and the differential risk of local production versus migration.

Agriculture: Risk and Control

Agriculture is another area where development ideals and the culture of migration present in Chanleas Dai highlight a policy vs. perception disconnect. Research on environmentally forced or motivated migrants has made the suggestion that aid projects around adapted land management techniques at home may be important in mediating the kind of vulnerability the causes migration (Renaud et al 2011). Similarly, increased rice production, and the expansion of small scale agriculture is widely regarded as a key to national development policy in Cambodia, and a means of addressing environmental vulnerability (MoE and UNDP 2011).

Agriculture programs were ever-present in Chanleas Dai and over the past decade a wide range of government and non-governmental programs have been implemented in Chanleas Dai in attempts to develop and expand agricultural output. Mainly these programs have focused on techniques for improved rice yield, sustainable farming practices, crop diversification, and strategies for marketing products. Yet as discussed in Chapter 5, most people have a pessimistic perception of local agriculture, related to both the number of environmental shocks over the past decade and the inadequacies of local

⁸⁴ See Fitzgerald and Sovannarith 2007 for examples of this perception in other areas of rural Cambodia.

markets and infrastructure to guarantee the profitability of investments. Thus migration, and the corresponding disinterest in more risky, less profitable village based strategies has been a main challenge to the success of each of these projects. The discourses around the local NGO development projects in the area offer another means of understanding how migrant and would-be migrant households perceive local livelihood strategies and environmental distress in relation to migration.

One of the most holistic and long-term projects in the area was an international NGO focused on water, sanitation, and food security. As part of their project, the organization worked to train model farmers, doing projects of rice intensification and crop diversification with motivated individuals interested in improving their own food security. The goal of the project was to have several model farmers who over the course of the year would be successful in ventures often viewed as risky. Model farmers were given seeds, resources, and training and were to become de facto teachers and models of success for others interested in learning from the same techniques. Though official reports show success in higher rice yields and vegetable production, commune officials argued that these programs were only effective at influencing the model farmers themselves, and had little impact outside of the households who received the free seeds, training, and materials. While the reasons behind the lack of adoption were complex, NGO officials noted that a major factor was the inability of the programs to mediate environmental insecurity, since they did not include structural improvements that would allow for irrigation or decreased reliance on rainfall. In good years, model farmers did significantly better than those using traditional techniques, but in years of flood or drought they lost similar percentages of their harvest. In contrast, those who migrated over the same period of time often had much more visible and impressive financial success.

Because of these challenges, a commune official shared that the relationship between farmers and agriculture programs was generally tense. At a meeting with commune officials and a new agriculture organization doing a needs assessment, one

officials mused about whether they could even find interested model farmers to commit to remaining in the village through the length of any new project.

Most plans to improve local production were relatively unsuccessful; “failures” he called them. However he didn’t blame the projects themselves for these failures. In contrast, he believed that agricultural development programs were limited in their potential for success as a result of the harsh environment, and the availability of easier, more secure wages abroad. Most people had already started looking to Thailand for easier ways to make money, he argued, a mindset that was only narrowed when flood, drought and crop failures occur. He noted:

It’s a challenge for us [as leaders] to handle. For example if there is a training program about new methods of rice farming, and it takes several months to see any benefit....people won’t do it. When people follow the technique it seems to work. But people don’t think that we can get benefits from farming. It takes time, and they can’t do other work [abroad] in the meantime. So they just throw their rice in the ground without using the new methods and go abroad.

Organizations were regularly trying to support systems of rice intensification and other diversification projects. But he observed that it was difficult for them to motivate farmers.

“If we call a meeting about agriculture, only a few people show up. Sometimes they just walk away from the meetings, especially if they don’t get anything [i.e. a stipend] from it....[In the past] everyone was farming, and then suddenly now everyone stops-- to go to Thailand. When one stops, the others see and get an impression that [farming] isn’t worthwhile. Sometimes organizations even give rice seeds to farmers but the farmers won’t work to collect the harvest. I don’t want to blame our people, but they’re really not eager to take advantage of work locally. Frankly, I’d say that 90% of them wouldn’t be willing to take on [agricultural] projects that involve any kind of new methods or technology.”

He explained this disinterest by referencing the potential profit one could earn abroad, in juxtaposition with the recurring droughts, crop losses, and floods that the

community had experienced. Without either crop insurance or sufficient institutionalized government security nets, the history of environmental challenges made any new agricultural venture feel like an unwise investment.

A way of making sense of local decision-making processes around migration vs. agriculture is through the perceived and real trade-offs in risk. A critical and yet often ignored aspect of risk-calculation is the consideration of control. Risk as a concept of analysis not only presumes a particular set of values and a calculation of costs and benefits, but also relates to how much control one feels they have over the chances of influencing any particular outcome (Giddens and Pierson 1998: 109). In Chanleas Dai, individuals both feel and realistically have little individual control over the annual rains which sustain their rice fields, the viruses which can infect their livestock, and the markets in which they can sell their produce. As noted earlier, these perceptions are strongly grounded in the environmental realities and insecurity of the area.

In contrast, households and individuals can control their movements, their worksites, their earning and spending abroad, and their image in the village through pursuing work abroad. Thus the village, a space *known* but vulnerable to external shock often feels more risky than the alternative: an *unknown*, but manageable and more secure potential in Thailand. The security that individuals have about their earning potential abroad is a direct result of an increasing culture of migration, which allows a seamless transfer of information about opportunities abroad, often without potential migrants even seeking out information. The continued stream of news, warnings, and wisdom is accumulated through the experiences of others, offering a relatively balanced picture of what is possible abroad. This is in stark contrast to the lack of information that community members have about weather patterns, new crop markets, systems of rice intensification, financial management, and small business management. In reality, migrants often know more about the Thai system of migrant registration than they do about agriculture market dynamics, successful pig farming strategies, finding an education scholarship, or how to access markets in nearby Siem Reap.

Final Thoughts

Despite the sometimes overwhelming presence of NGO's,⁸⁵ and the number of development reports created by commune councils for government purposes, it is difficult for individuals to not feel marginalized from national development policy in Chanleas Dai. Increasingly, it is also difficult for them feel secure in the environment to provide for anything more than basic needs. And as migration has grown in prevalence, offering a visible route for improvement, it has grown more and more common to want for, and seek out more.

Accordingly, migration is understood as both a strategy both to mitigate distress and to achieve mobility. In contrast, it is rarely seen as a way of moving towards a more secure ability to make ends meet at home. Similarly, while migration does diversify household labor, it not understood as a strategy useful to *mediate* the risk of investing at home, rather it is primarily viewed as serving to *replace* investment at home.

These perceptions suggest a few tentative conclusions about how we might expect migration to continue to impact opportunities for development and poverty reduction in Chanleas Dai. Migration, according to those who seek it out, will lead to a house, a motorbike, a means of repaying debts, and higher status, but not increased food security, skills, or opportunities to make ends meet at home. While these end goals are very much valued, they are not seen as feasible given the structural and environmental realities of Chanleas Dai. Thus the benefits of migration are rarely put back to use in expanding the productive capacity of village-based livelihood strategies, which are widely perceived as too risky to be worthwhile. This is not to say that opportunities for productive investment in Chanleas Dai don't, won't or can't exist, rather my research indicates they aren't widely perceived to exist or valued as such, and that they are risky, particularly for already vulnerable populations. The distinction is critical. The counter examples discussed throughout this dissertation point out that it is possible to make ends meet, and even attain limited mobility through the types of small-scale entrepreneurship and local

⁸⁵ More than a dozen local and international NGOs explicitly include Kralanh District in their target area. This does not include government ministries and development partners who implement short-term or one-off projects in the area.

investment that some families are investing in. Similarly, education clearly can bring opportunities to young people who continue through secondary education. The long-term focus required for these types of investment, and the risks they entail, however, make them less compelling options for most.

Throughout this dissertation I have had two main goals, first to voice migrant perspectives in Chanleas Dai, and second to argue for the importance of these perspectives in informing our theories and policy prescriptions around questions of development. My research suggests that there is a general disconnect between the idea that remittances, migration, and also microcredit will necessarily promote productive investments, and the perceptions that most individuals articulate of the village as a space incapable of this type of development. Moreover, where development dialogues in both microcredit and migration literature stress the potential around small scale entrepreneurship and informal sector jobs, individuals see these industries as increasingly risky, with such low payoffs that it is often not worth the investment. In contrast, they desire, seek out, and valorize wage labor, and secured market relationships/contracts.

What does this mean for the potential for positive change through migration? For families in Chanleas Dai? When I was doing interviews, I always ended conversations with a question to my respondents “what questions do you have for me?” In the majority of interviews, people asked why I was doing this research. What would it produce? Did I have a motivation? Was someone paying me? Was this related to the NGO programming I had been involved with? What did *I* think of migration? Some answers were the same over time: I hoped it would produce a book, plus many conversations, and a broader understanding of processes of migration for myself and others. No one was explicitly paying me at the time but my university was supporting me to do research. It wasn't directly related to PEPY's work but I planned to share my results with their staff in the hopes that it would better inform their programming. And my motivation was threefold: because I thought it really mattered, because I thought that a better understanding of migration might lead to the kinds of shifts that people told me they

wanted for their community, and because it was required for my PhD, which I hoped would get me a job.

However the question of what I *thought* of migration shifted over time. And admittedly I was often grateful to language skills as an excuse to why I wasn't always articulating my own perceptions and views clearly. I often tried to explain my perspective on migration: that is neither good nor bad, but that it is problematic when it involves a lack of choice or exploitation. Thus to the extent that rural vulnerabilities, indebtedness or a lack of meaningful local alternatives *required* migration, I felt it was problematic. In line with this perspective, some interviews left me deeply disturbed and pessimistic, the result of encounters where I heard about abuses from migrant employers abroad, listened to the realities of acute economic and environmental distress, or spoke with a young people about deeply emotional regrets or constraints. At other moments I felt a strong sense of possibility---one often shared by my respondents. The possibility of wage labor, at higher rates than one could find in Phnom Penh, for anyone who wanted it, relatively safely, was considered a tremendous opportunity. And it was. The fact that there were tens of thousands of dollars coming into this community every month from Thailand---for a community designated as one of the poorest in the country, was nothing short of tremendous. At these times I would often share with respondents the stories I knew of Mexican hometown associations, and other uplifting stories of transnational change that migrant groups had organized and created. I saw, and still do see, a remarkable potential in this relatively new pattern of migration to make changes that can have a lasting positive impact.

At the time of writing this conclusion, I position myself as having settled into a category I understand as skeptical, but ultimately hopeful, a perspective that I think many individuals in Chanleas Dai share. I am skeptical of what I see as simplified and under-informed policy prescriptions, both for development projects in general and specifically for increasing migration's potential to achieve it. Related, I am deeply skeptical of credit as a panacea, of NGOs as the primary means for change, and of government and NGO

programs that aren't grounded in or informed by the lived experiences of those they are aimed at.

And yet there are clear positive changes. I see that migration can and has improved standards of living for many families in ways that are locally important, leading to feelings of empowerment, contribution, and increased security. Although most people in Chanleas Dai are supremely disappointed with the potential of their local environment to provide opportunities to “develop,” they are making their way towards their goals regardless, using migration to seek out the kinds of improvements they see as most possible and most important.

There are also promising indications of change and progress in the fields of health, education, and in the infrastructure surrounding the Kralanh area that are indicative of a slow but real *evening* of what have been very uneven patterns of national growth. Though these shifts have been slow to expand local views of what is possible at home, there is no doubt that they are important in expanding both real and perceived opportunities. Likely, as Chanleas Dai becomes relatively less “remote” by virtue of increased links to both Siem Reap town and Phnom Penh, the economic possibilities both within and outside of Chanleas Dai will continue to improve, mediating the extent to which families in Chanleas Dai feel a need to look elsewhere to sustain their lives.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS						
No.	Pseudonym/ Position	Age	Sex	Migration Status	Other Status	Village
1	Alin	24	F	Former Migrant		A
2	Chamnap	21	M	Former Migrant		A
3	Chanthy	53	M	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	C
4	Chhunny	19	M	Former Migrant		A
5	Chiva	27	F	Former Migrant		A
6	Choeuy	47	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	A
7	Chrey	47	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	B
8	Chuon	31	F	Former Migrant		B
9	Davin	28	F	Former Migrant		A
10	Hout	28	F	Former Migrant		A
11	Kea	30	F	Former Migrant		B
12	Leat	43	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	A
13	Maly	46	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	B
14	Morn	30	M	Former Migrant		A
15	Mouyli	28	F	Former Migrant		A
16	Nor	50	M	Former Migrant	Former Meekjal	-
17	Noun	21	M	Former Migrant		B
18	Phairath	25	M	Former Migrant		B
19	Phasy	55	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	C
20	Phia	16	F	Former Migrant		C
21	Ponleu	26	F	Former Migrant		A
22	Romdoh	45	M	Former Migrant		B
23	Sak	26	F	Former Migrant		C
24	Salong	52	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	C
25	Saly	39	F	Former Migrant		A
26	Sambath	50	M	Former Migrant	Telephone Remittance Operator	A
27	Saren	37	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	C
28	Sarom	18	F	Former Migrant		C
29	Savy	45	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	B
30	Seiha	25	F	Former Migrant		C
31	Serei	24	F	Former Migrant		B

32	Sinath	42	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	A
33	Sinut	26	M	Former Migrant		B
34	Sokchea	62	M	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	A
35	Sophal	28	M	Former Migrant		A
36	Sophea	35	F	Former Migrant		A
37	Sou	36	F	Former Migrant		C
38	Srey Li	23	F	Former Migrant		A
39	Srey Nit	35	F	Former Migrant		B
40	Srey Sor	27	F	Former Migrant		A
41	Srey Sorit	30	F	Former Migrant		C
42	Srey Vouen	30	F	Former Migrant		B
43	Thida	32	F	Former Migrant		C
44	Thy	18	M	Former Migrant		B
45	Van	30	M	Former Migrant		B
46	Vanna	25	M	Former Migrant		B
47	Vean	50	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	D
48	Veasna	36	F	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	C
49	Vey	32	M	Former Migrant		D
50	Village Chief	50	M	Former Migrant	Parent of Migrant	D
51	Vuthy	18	M	Former Migrant		C
52	Yeut	26	M	Former Migrant		C
53	Bon	78	M	Non Migrant	Village Elder	A
54	Channy	26	F	Non Migrant	Teacher	A
55	Commune Official	56	M	Non Migrant	Commune Official	A
56	Commune Official	50	M	Non Migrant	Commune Official	A
57	Hanty	47	F	Non Migrant	Parent of Migrant	A
58	Leakena	40	F	Non Migrant		D
59	Mab	52	M	Non Migrant		C
60	Phally	35	M	Non Migrant	Teacher	C
61	Pheng	51	F	Non Migrant	Parent of Migrant	C
62	Saleath	50	F	Non Migrant	Parent of Migrant	A
63	Saream	49	F	Non Migrant	School Official	A
64	School Director	55	M	Non Migrant	School Director	A
65	Seav	55	F	Non Migrant	Parent of Migrant	A
66	Sinoun	73	F	Non Migrant	Parent of Migrant	A

67	Sobin	23	M	Non Migrant	Teacher	A
68	Srey Chen	22	F	Non Migrant	Teacher	A
69	Srey Mao	27	F	Non Migrant	NGO Worker	A
70	Srey Na	42	F	Non Migrant		B
71	Srey On	51	F	Non Migrant		A
72	Thearb	74	F	Non Migrant	Village Elder	A
73	Village Chief	48	M	Non Migrant		A
74	Village Chief	55	M	Non Migrant		D
75	Village Chief	50	M	Non Migrant	Parent of Migrant	B
76	Village Chief	60	M	Non Migrant		C
77	Village Chief	50	M	Non Migrant	Parent of Migrant	D
78	Village Chief	50	M	Non Migrant	Parent of Migrant	D
79	Village Chief	50	M	Non Migrant		D
80	Village Chief	50	M	Non Migrant		D
81	Village Chief	50	M	Non Migrant		D
82	Yong	26	M	Non Migrant	Teacher	A
83	MFI Staff	-	M	Non Migrant	Sub Branch Manager	-
84	MFI Staff	-	M	Non Migrant	Sub Branch Manager	-
85	MFI Staff	-	M	Non Migrant	Branch Manager	-
86	MFI Staff	-	M	Non Migrant	Branch Manager	-
87	MFI Staff	-	M	Non Migrant	Sub Branch Manager	-
88	Moneylender	-	F	Non Migrant	Market-based Moneylender	-
89	Moneylender	-	F	Non Migrant	Village-based Moneylender	A

1. As noted in Chapter 1, a number of my interviews included observer-respondents, who were not initially intended to be interviewed but at times became vocal participants in the interview process. These observer-respondents are not included here.

2. Ages were often reported as approximation, common in Cambodia particularly among older generations

3. Villages A, B, and C are the study villages. However at times I interviewed individuals outside of the primary study villages but within the commune, either because respondents were local officials, relatives of focus group youth respondents, or because I was told they had "alternative" or unique migration stories. Villages noted here as "D" represent non-study villages within Chanleas Dai commune. Where villages are not identified as A,B,C or D individuals are from nearby areas, but not Chanleas Dai commune

APPENDIX B: CHANLEAS DAI IN PHOTOS

All photos taken by the author except where otherwise noted.



Photo 1 (top left): A typical scene in the middle of a village of Chanleas Dai. *Photo: Jeff Kennel*

Photo 2 (top right): Taken in 2006, prior to new bridge construction in Chanleas Dai. *Photo: Jonathan Makiri*

Photo 3 (bottom right): Young girls on their way home from school. Many families have only one bicycle, so siblings often have to ride to school together. *Photo: Jeff Kennel*



Photo 4: An "ideal" home in Chanleas Dai; concrete on bottom with a wooden second story and tiled roof.



Photo 5: A home in progress, representing the typical piecemeal construction strategy that migrant households use to construct an ideal home over time.



Photo 6: Typical more modest wooden home with zinc roof.
Photo 7: In the foreground, a thatch home, and in the background new construction.
Photos: Jeff Kennel



Photos 8-10: The results of flooding in October 2009 which devastated roads and rice fields in Chanleas Dai.



Photo 11:
Preah Lean primary school in Chanleas Dai Commune, one of the 4 new schools constructed between 2007 and 2010.



Photo 12: The local wat, located near the center of Chanleas Dai. The temple was constructed through household labor and donations. Its total cost was estimated to me to be above 15,000 US Dollars. It was not yet fully completed in 2010



Photo 13:
The author, conducting
an interview in
Chanleas Dai.
Photo: Jeff Kennel

APPENDIX C: MAPS OF CHANLEAS DAI

Note: Red Star indicates approximate location.



Source: http://mapsof.net/uploads/static-maps/cambodian_provinces_bgn.png

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VITA

Maryann Bylander grew up in Austin, Texas and attended Westwood High School. She received her B.A. in Political Science from Rice University in 2003. After spending one year teaching English at a public high school in Japan, she entered the University of Texas PhD program in Sociology. There, she completed her M.A. in Sociology in 2006. During her time in graduate school Maryann worked with various non-profit institutions including Peace Boat, PEPY-Cambodia, NGO Education Partnership (NEP), and the Asian University for Women.

Email address: maryannby@gmail.com

This dissertation was typed by the author.