

## พื้นที่กึ่งเมืองกึ่งชนบทพื้นที่แห่งความเสี่ยงสำหรับผู้สูงอายุ

### A PERI-URBAN AREA: A RISK HOMETOWN FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE

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#### บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้เป็นงานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพที่ทำการศึกษาสถานการณ์ของผู้สูงอายุที่อาศัยอยู่ในพื้นที่กึ่งเมืองกึ่งชนบทแห่งหนึ่งในจังหวัดเชียงใหม่ วัตถุประสงค์ของงานวิจัยนี้ก็เพื่อที่จะทำความเข้าใจในสถานการณ์ดังกล่าวอันนำมาซึ่งความเปลี่ยนแปลงที่ส่งผลกระทบต่อการดำรงชีวิตของผู้สูงอายุ การรวบรวมข้อมูลต่าง ๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการวิจัยนี้ทำโดยจัดบันทึกจากการสังเกตการณ์การดำรงชีวิตโดยทั่วไปของผู้สูงอายุ และการบันทึกเสียงจากการพูดคุยสนทนา การสอบถามโดยตรง และการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกกับผู้สูงอายุ 12 คน โดยเป็นชาย 6 คนและหญิง 6 คน มีอายุอยู่ในช่วง 60 ถึง 75 ปี และเป็นผู้ที่อาศัยอยู่เดิมในพื้นที่ พบว่าการเปลี่ยนแปลงจากพื้นที่ชนบทสู่พื้นที่กึ่งเมืองกึ่งชนบทส่งผลกระทบต่อการดำรงชีวิตของผู้สูงอายุในอันที่ก่อให้เกิดความเสี่ยงต่อความมั่นคงในชีวิตด้านเศรษฐกิจและสังคมจากการลดลงหรือการสูญเสียไปของทรัพยากรในชุมชนที่เคยเอื้อต่อการดำรงชีพของผู้สูงอายุที่มีอยู่แต่เดิม งานวิจัยนี้จึงเสนอว่าในขณะที่การกลายเป็นเมืองแม้ถูกมองว่านำมาซึ่งความเจริญสุขุมชนโดยรวมแต่ขณะเดียวกันก็มีแนวโน้มที่จะทำให้ผู้สูงอายุซึ่งเป็นกลุ่มที่มีความเปราะบางตกอยู่ในสภาวะความเสี่ยงดังกล่าว ดังนั้นความเสี่ยงที่มีต่อผู้สูงอายุจึงเป็นปัจจัยสำคัญอีกประการหนึ่งที่ควรนำมาประกอบการพิจารณาในการดำเนินนโยบายด้านการพัฒนาในพื้นที่กึ่งเมืองกึ่งชนบท

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative research study investigated the situation of the local elderly people who lived in a peri-urban area in Chiang Mai. The purpose of this study was to understand such a situation of which the resultant changes affected the existence of the local elderly people. The relevant data of the study were collected through the notes taken during the observation of their everyday lives and the recordings of the casual conversations, direct inquiries, and in-depth interviews with 12 local elderly people, among which 6 were females and 6 were males, with their ages ranging between 60 and 75. It was found that the transformation of their rural area into a rural-urban area had an effect on the local elderly people, which caused them the risk of life's insecurity in the social and economic dimensions resulting from the drop in or loss of the locally available resources that they would have otherwise benefited from. This study suggests that even though urbanization may introduce prosperity into a particular area, it is simultaneously very likely to subject the already vulnerable elderly people to the risk of life's insecurity as such. Thus, risk to elderly people should be another important factor that needs to be taken into consideration when it comes to implementation of a development policy in a peri-urban area.

**Keywords:** Elderly people, Peri-urban, Risk, Urbanization, Social change

## **Introduction**

This research study views the changes resulting from the transformation of a place in Chiang Mai from a rural area into a peri-urban area as posing the risk of life's insecurity to the local elderly people living there. Accordingly, this section provides the background information by dealing with the definitions of 'urban' or 'urbanization' and 'peri-urban,' then goes on to introduce the relevant concept of risk for the purpose of data analysis.

According to the traditionally accepted way of thinking of Thai people in general, old age is so perceived as the time for taking a rest and enjoying the repayment of gratitude from one's child or children. That is to say, old age is expected to be the time for elderly people to step back from their active undertakings and leave them in the hands of younger people. Elderly people, also, are usually characterized by several traits: they usually remain home to take care of their grandchildren; they

usually go to the temple to seek peace of mind; or, they usually let their children take over what they are doing for a living because it is time to let go and rest. These paint a picture of a peaceful and healthy old age – the time many elderly people anticipate.

However, the advent of urbanization at a particular rural area sooner or later turns the place into one characterized by rural-urban interpenetration, which is also known as a peri-urban area. As for the meaning of peri-urban, it is also drawn from various ideas, and the term is meant to cover the area that is characterized by the rural-urban interpenetration. To better understand the situation, the definition of ‘peri-urban’ (also known as ‘rural-urban’) may be referred to as a place where one could still see green rice fields, orchards, gardens, and vegetable plots while commercial buildings, convenience stores, coffee shops, restaurants, service counters, and housing projects were generally seen standing scattered in the area, with outsiders or new settlers moving about here and there. As already mentioned above, the changes that occurred in peri-urban areas adversely affect the elderly people living there, and that can be viewed as a risk. Risk has become one of the terms that we hear more frequently in Thai society. For example, when the 6.1 magnitude earthquake hit Ban Mae Lao in Chiang Rai in 2014 and there were over a thousand aftershocks (Ornthammarath & Warnitchai, 2016), a large number of Thai people, as a result, came to be more aware of the term ‘risk.’ Following that event, there were also a few plane crashes. Then, to top the list of all risks, the Ebola virus outbreak in Africa came on the scene and has turned itself into a world problem. They all involved risks, and these risks are palpable in nature and, most of the time, take away people’s attention from other risks, especially social or societal risks. Risk now has become pivotal in both the personal and public domains. Consequently, the ways whereby coping with and managing risk either fatalistically or actively play an important role in life (Beck-Gernsheim, 2005). People can hardly stop coping with risk and so doing is just an unending job. Furthermore, it seems that the more they try to manage risk, the more they incur further risks. This is especially applicable at the global level in our advanced industrial world (Bennett 2005). Ulrich Beck called such a situation ‘risk society.’ According to Beck (2009), in risk societies, the ‘consequences and successes of modernization become an issue with the speed and radicality of processes of modernization.’ A ‘new dimension of risk emerges’ owing to people’s inability or

failure to handle the ‘conditions for calculating and institutionally processing it.’ The term ‘risk society’ in Beck’s terms ‘epitomizes an era of modern society that no longer merely casts off traditional ways of life but rather wrestles with the side effects of successful modernization-with precarious biographies and inscrutable threats that affect everybody and against which nobody can adequately insure.’ According to Bennett (2005), Beck’s assertion is that ‘the notion of risk is increasingly fundamental to global social life.’ Modernity is ‘a world that introduces global risk parameters’ owing to industrial society’s failure to gain control over the risks it has created. Beck claimed that risk alters our experience of the world qualitatively nowadays. In line with Beck’s notion of the risk society perspective is that of Anthony Giddens. According to Giddens (1990), his sense of risk “emphasizes more the disruptions effected by expert systems and globalization processes in private lives, and the transformations brought about by this.” Giddens held that the era of late modernity does not really or significantly produce more risks, but it is because of the fact that those risks are perceived to abound. That is associated with the general sense of subjectivity in the approach to life in the late modern era where it is far more responsive to the existence of risks. From this, it may be seen that Giddens’ perspective of risk is more on the interpretive side than that of Beck, which is very useful to this study. Giddens’s sense of risk that “emphasizes more the disruptions effected by expert systems and globalization processes in private lives, and the transformations brought about by this” is appropriately applicable to this study in that the elderly people were in a situation where most of the changes worked to invalidate their local support mechanisms, and that situation was therefore perceived to become risk to the elderly people. That in turn led to the interpretation of them as being at risk as such.

As urbanization came and stays, it is an on-going process. Such a place inherently abounds with changes. Rim Wiang is such a place. The fact that it is a peri-urban area with on-going urbanization processes situates the local elderly people in a risk hometown. Previous studies in the Thai context usually viewed elderly people either in a rural area or in an urban area, and there have been hardly any studies that directly deal with elderly people in such an area of rural-urban interpenetration. This study may therefore fill such a knowledge gap in the existing body of knowledge. Besides, this study also provides another perspective of viewing elderly people in such

an area by considering their situation through the lens of 'risk.' Accordingly, this study may serve to provide a different way of consideration from those of the past studies in viewing elderly people's situation in such an area.

### **Methodology**

As this study was to look into the lives of the elderly people living in a peri-urban area, the study was so designed that it would have to be carried out in an area characterized by rural-urban interpenetration. Therefore, some proper definitions were required for this purpose. According to United Nations (2015), 'urbanization' can be defined as a transformation from an agricultural rural area towards a densely populated area dominantly characterized by industrial, commercial, and service activities. As for the term peri-urban, OECD (1979) states, "The impacts of economic growth and physical expansion of the urban area are not confined within urban boundaries; they reach into much wider areas surrounding urban centres, creating so-called 'rurban areas', 'urban fringe areas', or 'peri-urban areas'. While the periurban area retains the characteristics of the rural area, these are subject to major modifications: changes take place with respect to physical configuration, economic activities, social relationships and so forth." In this study, the term 'peri-urban' was derived from both of the above and operationalized as a place where one could still see green rice fields, orchards, gardens, and vegetable plots while commercial buildings, convenience stores, coffee shops, restaurants, service counters, and housing projects were generally seen standing scattered in the area, with outsiders or new settlers moving about here and there. Rim Wiang was therefore selected as it answered to such a description. As for the informants, the elderly people to be chosen should still be healthy enough to move around and answer questions or recount their experiences without difficulty. There should be a good mix of both males and females. Therefore, 12 informants comprising 6 females and 6 males, aged 60-75, should serve the purpose and yield enough information for analysis based on the concept of risk. As for data collection, data were collected through observation, casual conversations, and in-depth interviews. Casual conversations with the local people in general was very useful in terms of verifying the collected data and as another source of information. All the data and information were recorded on a voice recorder at the time of the

interview and later transcribed directly into English. As this study was originally meant to be one of the interpretative tradition, in the data analysis, words or expressions indicating uneasiness, worries, feelings of being threatened, or concern were then interpreted as posing risk. Last but not least, before analyzing the data, all the names appearing in this study were altered to fictitious names to preserve the anonymity of all the people concerned.

## Results

### Social Changes as a Result of Urbanization

Important social changes in Rim Wiang that directly had an influence on the elderly people's lives include the following.

A. *Their farming expertise that they have accumulated for a lifetime as one form of their valuable cultural capital was rendered ineffectual as they were put out of their normal context, or decontextualized.* Such cultural capital can hardly be convertible into other forms of capital. In all practicality, this cultural capital now exists to no avail and the elderly residents are in a situation of being 'all dressed up and nowhere to go.' They have all the potential required to perform a particular task, but they have no stage on which to perform it. Grandpa Sit talked about some of his experience.

"My life has been with farming all along. It's the only field that I'm familiar with. If you ask me how to grow soya bean, I can tell you from the very start to the very end. But if you ask me about things outside the field of farming, then I may hesitate to tell you because it's not what I'm used to doing."

B. *Their common source for food and grazing land as common property (Santasombat, 2008), and their para-labor market as their social capital were all lost in the process of urbanization.* The two were usually relied on by most of the elderly residents. If they had not been taken away, they could have been very useful to them in helping them to be more productive in the family. Through being more productive, the elderly residents could have been more financially self-reliant and independent. Grandma Em mentioned the food source as follows.

“Outside people never imagined how much we depended on the food items that we could find in the fields. Those items could help us save a lot of money. Sometimes, we could even sell something, like fish or frogs, in the market. The money earned could often supplement our income.”

C. *The tradition of give and take or reciprocity has changed in its nature.* The people of Rim Wiang, as in other rural communities, once engaged more in reciprocity-based mode of exchange in their community. However, time took its toll on that. What happened was that such a mode of exchange decreased in its significance. The spirit of the give-and-take type of exchange has started to die down. Grandma Khao’s opinion may point in that direction.

“Nowadays, I hardly see one give away things to another. In the past, you’d see a person give her neighbor a bowl of spiced soup or some food stuffs. And they regularly did that. It was a wonderful way of life. Now, it may be because we have to face a lot of hardships, so much so that we have to take care of ourselves first.”

D. *Some long-standing traditions of cooperation such as “long kaeg” or “pai muang” also disappeared.* The elderly residents became more detached from their own community than before owing to the fact that their mechanism of cooperation collapsed. Both traditions are equal to a loss of part of their social capital. This loss works to cut off or alienate themselves from their fellow villagers. Such alienation can be viewed as being twofold in nature. The elderly people either inadvertently alienated themselves from the community or they were inexorably alienated from the community by the situation. What has resulted from such alienation is that, over time, the elderly residents are less likely to participate in communal activities. Besides, they are likely to be socially neglected, which eventually causes them to lose grip on their network support. Grandpa In talked about this as follows.

“We used to be very united in the past. That was because we cooperated a lot in several collective activities. We worked and became tired together. Then, we ate and drank together. Now no more. I wonder if the collectivity spirit is still there.”

E. *The rising cost of living was influential in forcing people to be more self-interested or less public-spirited.* People might sympathize with others underprivileged or less fortunate, but they might not be able to be kind enough towards them. Grandma Pong talked about this as follows.

“Under the present circumstances where everything’s so expensive, it’s not quite possible for one to help another. One has to take care of oneself and family first, which is very difficult already. Passing each day is not easy.”

F. *The preference for migrant workers could pose a threat to the elderly residents’ competitiveness in contesting locally available work.* The younger people may not be interested in this sort of work as they prefer work downtown. But the elderly residents are more sedentary or settled in their environment and may have to rely on what is locally available more than the younger people do. Such preference for migrant workers can work against their opportunity of getting jobs in their own neighborhood. As already mentioned above, Grand pa Put showed that he preferred migrant workers to the local people, and that could threaten their employment situation.

“When my longans need picking, I’ll call some migrant workers in the neighborhood to do the work. They’re basically cheaper and more productive. They work tirelessly, and I can have the harvest wrapped up in the timeframe that I expected. The locals, so to speak, are not comparable to them. They’re fussy and not that energetic.”

#### **Living in a Risk Hometown**

Rim Wiang, as already mentioned, is a place characterized by fundamental changes. The changes, in effect, can be couched in terms of social changes which in turn made Rim Wian become a risk hometown. The risk mentioned may be understood in different forms.

A. *Economic change.* Economic change led the elderly people to face an economic threat which mainly concerned “pak-thong” (literally “mouth-stomach”) or livelihood. Such risk was directly associated with the elderly people’s well-being. The fact that many turned workless forced them out of their previous role of a co-provider. In addition, they also became more dependent on or less independent of the family.



This means that the family had to use more resources to support them, and this caused them to become a burden. Meanwhile, the increase in the living costs put them in a situation where their already meagre income was hardly enough for their day-to-day living. That is to say, having enough to live with dignity still remained a struggle. Grandpa Put gave a picture of the economic impact.

“It seems that we have had quite a number of opportunities. Still, the cost of living rises so fast that many of us feel that it would be better to move out and live elsewhere where it’s cheaper. At least three families have already moved out. One family among them sold their property here and bought land elsewhere. Land is cheaper there. With the amount of money, they could have both land and some money which was left as their capital fund to start a new farming life with. Living here is now not easy. Actually, it’s a hard struggle for many of us.”

B. *Social change*. Social change was another type of change that occurred in Rim Wiang. As a large number of outsiders came into and settled down in the area and the local residents turned into a minority group of people, such a situation became a threat to the elderly residents. Many outsiders came with their wealth and lived with a higher standard of living. They had nice houses and drove fairly good cars. The local residents inevitably found themselves living among better others. The new settlers unintentionally set an example that was hard to follow. A better life or better living has become a pronounced ideology that a great many people desire to go after. The situation, in combination with an awareness of modernity, mentally impacted both the young and elderly people alike under the influential power of the context. Grandma Pit’s word indicated such a situation.

“A lot of people have moved in, and we’re now a minority group. They’ve come with their wealth and have a much better life than we do. They’re well-dressed and drive cars. They go to work downtown and make a lot of money each month. That’s a good life that we aspire to, too.”

That is the reason why most of the young people left home to look for well-paid jobs elsewhere. With the aspiration to a higher level of living standard in mind, they had to

work hard to make more money and spend a large portion of it to follow the path of a better life that others living among or around them were enjoying. A woman, aged 28, talked about this.

“Everybody has a mobile phone and a motorcycle. If one doesn’t have the two, one is likely to be looked down on. Or, at least, one feels that the two are, besides necessities, status symbols guaranteeing that one’s financial status is generally at the same level as others and not poor. Actually, it’s not just about the mobile phones and the motorcycles, they also talk about the way they dress and interesting places that they have visited.”

Such an ideology also extended to the idea of getting a good education for their children, which is very costly. On the side of the elderly people, they were also impacted by such an ideological atmosphere that crept into their family. Grandma Pit’s opinion reflected such ideology.

“Their children go to good schools downtown. And they’re bound to have better jobs. They’ll also succeed in life. That’s because they have a better education than other children around here. So, for our children to have a better future than their parents, they should go to a good school to get a better education.”

Then, they were the last batch of farmers of the community to see the farming career decline in their own hometown. They attributed the decline to the advent of urbanization. Grandpa Sit gave some comment below.

“It wasn’t like this in the past. Farming was always our career. It gave us everything. I had never thought before that it would almost come to a complete stop. It could be because our area was becoming more and more prosperous and farming should give way to prosperity. So, we were the last batch of the real farmers in this community.”

Furthermore, the collapse of several main local cooperative mechanisms posed a threat to the elderly people’s insecurity in their old age. The tradition of ‘kanlongkhaek’, or a reciprocal exchange of assistance based on respective durations of time spent in helping the other, fundamentally disappeared from the community. So

did ‘kanpaimueng’, or the annual dredging of irrigation canals in the rice fields. Kanlongkhaek is very important in that it is a cooperative activity. The principle is very simple. This time I am helping you with your work; another time you are obliged to help me with my work for the number of days that I helped you. That is to say, you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours. As for kanpaimueng, it adopts the principle that labor is mobilized to complete a task for the good of the public. Such organization brings people together to help each other overcome an obstacle or solve a problem collectively. Pramaha Wunsa commented that

“The collapse of the long-standing cooperative activities of our community has brought a kind of separation among us. Though such separation is not manifest, it’s there. We used to do things collectively, and now we have to do things in a more individualistic manner. We cooperate and rely on each other less and less. This is dangerous because the situation tends to make us lose the spirit of the community.”

The disappearance of important local cooperative mechanisms caused them to become more individualized and gradually lose the sense of cooperating with each other. This created a threat to their security when they were not able to maintain strong connection with the community any longer. Phramaha Wunsa further expressed his opinion that

“As a community, we need to maintain unity. If we don’t have unity, when we need help, who will come to our help? It would be a community that’s rife with insecurity.”

All these forms of risk evidently shaped themselves into the elderly people’s life’s insecurity.

## **Discussion**

Elderly people’s lives in Thailand may generally be brought to light by some studies as follows. Hongthong et al. (2015) discovered that over two-thirds of the elderly people living in Phayao Province, of which the information she insisted could serve as baseline information for rural Thailand, had a ‘fair’ level of quality of life. This indicates that elderly people living in rural Thailand were likely to be generally satisfied

with their lives. According to HelpAge International (2019), more adult children are less able to support elderly people in their families. This may be understood that more elderly people, both rural and urban, are likely to have only themselves to depend on in their old age. Furthermore, Rojananan (2018) found that only 37% of the elderly people in Thailand, rural and urban, were living with old-age security. That is to say, the majority of the Thai elderly people's lives are likely to be insecure in general. Besides, Yodmai & Somrngthong (2018) found that there are several factors, such as "marital status, sufficient income, savings, and healthcare services are influencing the quality of life among aging people in Thailand." From this, it may be perceived that economic difficulty is among the hardships that elderly people may sooner or later have to encounter. While these studies and many others view elderly people in either rural areas or urban areas, this study was conducted in a peri-urban area where rurality and urbanicity converged, producing an area characterized by rural-urban interpenetration. The elderly people living under the conditions of such an area, may be alternatively viewed through a different perspective, which in this case, through the lens of Giddens' concept of risk in the interpretative tradition. In the case of this study, the elderly people had previously been among vulnerable population groups in addition to the children and the disabled people. It was then found that they were later exposed to the urbanization-induced changes that worked to adversely affect their lives. Such unfavorable changes were then interpreted as subjecting the elderly people to risk of life's insecurity, which was found to be in economic and social dimensions owing to the loss or disappearance of several vital resources in their community, which would very likely lead them to a 'compromised life' instead of an otherwise 'normally expected life' in their old age. It may be noticed that while the several factors as already mentioned in Yodmai & Somrngthong's study determine elderly people's quality of life in general, the loss or disappearance of vital resources in the community may also be an additional important consideration in certain areas where changes resulting from urbanization unfavorably affect their lives in such a way that those changes could be visualized as posing risk. Furthermore, while those studies of Hongthong et al., HelpAge International, and Rojananan mentioned above show rural elderly people to be fairly satisfied with their lives in general and both rural and urban elderly people to possibly face problems of old-age insecurity, decreasing support

from their adult children, and economic difficulties respectively, this study duly fills the gap between rural and urban elderly people by perspectivizing peri-urban elderly people's lives as such.

## **Conclusions**

The advent of urbanization introduced many social changes into the once rural area, turning it into an area of rural-urban interpenetration. The local residents' normal way of life was disrupted. Such social changes sent their repercussions across the whole area, directly affecting the already vulnerable populations, among whom were the local elderly residents. Instead of growing old in their idyllic place, they had to live in a changing environment where they would sooner or later find themselves strangers in their own land. The impact of such changes practically subjected them to privations and disruptions in their old age, the time which would otherwise have been well spent in a serene, pastoral atmosphere. Such a situation ultimately placed them at risk of life's insecurity in their old age, and they finally ended up living in a risk hometown. As a result, all the above-mentioned accounts essentially illustrate how the changes led to the loss or disappearance of the elderly people's once locally available resources that would have otherwise duly supported their lives. The consequences of such changes were then interpreted as putting the elderly people at risk of life's insecurity in economic and social dimensions. In such a situation, this study therefore makes a suggestion that proper intervention measures may be necessary to help mitigate elderly people's such life's insecurity. For example, there should be a sort of taxation on certain businesses that might contribute to the compromise of elderly people's normal living; this tax revenue may then be used to support affected elderly people in the community.

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