Research Report

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An Elepahantine Misunderstanding: A Miscommunication between Researchers and Their Subjects

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Acknowledgement: This account has been prepared for a planned edited volume on “Disasters in the Field” being assembled by Gillian Ice.
The incident that constitutes the core of this account occurred on June 23, 2004 but the background for it dates from May 10, 1992. On that day the Bangkok Post featured a two-page spread depicting “the misery of those left behind” referring to the desertion of elderly parents in rural Thailand by their adult children who migrated away mostly to Bangkok.

A large part of the article featured a poverty-stricken village in Northeast Thailand including pictures of two pathetic looking elderly, one of whom was begging for food from neighbors. I read the article with some skepticism since the collaborative analysis of a large-scale representative survey of older persons I had been doing with Thai colleagues indicated deserted elderly persons were quite rare.

Such anecdotal depictions of deserted elderly and assertions that filial support is declining promote an impression that such desertion is widespread and continue to be common in the Thai mass media, as exemplified by the frequent focus on such situations in the currently popular weekly TV spot “Circle of Life” viewed all over the country.

As social demographers, my wife Chanpen, who is Thai, and I decided to do a more in-depth study in rural areas to determine to what extent this common impression is grounded in fact. We kept an open mind recognizing that large scale surveys, for whatever reason, might miss such cases. Our plan involved visiting four rural villages where we conducted an exhaustive listing in each of all elderly along with information about the location of their children. In addition we conducted interviews with cases selected to cover a range of situations including a number that, contrary to the prevalent norm for Thai elderly, were not co-residing with an adult child.

Given our initial skepticism about the common impression of widespread desertion, we decided to stack the deck against our doubts by including the village featured in the Bangkok Post article as one of our sites as well as another even more remote village in the same district where officials claimed the situation of elderly was even worse.

As it turned out this second village was at the epicenter of a local area that specialized in training elephants and bringing them around the country to places where tourists would pay for an elephant ride or to have their picture taken feeding one a banana. Appropriately the place was locally known as the “elephant village".
To make a long story short, our research indicated that the two elderly pictured in the *Bangkok Post* article were indeed deserted but that they were among only a small handful that was in such a situation. The vast majority of the over 100 older persons in the village lived with or next to a child and maintained contact with those who had left the village. In the other three villages, desertion was even rarer. But I digress…

Move ahead to 2004. Several additional nationally representative large-scale surveys of older Thais in the interim continued to show very low levels of desertion. At the same time, however, levels of migration of adult children increased and government officials in Bangkok as well as the mass media continued to portray deteriorating filial support for rural elderly as a result of the exodus of young adults. Thus we decided to go back and do in-depth interviews of parents with migrant children in the same four villages that we had visited a decade earlier in order to find out how migration had affected their well-being.

These interviews revealed mixed consequences but in most cases the net impact was relatively positive especially with respect to material support that migrant children provided. Moreover, the recent spread of cell phones dramatically improved the ability of elderly parents to keep in contact with migrant children in a way that was not an option a decade earlier.

By chance, several of the cases we chose for interview were the same ones we had interviewed a decade earlier including an elderly couple in the “elephant village,” although we didn't recognize this until later. The couple had seven children and, at the time of the first interview, was living with their youngest daughter “Lek”, her husband, and an infant granddaughter. By the time of the second interview, the son-in-law had bought an elephant and together with Lek had gone to Pattaya, a seaside resort several hundred kilometers away and very popular with foreign tourists. They lived in an “elephant camp” where guides brought tourists to take rides on the elephants. The granddaughter however remained with the elderly couple and Lek regularly returned every month or so to visit both her daughter and the parents. Lek also was the main source of the parents’ material support without which they said they would be unable to manage.

Four of their other six children had migrated elsewhere, one son lived in a nearby village, and eldest daughter “Yai” lived with her daughter only a few minutes walking distance from her parents whom she saw every day when she was there. Her husband, however, had also bought an elephant which he took to the camp in Pattaya where he stayed. Since it was school vacation at the time of our interview, Yai and the daughter were temporarily visiting her husband at the camp but would return fairly soon. Thus, for the moment, the elderly couple was living alone with their 10-year-old granddaughter from Lek.

While they complained about being lonely, overall they viewed the migration of their children positively since they clearly recognized that it was critical to their economic support. They also said that Lek had made clear her intentions to eventually return permanently and care for them when they were no longer able to do so themselves.

As it turns out, by sheer coincidence, immediately following our fieldwork, we were planning to drive directly to Pattaya where I was scheduled to give a talk at a conference. I thus thought it would be interesting if we could meet with the daughters at the elephant camp there and get their
views about how migration impacted their parents. I took a picture of the parents to give as a gift to the daughters as a gesture of goodwill if we met them.

A few days after the interview we arrived in Pattaya in the evening. While I was giving my talk the next morning at the conference, Chanpen went to search for the daughters. After quite some effort she not only located the right “elephant camp” (no easy task as there were more than we expected) but even managed to find Yai (but not Lek) at her small hut in the camp, give her the picture, and chat with her about her parents. Yai of course was rather surprised at the visit.

Chanpen explained that we had interviewed her parents a few days before and described the purpose of our research. She stressed the need for government policies regarding older persons to be based on accurate information about their actual situation. She pointed out that the officials in charge of programs aimed at improving elderly welfare rarely left Bangkok to see the situation themselves and thus that the results of our research would help them understand the needs of Thai elderly better and hopefully contribute to improved policies and programs.

When Chanpen returned to the hotel after my talk, I listened with great interest to her account of her meeting with Yai. She felt it went well. Since I was very interested in seeing the situation in the elephant camp and taking some photos, we decided to go together later that afternoon. After we arrived at the camp, we managed to locate Lek, the daughter that Chanpen had not met in the morning, working at a small restaurant near the camp's entrance. To our surprise she seemed displeased see us and was very reluctant to talk with us. She did acknowledge that she knew that Chanpen had been talking with Yai earlier.

While we didn't know what to make of Lek’s distinctly unfriendly reaction, something very uncharacteristic in Thai social interactions, we were curious to find out what was going on. So we went to the small hut where Yai and her daughter were staying and where Chanpen had talked with them that morning. Yai also seemed less than thrilled to see us, but after a short while she said she remembered me from our first visit to her parents house 10 years ago. Apparently visits by Westerners were a rare and memorable event in the “elephant village” if not in the elephant camp. This seemed to allay somewhat her reluctance to talk further with us (although not her reluctance to be photographed) and with some prompting explained what was going on.
Undoubtedly Chanpen’s explanation of the purpose of our research would have been readily understood by another social researcher and probably by most Thais with a higher education. But clearly the concept of social science research for the sake of knowledge was incomprehensible to Yai and Lek, who had only a fourth grade education. Viewed through their lenses it made much more sense to relate Chanpen’s visit and interest in the situation of their elderly parents, who were at the moment on their own back in the village, in the context of their own knowledge base.

As with so many other Thais, they were well acquainted with the Circle of Life program and its frequent focus on pathetic cases of elderly parents who were neglected and left to suffer by irresponsible adult children. Thus they assumed Chanpen was working for the TV program and was about to portray them on television as irresponsible daughters who deserted their poor aged parents. Indeed they were so worried that after Chanpen’s visit they called their parents with their mobile phone to ask what was happening. Apparently our explanation of why we had come to their village to interview them had eluded the parents as well and they were unable to put the daughters’ fears at rest.

By the time we ended our conversation with Yai, I believe she was convinced that we intended no harm and were not about to air their story on television. The fact that they misunderstood our intentions is particularly ironic given that we viewed the relations with the parents largely in a positive rather than a negative light. The experience did humble us, however, and underscored just how naïve we as social researchers can be in thinking we are communicating effectively with those who live in a very different cognitive world than our own.
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