



# Skipped-Generation Families: Economic Happiness in Rural North-Eastern Thailand

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This paper investigates economic happiness of skipped-generation families in rural north-eastern Thailand. The qualitative methodological approach was implemented in the study. Data collection was conducted in April - May 2018 and in-depth interview was used as a research instrument to collect data from two groups of key informants, including 1) community leaders, community seniors, and community committees, in total eight persons, and 2) skipped-generation families living in a rural north-eastern region of Thailand, in total twenty families. Data analysis was done by the content analysis method.

The study indicated that skipped-generation families are the families with grandparents and grandchildren living together. Most families have an agricultural occupation, because they have a lot of land by inheritance and divided into two parts: housing and farming. Mostly agricultural income by sugar canes and farming can earn 2,400 USD per year. Moreover, remittances from international migrant only 450 USD per month is spent on family expenses and education of grandchildren. Some families do not have enough money to invest in farming in the next year, and they have a lot more debt than 3,000 USD from a migrant who goes to work abroad. However, skipped-generation families have a perception of economic happiness "An empty hand is no lure for a hawk, no man is happy who does not think himself so" So, skipped-generation families must take this view to manage the economic situation of the family, even though the incomes are insufficient to cover their living and lack of labor due to migrant workers going to work abroad. This affects the economic happiness of skipped-generation families to sustain their living in a rural society.

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## INTRODUCTION

”Grandparents raising grandchildren” has been a social phenomenon that is generally found in rural northeastern Thailand. The phenomenon has affected relationships within families, since Children’s parents have migrated to work out of the community for a long time. It resulted in a decrease of relationships and communication among family members. Moreover, overseas working is a highly-spend activity that the family has to bear migration expenses for those who are working overseas, so this causes unsecure economic status of family due to an imbalance between income generated and debt of the family [Boonkwang \(2017\)](#) . Family members have to leave their children with their grandparents, and migrate to work overseas. Thai scholars have considered this type of family as ”skipped-generation family” [Potisita \(2009\)](#). It is generally found different attitudes of living between grandparents and grandchildren in skipped-generation family due to life experiences and modernity circumstance [Jampaklay et al. \(2012\)](#). However, different attitudes of living maybe a conflict between grandparents and grandchildren. The misunderstanding between grandparents and grandchildren probably provides a negative impact to the development of children. Children who grow up with such families might cause social problems [Sri-Reungla \(2006\)](#) especially among the oversea migrant families in the northeastern region.

Therefore, it is clear that overseas working becomes a condition that shifts type of family at places of origin from extended family to skipped-generation family. Moreover, it affects other family members, who are considered as being people who are left behind, especially in terms of coexistence between two-generation people with different attitudes of living, violence within families, debt from migration expense, or receiving remittance lower than family’s expectation. These negative effects have related to livings of skipped-generation family, and it brings to the research question that how is the economic happiness in skipped-generation family with international migrants?

This paper implements concepts of happiness, skipped-generation family, and migration as following details.

Happiness is a concept that has been developed since the ancient Greek era. Bhutan is the first country that applied the concept to measure the happiness of citizens in the country. In general, happiness is measured by two perspectives including 1) objectivity perspective; in which the measuring scale is observable, for instance, frequency of brain waves or heart rates, and 2) subjectivity perspective in which the measuring scale is depending on an individual’s feeling, for instance, individual happiness and individual satisfaction. Many scholars have identified this measuring type as the Global Self-Report [Kittiprapat et al. \(2010\)](#) . Currently, there are a variety of happiness measuring which present various indicators at different levels based on social contexts. This paper applies a concept of happiness, developed by Thai Health Promotion Foundation, which identifies eight perspectives of happiness includ-

ing health, relaxation, knowledge gaining, morality, money usage, a good family, and good society [Wasantanarat \(2008\)](#). These indicators cover different dimensions that may influence on happiness of the family. In this article, the researcher is presenting economic happiness of skipped-generation family.

Skipped-generation family is a concept that shares a same root with the concept of family. The Department of Women’s Affairs and Family Institutions (2005) [Potisita \(2011\)](#) found that familial structure of this family type comprised of people from two different generations who are elderly and children. Skipped-generation families are mostly found in a rural area. People who are at working age would migrate to work elsewhere, and they would leave their children with their grandparents. Grandparents play a major role to raise grandchildren, while the child’s parents, or the migrants, would send remittance back to their families. [Potisita \(2011\)](#) defines meaning of family that definitions of family and household are different, but there is rarely to separate each other. People who are related to each other as ”family” and they live together at the same place, while household represents people who are living at the same place, but relationships in place does not always present as family relationships.

Theory of migration has been developed by Ravenstein and Lee. Ravenstein and Lee develop the theory with regard to migration from rural area to urban area for job seeking. Transportation systems become an essential factor contributing migration [Piriyakul \(2006\)](#). People who decide to move normally make a decision based on attracted things at destination places which meet migrant’s requirement or satisfaction while places or origin could not satisfy them, such as economic condition. Migration presents three patterns including 1) internal migration, 2) external migration, and 3) step migration. In addition, there are two types of migration to be recognized: temporary migration and permanent migration [Chan-tarasuwan \(2008\)](#) .

## METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative research. The Research area is Olo Village in the Phu Kiew District, Chaiyaphum Province. This area is one of the largest migrant population cities in northeastern Thailand, so it was possible to find skipped-generation families there. Moreover, this area is rich of natural resources and kinship system still an essential bond that linked people in a rural society. These conditions might contribute happiness to a skipped-generation family. Unit of analysis is family and community. Key informants at family unit were twenty of skipped-generation families with international migrants, living in Olo village Moo 1, 10, and 11. In-depth interview and non-participatory observation were applied as research instruments. Interview guideline contained several questions with regard to coexistence, roles and functions within the family, interrelationship within the family, interrelationship with the migrants, interrelationship with the community, and happiness in skipped-

generation families' perspective. While key informants at the community unit were divided into three groups including 1) two seniors from Olo village Moo 1 and 10, who knew the history of the community, 2) three community leaders, and 3) three community committees. Those key informants were selected to acknowledge the community background such as socio-cultural context, economic context, community history, and dynamic of family structure that might affect ways of life and happiness of skipped-generation families in rural north-eastern Thailand.

The content analysis method was used to analyze data. The analysis considered three elements Miles and Huberman (1994) included 1) data organizing is a process of manipulating data in easily store and use. The researcher collected data from the research field, and categorized the data based on question sets. Content was a process that categorized data in order to prioritize data and arrange data systematically. 2) Data display is the process of presenting research findings. The process concerns rationality and validity of the data which is in line with the social phenomenon. the Researcher connected field data of the phenomenon of skipped-generation family with international migrants in Thailand in order to reveal the happiness perspective of skipped-generation family. 3) Conclusion, interpretation, and verification is a process of concluding research findings based on interpretation and data verification to consider relationship with social phenomenon. These analysis processes would explore ways of life and happiness of skipped-generation families with international migrants in rural north-eastern Thailand. It would be a guideline for enhancing sustainable happiness among families, and empowering families to sustain their livings.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Results of the study were divided into two parts including 1) community background; which consisted physical background, economic background, and socio-cultural background, and 2) skipped-generation family and its economic happiness; which consisted characteristics of skipped-generation family, economy and the migrants, and happiness perspective of skipped-generation family.

### Community Background

Olo Village is a rural community, located in the Olo Sub-district, Phu Kiew District, Chaiyaphum Province. The village consists of three sub-communities including Olo Moo. 1, Olo Moo. 10, and Olo Moo. 11. Olo. The Landscape of the Village is a flat plain surrounded by sparse forests and mountains. The Landscape character is a sandy loam, which is suitable for crop cultivation. A big pond named "Nong Haew" is a public water source in the community. The pond is a vital water source for people in Olo Village and communities nearby especially for agricultural activity and daily consumption.

Regarding the community economy, the community has originally conducted agriculture. In 1957, people in the community started growing kenaf since it was very popular among farmers over the northeastern region. The circumstance caused a change of production mode from subsistence production to commercial production. Later, in 1987, a sugar mill was set up at the Phu Kiew District. Farmers decided turning their rice farms into sugarcane farms in order to support production capacity of the sugar mill. Most of the rice fields in Olo Village were replaced by sugarcane. For example. One household had 1.60 hectares of land for rice farming. They decided shifting cultivating by growing sugarcane for 1.28 hectares of land, and spared 0.32 hectares of land for rice farming. In 2005, a number of farmers brought rubber to grow in Olo area due to high rubber price at that time. However, rubber price is down in especially after 2014. Villagers, thus, turned to grow sugarcane again and it has become the major crop in the community as figure 1

[Figure 1 about here.]

The Socio-cultural background of Olo Village is based on the local northeastern tradition named "Heed Sib Song Kong Sib See". People have set up religious events every month throughout the year. However, more people in Olo Village have been moving out of the village to work. The events, therefore, occur in some months. In addition, the Loy Kra Tong traditional event is another major event in Olo Village. There is a beauty contest by recruiting the elderly or girls instead of the adults to join the contest. This is an opportunity for groups of people to participate in community activities.

### Skipped-generation family and economic happiness of skipped-generation family

#### Characteristics of skipped-generation family

Skipped-generation families at Olo Village have various patterns of coexistence. The Researcher identified patterns of coexistence of skipped-generation families based on the number of family members and the number of migrants as following details.

[Table 1 about here.]

According to table 1, most skipped-generation families are the families with both grandfather and grandmother living in pairs. Seven of the skipped-generation families had more than one grandchild and there are two household members working overseas. Agriculture presented as a main occupation because most skipped-generation families had many inherited lands. Moreover, the sugar mill set up 15 km away from the village made that skipped-generation families chose to grow sugarcane to supply the sugar mill. Sugarcane production made at least 2,400 USD per year, in case of small land owners. While families with over 3.20 hectares of land were able to make 6,000

USD per year. Some families generated income by offering land rent to those who interested in. This was another option for skipped-generation families, who did not have labour force within their household, to generate income throughout the year.

However, coexistence among grandparents and grandchildren always resulted in different perspectives in living. Raising grandchildren by grandparents caused problems within families especially on attitudes and ways of life between grandfather, grandmother, and grandchildren. Grandmothers often had a simple lifestyle. They were not ambitious, and were not extravagant. While grandfathers, who acted as family head, would sometimes show the leader's behavior. For instance, they bought some luxurious objects such as cars or agricultural vehicles. When their grandchildren wanted to buy a mobile phone, a motorcycle, some electronic devices, and their grandmother often denied responding grandchildren's needs because their grandmother thought it was unnecessary and extravagant. If grandchildren were still stubborn to buy it, grandmothers might punish grandchildren in order to stop them to think about buying the item. On the other hand, grandfathers usually supported their grandchildren's needs because they thought it was necessary to buy.

### Economy and migrants

Relationships in skipped-generation families between family members at places of origin and migrants was another essential condition that affected way of life and happiness of skipped-generation families. It was found that skipped-generation families always had a commitment with their migrants regarding working overseas. Migrants would send remittance back to their family at places of origin, while their grandparents took responsibility to raise the migrant's children in return. However, sometime working overseas might not provide positive output to households. Many migrants moved to work overseas illegally. Once they arrived at the destination country, they were exploited by employers, or some were canceled a job. They had to use networks of Thai people who lived abroad to seek for a new job. This circumstance directly affected households at places of origin because the migrant households spent a lot of money for migration expense and bear a debt. If their migrants could not send remittance back to pay for a debt, working contracts might be terminated. Therefore, to solve this problem, households chose to make a loan from an illegal source to pay another source. It was like an endless circle of debt.

Therefore, it might say that most skipped-generation families expected remittance from migrant members. More than 50% of total remittance was used for children's education expense and caring expense, 30% of remittance was used for agricultural expenses, and 20% was used for daily expenses and migration loan. In case the migrants could not send remittance on time, their households at place of origin had to make a loan from other financial sources to pay debt and invest in agricultural activity. In addition, many skipped-generation families

chose to release their lands for a rent, if they were facing with bad production season or labour shortage, in order to generate income for livings.

### Perspective of economic happiness among skipped-generation family

Most skipped-generation families were farmers who owned a lot of inherited land. They grew sugarcane as primarily because sugarcane was easy to grow, and it produced large amount of output. Moreover, the sugar mill located nearby the village, so people in Olo village changed production mode into sugarcane production for commercial purpose. Sugarcane became another option for households who had a lot of land in order to generate household income as one of skipped-generation family mentioned below.

*"... In the past, I did rice farm. I did it long time ago since my grandparents were still alive. When the sugar mill came to Phu Kiew, almost all of my neighbors turned themselves to grow sugarcane because it produced good income to the household. It did not need much labour force to take care of the crops. Someone grew sugarcane for 1.60 hectares of land, and they got more than 3,000 USD. Therefore, I decided growing sugarcane as same as the others..."* (Interviewed Mrs. Orathai, 2018).

Due to sugarcane production, Mrs. Orathai's family was able to buy lands or rent lands to increase sugarcane plantation area. Mrs. Orathai's family became head of the sugarcane quota in the community. Although, however, some skipped-generation families had large lands, they faced with labour shortage because their family members were working overseas. To deal with this circumstance, they agreed to release lands for rent because rent cost was quite satisfying and they did not have to manage the lands. It was noted that rent cost per Rai per year was estimated 70 USD – 100 USD.

This characteristics of skipped-generation families normally had perspective of happiness about an increase of production yield or incomes which were able to get rid of family's debt or let them live happily. Most of wealthy skipped-generation families would renovate their house. Some of them thought the original appearance does not meet the needs of housing. Traditional value about housing had changed. People in the past built a house for living, but now houses were represented as the economic power of the family. If any family had a concrete-built house, it represented that family as being "rich". While the families who built houses with a piece of wood became the poor families. In addition, some families chose to purchase modern technology machines or equipment such as cars, agricultural machines, or even air conditioners. This was an attempt to represent economic status of the family in the countryside. However, this happiness perspective was often found among the wealthy families, but happiness perspective of the poor families was different.

Some skipped-generation families were poor families due to a small size of land they owned and they could not allocate lands for rent. They also had a lot of debt due to migra-

tion expense. This group of skipped-generation families was facing with difficulty in life. The incomes they received were not sufficient. Some families never received remittance from their migrant members, so they had to work the self-employed tasks for their livelihoods. However, the current uncertain economic conditions and lower sugarcane price forced them to make a loan in advance, and they awaited income from the sugarcane in the next crop or remittance from the working overseas immigrant to clear their debt.

It is found that a community and a positive view of living were important things that helped skipped-generation families to spent livings in a rural society. Almost all the neighbors of skipped-generation families were relatives or close friends. Skipped-generation families often asked for help from neighbors to do activities such as farm activity which needed labour forces or religious activities. In addition, parenting was another activity that skipped-generation families needed help from neighbors or relatives. They helped each other to raise children when some families were busy in production activities or had business to do outside the community. This kind of help still presented in the northeastern region. In addition, this group of skipped-generation families had perspective towards economy that "they satisfied in what they have and do not compare yourself with others". Comparing with others would cause them to be unhappy because they could not find or have as much as other families. Therefore, satisfaction in life became another important factor that contributed happiness to skipped-generation families.

## CONCLUSION

According to research findings above, skipped-generation families have different perspectives of happiness. The wealthy

Skipped-generation families with large size of lands would have economic happiness due to an increase of income and production yields. They suggested that having much money would allow them to buy necessary equipment's such as agricultural machines, cars, houses, and it enhances their self-esteem in community. This is different from the poor families who have small lands. The poor families have economic happiness based on sufficiency. They are happy to spend money as needed, and they satisfy in their livings without comparison among other families. It is conformed to Thai quotation that "Be satisfied with what you have. People who are unhappy are those who think they are unhappy". Poor skipped generation families take this view to manage unpleasant economic situations of the family. For instance, insufficient income, debt, and labour shortage within the family due to international migration. They have to deal with these obstacles to secure their livings.

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**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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**TABLE 1** | coexistence of skipped-generation family by number of family member

Grandparents	Grandchildren	Parents of Grandchildren who Working Overseas	Family in Total
1 person	1 person	1 person	1 family
1 person	1 person	2 persons	2 families
1 person	More than 1 person	1 person	3 families
1 person	More than 1 person	2 persons	1 family
2 persons	1 person	1 person	1 family
2 persons	1 person	2 persons	3 families
2 persons	More than 1 person	1 person	2 families
2 persons	More than 1 person	2 persons	7 families
			20 families

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