

Family Support and Living Arrangements of Thai Elderly

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Despite rapid social and demographic change, a widespread and functioning familial system of support and care has been maintained

In contrast to the situation only a decade ago, recognition of the importance of population ageing and the need for policies and programmes to address the rapidly growing population in older age groups is now widespread among scholars and government planners in Thailand. The most recent Five-Year National Social and Economic Development Plan (1997-2001) specifically addresses the need to promote proper health care and support of the elderly by family members and to provide social welfare benefits for the isolated indigent elderly (NESDB, no date). This increased interest in issues related to ageing in Thailand has been accompanied by a considerable research effort directed towards the topic over the same period. These efforts have included several surveys especially focused on the older population as well as analyses of other more general sources, such as censuses, for this purpose.

The present analysis focuses on family support to the Thai elderly, defined as the population aged 60 and older, especially as manifested through living arrangements and intergenerational exchanges of both a material and non-material nature. Data come primarily from a 1995 nationally representative survey. We start by assessing the extent to which changes in the level of coresidence are evident by comparing results with those from previous sources. We then explore living arrangements and material exchanges and contact between the children of the elderly and the parents themselves. Particular attention is given to those elderly who are not coresident with their children. We conclude with an assessment of the extent to which the family system of support appears to be functioning in the present era of rapid social and demographic change.

Sources of data

The primary source of data analysed in this presentation is the Survey of the Welfare of Elderly in Thailand (SWET) conducted in 1995.¹ The survey is based on a national probability sample of persons aged 50 years old and older in private households who were usual residents of the household. A total sample of 7,708 persons were interviewed. Details of the survey methodology and sample are provided elsewhere (Chayovan and Knodel, 1997). For the purpose of this presentation, we limit consideration to the 4,486 respondents who were 60 years of age and older in order to focus on the elderly population and to facilitate comparisons with prior surveys that covered only persons in this age range.

Two previous surveys of the elderly population are also drawn upon for comparison. The first is known as the Socio-economic Consequences of the Aging Population in Thailand (SECAPT) survey conducted in 1986 and based on a nationally representative sample of 3,252 persons aged 60 and older (Chayovan, Wongsith and Saengtienchai, 1988).² The second, a large national survey of more than 14,000 persons aged 50 and older, of whom almost 8,000 were aged 60 and older, was undertaken in 1994 by the National Statistical Office (see NSO, no date; Knodel, Amornsirisomboon and Khiewyoo, 1997). Data are also available from recent Thai censuses that can be used to determine the extent to which elderly women coresided with their own children. In this report we draw on public use samples from both the 1980 and 1990 censuses to make this calculation.³

All three special surveys on the elderly are limited to those who live in private households. Both the 1980 and 1990 censuses indicate that less than 2 per cent of the population aged 60 and older lived in collective households, primarily in temples, presumably as Buddhist monks or nuns. Thus, those excluded primarily represent cases in which a religious institution serves as an alternative to familial living arrangements. The number of elderly who reside in special homes for the elderly is demographically insignificant (Pichyangkura and Singhajend, 1991). Given that the proportion of elderly living in collective households is quite low, the overall picture of living arrangements that is provided by the survey data based on private households only is unlikely to be seriously distorted by their omission.⁴

Results

Patterns and trends in living arrangements

In Thailand, as in most Asian countries, a central feature of the family support system for elderly members is coresidence (or a functionally equivalent arrangement) with one or more adult children. A common, if narrow, measure of such coresidence can be determined for all sources referred to above: namely the percentage of elderly who coreside with one or more of their children in the same household.⁵ Table 1 indicates this measure for all sources, both for all elderly and for elderly persons who have at least one living child. The surveys included information on adopted children and stepchildren as well as the respondent's own biological children while the censuses relate to biological children only. For this reason, the

percentages of elderly persons with no children is lower for the surveys. In all cases, however, the elderly without children constitute a small share of all elderly persons in Thailand.

Table 1: Among persons 60 years and older, the percentage who have no children and the percentage coresiding with a child, according to different sources, Thailand

Source	Percentage coresiding in the same household with a child among:				
	Elderly with no children ^a	All elderly	Elderly with at least one child ^a	Elderly living along	Elderly living with a spouse only
Censuses (women only)					
1980	7.1	76.2	82.0	n.a.	n.a.
1990	6.7	76.8	82.3	n.a.	n.a.
Surveys					
SECAPT 1986	3.5	76.9	79.7	4.3	6.7
NSO 1994	3.5	72.8	75.4	3.6	11.6
SWET 1995	4.4	70.9	74.2	4.3	11.9

Sources: Results other than for the censuses refer to the elderly in private households. NSO results are from Knodel, Amornsirisomboon and Khiewyoo, 1997.

^a Refers explicitly to own, adopted and stepchildren in SECAPT, NSO and SWET; although not explicitly stated in the censuses, "children" probably refers to "own children" only.

All sources based on data through 1990 indicate that 76-77 per cent of all elderly persons coreside with one of their children. The 1994 NSO survey and the 1995 SWET show somewhat lower levels of coresidence (73 per cent and 71 per cent, respectively). When consideration is limited to those elderly with at least one living child, there is more variation in the percentage coresident because of the differences in the percentage without children. However, all sources through 1990 indicate close to or above 80 per cent of the elderly with a living child as coresident. In contrast, the 1994 and 1995 surveys indicate only 75 and 74 per cent coresidence, respectively. The lower levels of coresidence found in the more recent data could possibly signify the start of a trend away from coresidence. However, it is also possible that differences in sampling techniques and survey methodology between the sources could account for all or part of the differences. Interestingly, the results from the 1980 and 1990 censuses, which are presumably reasonably comparable to each other, do not reveal any prior sign of declining coresidence with children among elderly women.

Table 1 also indicates that very few Thai elderly live alone and this has not changed over the period covered. In contrast, there are substantially more elderly living with a spouse only according to both the NSO survey and SWET compared with SECAPT. This could reflect an increased tendency for adult children to establish separate, but possibly nearby households, as long as elderly parents have each other to live with. The finding that living alone has not increased, however, suggests that once one of the parents dies, coresidence often resumes.

Table 2: Alternative measures of living arrangements in relation to children among population aged 60 and older who have at least one living child, Thailand, 1986 and 1995

Measure and source	Total	Sex		Age		Residence	
		Male	Female	60-69	70+	Urban	Rural
Percentage coresident with a child in same household:							
SECAPT 1986	79.7	79.3	79.9	82.3	75.6	81.9	79.2
SWET 1995	74.2	75.0	73.4	73.8	74.8	80.0	72.9
Percentage coresident or living next door to a child:							
SWET 1995	84.0	84.8	83.3	82.8	86.0	84.7	83.9
Percentage coresident or seeing a child daily:							
SECAPT 1986	90.7	89.8	91.4	91.2	90.0	87.5	91.4
SWET 1995	89.8	90.5	89.2	89.3	90.6	88.6	90.0

The extent of coresidence in the same household according to sex, age and type of area of residence of the elderly is compared in table 2 between SECAPT and SWET for the elderly with at least one living child. To the extent that a comparison between these two surveys reflects changes in levels of coresidence of elderly parents with children in the same household, coresidence apparently declined equally for men and women but quite unequally according to age and residence of the elderly, with the reduction limited mainly to younger elderly persons (aged 60-69) compared with those older and to the rural elderly compared with those in urban areas.⁶

The levels of coresidence cited so far are based on a very narrow definition of the phenomenon. In all of the sources cited, the definition of a household typically relies on the official household registration system and thus corresponds to individual dwelling units. In most cases, therefore, living in the same household refers to situations where the elderly and one or more of their children share the same dwelling. Situations in which elderly parents and children live in separate dwellings (with separate registrations) but belong to a related cluster of houses that are interdependent are thus ignored. In many respects, however, such arrangements can serve many of the same functional purposes for meeting the needs of the elderly as living in the same dwelling. Previous studies have indicated that such situations are not unusual in Thailand, especially in rural settings (Cowgill, 1972; Knodel and Saengtienchai, 1996). Thus, results based strictly on coresidence in the same household understate the extent to which the living arrangements of the elderly and their families are intertwined with exchanges of social and economic supports.

In SWET, information was solicited on the location of each of the respondent's children as well as the support each child provided and received. With respect to location, respondents were specifically asked if any of their children who did not reside in the same household lived in an adjacent dwelling. Among the elderly who had a living child but did not coreside with a child in the same household, almost 40 per cent lived adjacent to a child. When these are added to cases where a child was literally coresident, 84 per cent of the elderly are found to be either coresident or living adjacent to a child. Moreover, as indicated in table 2, there is very little difference in this respect between men and women, younger and older elderly, or those in urban or rural areas.

Even including children living in adjacent households can understate the extent to which considerable daily interaction occurs between the elderly and their children, since children who are not literally next door but live nearby can also assist elderly parents in a variety of ways. A more encompassing estimate of the extent to which living arrangements facilitate daily interaction between elderly parents and their children can be obtained by combining information on coresidence with that on the frequency of contact that the elderly have with non-coresident children. Such information was collected in both SECAPT and SWET. As table 2 also indicates, 91 per cent of elderly parents in SECAPT and 90 per cent in SWET either coreside in the same household or have daily contact with at least one child. This means that over half of elderly parents (54 per cent in SECAPT and 60 per cent in SWET) who do not coreside in the same dwelling with a child nevertheless see a non-coresident child every day. Such situations are likely to afford ample opportunities for exchanges of support and services.

The frequency of such visiting is no doubt made possible by the proximity of residences and in many cases reflects situations in which the dwelling units of the elderly and their children in some sense could be considered to form a broader cluster of interrelated households, especially in cases where the child is in an adjacent dwelling (Knodel and Saengtienchai, 1997). The fact that there is very little difference between the two surveys with respect to this more comprehensive combined measure of coresidence and daily contact suggests that the apparent decline between the two surveys in literal coresidence in the same household does not reflect a trend towards desertion of the elderly but rather a limited modification of living arrangements that most likely retains essential exchanges between parents and children. Possibly the improved economic situation in recent years to the middle of 1997 has facilitated construction of separate dwelling units for married adult children next to or near their elderly parents. Such arrangements may be seen as providing greater privacy for both parties while retaining a close level of interaction consistent with a family system of support and care of the elderly. Focus group discussions have revealed that some elderly persons prefer this type of arrangement, especially if they are in good health (Knodel, Saengtienchai and Sittitjai, 1995).

The fact that the main decline in coresidence is observed for the elderly in rural areas, where obtaining land for a new house is not a major problem, is consistent with this speculation. So is the fact that the apparent decline in coresidence is concentrated among the younger elderly and is only very modest among the older elderly, who are more likely to have needs for physical care and concerns about health that require closer attention by a care-giver.

Table 3: Selected measures of living arrangements of population aged 60, by sex, age and residence, Thailand, 1995

Measure	Total	Sex		Age		Residence	
		Male	Female	60-69	70+	Urban	Rural
Percentage alone	4.3	2.9	5.5	3.7	5.3	3.6	4.5
Percentage with spouse only	11.9	14.5	9.7	13.3	9.6	6.6	13.0
Percentage with spouse (with or without others)	60.4	81.0	43.1	69.0	46.3	51.8	62.3
Percentage in three-generation households	47.0	44.7	49.0	45.0	50.3	48.5	46.7

Percentage living with any:							
Child	70.9	72.7	69.4	70.5	71.7	76.6	69.7
Child aged 18+	69.0	69.4	68.6	68.3	70.1	75.8	67.5
Single child	33.2	41.5	26.2	38.7	24.2	45.0	30.6
Ever married child	50.7	47.0	53.8	46.9	56.9	51.9	50.4
Son	36.3	40.8	32.5	38.7	32.3	49.4	33.4
Daughter	49.3	50.4	48.4	49.4	49.3	55.8	47.9
Single son	20.5	26.7	15.2	25.5	12.3	28.2	18.7
Single daughter	20.0	24.5	16.3	22.7	15.7	33.2	17.1
Ever married son	19.6	19.6	19.6	18.0	22.3	28.8	17.6
Ever married daughter	33.8	31.0	36.2	32.2	36.6	30.6	34.6
Ratio living with:							
Single daughter/single son	0.98	0.92	1.07	0.89	1.28	1.18	0.91
Ever married daughter/ever married son	1.72	1.58	1.85	1.79	1.64	1.06	1.97

Source: SWET, 1995.

Note: Results refer to the elderly in private households. Children include own, adopted and stepchildren. Three-generation households include respondents who live with their children and grandchildren as well as those who live with their parents and children or grandchildren.

A more detailed set of indicators of living arrangements of the Thai elderly population according to with whom they live is provided in table 3 by age, sex and area of residence of the elderly respondent based on SWET. Some of the observed differences between men and women and between older and younger elderly persons are largely reflections of the demographics of ageing. For example, the fact that the proportion of elderly who live with a spouse (regardless of the presence of others) is almost twice as high for men as for women undoubtedly reflects the tendency of women to outlive their husbands, both because of higher male mortality and the age differences between spouses, as well as a greater tendency for older men, compared with older women, to remarry in cases of widowhood. Likewise, the far higher proportion of younger compared with older elderly who live with a spouse (with or without others) reflects the increased chance of a spouse dying as people age. Although the proportion living alone is low for all categories shown, these same demographic processes undoubtedly underlie the noticeably higher levels found among women compared with men and among older compared with younger elderly persons.

Overall, almost half of the Thai elderly live in a three-generation household. There is little difference in this respect between urban and rural elderly. Almost all the elderly who live with a child live with an adult child. Thus, the percentage who live with at least one child aged 18 or older is only slightly lower (69 vs. 71 per cent) than the percentage who live with any child. Elderly persons are considerably more likely to live with an ever married child than a single child, although this is far more so for the older than the younger elderly, reflecting the greater likelihood that the elderly's children are married as the elderly themselves grow older (Knodel, Chayovan and Siriboon, 1996).

The elderly who live with single children are about as likely to live with a son as a daughter (about 20 per cent in each case). In contrast, far more Thai elderly persons live with an ever married daughter than an ever married son (34 vs. 20 per cent). This tendency is strong among both men and women and younger and older elderly; however, it is largely a rural phenomenon. Among the urban elderly, there is little difference in the proportion who live with an ever married son or daughter. The rural-urban differences in this respect undoubtedly reflect the far greater influence of Chinese ethnicity (and the associated preference for residing with a married son) among urban Thais compared with their rural counterparts.

Intergenerational exchanges of material support and contact

The familial system of care and support for the elderly in Thailand consists of numerous exchanges of services and material contributions among a variety of kin but especially between parents and children. Detailed information was collected in SWET about some of these exchanges between the elderly and each of their children. For some aspects of exchange, the information solicited was conditional on whether or not the child lived outside the household of the respondent. Overall, 96 per cent of the elderly have at least one living child, 91 per cent have at least one non-coresident child, and 71 per cent have at least one coresident child. On average, 4.6 children of elderly parents with at least one non-coresident child lived outside the household; among the coresident elderly, an average of 1.6 children lived in the same dwelling as their parents.

Table 4: Exchange of food/clothes and money with a parent among children of parents aged 60 and older, by the location of the child relative to the parent, Thailand, 1995

	Location of the child						
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	Same house	Adjacent house	Same community	Same province	Elsewhere
Percentage giving food/clothes to parent at least:					
Daily	X	27.8	9.1	2.7	.5
Weekly	X	49.4	29.2	12.9	2.0
Monthly	X	61.2	46.7	32.7	12.0
Yearly	X	81.0	76.1	72.6	66.3
Percentage receiving food/clothes from parent at least:					
Daily	X	10.6	4.6	1.5	.1
Weekly	X	20.3	13.2	4.6	.5
Monthly	X	26.2	21.1	11.4	3.3
Yearly	X	33.6	32.1	25.4	22.2
Percentage giving to parent:					
Any money	59.7	60.0	53.6	61.3	65.9
At least 1,000 baht	42.7	23.9	20.1	31.6	45.9
Percentage receiving from parent:					
Any money	27.7	13.2	11.8	11.2	11.4
At least 1,000 baht	21.9	7.8	7.2	7.9	8.9

Source: SWET, 1995.

Note: Results refer to the elderly in private households. Children include own, adopted and stepchildren.

Table 4 examines material exchanges in terms of food or clothes and in terms of money given and received during the past year based on children as the unit of analysis. Results are shown by the child's location relative to the parent.⁷ The question on exchanges of food or clothes was asked only in relation to non-coresident children, since in the case of coresident children exchanges within the same household are likely to be both routine and difficult for a respondent to sort out. Note that food and clothing were combined as a single item in the question that respondents were asked. Presumably, food is the predominant item involved, especially when considering frequent exchanges.

In general, substantially higher percentages of non-coresident children give rather than receive food or clothes in exchanges with parents, although the extent to which parents also give is not trivial. Moreover, the probability of any such exchange as well as its frequency is directly associated with the proximity of the households involved. In particular, daily or weekly exchanges of food and clothes are limited mainly to children who live within the same community and especially those who live adjacent to their parents. Over one-fourth of children living adjacent to an elderly parent provide food or clothes on a daily basis and almost half on at least a weekly basis, testifying to the close linkages between such households. Among children who live outside the immediate community, exchanges of food or clothes are limited largely to less frequent exchanges. Yearly exchanges are nevertheless fairly frequent, especially with respect to children providing food or clothes to the parent. This likely reflects the Thai tradition of returning to visit parents at least once a year during the Thai New Year celebration (Songkran) in mid-April and the normal practice of bringing some gift (typically food and/or money) when visiting from a distance.

Information on exchanges of money was sought from all children including those coresident. Respondents were asked if any money was given or received during the past year and if so, whether the total amount involved equaled at least 1,000 baht (US\$40 at the time of the survey). As table 4 shows, money exchanges flow in both directions although children are considerably more likely to give money to parents than to receive it. Although there is no clear relationship between the location of the child and giving any money to a parent, if consideration is limited to amounts of 1,000 baht or more, coresident children and those who live farthest away (i.e. in a different province) are distinctly more likely to provide such amounts than other children. For distant children, this probably reflects a combination of greater ability to contribute money owing to the higher proportions of such children who have paid jobs in the non-agricultural sector and attempt to substitute money for the more frequent types of exchanges of food and services that can take place when living nearby. In the case of coresident children, the high proportion providing at least 1,000 baht probably reflects the nature of shared finances within the same household and thus represents a rather different type of phenomenon.

Such an interpretation is consistent with the observed pattern of receiving money from parents. By the time parents are elderly, the normative obligation for support flows from children to parents rather than the reverse (Knodel, Saengtienchai and Sittitrai, 1995). Thus, although we would still expect the nature of shared household finances to increase the likelihood that an elderly parent would provide money to a coresident child, we would not expect parents trying to compensate children who are far away from home by providing money in lieu of other forms of support to the children. This is just the pattern that is evident,

i.e. those children who coreside with parents are clearly more likely than all others to receive either any money or amounts of at least 1,000 baht. Among non-coresident children, however, there is little difference according to their location with respect to having received money from parents.

Table 5: Contact with and receipt of support from non-coresident children, by living arrangement, among the population aged 60 and older, Thailand, 1986 and 1995

	Coresides in same household with child			Not living with any child		
	Total	Alone	With spouse only	With others only	With spouse and others	
Of all persons 60+						
Percentage with a non-coresident child:						
SECAPT 1986	91.2	84.8	89.1	89.7	70.1	94.0
SWET 1995	93.4	85.0	86.3	93.1	64.0	93.4
Of persons 60+ with at least one non-coresident child						
Percentage with a child in an adjacent house:						
SWET 1995	35.5	38.2	45.5	39.0	29.0	39.1
Percentage with a child in same community ^a :						
SECAPT 1986	70.2	68.6	70.0	71.8	67.0	65.4
SWET 1995	70.2	68.2	66.8	73.3	58.1	67.4
Percentage who see a non-coresident child:						
- Daily:						
SECAPT 1986	53.9	55.3	56.0	61.0	47.4	55.0
SWET 1995	63.3	60.5	61.1	65.2	48.2	60.8
- At least weekly:						
SECAPT 1986	72.1	69.6	69.3	74.1	62.7	71.0
SWET 1995	76.4	73.6	72.0	80.4	58.1	73.9
- At least monthly:						
SECAPT 1986	81.9	82.9	78.6	87.0	77.4	86.3
SWET 1995	88.5	87.8	82.5	94.7	77.2	86.0
Percentage who receive food/clothes from a non-coresident child:						
- Daily:						
SWET 1995	17.3	22.6	28.3	23.1	18.0	21.6
- At least weekly:						
SWET 1995	36.4	43.1	46.1	44.1	34.2	46.5
Percentage who received money in previous year from a non-coresident child:						
- Any money:						
SWET 1995	88.4	87.1	85.2	88.7	88.1	84.5
- At least 1,000 baht:						
SWET 1995	69.9	66.9	63.6	67.8	66.8	67.4

Note: Results refer to the elderly in private households. Children include own, adopted and stepchildren.
a Including children who live adjacent to parents.

Table 5 switches focus back to the elderly as the unit of analysis and examines the association between living arrangements and both contact with non-coresident children and receipt of material support from them. Since information on contact with non-coresident children is available from both SECAPT and SWET, results from both sources are presented on this issue. Because the elderly who have no non-coresident child are obviously unable to have contact with or receive support from such a child, results are presented only for the elderly with at least one non-coresident child. It should be noted, however, as also shown in table 5, that among all elderly, there is some variation in the percentage who have a non-coresident child according to living arrangements, although only in the case of the elderly who live with "others" (i.e. other than a child or spouse) is the proportion under 90 per cent.

Results from SWET indicate that a large share of the elderly (with a non-coresident child) who do not live with a child live in a house adjacent to a child (overall 38 per cent). This is especially so for the elderly who live alone (45 per cent). Moreover, a substantial majority (close to 70 per cent) of both coresident and non-coresident elderly with a non-coresident child have a child in the same community. For most living arrangement categories, there is little difference in this respect between the SECAPT and SWET results. Information on contact with children indicates that a very substantial proportion of elderly in all living arrangement categories see a non-coresident child frequently. For elderly persons (with a non-coresident child) in all categories, except the elderly who live with "others", the majority in both SECAPT and SWET see a non-coresident child daily. Moreover, this is somewhat higher in SWET than in SECAPT. If weekly or monthly contact is considered, considerably higher levels of contact are indicated.

Overall, the results regarding contact with a non-coresident child as well as living next door to or in the same village as a child do not suggest that there is much difference in these respects between the elderly who coreside with a child and those who do not. They do indicate, however, that few elderly, including those who do not coreside with a child, are isolated from all their children.

In addition to having contact with non-coresident children, a substantial minority of the elderly receive food or clothes from at least one child on a fairly frequent basis. Elderly persons who do not live with a child are somewhat more likely to receive food on a daily or weekly basis than are the elderly who do coreside with a child, suggesting some modest compensation on the part of children for not living in the same household with parents. On the other hand, the chance of elderly parents receiving financial contributions from at least one non-coresident child appears to be similar regardless of the living arrangement.

Table 6: Proportion of elderly who have regular contact with specific kin, by coresidence with child, Thailand, 1995

	All elderly		Elderly with kin outside household	
	Contact yearly	Contact monthly	Contact yearly	Contact monthly
Coreside with child				
Sibling	68.2	33.4	83.3	40.7
Grandchild	89.0	X	92.5	X
Niece/nephew	75.0	X	81.6	X
Other relative	57.3	X	57.3	X
Not coreside with child				
Sibling	70.5	36.5	82.1	41.4
Grandchild	78.1	X	93.6	X
Niece/nephew	77.7	X	84.7	X
Other relative	56.3	X	36.3	X

Note: X = not available.

Besides interactions with their children, contact with other family members can also form an important part of an elderly person's social support. Table 6 summarizes limited information as collected in SWET about contact between the respondent and other family members living outside the household. Results are shown for all elderly respondents, regardless of whether or not they had non-coresident kin of a particular category as well as for those respondents who had at least one such non-coresident kin. In order to determine if coresidence with children substituted for social contacts with other kin, results are shown separately according to whether or not the respondent coresided with one or more children.

In general, only small differences in the percentage having contact with kin are evident between the elderly who coreside with a child and those who do not. Moreover, among the elderly with specific kin outside the household, the vast majority have

at least yearly contact with all but more distant relatives. Indeed, for the elderly with living siblings, approximately two-fifths see a sibling at least monthly. The overall situation suggested from the results in table 6 is one in which most Thai elderly persons maintain at least occasional social contact with a variety of different kin. Thus, although adult children in most cases are at the centre of the family support system, other family members also form part of a broader family network of social support.

Discussion and conclusions

Survey and census data on the living arrangements of the elderly and their linkages with related aspects of material exchanges and contact with their children indicate that a widespread and functioning familial system of support and care for the older population has been maintained in Thailand despite rapid social and demographic change over recent decades. Although difference in samples and data collection methods preclude arriving at firm conclusions, there is some suggestion in the available data that coresidence of elderly parents with at least one child, literally defined as living in the same dwelling unit, is declining. However, this does not appear to represent an erosion of the support system, judging from the fact that increased daily contact between older parents and non-coresident children almost fully compensates for this decline. Rather, it may reflect a tendency to "buy more privacy" for both generations by establishing nearby households, a possibility made more affordable by rising incomes, while retaining sufficient proximity to permit maintaining essential aspects of traditional intergenerational obligations of care and support.

Table 7: Percentage distribution according to living arrangements among the population aged 60 and older in collective and private households, Thailand, 1995

	Percentage of all elderly ^a	Percentage of major category
In collective households (from 1990 census)		
In temple as monk (men only)	1.5	5.7
In temple but not a monk	0.2	9.3
Other than temple	0.1	4.9
Total	1.8	100
In private households (from SWET, 1995)		
Elderly with a living child		
1. Lives with child aged 18+	67.7	72.1
2. Lives adjacent to a child	9.7	10.3
3. Sees a child daily	6.6	7.0
4. Lives with other relative aged 18+ (excluding spouse)	2.1	2.2
5. Lives with spouse and underage child or relative	2.2	2.3
6. Lives with spouse only	3.5	3.7
7. Lives with underage child or relative only	0.8	0.9
8. Lives alone	1.5	1.6
Total	93.9	100
(Of the elderly in categories 5 through 8 above, 73 per cent received 1,000+ baht from at least one child in previous year.)		
Childless elderly		
1. Lives with other relative age 18+ (excluding spouse)	2.6	60.6
2. Lives with spouse and underage relative	0.1	2.4
3. Lives with spouse only	0.8	18.8
4. Lives with underage relative only	>0.1	0.8
5. Lives alone	0.8	17.5
Total	4.3	100
(Of the elderly in categories 4 and 5 above, 49 per cent see a sibling daily.)		

Notes: Within each of the three major groups, assignment to specific categories is hierarchical. Non-relatives in the household are ignored for the purpose of the above tabulations. Overall, 1.2 per cent of the elderly in SWET lived in households with one or more non-relatives. Children include own, adopted and stepchildren.

a The percentages shown for private households (based on SWET) have been adjusted to reflect the 1.8 per cent

of the elderly who are indicated as living in collective households based on the 1990 census.

The pervasiveness of a functioning familial system of care and support for the older generation in Thailand is illustrated in table 7 which combines the detailed information on living arrangements, social contact and monetary contributions from the younger generation available from SWET for 1995 with supplementary information from the 1990 census on collective households. Only 1.8 per cent of the elderly live in institutional households, and the vast majority of these (86 per cent) are monks in temples. Information on how long these elderly men had been monks or their reasons for entering the monkhood is unavailable. However, it seems reasonable to assume that most are there for reasons other than a failure of family support. In view of the fact that our previous analysis indicated little gender difference in coresidence with children (see e.g. table 2), if residence in temples were mainly a symptom of a failing family support system, we would not expect to see such a sex imbalance among those seeking refuge there.⁸ Thus, even the small numbers of elderly in collective households probably do not in the main represent failures of the familial support system.

Among the elderly in private households, it is useful to separate those who have a living child from those who do not, in view of the fact that the living arrangements and support exchanges available to these two groups necessarily differ. Within each group, a hierarchical set of living arrangement categories has been defined in a manner intended to represent roughly a descending scale in terms of normatively preferred forms of familial support and care. Thus, situations in which adult children are likely to be playing important roles are given precedence in the hierarchy to ones where other relatives are likely to be doing so. Since young children (defined as being under the age of 18 for this purpose) are unlikely to be able to provide full assistance in the household either in terms of taking on important household responsibilities or bringing in significant income, they are considered as dependents rather than as part of the familial support system for the elderly in the construction of the hierarchy. Within each of the two major groupings (those with and those without a living child), each elderly respondent is assigned the first category for which he or she qualifies.

Elderly persons who have children and live in private households are by far the vast majority (94 per cent) of the elderly population and most of them reside with an adult child (aged 18 or older). Among those who do not coreside with an adult child, most either live next door to a child or see a child daily. These three categories already encompass 90 per cent of the elderly with a child. Even among the remaining 10 per cent, some live with other relatives aged 18 or older who may well play a role within the household similar to that of a coresident child, and just over half live with a spouse. Only 2.5 per cent of the elderly with a living child live only with a child or relative under 18, or completely alone. Even the 8 per cent of elderly parents who are not coresident, do not live adjacent to a child, do not see a child daily, and do not live with another relative aged 18 or older are not necessarily cut off from support from their children. This is indicated by the fact that almost three-fourths of them receive significant monetary contributions (i.e. at least 1,000 baht) from at least one child.

The information in SWET also shows that most of the small minority of elderly who are without a living child (representing 4.3 per cent of the total elderly) are integrated into the prevailing familial system of care and support. Just over 60 per cent coreside with some relative aged 18 or older. Most of the remainder live with a spouse. Only about 18 per cent live either with a relative under 18 or entirely alone. Again, however, it would be wrong to think that all in even this group are outside the family support system as indicated by the fact that almost half (49 per cent) report seeing a sibling daily.

The overall picture provided by the composite of data used to construct table 7 is one of a remarkably pervasive system of familial support and care for the Thai elderly. Although forces of demographic and socio-economic change may modify the situation in the future, so far there are few, if any, signs that widespread abandonment of the Thai elderly by their children or kin is likely to come about in the foreseeable future. This does not mean that the Thai elderly do not face serious economic problems or necessarily have access to the extra-familial services, including health services, that are necessary for their welfare (see e.g. Knodel, Amornsirirong and Khiewyoo, 1997). It does mean, however, that programmes intended for assisting elderly Thais should in many cases consider aid to needy families with elderly members rather than focus only on the tiny minority who are truly deserted by their children and kin.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported in part by a research grant from the U.S. National Institute on Aging (NIA), under the project "Rapid Demographic Change and the Welfare of the Elderly" (#R37AG07637).

Endnotes

SWET was conducted jointly by the Ministry of Public Health, the Health System Research Institute and the Institute of Population Studies of Chulalongkorn University, with technical assistance provided by the University of Michigan.

SECAPT was conducted by the Institute of Population Studies, Chulalongkorn University as part of the ASEAN Population Programme.

The 1980 and 1990 Thai censuses included direct questions about the number of a woman's children who lived in the same household as she did, the number who lived elsewhere, and the number who had died. Although this information was collected for the purpose of estimating fertility and mortality, it can be used to examine coresidence with children. Equivalent data for men are lacking (see Knodel, Chayovan and Saengtienchai, 1994).

Any bias introduced is primarily for men given that, according to the 1990 census, men constitute 91 per cent of the elderly in collective households. Thus, the percentage of men aged 60 and older in collective households is considerably higher than for women (3.5 vs. 0.3 per cent). Almost all these men (98 per cent) were residing in temples and 96 per cent of them were monks. Among women in collective households, 64 per cent lived in temples. Although the census does not directly identify if such women are nuns, it seems safe to assume the vast majority are.

In a small proportion of cases, coresiding elderly persons are living with a child who has not yet reached adulthood. In SWET, for example, 3 per cent of households of respondents aged 60 or older with a coresident child had no child at least 18 years old.

For the purpose of this presentation, urban is defined as officially designated municipalities and Bangkok. Living in the same community was defined as living in the same village for rural respondents and in the same neighbourhood for urban respondents.

Only 9.3 per cent of the elderly in collective households were women.

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