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A Review Manuscript

Social Transformation, Inequality and Migration in Contemporary Thailand: A Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

Thailand provides a particularly productive case for examining how economic development, demographic change, migration, urbanization and unequal access to resources interact to reshape social relations. This manuscript develops a sociological analysis of contemporary Thailand using secondary evidence from national statistics, international development reports and peer-reviewed scholarship. Rather than presenting new survey or interview data, the article synthesizes existing evidence to explain how structural inequalities are reproduced across class, space, generation and migration status. The analysis identifies five interconnected processes: persistent socioeconomic inequality; Bangkok-centered spatial and institutional concentration; demographic ageing and low fertility; internal and cross-border migration; and the institutional production of social inclusion and exclusion. Recent evidence indicates that Thailand has achieved substantial long-term reductions in poverty, but inequality remains significant, with occupational and educational differences, spatial disparities and concentration of wealth continuing to shape life chances. At the same time, demographic ageing and very low fertility are altering household structures, labour markets and intergenerational relations. Internal migration remains substantial, while migrants from neighbouring countries occupy important but vulnerable positions in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, construction and services. The article argues that Thai social transformation should not be understood simply as a linear transition from a rural to an urban or traditional to a modern society. Instead, Thailand is characterized by layered modernities in which older hierarchies coexist with new market, educational, bureaucratic and transnational forms of stratification. The paper concludes by proposing a sociological framework that connects structure, institutions and everyday social practices, and identifies implications for future research on inequality, migration, ageing and social cohesion in Thailand.

Keywords: Thailand; sociology; social inequality; social stratification; migration; urbanization; ageing; social change; labour; social exclusion

1. Introduction

Thailand has experienced profound social transformation over the last several decades. Economic development, industrialization, expansion of education, urban growth, international migration and changing household structures have altered the organization of everyday life. Yet social change has not produced a uniform convergence toward equality or social mobility. Instead, old and new forms of hierarchy have become intertwined. Educational credentials, occupation, wealth, geography, citizenship and access to institutions increasingly interact to determine who can convert economic growth into secure life chances (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016; World Bank, 2024).

The sociological significance of Thailand lies partly in this combination of rapid transformation and persistent stratification. Thailand has made major gains in poverty reduction and human development, but inequality remains multidimensional. The World Bank reports that inequality in income and wealth remains high and that unequal opportunities are associated with education, occupation and spatial location (World Bank, 2020, 2024). Recent scholarship similarly emphasizes the importance of cultural dispositions, social hierarchy and the historically formed "Thai habitus" in understanding how inequality is experienced and reproduced (Thongsawang, Rehbein, & Chantavanich, 2024).

Demography adds another layer. Official statistics show a marked increase in the share of older people and a decline in the share of children. In the Statistical Yearbook Thailand 2024, the population aged 60 and above reached 20.0 percent in 2023, while the total fertility rate was approximately 1.00 (National Statistical Office of Thailand [NSO], 2024). These changes affect family organization, care work, labour supply and intergenerational transfers. They also raise questions about whether social institutions designed during a period of demographic expansion remain adequate for an ageing society.

Migration provides a further lens through which Thai social transformation can be examined. Internal migration continues to connect rural and urban areas, while Thailand is also a major destination for workers from neighbouring countries. NSO data record 798,749 internal migrants in 2024, after a peak of 981,521 in 2023 in the series reported in the Statistical Yearbook Thailand 2025 (NSO, 2025). Research on Myanmar migrant workers demonstrates that migration is simultaneously an economic process and a process of social boundary formation, in which legal status, nationality, race-like distinctions, class and cultural identity influence access to social space and security (Doungphummes, Saeheng, & Phanthaphoommee, 2023; Mortensen, 2024).

This article therefore asks: How can contemporary Thai society be understood through the interaction of inequality, demographic change, migration and institutional transformation? The central argument is that Thailand should be analysed as a stratified and socially differentiated society in which modernization has generated new opportunities while also reorganizing existing inequalities. The article contributes a synthetic sociological framework rather than a new empirical dataset. Its purpose is to integrate demographic, economic and migration evidence into a coherent account of social transformation.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social stratification and life chances

A sociological analysis of Thailand benefits from treating inequality as more than a difference in income. Weber's concept of life chances emphasizes the unequal capacity of social groups to obtain valued goods and opportunities through their social position (Weber, 1978). Bourdieu's framework extends this approach by distinguishing economic, social and cultural capital and by showing how dispositions and institutions can reproduce privilege across generations (Bourdieu, 1986). These perspectives are useful in Thailand because

education, occupational status, family networks, geographic location and wealth interact rather than operate independently.

The concept of social reproduction is especially relevant. Unequal households do not merely possess different amounts of income; they differ in their ability to invest in education, housing, health, mobility and social networks. Consequently, inequality can persist even when aggregate economic conditions improve. In Thailand, evidence that education and occupation are major contributors to income inequality supports an interpretation in which structural advantages are converted into differentiated life chances (World Bank, 2020, 2024).

2.2 Habitus, hierarchy and institutionalized inequality

The concept of habitus helps connect structural inequality with everyday practice. Habitus refers to durable dispositions through which individuals perceive social positions and act within social fields (Bourdieu, 1977). Recent scholarship on Thai society argues that historically formed dispositions and social hierarchies remain relevant to contemporary inequality (Thongsawang et al., 2024). This does not mean that Thai society is culturally fixed. Rather, social change occurs through the reinterpretation of inherited expectations within new economic and institutional environments.

Institutional sociology adds a complementary perspective. Bureaucracies, schools, labour markets, migration regimes and welfare institutions distribute opportunities through formal rules and informal practices. Evers (2009) argued that urbanization and bureaucratization in Thailand contributed to the consolidation of a social class structure around Bangkok. The implication is that modernization can create new forms of hierarchy rather than simply dissolve older ones.

2.3 Migration, boundary-making and social exclusion

Migration is treated here as a relational process rather than merely movement between locations. Migrants enter labour markets, neighbourhoods, schools, religious spaces and administrative systems in which they are categorized as insiders or outsiders. Social exclusion may therefore be produced through documentation requirements, occupational segmentation, stigma, language, nationality and unequal access to services. Recent research on Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand illustrates how “othering” can be reproduced through public discourse, particularly during periods of crisis (Doungphummes et al., 2023).

Mortensen (2024) further demonstrates how legal status and enforcement practices can shape the conditions of migrant labour in Thai agriculture. This perspective is important because it shifts analysis from individual vulnerability to the institutions and relations that produce vulnerability. At the same time, migrants are not passive subjects: they construct networks, use religious and cultural spaces, move between identities and develop strategies for navigating social boundaries.

3. Methodology

This manuscript uses a qualitative, integrative review design based on secondary data and published scholarship. The evidence base combines: (1) official Thai demographic and migration statistics; (2) World Bank reports and datasets on poverty, inequality and structural development; and (3) peer-reviewed sociological and interdisciplinary research on class, migration, social exclusion and social change. The approach is interpretive rather than statistical. Quantitative indicators are used to establish the scale and direction of social change, while sociological literature is used to interpret the mechanisms through which institutions and social relations shape outcomes.

The unit of analysis is Thai society as a national social formation, while recognizing substantial regional, class, gender, age and migration-status differences. The article does not claim that national averages represent all Thai

residents equally. Nor does it infer causality from descriptive statistics. Instead, it uses convergence across independent sources to identify sociologically meaningful patterns. The most recent official statistics available for this manuscript are primarily from 2023–2024, while academic sources published in 2024–2026 are incorporated where relevant.

4. The Social Structure of Contemporary Thailand

4.1 Inequality beyond income

Thailand's development experience complicates the assumption that economic growth necessarily produces social equality. Poverty has fallen dramatically over the long term, yet the distribution of income and wealth remains unequal. The World Bank's analysis identifies education, occupation and spatial disparities as important structural contributors, while noting that wealth is substantially concentrated among the richest households (World Bank, 2020, 2024). This suggests that inequality is reproduced through several interconnected mechanisms rather than through income alone.

From a sociological perspective, wealth matters because it can be converted into other forms of capital. Wealthier households can purchase better housing, private education, transportation and access to networks that facilitate employment. They may also be better positioned to absorb economic shocks. Consequently, two households with similar current incomes may possess very different future opportunities because their accumulated assets and social connections differ.

Spatial inequality is equally important. Bangkok functions as a major centre of employment, higher education, government administration, finance and corporate activity. The concentration of institutions in the capital can produce cumulative advantages for people who live in or can relocate to metropolitan areas. Conversely, residents of poorer or more remote areas may face higher costs of accessing specialized education, formal employment and state services. Evers's (2009) analysis of Bangkok's bureaucratic and class formation helps explain why urban concentration can become a mechanism of stratification rather than merely a demographic phenomenon.

4.2 Education and intergenerational reproduction

Education is commonly presented as a route to social mobility, but sociological analysis requires attention to unequal educational starting points and returns. Differences in school quality, household resources, location, parental education and access to supplementary learning can influence educational trajectories. The World Bank identifies human-capital inequality as a persistent structural challenge in Thailand, including uneven learning outcomes and barriers affecting vulnerable groups (World Bank, 2024).

Educational expansion can therefore have contradictory effects. It can increase absolute mobility by enabling more people to obtain credentials, while simultaneously intensifying relative competition for high-status positions. When high-return occupations remain concentrated in particular institutions and metropolitan areas, educational credentials may function as mechanisms of selection as well as mobility. In Bourdieusian terms, formal qualifications interact with cultural and social capital, meaning that the same credential may have different effects depending on the resources surrounding the individual (Bourdieu, 1986).

4.3 Class, occupation and the changing labour market

Thailand's labour structure includes formal employment, informal work, agriculture, manufacturing, services, public-sector employment and a substantial range of self-employment. These categories are not simply economic classifications; they imply different degrees of income security, legal protection, social insurance and occupational prestige. The World Bank's recent assessment identifies productivity constraints, labour-market

vulnerabilities and unequal human-capital outcomes as interconnected challenges for inclusive development (World Bank, 2024).

Class should consequently be understood relationally. A middle-income salaried worker may possess greater employment security than a higher-income self-employed worker whose income is volatile. Similarly, a migrant worker and a Thai citizen performing similar tasks may occupy different institutional positions because nationality and documentation affect rights and bargaining power. A sociological approach therefore examines the institutional organization of work alongside income levels.

5. Urbanization and Spatial Transformation

Urbanization has been central to Thailand's social transformation. Bangkok and other urban centres have expanded as sites of employment, education, consumption and cultural production. However, the national statistical picture should not be reduced to a simple rural-to-urban transition. NSO data indicate continuing flows in multiple directions. In 2024, for example, migration included movements within provinces, between regions, from urban to rural areas and from abroad to Thailand (NSO, 2025).

The multidirectional character of migration suggests that households use mobility strategically. People may move for employment, education, housing, family reunification or return to their place of origin. Such movements complicate the idea of permanent rural depopulation. Instead, households can operate across multiple places, maintaining economic and emotional ties between cities and rural communities.

Peri-urban areas are particularly sociologically significant because they combine agricultural land, industrial activity, housing development and environmental risk. Recent research on Khun Samut Chin illustrates how peri-urban communities can experience economic opportunity and environmental vulnerability simultaneously, with adaptation shaped by state policies, household resources and wider political-economic forces (Marks, Middleton, & Pratomlek, 2025). Spatial change is therefore not merely a matter of population density; it is also a process of redistribution of risk and opportunity.

Table 1. Selected Indicators of Social Transformation in Thailand

Indicator	Year	Value	Sociological significance
Population aged 60+	2023	20.0%	Indicates advanced population ageing and changing care relations.
Total fertility rate	2023	1.00	Signals very low fertility and long-term household/demographic change.
Urban population share	2023	34.2%	Shows continued urban concentration alongside substantial non-urban population.
Population migrants	2024	798,749	Demonstrates continuing internal mobility and spatial restructuring.
Migrants within same region	2024	60.0% of migrants	Shows the importance of short-distance and regional mobility.
Migrants between regions	2024	30.3% of migrants	Links regional labour markets and household strategies.

Source: National Statistical Office of Thailand (2024, 2025). Figures are national aggregates and should not be interpreted as uniform experiences across regions or social groups.

6. Demographic Ageing and the Transformation of Family Life

Thailand's demographic transition is one of the most consequential social changes underway. The proportion of older people increased from 17.3 percent in 2019 to 20.0 percent in 2023, while the child population declined from 17.1 to 15.6 percent over the same period (NSO, 2024). The total fertility rate fell to approximately 1.00 in 2023. These figures imply a future in which fewer children enter the labour force while a larger share of the population requires retirement income, healthcare and care services.

Ageing is also a transformation of family relations. In societies where families historically provide substantial care, lower fertility means fewer adult children are potentially available to support ageing parents. Migration can intensify this challenge because adult children may live far from their parents. At the same time, older people are not simply dependants: many continue to contribute through household production, childcare, agriculture, informal work and community participation. A sociological analysis must therefore avoid equating ageing with dependency.

The demographic transition also has gendered implications. Care work is often distributed unevenly within families, while women's labour-force participation and migration patterns can change the availability of unpaid care. The World Bank identifies sub-optimal female labour-force participation and ageing as part of the human-capital and inclusion challenges facing Thailand (World Bank, 2024). The intersection of ageing, gender and employment deserves greater empirical attention.

Table 2. Demographic Change, 2019–2023

Indicator	2019	2023	Change / implication
Children aged 0–14	17.1%	15.6%	Declining share of children.
Working-age population (15–59)	65.5%	64.4%	Gradual reduction in the conventional working-age share.
Older population (60+)	17.3%	20.0%	Rapid increase in ageing.
Total fertility rate	1.54	1.00	Marked decline in fertility.
Population growth rate	0.22%	-0.06%	Shift toward very low/negative natural demographic growth.

Source: NSO (2024), Statistical Yearbook Thailand 2024.

7. Migration and the Production of Social Difference

7.1 Internal migration

Internal migration is an important mechanism connecting households to changing labour markets. NSO's 2020–2024 Migration Survey shows that migration is frequently associated with employment, family relationships, housing and return to one's place of origin (NSO, 2025). In 2024, 159,800 migrants reported moving to look for work, while 173,400 moved to follow household members and 126,300 moved for housing reasons. These figures demonstrate that mobility is socially embedded: migration decisions are made within households and kinship systems rather than solely by isolated individuals.

The relatively large proportion of within-region migration in 2024—60.0 percent—also challenges narratives that equate migration with long-distance movement to Bangkok. Local and regional mobility can be equally important for social reproduction. People may move between rural districts, provincial towns and nearby urban centres while maintaining family networks and cultural ties.

7.2 Cross-border migration and labour segmentation

Thailand's economy also depends on migrant labour from neighbouring countries. Myanmar migrants are especially important in sectors where demand for labour is strong and employment conditions can be insecure. The sociological issue is not simply that migrants occupy low-paid jobs; rather, legal status and nationality can become mechanisms through which labour markets are segmented. Mortensen (2024) shows how practices of illegalization in rural agro-industry can produce insecurity and restricted mobility, while Doungphummes et al. (2023) demonstrate how public discourse can reproduce migrant "otherness" during crises.

This suggests a relationship between economic incorporation and social exclusion. Migrants may be economically necessary but socially marginalized. Such a contradiction is common in migration systems: labour demand can encourage migration, while citizenship and administrative institutions restrict migrants' access to rights or social recognition. The result is a differentiated social membership in which participation in the economy does not automatically produce equal belonging.

Recent qualitative research further indicates that migrants can use cultural and religious similarity as a resource for navigating marginalization. Research on Myanmar migrants describes how shared Buddhist identity can provide access to social spaces, moral belonging and community support even where legal and economic vulnerabilities persist (Chaidee & Sasiwongsaroj, 2026). This illustrates that exclusion is neither total nor uniform; migrants can occupy shifting positions across different social fields.

Table 3. Migration in Thailand, 2020–2024

Year	Total migrants	Within same region	Between regions	Other*
2020	1,049,900	632,500 (60.2%)	387,300 (36.9%)	30,100 (2.9%)
2021	667,000	395,600 (59.3%)	260,100 (39.0%)	11,300 (1.7%)
2022	808,800	517,700 (64.0%)	243,700 (30.1%)	47,400 (5.9%)
2023	981,500	606,800 (61.8%)	299,700 (30.5%)	75,100 (7.7%)
2024	798,700	479,500 (60.0%)	242,100 (30.3%)	77,200 (9.7%)

**Other includes migrants from foreign countries. Source: NSO (2025), Migration Survey 2020–2024.*

8. Social Exclusion, Identity and Belonging

The study of Thai society requires attention to the boundaries through which people are categorized. Nationality, ethnicity, class, occupation, region and legal status can all influence social membership. These categories do not necessarily operate separately. A migrant worker may experience disadvantage because of the interaction between foreign nationality, documentation status, occupation and residence. Similarly, rural residents may encounter barriers linked to location, education and labour-market structure rather than to rural identity alone.

The concept of social exclusion captures these processes because it directs attention to restricted participation in institutions and social relationships. Exclusion can be material, such as limited access to secure work; institutional, such as documentation barriers; spatial, such as residence in marginalized areas; or symbolic, such as stigmatizing representations. Research on Myanmar workers during the COVID-19 period found that online

discourse could reproduce stereotypes and hostility, demonstrating how crisis narratives can intensify pre-existing boundaries (Doungphummes et al., 2023).

At the same time, Thai society contains multiple mechanisms of inclusion. Religious institutions, neighbourhood associations, workplaces, schools and kin networks can provide social support. For migrants, temples and other community spaces may function as sites of cultural reproduction and social connection (Singchai, Chamraspant, & Srisantisuk, 2015). This reinforces the importance of studying social institutions as both mechanisms of regulation and resources for agency.

9. Discussion: A Sociological Model of Thai Social Transformation

The evidence reviewed above suggests that Thailand's contemporary social structure can be understood through four linked dimensions: stratification, spatiality, demography and mobility. These dimensions interact to create cumulative advantages and vulnerabilities. For example, a household with limited economic resources may also live far from high-quality education, have fewer social connections to formal employment, and experience greater exposure to insecure work. Conversely, households with wealth, education and metropolitan networks may convert these resources into additional opportunities.

The interaction can be represented as a cycle of social reproduction. Economic resources influence educational opportunities; education affects occupational destinations; occupation shapes income and social insurance; income and assets influence residential location; and location affects access to education, employment and services. Migration can interrupt or reinforce this cycle. A move to an urban centre may expand employment opportunities, but it may also generate housing costs, social isolation or precarious work. Cross-border migration can generate remittances and household income while exposing migrants to legal insecurity and stigma.

Demographic ageing adds a temporal dimension. Families must allocate resources not only between children and working adults but also across generations. As the number of older people rises and fertility remains low, care becomes a central sociological issue. The question is not simply whether the state or family will provide care; it is how care responsibilities will be negotiated among households, employers, communities, markets and public institutions.

The central theoretical implication is that modernization in Thailand should be treated as a process of institutional recombination. Traditional kinship, religious practices and regional identities continue to matter, but they operate alongside bureaucratic institutions, labour markets, educational credentials, global migration and digital communication. Social change therefore produces hybrid arrangements rather than a clean replacement of “traditional” society by “modern” society.

Table 4. Analytical Framework for Understanding Contemporary Thai Society

Dimension	Structural mechanism	Potential consequence	Key sociological question
Class and wealth	Unequal assets, occupations and opportunities	Intergenerational reproduction of advantage	How are resources converted into life chances?
Education	Unequal learning environments and credentials	Differentiated mobility	When does education enable mobility and when does it reproduce hierarchy?
Space	Concentration of institutions and jobs	Regional and metropolitan disparities	How does geography shape access to opportunity?
Demography	Low fertility and population	Care and labour-market	How are intergenerational

	ageing	pressures	relations being reorganized?
Migration	Labour demand plus legal differentiation	Inclusion with unequal rights	How do mobility and citizenship interact?
Identity	Nationality, culture, class and stigma	Boundary-making and belonging	Who is recognized as a full social member?

10. Implications for Sociological Research

First, future research should disaggregate national inequality statistics by region, gender, age, migration status and occupation. National averages can conceal substantial differences in life chances. Second, more longitudinal research is needed to examine whether educational expansion is translating into intergenerational mobility or merely increasing credential competition. Third, research on ageing should examine care networks rather than treating older people only as a demographic burden.

Fourth, migration research should integrate internal and international migration. These processes are often studied separately even though they may be connected through household strategies, labour-market demand and regional development. Fifth, research on migrant inclusion should examine both formal institutions and everyday social spaces, including temples, schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods. Sixth, environmental change deserves greater integration into the sociology of inequality because climate and coastal risks can redistribute vulnerability across already unequal populations.

11. Conclusion

Thailand's contemporary social transformation is characterized neither by simple modernization nor by the disappearance of older forms of hierarchy. Instead, economic development, urbanization, demographic ageing and migration have reorganized the foundations through which social advantage and disadvantage are produced. Inequality persists because economic resources interact with education, occupation, geography, institutional access and social networks. Migration both challenges and reinforces these structures: it enables households to pursue opportunity while creating new distinctions around citizenship, legality and belonging.

The demographic transition makes these questions more urgent. Very low fertility and a rapidly ageing population will reshape labour markets, families and care arrangements. At the same time, internal and international migration will remain important mechanisms through which workers, households and communities respond to uneven opportunities. A sociological understanding of Thailand therefore requires an integrated approach that connects macro-level structures with institutions and everyday practices.

The principal contribution of this review is to frame Thai social change as a process of layered transformation. Inequality, migration, urbanization and ageing are not separate topics; they are mutually constitutive dimensions of the same social system. Future scholarship can build on this framework through comparative regional studies, longitudinal household research, ethnographic work with migrants and older people, and mixed-method studies of education, employment and social mobility.

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