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Gentrification and inequality in Bangkok: Housing pathways, consumerism and the vulnerability of the urban poor.

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Abstract:

This study reports the housing experiences and pathways of different populations living in a gentrifying neighbourhood in Bangkok- newcomers living in condominiums, original residents who have managed to remain and others who have been evicted. The respondents' accounts reveal contrasting life-stories of hardship and progress. For poorer residents, gentrification intensified existing vulnerabilities, with evictions or the threat of evictions disrupting their ability to maintain stable lifestyles and livelihoods. For the more affluent, gentrification offered new life-style opportunities, new ways of enhancing personal and family interests and also promoted a renegotiation of family arrangements. Gentrification is a local and personal process, but one that is conditioned by broader economic forces and the inequalities of class. The theoretical challenge of gentrification is therefore to provide an account that considers the interaction between the varied experience of individuals, their biographical habitus and the differential vulnerabilities of different social classes, their structural habitus.

Keywords: habitus, urban redevelopment, urban poor, urban risks, spatial capital

Introduction

The aim of this study is to understand the processes of new build gentrification in Bangkok, Thailand, through drawing on the stories of residents affected by the development of condominium apartment blocks and using the ‘housing pathway’ approach (Clapham 2002; 2005) as a framing device for a systematic understanding of class ‘habitus’. Gentrification is defined, following the Oxford English Dictionary (<https://www.oed.com/>) as ‘the process by which an (urban) area is rendered middle class’. Gentrification is distinct from redevelopment, this latter involving the built environment rather than the social characteristics of the occupants, but in new build gentrification, the terms are interchangeable.

Because gentrification is an expression of class relations, it is also an expression of inequality as developers, affluent consumers and poorer households, compete with one another for urban space. The Thai economy is characterized by levels of inequality that are amongst the highest in the world, irrespective of whether this is measured by household income and consumption (Jenmana 2018; Jenmana and Gethin 2019, p.1-2) or by individual wealth through the ownership of land and other assets (Credit Suisse 2018, Table 3.1; Phongpaichit and Baker 2015). Economic development in the thirty years before about 2015 (after which time income growth has stalled) led to higher average incomes and upward mobility for some but also left behind others in various degrees of poverty (Endo 2014, p.280; Yang, Wang, and Dewina 2020, Figure 0.1).

The extremes of inequality mean that Bangkok is a good candidate for a comparative study of gentrification, as advocated by Lees (2012), considering the local experience in comparison to that elsewhere. In addition, Bangkok is a good candidate for testing the

argument that, when applied to cities in the ‘Global South’ and ‘East’, the discourse and language of gentrification becomes ‘overstretched’ (Bernt 2016, p.637) so provoking a degree of ‘concept dilution’ (Forrest 2016, p.609) and risking ‘overgeneralization’ (Shin, Lees, and López-Morales 2016). Previous studies have noted how redevelopment, including redevelopment for middle- and upper-class housing, has displaced the poor from the central areas of Bangkok (Askew 2002, p.239; Endo 2014, pp.154-156; Evers and Korf 2000, p.204). However, the views of those involved in gentrification and redevelopment have not been reported in detail.

To test the criticism of conceptual overstretching and dilution, the paper starts, in a section entitled ‘Gentrification in Bangkok’, with how gentrification, class and the risks associated with urban poverty have been conceptualized in studies of Thai society and how these relate to the concepts used in the international literature. The second section ‘Background, research strategy and methodology’ introduces the case study neighbourhood in more detail, again emphasizing the way that gentrification is a specific, local as well as global process. This same section then shows how the pathways approach may be applied as a means of understanding the housing experiences of neighbourhood residents. Subsequent sections deal with the presentation of the accounts of residents and a discussion of the life stories in light of the existing literature.

Gentrification in Bangkok: modernity, class and urban risk

Gentrification has sufficient public recognition in Thailand to merit a brief mention in the Thai Wikipedia (<https://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/การเปลี่ยนแปลงชนชั้น>) as a controversial process that often triggers social conflict. The usual translation of ‘gentrification’ in Thai as ‘the changing of classes’ is consistent with its use in English.¹ Yet subtle differences in meaning have emerged. The examples cited in the Thai Wikipedia come from other

countries. Other sources also suggest that gentrification is a foreign import. For example, writing in the English language daily newspaper 'The Bangkok Post', Wattanasukchai (2020) uses the term 'gentrification' to describe how new development and higher rents combine to destroy the 'soul' of older neighbourhoods. Gentrification, according to this view, amounts to the introduction into the Thai urban landscape of international modernity as represented by new economic practices, consumption patterns and building forms.

In addition, the same sense of interaction between tradition and modernity is apparent in accounts of class and power. Vorng (2011: 2017), in particular, has used qualitative interviews to show how, in conditions of growing affluence for some, conspicuous consumption serves to maintain long-standing social distinctions in Bangkok through the display of material possessions such as the latest phone or watch or a fashionable bag and how the establishment of an urban mass transit system centralized consumption patterns with stations "densely packed with shopping malls, markets, condominiums, apartment blocks, and homes" (Vorng 2017, p.59). Equally, however, inequality based on consumption has co-existed with the persistence of status-oriented deferential behaviour in which the working class often find themselves kept out of 'elite spaces' (Vorng, 2017, pp.129-136), such as the shopping malls.

To say that inequality and class is reflected in consumption patterns means that for Askew (2002, p.9), different social groups have a different 'habitus', a term that is derived from Bourdieu (1984, p.101) and may be defined as 'the internalized form of class condition'. Other studies (for example, Bridge 2003, p.2546; Paton 2010, p.43; Rérat and Lees 2011, p.127) have used concepts of habitus to explain how urban spaces and neighbourhoods are enmeshed in the lifestyles and daily routines of different social classes and, in addition, in the expectations based on those lifestyles and routines. Habitus, neighbourhoods and urban space become enmeshed in different ways for different groups and with varying levels of local

rootedness. A distinction is, for example, sometimes drawn between the spatial fixedness (or ‘fixity’) of the disadvantaged and the ‘left-behind’ and the mobility of the affluent and powerful (Paton 2010, p.109; Savage 2014, p.40).

Strictly defined, however, habitus is a stable, structuring set of behavioural dispositions. It is a conservative force, with its own inertia and tendency to reproduce the social practices of the past. Applied to gentrification, therefore, habitus is open to a logical objection as gentrification amounts to the emergence of new lifestyles and preferences, at least amongst the middle-class households for whom living in a gentrified or potentially gentrified neighbourhood is a conscious choice (Bridge 2001, pp.206-7).

Yet habitus is also an ambiguous concept with a generative, creative dimension. For some, Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is analytically adequate because it is embedded in a multi-layered, dynamic social structure and is therefore “subject to permanent revision in practice” (Wacquant 2016, p.68). For others, habitus as conceived by Bourdieu is inherently limited in that it simultaneously overlays but downplays the insights of phenomenological approaches to sociology and psychology, with their emphasis on the negotiation of social identity (Bottero 2010, p.3) and the ability of individuals to alter their habits and expectations to circumstances (Crossley 2001, pp.95, pp.107-110). Habitus as conceived in phenomenology is a product of a person’s biography and the situation in which they find themselves as well as social structure. Moreover, biographical habitus has a dynamic logic that involves more than the reproduction of previous practices (Frère 2005, pp.485-7).

In Thailand, the notion of a stable, enduring structural habitus looks especially anachronistic. Thongsawang et al (2020) note that ‘habitus’ as a stable frame of reference for class does not include the transformations caused by globalization and modernization. In Thailand, as in many countries in the Global South (Jodhka et al 2017), pre-capitalist socio-cultural inequalities combine with capitalist social classes to create multiple, variable habitus

types. For Thongsawang, Rehbein and Chantavanich (2020), the concept of habitus can therefore only be applied to Thailand if modified “to reduce further its inherent European bias” (op cit, p.521).

In the context of increasing affluence for some, Vorng (2017, p.52) goes further, arguing that the mix of socio-cultural status differences and modern affluence interact with each other in a way that “is contingent upon situational specificity and hence has a contextual and dynamic quality”, distinct from static concepts of habitus. Vorng (ibid, p.12) also cites a remark by Giddens (1991, p.81) that consumption gives material form to “particular narratives of self-identity” and therefore to new narratives of social distinction. Living in a modern condominium becomes part of the trappings of an affluent lifestyle, albeit a lifestyle that is commonly built on a site that was previously home to the urban poor.

The relation between economic development and inequality is reciprocal. Just as much as the legacy of traditional status distinctions interact with modern forms of inequality, so modernity and the growth of cities generate new forms of inequality. The process of urban development raises the value of property, so changing the urban landscape and creating new patterns of wealth. Askew (2002, pp.194-225) noted how the initial stages of urban development, the conversion of agricultural land to urban uses, helped otherwise poor local landowners in providing new sources of capital and income. The conversion of farmland is distinct from gentrification and urban redevelopment, however, as greenfield development does not involve displacement of the poor.

In addition, modernity, economic development and the growth of cities create new risks for the urban poor. In a case study of two lower-class Bangkok communities, Endo (2014, p.18) considers inequality as differential vulnerability to the risks of urban life, using a definition of vulnerability derived from Moser (1998, p.23) “as insecurity and sensitivity in the well-being of individuals, households and communities in the face of a changing

environment”. Endo goes on to note, again following Moser that urban risks “differ fundamentally from those of rural areas” and involve the commodification of labour, environmental hazards, including poor quality housing and social segregation. Using the same logic, gentrification and the loss of home is a further risk to which the urban poor are vulnerable and this vulnerability is intensified by redevelopment.

The implication is therefore to understand gentrification in terms of both changes in the urban built environment and the socio-cultural dispositions involved in the habitus of those involved. For example: what is the motivation for the arrival of the middle and upper classes in terms of their tastes and identity? In new build gentrification, housing demand and preferences are converted into material form by developers. Yet the existence of some form of demand for urban centrality remains a precondition for redevelopment. What is the basis of this demand? Moreover, once redevelopment is underway there are other questions. For example: how do lower class residents experience the disruption caused by eviction? To what extent, if any, can displacement have long-term redeeming aspects for those displaced?

Background, research strategy and methodology

Because gentrification occurs in specific neighbourhoods and involves multiple actors, the causes and implications are most easily revealed through a case study. Klong San, the case study neighbourhood in this study, lies on the west bank of the Chao Phraya River, with a major business district, Sathorn over the river just to the east. Development in Klong San was hindered until 1982 by the absence of a bridge over the river. Nevertheless, from the 1960s onwards, farmers became willing to sell or lease (‘seng’ under Thai law) their land for development. This first stage of urban development, the results of which still exist, comprises a few low-rise apartments, some areas of mostly one story, irregularly designed self-built housing, but predominantly rows of two or three-story ‘shophouses’, organized along ‘sois’,

side streets of varying length. There are also many workshops and small industrial premises as well as two large open-air markets where local traders purchase materials and food or sell finished products such as shoes.

The subsequent redevelopment of parts of Klong San, in the form of apartment blocks, (Figure 1) was triggered by the opening in 2009, after construction delays, of stations along an extension of the elevated rail network across the river.

Figure 1: The contrast between the condominiums and the neighbourhood

From 2006 to 2014 twenty-nine apartment blocks were completed in Klong San, in the vicinity of stations and marketed by the property industry for a new, relatively young core clientele, the ‘Skytrain Generation’, named after the elevated section of the mass transit system. Once the younger affluent consumers moved in, older people started to follow, partly to maintain family relationships and partly for reasons of convenience (Interview with a real estate agent, undertaken in July 2015). The shophouses in the side streets were designed and built as combined residential and commercial buildings, with the residential element capable of accommodating a multi-generational household. They comprise two or three bedrooms, with additional rooms and spaces for family use. The condominium apartments have, in contrast, been designed mainly for single person and childless households. They are generally smaller, comprising a mix of one- and two-bedroom accommodation of between about 25 and 65 square metres ² and are generally also equipped with communal facilities, notably a swimming pool.

New build gentrification in Klong San has taken place against a background of urban population growth that is rapid compared to cities in Europe, though “not particularly rapid by East Asian standards” (WBG 2015, p.113). It has taken place, in addition, in a political context that lacks an effective ‘planning culture’ (PRCUD 2013, p.4). In Klong San, as more generally in Bangkok and Thailand, development and redevelopment has proceeded through

building on particular parcels of land on an ‘ad-hoc’ (ibid, p.2) and therefore piecemeal basis and, in contrast to the “property states” of Hong Kong and Singapore (Haila 2000), without public agencies capturing much of the consequent uplift in property values.

Housing pathways

An earlier study, undertaken in 2012 (Moore 2015), revealed that the new apartments in Klong San have rents that would be unaffordable for those on the national average wage and that most households in the area were earning below the average. The same study revealed limited social mixing between populations, a mixed assessment of neighbourhood change and particularly negative views from households undergoing eviction. The study was nevertheless limited. Few displaced households could be found, there was no in-depth focus on the motivations of the gentrifiers and the interviews also did not involve questions about the household’s housing history.

For this study, the ‘housing pathway’ approach (Clapham 2002 and 2005) has provided a relevant analytical framework. Tracing a housing pathway is an exercise in tracing the changing meaning of the home, irrespective of how the changes are caused- whether by a change in personal circumstances or in the market or local context (Clapham 2005, pp.29, pp.155-184). The aim is, as Clapham (2005, p.27), states, to define “patterns of interaction (practices) concerning house and home, over time and space”.

The original intention of housing pathways was to provide a ‘thick’, qualitative account, using semi-structured interviews. Most examples focus on decisive moments, such as the transition from the family home to adulthood or the transition in and out of homelessness. However, Karsten (2007) has used the same approach to understand the housing preferences of middle-class families. In addition, the housing pathways approach is flexible as to the cultural and economic context. Endo (2014, pp.22-25) uses a closely related approach, ‘life-

course analysis' derived from Giele and Elder (1998) to reveal how the occupational experiences of the urban poor in Bangkok have changed over time.

The flexibility of the housing pathways approach has an apparent disadvantage. Natalier and Johnson (2012, p.77) warn that many housing pathways studies “are largely descriptive with little analysis of the relationship between an individual’s resources and interpretive framework and their structural positioning”. That risk may be minimized, however by linking pathways to different population groups (Campbell 2017, pp.54-55; Wiesel, Easthope, and Liu 2011, pp.15-16) and in addition by linking the pathways to how home and the locality support or fail to support the lifestyles and economic life-courses of those populations.

In any case, the housing pathways approach is well adapted to revealing the relation between inequality and changing lifestyles and, as part of this, to revealing the relation between habitus as a structural concept, the experience of the individual and consumption processes. Clapham (2002, pp.59-61) considers the approach as a ‘postmodern’ methodology, one that enables an understanding of the implications of accelerated economic and social change. Postmodern for Clapham means an extension, rather than a rejection of modernity and is therefore fully consistent with the ideas of Giddens (1991, pp.82-85) on the emergence of a society with increasingly differentiated patterns of consumption and lifestyle and where life-planning becomes a central device in the construction of social identity (ibid). Moreover, as is also a theme in Giddens (1991), the focus of a housing pathway is neither the biography of the ‘self’, the individual taken in isolation, nor the position of the individual within a social structure, but the interaction between the two (Clapham 2002, p.62). Applying a housing pathways methodology is therefore able, in principle, to accommodate the ambiguities of habitus.

The housing pathways approach has other advantages. So long as the sample of respondents is appropriate, the approach corrects a tendency in gentrification studies to

neglect the experiences of poorer residents (Allen 2008). The analysis by Vorng (2017), with its concern with middle-class identities, likewise ignores the experience of the urban poor. In addition, the approach can reveal the impact of eviction in more depth than accounts, for example Rérat (2018, para 7.4.1), that use the concept of spatial capital. This latter concept formalizes how habitus is enmeshed in lifestyles and the economic life of residents and can reveal the negative, disruptive implications of displacement from a central area to the urban periphery. Concepts of spatial capital do not however reveal the psycho-social anxieties associated with the loss of home (Fried, 1963; Kearns et al., 2000) or the sense of dislocation amongst those who manage to stay in the locality (Atkinson 2015).

The questionnaire and sample

The interview schedule contained a mix of standard and variable questions. All respondents were asked about their housing history from birth till the present day. Respondents were also asked about questions about their background, for example about their income, occupation and tenure. Those evicted were asked about the impact on their lives and how they had adjusted thereafter; other residents in the neighbourhood were asked what they thought of the changes brought about by redevelopment and the newcomers living in the blocks were asked about why they had moved to their present home. Respondents talked either of the impact of housing issues on their lives, as in the case of eviction, or of how the search for work or of personal situations, such as ageing or family, influenced their housing. All this generated individual life stories that include but go beyond their housing experience.

The specific case study sites were around two transit stations, Wongwian Yai and Krung Thonburi, that had opened in 2009, as shown in Figure 2. The sites were chosen to include, around Wongwian Yai station, an area undergoing gentrification and, around Krung Thonburi station, an area where condominium development had been mostly completed. All residents

were living within the locations indicated in Figure 2 at the time of the interview or had lived there previously, prior to displacement.

Figure 2: Case study sites

There was no official database available to conduct random sampling. Households were found either through social contacts developed in the pilot study or through ‘door knocking’, whilst an attempt was also made to provide a balance of responses of the three main population groups identified in the pilot study, namely

- those directly displaced from their previous home;
- other residents in a variety of household types and financial positions;
- the condominium dwellers.

The interviews with the displaced and neighbourhood residents mostly took place in the home. Owing to block management and security rules, the interviews with the condominium residents took place in the lobby.

The interviews, undertaken in 2015, lasted forty-five minutes to one hour or more. As English was limited for many of the non-condominium participants, an interpreter conducted the interview in the presence of the author. The interpreter was completely fluent in English. The author also has knowledge of the Thai language and was able to check therefore whether the interpreter followed the interview schedule and was able, in addition, to discuss any responses that needed further clarification, such as phrases and idioms that did not have direct translations.

The profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

As is apparent, the respondents living in the condominiums are younger (mostly in their twenties and thirties) than those living in the neighbourhood (either as ‘displaced’ or ‘other local’). The condominium residents also spent longer at school and were more likely to have

a university education and a managerial or professional occupation. The displaced respondents generally reported the lowest educational levels, to an elementary level only. They were also mostly dependent on precarious unskilled occupations and were more likely to rent rather than either own or lease (seng) their home. Eleven of the respondents, including nine of those living in the condominiums have the housing status of ‘lodgers’, indicating that they have no formal legal status and live in their homes with the permission of another- nearly always a close family relative.

Presenting the life stories

To provide further detail, the accounts may be converted into a series of ‘vignettes’ (Grbich, 2013, pp.125-126, pp.312-313), compressed, illustrative stories that clarify the perspective of selected, typical respondents and clarify, in addition, the situation in which they find themselves. As is the usual intention of the housing pathways approach, the vignettes mostly report the subjective views and experiences of respondents. However, the reported information on rents and household size is also included where available. Table 2 uses a series of pseudonyms to summarize the characteristics of those respondents that form the basis of the vignettes.

Table 2: Characteristics of respondents whose stories are cited in detail

The use of vignettes implies a double analysis of the responses, involving a distinction between summarizing the experiences of the respondents in their own words, the subject matter of this section, and then interpreting those views in a discussion section. In summarizing the experiences of residents, the life-stories of the condominium residents are discussed first as they clearly illustrate how the lifestyles of affluent households and therefore their class habitus stimulate gentrification, whilst gentrification itself has, in turn, a reciprocal impact on habitus.

Condominium Residents

The newcomers living in the apartments typically came from families who had bought the property outright with no mortgage. The respondents were mostly single and comprised the children of parents who had relocated to the suburbs in the 1980s and 1990s. Living in Klong San meant they no longer had to endure what could be a two-hour commute both to and from work. Middle aged couples, with and without children also lived there, as did some more elderly residents.

The story of Nong, twenty-five years old, reveals the attraction of the condominium as a base for a young person and a source of profit for the family. Originally living in the city, her parents had moved further away. They bought two one-bed condo units about five years ago, with the main motivation being somewhere to park the car when going to the center, to sleep overnight if necessary and to capitalize on price appreciation. Her grandfather had lived in one apartment, but had recently fallen ill and had moved back to the main family residence. Nong lived in the other apartment and noted how the condo also provided a better lifestyle and greater freedom:

You get freedom, you're near the swimming pool. And yeah. I think freedom.

Because you know Thai families are like...they don't treat the kids like foreigners, like the Westerners do. They're gonna treat their kids forever as kids, and sometimes we want to have more freedom.

Living independently in a condominium was a departure from traditional Thai expectations that unmarried girls and women would continue to live in the family home.

Other young women living in the condominiums had the same story, explaining how they had reduced their commute, but also gained independence and an improved social life as they had less restriction from their parents. The intention was, nevertheless, generally to return or move to the suburbs when the time came to settle down and have a family.

The account of Mint provides an example. Mint, who was aged thirty at the time of the interview, had moved from the suburbs with her sister to live in a two-bedroom unit purchased by her parents, thus avoiding a long commute. Like others, she usually only stayed in the condo five days a week, returning to her parent's house at the weekend. When asked if it felt like a home, she replied, "Not really, actually to be honest I feel like it's more of a temporary place, like a hotel". As she also explained: "as I get older I kind of like the home lifestyle more".

Family obligations also include meeting the educational needs of children and young adults. Relatively affluent middle-class households would let their children stay in the condominiums, secure in the fact that it was safe as they could walk straight onto the Skytrain to travel to a reputable school, negating the need to walk around the neighbourhood. For instance, Oak is an engineer and had settled in the suburbs. He bought a one-bedroom condominium for his children to stay in and get to school so his wife did not have to do the commute, something he explained many of his friends had done. Due to the flooding of their house in the citywide floods of 2011, Oak and his wife also moved into the condominium as well. However, like many other households, the condominium was a secondary home as they kept their main residence in the suburbs, intending to return there one day.

Displaced residents

For those displaced, the loss of their home started when they learnt that their landlord had sold off the property to a developer. They would then know that their existing rental contracts would not be renewed. For those with long-term rental contracts (sengs), a limited degree of compensation was nevertheless available through negotiation.

Only one respondent, Somsri, managed to acquire alternative accommodation in Klong San of equivalent quality and rent. Somsri was born to a poor farming family and moved to Bangkok as a teenager to find work. She now washes and cleans clothes for local people at

her house. Staying in the neighbourhood meant Somsri remained close to her clientele and, through family contacts, she was able to obtain accommodation of about the same size and rent level. The rest either moved out of Klong San (five respondents) or lived in Klong San in accommodation that was either more expensive or overcrowded or both.

A group of respondents, previously living in a self-build community, had particularly intense feelings of loss and disruption. Their parents had built their homes many years before on what was then a greenfield site. Ownership of the land remained with the landlord who charged a nominal ground rent that was between around US\$15 and US\$24 (฿500-800) ³ per month and that hardly increased over the years, barely covering the property taxes and expenses, according to a respondent. After the land passed to the grandson of the original owner, its site was sold.

The story of Aom provides an example:

During the first nights away I couldn't get to sleep because I never lived anywhere else. In the early days, I cried every night because I didn't want to move out. When it was nearer to the deadline, on the day we were supposed to move out, I just sat and cried because I didn't want to go. Also, we had to move stuff out, and there was only my kid and me. We had to help each other; no one came to help us.

Aom's situation was made worse because she had no legal title to the property, had received no compensation and had, in the meantime, taken out a loan with an illegal money lender at 120% interest. To stay locally, she, her son and her mother now live in "cramped", overcrowded and "very uncomfortable" conditions in one room with one bed. The rent, at about US\$75 (฿2,500) is over triple that of her original house.

The experiences of Mim, originating from the same community, reveal how the loss of the family home also removes the memories associated with place:

I miss everything about it. I felt very happy staying at my old house. I got to stay with my brothers and sisters. Stay with my children and my grandchildren. I lived in that house since my parents weren't even old yet, and now they are dead.

Everybody died here: my father, mother and my younger brother. They all died there. I was the one that took care of everyone. I was the eldest sister. I had to take care of everything.

Mim moved into a house that she shared with her cousin, Prae, who also had been evicted and now says she sleeps in a space in the hallway as her son and his family has the only available bedroom. Like Aom, and despite the cramped conditions, their rents are much higher, as it is \$180 (฿6000) per month for the whole house.

For those forced to live outside the immediate neighbourhood, the move had reduced the chances of finding work. For example, Surit and his brother Suk had grown up in the area and had been displaced twice due to condominium development. After the first displacement, the brothers had previously used all their savings to purchase a 3-year long seng for around \$US11,400 (฿380,000), but the seng was not extended and the brothers had to move again and were forced to live separately in one-bedroomed apartments in another neighbourhood. The loss of home had led in turn to the loss of the social networks they had depended on for their whole lives:

When we live here, we don't know anyone. It's like we're alone. You get the idea? In the community, at least they [friends/acquaintances] would recommend you like, 'Hey, you're unemployed, go do this'. People would tell you to go work there. When we come here, we don't know anyone. We just live like this [sitting

inside as we are in the interview]. When it's time, we just get in our room and go to sleep. (Surit)

The brothers were bitter about their experience and critical of the landlords who had sold out to developers. On the occasion of the first eviction, Surit had visited the landlord prior to moving and noted that he lived in an old house and also appeared to have no money. Yet the condition of the landowner's house did not cause any sympathy. For Surit, the ownership of land enabled landlords to take advantage of people like him "who have to work hard".

For those evicted, the loss of their home and the construction of the condominiums led them to reflect on the huge divide between the affluent and the poor:

They are the sky, I am the dirt. They live in the condos, like that. They must have a lot of money, a lot of income. As for me, I barely have any money. Their life is a lot different. I am stressed every day. (Mim)

To be honest, poorer people are not given any opportunity at all. Even these days it doesn't change, leave alone the future. It's impossible. (Aom)

Overall, households tended to see little hope that they would be able to see significant improvements in their situation into the future.

The experience of another respondent, Kat, shows how eviction could also adversely affect the lives of residents in secure employment. Kat had migrated from south Thailand when young, eventually marrying and living with her husband's family and their two children. Unlike the other evicted respondents, Kat had a middle-class occupation and her husband, who was soon to retire, worked in a private company. They had previously bought a house in the suburbs to which they intended to move to eventually, but wanted to live in Klong San as long as possible owing to the convenient location and because the suburban house was in need of renovation. They also had received verbal assurances from the landlord

that they would not be evicted. Once redevelopment started, they tried to remain while they borrowed money to complete the house in the suburbs, but felt harassed by the behaviour of the workers who undertook the demolition and rebuilding work. Being concerned about security, Kat rented an apartment near the university for her daughter, which was an added expense, and her son moved to dormitories at his university, causing yet another expense. The redevelopment of the blocks therefore caused Kat to split up her family, when she would have preferred to keep them together. At the same time her mother-in-law got colon cancer and so they had to borrow to pay the medical bills, leading to additional costs her family could ill afford. “There were so many issues”, Kat reported.

Other Local Residents

A sense of insecurity was also apparent amongst those who had not been displaced. Pranom and his family had previously migrated to Bangkok to escape poverty and improve his work skills, eventually earning a living through making amulets in his home. They were living in a rented shophouse with three bedrooms and therefore adequate space. However, they were renting from a landlord who did not want to give them a lease, with its greater security of tenure. Seeing eviction occur around him, Pranom explained the fear he feels as he has neither contractual employment nor rental security. His landlord could ask them to leave any time and his situation would deteriorate should other life problems arise: “Today, if we live like this, there aren’t any problems. We have enough money for food but not enough to save up. If we get sick you can just let us die”. Such concerns were evident among several of the households, in that if other issues such as illness arise, their situation might become hopeless.

The population living in the neighbourhood included households for whom eviction was either less likely or would have fewer negative consequences. Respondents from this group could see financial benefits in the development of the blocks. Chayuth is an example. He had migrated from a rural area, but was born to government workers who generally have the

security of benefits such as health cover and a pension. Initially living with the family of his sister-in-law in the locality, he then began renting a nearby house to have more space as one of his sons had children too. He worked as a surveyor before running part of his sister's jeans business. Though renting in Klong San, he and his wife owned two properties further out from Bangkok and also land where his wife is from. He therefore viewed the world as a businessman and property owner rather than renter. He saw the negative aspects of development, such as the traffic congestion, and the lack of affordable housing. However, overall,

Yes, I think it is a good thing. That means the city is expanding this way, so it must be good. Right now, we might be annoyed or frustrated at the construction of the new buildings and such, but it is good. For the owners of the lands, for example, say the price was (US)\$10 million before. Since then there have been new condominium developments, the price has appreciated to \$100 million. How can this not be good?

It thus appeared to be second nature to view the accumulation of wealth for landowners in a positive light given his family's own high levels of economic capital.

Discussion:

Following the analysis of Clapham (2005, p.56), the life stories may be re-analysed as a distinction between those that emphasize, in various ways, constraint and reaction and others that emphasize 'life planning' and advancement. Amongst the respondents in Klong San, unplanned and constrained pathways are represented by life stories of adjustment- adjusting to eviction, adjusting to the threat of eviction and adjusting to other, non-housing issues, as were the common themes of most of the poorer respondents. For the planned pathways, the

theme is finding ways to protect and enhance the respondents' long term interests and those of their family.

Pathways of advancement

Life stories in the context of gentrification are stories of winners and losers. The contrasts in Klong San are particularly stark. Unlike accounts of middle-class households in Europe (Bridge 2003; Karsten 2007), the condominium respondents in Klong San were usually sufficiently wealthy, in relation to the local property market, that they could rent or own two or more homes. The choice of residence was therefore temporal, rather than spatial- which house would be occupied when- and which property was considered the principal residence and home. In general, the condominiums were considered as secondary, temporary residences, compared to the home in the suburbs.

The basis of demand in Klong San is the attraction of urban centrality, as is an almost inevitable theme in gentrification studies. To summarise the analysis of Vorng (2017, p.10, p.78), the middle class and upper classes have pursued consumerist lifestyles that reflect both their sense of modernity and their high status. Proximity to good quality schools and universities was another theme, as has also been repeatedly reported as an aspect of gentrification elsewhere, for example in London (Hamnett and Butler 2011) and Nanjing, China (Wu, Zhang and Waley 2016, p.17). Location rather than the quality of the accommodation was the main theme in respondents' accounts. Oak, for example, had bought a condominium, partly to allow his children to get to school, before moving in himself. Likewise, Kat, the only displaced respondent in a professional occupation, reported how she rented an apartment elsewhere to allow her daughter to attend university, even though she faced multiple money problems.

The promotion of educational opportunities is, moreover, a reminder that life in the condominiums was commonly seen in relation to the family and its investments, as well as to

the amenities and work available in central Bangkok. Indeed, as their informal housing status as lodgers suggests, many of the younger people would not have lived in the apartments without family support, a point also noted by Vorng (2017, p.156). Yet, the lifestyle of Nong, Mint and others was not characterized by a stable 'habitus', that persisted from one generation to another. The women interviewed in the apartments were aware their lifestyles incorporated greater independence than would have been possible for younger middle-class women in the past. The development of the condominiums encouraged as well as reflected changes in lifestyles and culture and, in particular, encouraged a renegotiation of family relationships.

Constrained, trapped and unplanned pathways

Eviction and displacement amounted to a multiple loss for those affected. The loss was psycho-social in the loss of a stable home and community and, as in the case of Aom and Mim, stimulating a sense of grief for lost events and lost family members, much in the same way as reported by Fried (1963). If residents had to move to another neighbourhood (like Surit), displacement also undermined the economic foundations of their livelihood, sometimes built-up over many years, much as analysed by Endo (2014, p.16). For those previously living in the self-build community where they had paid only nominal rents, the financial effect was brutal. The residents living in the self-build community offer an extreme case. Their eviction and the sale of the land on which the homes once stood were indicative of changing practices amongst landlords as they sought to maximize rent and capital returns.

Given the existence of an earlier study undertaken by the author in 2012, it was possible to provide insights into how respondents had progressed since displacement and the interviews undertaken three years previously. The experience was variable. Around half of those displaced had managed to get settled and had, as one respondent stated, put their loss behind them. No one reported positive benefits, however, along the lines that Li, van Ham, and

Kleinhans (2019) have reported from China for a comprehensively planned programme of redevelopment with rehousing of those displaced. Other case studies of comprehensive redevelopment in China such as He (2010) report less favourable outcomes for those displaced. As a result, it is not possible to generalize that comprehensive redevelopment necessarily gives more favourable outcomes than piecemeal development as practiced in Bangkok. For the respondents, the crucial factors were the degree of legal protection and security and the level of compensation (if any).

Previous analyses of gentrification and of social exclusion, using concepts of spatial capital (Rérat 2018, para 7.4.1) and class habitus (Paton 2010, p.109; Savage 2014, p.40) distinguish between the spatial fixedness (or fixity) of poorer, displaced and gentrified residents and the apparent mobility of the affluent. That distinction does not recognize the different dimensions of fixedness and mobility. On a day-to-day basis, the poorer residents in Klong San were indeed less mobile than the gentrifiers- the so-called Skytrain Generation. With the exception of those who had retired, the poorer respondents worked within the informal economy and were therefore dependent on the local markets, local shops and a local clientele for the goods and services they provided. Yet that local orientation did not mean the absence of residential mobility, meaning the likelihood and expectation, amongst the poorer respondents, that they would move their place of residence in the future. Respondents spoke of migration from the countryside, of previous episodes of displacement, of the possibility of future displacement and for some the possibility of a return to their 'home' towns or villages elsewhere in Thailand. The respondents did not necessarily want to move. Poorer residents in Bangkok commonly have to move because of the uncertainties of urban life, as Endo (2014, pp.146-150, pp.154-156) noted and their inability to protect and maintain their livelihood and lifestyle in the face of those uncertainties.

The loss of home is not the only vulnerability faced by poorer respondents. The cost of medical bills featured strongly as an unsettling feature in the life stories of Pranom and Kat, for example. Moreover, as would be expected of constrained or trapped pathways, displaced respondents and those facing the possible threat of displacement used terms and pointed to factors that indicated a loss of control, a sense of powerlessness and a sense of personal stress (Ross and Sastry 1999). The displaced and lower income neighbourhood respondents mentioned powerful others such as landowners and developers or abstract, powerful legal processes and documents such as rental agreements or sengs as determining the outcome. Those such as Somsri, with a seng, at least had the security of knowing that they could have several years before they could be evicted, and this was the ideal tenure sought for those who could not purchase. To an extent, therefore, the tenure status of residents operates independently of economic factors as an influence on their life stories. Somsri also mentioned 'luck' as enabling her family to live in Klong San- another term indicating the existence of factors over which they had no control.

The lives of middle-class respondents also had unplanned elements and episodes, but these were qualitatively different. The condominium respondents reported how their lives had been disrupted by the flooding event of 2011. According to one, the condominiums became, for a time, 'backup housing' for those displaced from flooding elsewhere, but able to rent or buy two homes. For the condominium residents, flooding was a unique disruptive event and one whose consequences they could avoid through a private, family strategy of moving to another home. For the urban poor, the threat of expensive medical bills and of eviction was persistent and pervasive.

Poorer respondents did not lay the blame for their predicament on specific policies or individuals in government. They blamed instead long-persisting inequalities, often described in terms of the 'rich', seen to be those in Bangkok who own and can acquire more land, and

the ‘poor’, who are forced to rent, and they accepted, in addition, that they had no means or resources to ever change this. The comment of Mim: “They are the sky, I am the dirt”, is a long established Thai saying, but is also a conscious testament to the persistence of fundamental inequalities that are unlikely to disappear.

Some respondents such as Surit also expressed a sense of grievance about the actions of landowners. Yet discontent and grievance was countered by a widespread view, apparent amongst other respondents, mostly property owners such as Chayuth, that the blocks represented a natural and inevitable aspect of economic development and that, as land becomes more valuable, it will naturally be used to maximize profit. References to organized opposition do not figure in any of the accounts. Collective efforts of community improvement and protection have been reported elsewhere in Bangkok (Shelby 2017), but were absent in Klong San. Given the lack of easily accessible legal procedures, the variety of property relationships and the acceptance of development as inevitable or desirable, opposition would in any case have been difficult to organize, with uncertain outcomes.

Conclusions

This study has provided a detailed examination of the experiences of those living in a gentrifying neighbourhood in Bangkok. The contrasts in occupations and educational background of those living in the neighbourhood and the gentrifiers resemble the class distinctions identified by Bourdieu (1984), with the newcomers in the condominiums being educated to a higher level and having more stable and higher incomes. In addition, as is apparent in the repeated references to family and family support, the inequalities are class-based as they are likely to be passed from one generation to another.

Previous accounts of Thai class structure (Thongsawang, Rehbein and Chantavanich 2020; Vorng 2017) have criticized Bourdieu’s concept of class on the grounds that it assumes a

stable, structuring habitus. The housing pathways of the respondents in Klong San, as revealed in this study, likewise warn against any assumption of stability. Instead the inequalities of class are revealed in the varying ability of individuals and families to cope with change, to plan their lives and their varying vulnerability to the multiple risks and disruptions of daily life, including the risk of eviction.

A clarification is necessary. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is not wholly based on stability. As concisely summarized by Wacquant (2016), a structural concept of habitus accepts the necessity for individuals to adapt social practices in the face of new situations and is therefore well suited to understanding the constrained pathways of the urban poor in the face of gentrification. The limitations of Bourdieu's concept are instead revealed in the life-stories of the middle-class respondents, as these have a dynamic biographical aspect, based around personal and family aspirations, that is best interpreted in the light of phenomenological concepts, as others (Crossley 2001; Frère 2005) have argued.

The distinctiveness of Thai class relations is a reminder in turn of the risk, noted by Shin, Lees, and López-Morales (2016) of overgeneralization when the discourse and language of gentrification is applied to a variety of different countries and cities. The prevalence of multiple residence amongst the condominium occupants offers an example of overgeneralization, as this implies different living arrangements compared to those prevalent in Europe (Bridge 2003; Karsten 2007) and other western countries. Another example stems from assumptions about the apparent spatial fixedness and immobility of the urban poor. The spatial fixedness and immobility of the urban poor in Klong San only applies to their day-to-day dependence on the neighbourhood rather than their previous or expected residential mobility.

The risk of overgeneralization in specific aspects of urban life does not mean, however, that gentrification is an inappropriate, 'overstretched' term when applied to Bangkok. As

elsewhere, gentrification involves the displacement of poorer residents by affluent and wealthy groups and is linked to changes in the property market. Equally, as is widely recognised elsewhere (for example Atkinson 2015), gentrification does more than reveal existing inequalities. It promotes economic inequality through higher rents and, if those displaced are required to move elsewhere, by a loss of social contacts and a denial of livelihood. Further, gentrification intensifies the sense of disadvantage and powerlessness amongst the urban poor- as evidenced by their lack of legal housing security and the huge gap in material possession between themselves and their affluent neighbours. Gentrification is disruptive and makes disadvantage visible and tangible to those living in the neighbourhood. Moreover, even if the term ‘gentrification’ was replaced by another, the processes and implications would remain the same.

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Notes

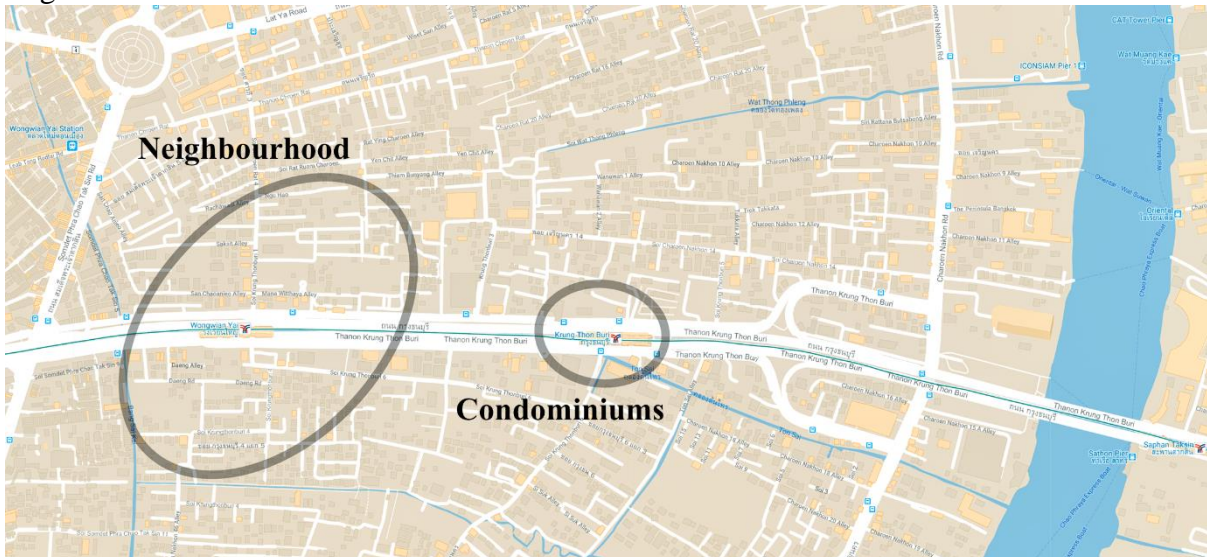
- 1 The authors are grateful to an anonymous referee for clarifying the translation of 'gentrification'.
- 2 As revealed in the online advertisements of 'Thailand Property' <<https://www.thailand-property.com/properties-for-sale/bangkok/khlong-san>>. (Consulted May 2021)
- 3 The conversion from Thai Baht (฿) to US\$ has been undertaken using the historical currency data for June 2015 on the OOANDA website when the rate was about US\$1 equals ฿0.03. <<https://www1.oanda.com/currency/converter/>> (Consulted May 2021)

Figure 1: The contrast between the condominiums and the neighbourhood



Left: an almost completed block towering over its surroundings. Top Right: the blocks close to Wongwian Yai station. Bottom Right: a typical neighbourhood side street or 'soi'. Photographs by the author

Figure 2: Interview locations



Source: Adapted from Google Maps

<i>Table 1: Profile of respondents</i>			
	Neighbourhood displaced (11)***	Other neighbourhood (14)	Condominium (22)
<u>Age Range</u>			
0-17	-	-	1
18-24	-	-	5
25-34	1	1	8
35-44	-	2	5
45-54	5	6	-
55-64	4	2	2
65+	1	3	1
Average Age	47	54	33
<u>Education</u>			
Primary School	9	12	-
Secondary School	-	1	3
Vocational College	1	1	-
University	1	-	16
Not Known	-	-	3
<u>Occupation/Skill Level*</u>			
1	8	-	-
2	2	9	1
3 & 4	1	1	15
Not working	-	1	-
Student	-	-	4
Retired	-	3	2
<u>Tenure</u>			
Owner	1	7	10
Senging	2	3	n/a
Renting	6	4	3
Lodging**	2	-	9
<u>Household Composition</u>			
Married/Co-habiting with child(ren)	2	8	4
Married/Co-habiting no child(ren)	-	-	1
Single Parent	1	3	-
Single Person	2	2	9
Sharing with relatives	6	1	6
Sharing with friends	-	-	2
<u>Migratory Status</u>			
Born in Klongsan	7	6	2
Born in Bangkok	-	2	15
Born in Provinces	4	6	7
<p>* Based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) as used by National Statistical Office in Thailand. 3-4: Managers, professionals and technicians; 2: clerical, services and sales, crafts and related trades; 1: unskilled and elementary.</p> <p>** 'Lodgers' for condominiums is principally children living in the parental owned unit</p> <p>*** Data reflects status after eviction.</p>			

Table 2: Characteristics of respondents whose stories are cited in detail

Name	Age	Sex	Household Type & Size	Occupation and Skill Level	Education	Tenure
Displaced residents						
Aom	45	F	Sharing with relatives - 3	Food Vendor (1)	Primary	Renting
Kat	52	F	Married with Children - 4	Accountant (3)	University	Owner
Mim	54	F	Sharing with relatives - 8	Food Vendor (1)	Primary	Renting
Prae	60	F	Sharing with relatives - 8	Food Vendor (1)	Primary	Senging
Somsri	52	F	Married with Children - 4	Sewing and Ironing (1)	Primary	Senging
Suk	55	M	Single - 1	Factory Worker (1)	Primary	Renting
Surit	54	M	Single - 1	Taxi Driver (1)	Primary	Renting
Other local residents						
Chayuth	59	M	Married with Children - 6	Retired (4)	Vocational College	Renting
Pranom	54	M	Married with Children - 4	Trinket Maker (2)	Primary	Renting
Condominium residents						
Nong	25	F	Single - 1	Air Hostess (2)	University	Lodger
Mint	30	F	Sharing with relatives - 2	Working in parent's company (3)	University	Lodger
Oak	57	M	Married with Children - 4	Engineer (4)	University	Owner