

The Transformation of Thai Families in the Context of Globalization^{*}

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Received 16 August 2025; Revised 27 August 2025; Accepted 22 September 2025

Abstract

This article examines the transformation of Thai families within the context of globalization, highlighting structural, economic, cultural, technological, and intergenerational dimensions of change. Traditionally rooted in Buddhism, kinship solidarity, and agrarian lifestyles, Thai families once revolved around extended households and hierarchical roles. However, modernization processes such as urbanization, industrialization, and education reform began reshaping family patterns before the intensification of globalization. Global forces have since accelerated these changes, producing smaller nuclear households, single-parent and blended families, and transnational caregiving arrangements driven by labor migration. Economic pressures and consumer culture have further altered aspirations and domestic roles, while cultural influences from global media and discourses of gender equality have redefined gender relations and challenged patriarchal authority. Technological innovations, particularly social media, have reshaped family communication but also created generational divides. These dynamics produce tensions between traditional filial piety and modern ideals of independence, yet families adapt through hybridization, blending traditional values with global influences. The Thai case contributes to broader debates on family change in Asia by illustrating how local traditions mediate global cultural flows. The article concludes that Thai families remain resilient, not in decline, but continually negotiating continuity and change in an interconnected world.

Keywords: Thai families; globalization; cultural change; intergenerational relations; hybridization

Introduction

The family has long been regarded as the foundational institution of Thai society, serving as the primary unit of socialization, care, and moral development. Traditionally, Thai families were rooted in agrarian lifestyles, Buddhist values, and kinship networks that emphasized collectivism, filial piety, and respect for elders (Mulder, 1997; Podhisita, 1994). Extended family households were common, with several generations living together and sharing responsibilities, particularly in rural

Citation



* Phramaha Phanuvich Panuwitoyo. (2025). The Transformation of Thai Families in the Context of Globalization. *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Innovation*, 2(3), 47-54.;

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.>

Website: <https://so14.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/AJHSI>

communities where agricultural labor required cooperative support (Kanchanachitra et al., 2010). Religious principles, particularly those derived from Theravāda Buddhism, further shaped family relations by instilling norms of compassion, interdependence, and moral duty (Keyes, 1984).

However, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, globalization has brought significant cultural, economic, and technological changes that challenge these traditional family systems. Economic globalization has encouraged labor migration, both domestically from rural to urban areas and internationally, reshaping family structures into transnational and single-parent households (Jones & Chantavanich, 2009). Cultural globalization, particularly through the influence of mass media and digital platforms, has introduced new values such as individualism, consumerism, and gender equality, which sometimes conflict with traditional Thai values of hierarchy and collectivism (Rigg, 2019). Meanwhile, technological globalization, especially the rise of social media and mobile communication, has reconfigured intergenerational relationships and communication within families, generating both opportunities for connection and tensions due to the digital divide (Kaewthep, 2017).

This article aims to critically examine how globalization has transformed Thai families, with a particular focus on structure, values, and intergenerational relationships. It argues that globalization does not simply erode traditional systems but produces hybrid forms of adaptation, where traditional kinship values coexist and sometimes conflict with global cultural flows. The scope of the discussion is conceptual, grounded in sociological and anthropological theories of family transformation and globalization (Giddens, 1990; Robertson, 1992), and informed by comparative perspectives from other Asian societies undergoing similar transitions, such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. By adopting this approach, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how globalization reshapes one of the most enduring social institutions in Thai society.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Understanding the transformation of Thai families within the context of globalization requires a multi-dimensional theoretical approach. The conceptual framework draws upon globalization theory, models of family transformation, the notion of cultural hybridization, and comparative perspectives from other Asian societies.

Globalization Theory provides a foundation for analyzing how transnational flows of culture, economy, and technology reshape family institutions. Giddens (1990) argues that globalization disembeds social relations from local contexts, creating new forms of interconnectedness that influence even the most intimate domains of life, such as family. Robertson (1992) emphasizes that globalization involves both the universalization of cultural forms and the particularization of local adaptations, a dynamic often referred to as “glocalization.” Appadurai’s (1996) framework of global cultural flows—ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes—further explains how migration, global media, and economic restructuring shape family life in Thailand. For example, labor migration (ethnoscape) and global media consumption (mediascape) significantly affect household structures, intergenerational roles, and identity within Thai families.

Family Transformation Models highlight how families evolve alongside modernization and social change. Modernization theory posits a shift from extended family systems to nuclear households as societies industrialize and urbanize (Goode, 1963). Structural functionalism, particularly the work of Parsons and Bales (1955), frames the family as adapting to fulfill specialized roles: socialization of children, emotional support, and regulation of reproduction. In Thailand, as in other parts of Asia, modernization has led to smaller family units, dual-income households, and changing gender roles (Caldwell, 2005). These shifts align with broader patterns of family transformation under globalization, though they also carry local cultural nuances.

The concept of Cultural Hybridization is particularly useful in examining Thai families. Thai traditions rooted in Buddhism, collectivism, and filial piety emphasize obligations to elders, respect for hierarchy, and communal values (Mulder, 1997; Keyes, 1984). Globalization introduces competing values of individualism, consumerism, and digital lifestyles, which create tensions but also opportunities for negotiation. Thai families often blend these influences, producing hybrid forms of family life. For instance, while younger generations increasingly assert independence through global youth culture, obligations to support parents and maintain kinship ties remain deeply ingrained (Podhisita, 1994). This process reflects what Robertson (1995) calls the “interpenetration of the global and the local.”

Finally, a Comparative Lens situates the Thai experience within broader regional transformations. In Japan, declining fertility and delayed marriage have produced shrinking households and an aging population (Ochiai, 2013). South Korea has seen similar changes, with rapid industrialization weakening traditional Confucian patriarchal structures and reshaping gender roles (Chang & Song, 2010). In the Philippines, large-scale international labor migration has produced “transnational families,” where caregiving and economic support are maintained across borders (Parreñas, 2005). These cases offer insights into the Thai context, suggesting that while globalization has universalizing effects, each society negotiates change through its own cultural frameworks. Thailand’s Buddhist-agrarian heritage and collectivist values provide distinct contours in this regional landscape.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this article frames the transformation of Thai families as a complex process shaped by the interaction of global flows and local traditions. This conceptual approach highlights not only the disruptive impact of globalization but also the adaptive strategies through which Thai families preserve continuity while embracing change.

Historical Background of Thai Families

The family has historically been the central unit of Thai social organization, serving as the primary site of economic cooperation, cultural transmission, and social control. The traditional Thai family system was largely structured as an extended family, where several generations lived under the same household or within close proximity. This arrangement fostered intergenerational solidarity, with grandparents, parents, and children sharing responsibilities in household management, childcare, and agricultural labor (Podhisita, 1994). Kinship networks extended beyond the nuclear family to encompass cousins, uncles, aunts, and even fictive kin, creating wide social safety nets that functioned as a substitute for formal state welfare systems

(Phongpaichit & Baker, 1995). In rural Thailand, the extended family model was particularly suited to agrarian life, as cooperative labor was necessary for rice farming and other subsistence activities (Kanchanachitra et al., 2010).

The social and religious values shaping Thai family life were deeply influenced by Theravāda Buddhism, which provided moral codes and practices reinforcing filial obligations, respect for elders, and interdependence within kinship systems (Mulder, 1997). Buddhist teachings on compassion (*metta*) and gratitude (*katanyu*) were incorporated into familial expectations, requiring children to care for aging parents as an expression of karmic reciprocity (Keyes, 1984). Hierarchical values structured relationships within the household, where parents and elders occupied respected positions of authority, while younger generations were expected to show deference and obedience. Gender roles were also strongly influenced by cultural and religious norms: men were often encouraged to enter the monkhood at least temporarily to accrue merit for their families, while women carried the primary responsibilities for caregiving and household management (Hanks, 1962).

Even before the era of globalization, Thailand experienced transformations in family structures due to processes of urbanization, industrialization, and education reform. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, rural-to-urban migration accelerated as economic development concentrated in Bangkok and other metropolitan areas, gradually weakening the prevalence of extended households (Chamratrithirong et al., 1988). Industrialization and the shift toward a market economy encouraged the growth of nuclear family units, particularly in urban centers where housing space was limited. Educational reforms in the 1960s and 1970s also reshaped family life by raising aspirations for upward mobility and altering gender expectations, as more women gained access to secondary and higher education (Fukui, 1993). These pre-globalization changes laid the groundwork for more profound shifts in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, when globalization began to intensify economic migration, cultural exchange, and digital connectivity.

Thus, the historical trajectory of Thai families demonstrates both continuity and change: while traditional extended families rooted in kinship solidarity and Buddhist values formed the foundation of Thai society, modernization processes had already begun to reshape family forms before the pressures of globalization emerged. This history provides an essential baseline for understanding how contemporary Thai families negotiate the new challenges and opportunities brought by globalization.

Dimensions of Transformation in the Context of Globalization

Globalization has reconfigured Thai families in multiple dimensions, reshaping their structure, economic roles, cultural values, and intergenerational dynamics. These transformations reflect broader global patterns but are also mediated by local cultural frameworks, producing hybrid forms of family life that blend tradition and modernity.

Structural Changes

One of the most visible changes is the structural shift from extended families to nuclear households. While multi-generational living arrangements were once dominant, urbanization and industrialization have led to smaller households, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai (Chamratrithirong et al., 1988). Fertility decline, influenced by state family planning policies since the 1970s, has further reduced household size (Knodel et al., 1987). In addition, new household

forms—such as single-parent families, blended families due to remarriage, and “skip-generation” families where grandparents care for grandchildren while parents migrate for work—have become increasingly common (Zimmer & Knodel, 2013).

Economic Changes

Economic globalization has also reshaped Thai families. Labor migration, both internal and international, has altered household structures and caregiving patterns. Many rural families rely on remittances from members working in Bangkok or abroad, particularly in East Asia and the Middle East (Jones & Chantavanich, 2009). At the same time, the rise of dual-income households reflects both necessity and opportunity, as women increasingly participate in the labor market. This shift challenges traditional gender roles and redistributes domestic responsibilities (Rigg, 2019). Moreover, consumer culture, driven by global capitalism, influences family aspirations and lifestyles, shifting the focus from subsistence and communal well-being toward material consumption and individual achievement (Phongpaichit & Baker, 1995).

Cultural Shifts

Cultural globalization has introduced new values that redefine family roles and weaken traditional patriarchal authority. Exposure to global discourses of gender equality and human rights has transformed expectations of women’s roles in both household and public spheres (Van Esterik, 2000). Younger generations increasingly reject rigid hierarchical norms, preferring more egalitarian family relationships. The influence of global media, particularly through television, cinema, and digital platforms, also reshapes youth identities and family expectations, often generating tensions between traditional parental authority and modern aspirations (Kaewthep, 2017).

Technological Impact

Technological globalization has had profound implications for family interactions. Social media and digital communication platforms, such as Line, Facebook, and TikTok, have become integral to family life, enabling real-time communication across distances and supporting transnational caregiving arrangements (Boonyarattanasoontorn, 2020). At the same time, the **generational digital divide** introduces new challenges: while younger family members are adept at using technology, older generations may struggle, creating intergenerational misunderstandings and weakening traditional communication patterns (Howard, 2011). Technology also facilitates the exposure of youth to global cultures, sometimes clashing with parental expectations rooted in Thai traditions.

Intergenerational Dynamics

These changes have intensified tensions between **traditional filial piety** and modern ideals of independence. Theravāda Buddhist values emphasize gratitude (katanyu) and obligations of children to care for aging parents (Mulder, 1997; Keyes, 1984). However, as younger generations pursue education, careers, and urban lifestyles, they increasingly prioritize personal autonomy, which can lead to intergenerational conflict (Zimmer & Knodel, 2013). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that while filial obligations may be renegotiated, they are not disappearing; rather, they are adapted to fit contemporary realities, such as through financial support instead of co-residence (Knodel & Saengtienchai, 2005).

Taken together, these structural, economic, cultural, technological, and intergenerational shifts demonstrate that Thai families are not simply being eroded by

globalization. Instead, they are adapting to new conditions, blending traditional values with global influences in ways that reshape but do not eliminate the family's role as a central institution in Thai society.

Conclusion

The family has always been regarded as the foundation of Thai society, serving as the central institution for socialization, caregiving, and the transmission of cultural values. Traditionally, Thai families were structured around extended households, where multiple generations lived together and relied on strong kinship networks. These arrangements were deeply rooted in Theravāda Buddhist teachings, which emphasized compassion, gratitude, and filial obligations, and were closely tied to Thailand's agrarian way of life. Within this framework, respect for elders, interdependence, and clearly defined gender roles were central to family functioning.

Over the past century, however, Thai families have undergone significant transformation. Even before the rise of globalization, processes such as urbanization, industrialization, and education reforms were already reshaping household forms. The movement of young people from rural areas to cities, the growth of wage labor, and the spread of modern schooling weakened the extended family model and promoted smaller, nuclear households. These pre-globalization shifts created conditions that would later be intensified by global economic, cultural, and technological changes.

Globalization has since accelerated and deepened these transformations across several dimensions. Structurally, Thai families have shifted further from extended to nuclear forms, while new patterns such as single-parent, blended, and skip-generation households have become more visible. Economically, internal and international labor migration has fragmented households but also introduced transnational caregiving systems, while the rise of dual-income families reflects both necessity and greater participation of women in the workforce. Consumer culture, tied to global capitalism, has further reshaped family aspirations and lifestyles.

Culturally, globalization has redefined traditional norms and roles. Exposure to global media and discourses of gender equality has weakened patriarchal authority and encouraged more egalitarian relationships between men and women, as well as between parents and children. Younger generations, increasingly influenced by global youth culture, often challenge traditional hierarchies, creating tensions but also opportunities for renegotiation of values. At the same time, the cultural principle of filial piety remains strong, though adapted to modern conditions, for example through financial support rather than co-residence.

Technological change has also played a critical role. Social media and digital platforms now structure communication within families, allowing connections across distance and enabling migrant workers to remain present in the lives of their children and parents. Yet these technologies also create a generational digital divide, as younger

family members adopt new communication styles while older relatives struggle to keep up, sometimes leading to conflict or misunderstanding.

These developments have produced new forms of intergenerational dynamics in Thailand. While traditional Buddhist and collectivist values continue to emphasize obligations to parents and community, younger people increasingly prioritize education, careers, and personal independence. The result is not a simple decline of tradition but rather a hybrid form of family life that combines continuity with change.

In summary, Thai families have been significantly reshaped by globalization, but they remain resilient social institutions. Rather than collapsing under global pressures, they adapt through negotiation and hybridization, blending traditional values with modern influences. The Thai experience parallels other Asian societies, such as Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, but is also distinctive due to its Buddhist heritage and kinship-based traditions. Understanding these transformations has important implications for social policy, including the need to strengthen family support systems, address challenges of aging populations, and promote digital literacy across generations. Ultimately, the story of Thai families in the age of globalization is one of both transformation and persistence, where tradition and modernity coexist in dynamic tension.

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