Introduction

Fieldnotes

The slum, Bangkok. 4.30 p.m. 6 July 2006

I am on my way to the community gym that takes place in the forecourt of a large NGO located in the city's biggest slum. I step into the fierce blaze of the sun and walk under a massive concrete expressway that roars and shakes under the weight of the container trucks transporting goods to and from the port. Lorries are strewn everywhere, rusty skeletons of their former selves that now provide beds for those who do not have them and climbing frames for the young children who live nearby. I cross a railway line littered with rubbish and walk under a second expressway, past an old man sitting on a broken sofa, his ribs sticking out, his back as bent as the top of a coat hanger. Behind the sofa is an outdoor living room that has no walls or ceiling. The space is demarcated by rickety wooden cabinets that run along three sides. A television blares out and about ten people gather around to watch. I walk on, past a young man who is laughing hysterically, one arm inside his zipped-up jacket, holding a plastic bag and sniffing from it. I walk on. A man approaches and asks for five baht, and follows me up the road, barefoot, clutching at my wrist. I get to the main intersection at the centre of the slum and see P[1] Jok making fruit shakes for her customers. She nods towards a group of young couples sitting on motorbikes opposite her stall. 'Look', her nod says, 'I told you the teenagers around here are no good'. The mid-afternoon lull – those hours after lunch when the sun beats hard, the streets are quieter and daily life seems to move in slow motion – gives way to the hustle and bustle of early evening. Barbecue coals are lit and stoked and smoke billows out across the tin rooftops. Woks hiss, dirty water splashes into the gutters, announcements from the community leader crackle through the loudspeakers that are tied to the lamp posts, and motorbikes, bicycles, push carts, pickup trucks, pedestrians and stray dogs compete for space on the dusty lanes. I arrive at the gym and it

is deserted except for Som, a young man of seventeen who sits on a weightlifting bench under a plastic awning waiting for his friends.

Som is wearing an NYC baseball cap, a pair of bright orange sunglasses and three chunky metal chains around his neck. Hanging from each chain is a pendant: from one a miniature statue of Buddha, from another a letter from the Japanese alphabet with the word JAPAN inscribed underneath, and from the third a diamante dollar sign. He is dressed in a vest, into which he has cut a deep V shape at the neck, and a pair of baggy jeans scarcely held up by a belt emblazoned with the word BLING, clearly worn for ornamental rather than functional purposes. Som sits with his elbows resting on his knees, his hands clasped together, his head hung low. I sit beside him, and he tells me that he is not feeling so good. When I ask why, he says he has not slept properly for three nights because he has so many problems. What problems? I ask. And he tells me of the troubles that the dark nights intensify in their own cruel way.

Som's mother recently told him that she and Som's sister would be moving up country, because a family feud following the death of Som's grandmother means that they are no longer welcome in the small wooden hut where they live with Som and Som's aunt, uncle and cousins. Som has been told to leave and has three weeks to find somewhere to live. He does not earn a reliable or adequate income: some weeks he gets casual labouring work at the port for one or two nights, he helps a friend's mother at her market stall for a couple of hours on weekday afternoons, and sometimes he gets extra work on Saturday evenings packing away the tables and chairs at a local street cafe. While these sources of income are indispensable for Som, they provide him with no security – nothing with which to weather the storm that has come his way.

Som was born just outside Bangkok and lived in a rented apartment in a low-income neighbourhood with his mother, father and older sister until he was eight years old. His father came from the north-east of Thailand and worked as a telephone repair man, and his mother comes from a family who settled in Khlong Toey slum in the 1950s, and worked in a garment factory. When Som was eight, his father died from cancer of the liver, and an ensuing conflict between his mother and his father's family left Som's mother with no inheritance and insufficient means with which to raise her two children. She moved back to Khlong Toey slum with Som and his sister, and into her mother's house, which was already home to Som's grandmother, aunt, uncle and four cousins. During this time, Som attended the local community school but left at thirteen, before completing compulsory

schooling, because he was no longer prepared to suffer the beatings he received at the hands of his teachers (punishments for falling asleep in class, a result of working in the early mornings to help his mother make ends meet). For the next three years, Som worked in a variety of informal jobs: at a toy shop, at market stalls and food stalls, and running errands for neighbours. He continued to live in his grandmother's house with his mother and sister and extended family, but relationships within the household grew increasingly strained, as poverty, overcrowding and gruelling work took their toll on family members, and as Som's mother and sister became increasingly dependent on alcohol and prone to bouts of violence. When Som was fourteen, he moved out to live with a girlfriend who was considerably older than him and rented her own room, but when that relationship broke down he moved back to the family home where he has been ever since, although he stays frequently at friends' houses.

Som has his heart set on a better life than the one he knows today. When he was sixteen, he decided to return to school in order to increase his earning potential, and enrolled on a course at the local community college to prepare for his lower secondary exams. Since then he has been studying part time and working as a casual labourer, but he dreams of doing a nine to five job in an office, of wearing a suit and of earning enough money to support his family and leave the slum.

About this Book

This book is about Som, his friends and his peers growing up in the slums of Bangkok, at a moment in their lives and a moment in national and global history marked by a series of profound and interlocking transitions. It offers an account of an ethnographic study I undertook between 2005 and 2006 in an inner-city slum, first undertaking participant observation and engaging in everyday conversations, then conducting interviews, focus group discussions and a range of other qualitative, participatory research activities. It also draws on fieldwork undertaken in the homes and schools of relatively wealthy Thai families, although these remain in the background, referred to as a means of drawing out some of the issues and concerns particular to those living in slum communities.

The book is about *the search for a better life* – what this means for those struggling to get by in a rapidly developing and globalizing economy, how they try to fulfil their dreams, and the outcomes and side effects of their endeavours. It is not a book about the most destitute or

otherwise troubled slum dwellers whose stories may be more familiar; it does not focus on the issues of housing, drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, HIV-AIDS, gambling, orphaned children, teenage pregnancy or suicide – although these issues are certainly present and form a crucial part of the backdrop against which Som and his peers were growing up. Instead, this book tells a story about a group of slum dwellers who are trying to create a better life for themselves and their families, with the odds stacked against them.

In this, it focuses on three key spheres of everyday practice: *living the teenage life*, or engagement in global cultural practices; *doing the right thing*, or engagement in local cultural practices; and *forging the future*, or engagement in educational and economic activity designed to reduce hardship and improve material standards of living. It explores the key activities involved in each of these spheres of activity, the meanings that participants attach to them, the pertinent elements of the contexts in which those activities take place and the unintended consequences that can ensue from them.

Theoretically the book reflects on the issue of agency, as exercised by young people living in conditions of severe structural constraint, showing how the exercise of agency can have negative outcomes for those who struggle to survive the daily grind of slum life yet dare to dream of something better. In particular, the book demonstrates that when studying the agency of the urban poor, a holistic approach is important: action in one sphere of life can have 'spill-over' effects in other spheres, and without acknowledging the existence of these multiple spheres and the connections between them, we cannot properly understand the ways in which agency operates when severely constrained, often bumping up against itself in different realms of practice and interacting with multiple structures to produce counterproductive outcomes.

This theoretical approach sits alongside that of scholars writing within the interdisciplinary and expanding global youth studies literature, in particular those whose work takes a critical approach to the study of marginalized agency. Many of these scholars are influenced by Bourdieu's notion of cultural production and reproduction, identifying the mechanisms through which young people living in conditions of socio-economic disadvantage around the world come to reinforce their positions of marginalization through everyday cultural practice. In this book I take a slightly different approach, analysing not how the exercise of marginalized agency can reproduce socio-economic structures of oppression, but instead how exercising marginalized agency within one realm or sphere of cultural practice can

engender counterproductive outcomes within other spheres, bringing in its wake a host of unintended, negative outcomes.

The critical scholarship within the global youth studies literature has informed the theoretical framework in this study, which I developed through the iterative process of data analysis and reading. This framework is represented visually in Figure 0.1. Each circle represents a sphere of action and appears porous to represent the insecurity and

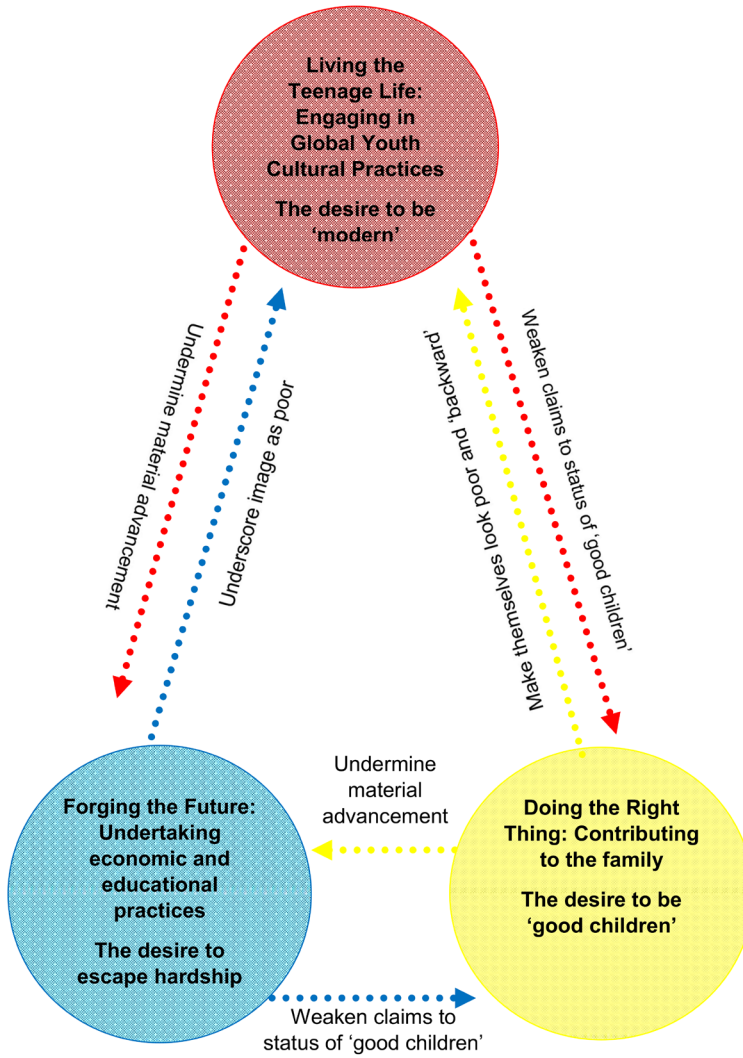

Figure 0.1. Diagram showing how action in each realm of practice can be precarious and have unintended consequences for other realms.

complexities attendant in each set of endeavours (each of these circles forms the basis of discussion in one of the empirical chapters in Part II of the book). The dotted arrows between the circles represent the spill-over effects emanating from and destined towards the other spheres of activity. The diagram provides a way of understanding how action within one realm of practice is itself fraught with tension and can have disabling effects in other realms when exercised by those in positions of structural disadvantage.

The remainder of this book sets about elucidating the central argument – that for young people growing up in urban poverty, the multifarious pursuit of a better life can have profoundly negative consequences. It is divided into three parts. Part I provides the background to the study. Chapter 1 sets the scene: it outlines the key terms used throughout the book, introduces Theravada Buddhism and some of its salient aspects as these relate to the central concerns of the study, then recounts Thailand's story of rapid development and the history of slum proliferation in the country, briefly surveying the socio-economic context in which the search for a better life has come to such prominence and introducing the slum in which fieldwork took place. Chapter 2 goes on to survey and critique the existing literature that deals with young people in Thailand – either explicitly or by implication – and to highlight the theoretically informed, critical studies that have influenced my interpretation of empirical data and the development of my conceptual framework. Chapter 3 describes the fieldwork journey, offering a personal and reflexive account of the processes of research design, data collection and analytical interpretation.

Part II details the main findings of the study. Chapter 4 focuses on young slum dwellers' endeavours to 'live the teenage life', to engage with the products and images of the global youth culture industry, and through these to construct images of wealth, global connection and modernity and present these to others, especially their peers. The chapter explores the complex and contradictory context in which these practices take place and some of their unintended consequences, especially those relating to the other two spheres explored in the book. Chapter 5 discusses young slum dwellers' attempts to 'do the right thing' by their families, to provide much-needed support in the form of money and labour, and through this to construct themselves as 'good' children. The chapter pays attention to the unintended consequences of these endeavours, focusing on those that spill over into the other two spheres of everyday practice. This chapter also investigates young slum dwellers' attempts to make *living the teenage life* and *doing the right thing* compatible, once again focusing on the unintended

outcomes of action in this regard. Chapter 6 discusses young slum dwellers' attempts to secure a better standard of living in the future. It explores the key ways in which they work towards their dreams of material advancement, focusing on the unintended side effects that can ensue from the fragility of the support available to them. It explores participants' own understandings of the struggle to get ahead, and notes the irony that it is precisely by thinking and acting in accordance with widely revered norms in the local, national and global contexts that their endeavours can be so fraught.

Part III comprises a short concluding chapter that summarizes the key findings and discusses their implications for the literatures discussed in Chapter 2 and relevant policy arenas.

The search for a better life could not be more central in today's geopolitical and socio-economic climate. Global migration figures from 2015 (International Organisation for Migration 2016) show the highest number of international migrants in recorded history, as people from all over the world – and for very different reasons – attempted to secure a better life for themselves and their families, whether as economic migrants, refugees or asylum seekers. At the same time, the discourse of well-being has moved from the annals of history, philosophy and the periphery of certain academic disciplines, to become a prominent feature of contemporary scholarly, political, organizational, community and individual endeavour, as people the world over wrestle with what it means in contemporary times to live a good life and with how to best attain – and sustain – it.

It is an opportune moment to pause and reflect on some of the more nuanced and problematic processes that can make the search for a better life so precarious for those who begin their journeys on a shaky footing. In so doing, we may be better positioned to support our less fortunate contemporaries to weather the storms that visit them in their search for a better life, to support them in bracing themselves for the potential pitfalls along the way.

Note

1. P is the designation given to older siblings, but can also be – and is often – used for slightly older friends and acquaintances. It denotes respect.