

[19-7]

Society and Culture in Rural Thailand (1970 - 1984) :

Current Trends and Directions \*

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Introduction

A discussion on the state of rural studies in contemporary Thailand and the directions they should take, I propose, should be conducted against the background of the major socio-political events the 1970's and the sudden discoveries of maldevelopment symptoms characterized by growth with growing external dependence and modernization without development.

The events and symptoms as such have made sensible social scientists and concerned observers deeply aware the knowledge gaps to be covered before any such disciplines could claim adequacy in providing systematic knowledge, and understanding of the dynamics of social change, and most ideally the predictive power over future events.

The purpose of this preliminary working paper is twofold. Firstly to survey the state of Thai rural studies during 1970 - 1984. I therefore survey the existing books; articles and research and working papers related to society and culture in rural Thailand. Secondly, to

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discuss the changing focus of interests, to identify gaps of research, and the directions or challenges in the future with reference to the contemporary historical context.

In the total 285 items of work have been reviewed with 15 items from Japanese sources and 50 items from English sources and the rest are from Thai sources.

Literature by subfields of rural studies

subfields	number of items
1. Concepts and Approaches	17
2. Society and culture : general	18
3. Society and culture : local, folk, minorities	38
4. Social Structure, Class Structure	14
5. Family, Education, Women	16
6. Values, Worldviews and Religions	35
7. Rural Political Economy, Science and Technology	41
8. Rural Organizations	14
9. Urban-rural Relations, Migration	11
10. Conflicts, Foreign Agribusiness	15
11. Rural Problems : Land, Health etc.	25
12. Social and Cultural Policies	11
13. Development, Innovation	<u>30</u>
Total	<u>285</u>

## Changing Focus and Trends

### 1. Paradigms of rural social structure and culture.

The starting points were Ruth Benedict's Thai individualism and John F. Embree's loosely structured social system theses. Despite some different emphasis, both share the main theme of Thai individualism and lack of disciplined behavior. The conceptions were later pursued in field research at Bang Chan by Cornell University team whose findings elaborated the theme further by emphasizing the role of religious beliefs in determining the specific social pattern. The paradigm was examined and partly challenged in a conference with few foreign including one Thai participant resulting in a book edited by H.D. Evers (1969). Although horizontally or interpersonally, relationships may look comparatively 'loose', but the vertical relationship, i.e. between superiors-inferiors, bureaucrat-farmers, are quite rigid or 'tight'. Furthermore, with reference to institutional-structural level of analysis, there is no such thing as 'looseness'. Some Thai sociologists challenged the paradigm by pointing out the impressionistic and thus inadequate understanding the Thai social pattern such as those based on พหุชน.

It is interesting enough to note that among the social scientists from Japan, the reference home of the tight structured model, there have been no one giving much weight in applying the paradigm to explain Thai social phenomena: There are scholars who are either like the late Mizuno who develop different mode of explanation or strong critics who pointed out the ahistoricity of the concept and the

mistrepresentativeness of Thai rural scene. Moreover, in an international symposium on "A Comparative Study of Paddy-Growing Communities in Southeast Asian and Japan" in Kyoto, Japan in 1979, the loose-tight dichotomy is seen as at best a starting point but inadequate for comparative studies crossculturally. Three approaches namely, econolical, historical, and socio-cultural ones were suggested as more promising (Kuchiba, 1979).

Unsatisfied with the inadequacy of the loose structure paradigm, Akin Rabhibhatana proposed the patron-client paradigm as an alternative based upon firstly his social historical and later rural development research. This conception came to be widely discussed empirically and at least accepted for micro socio-political analysis with some elaboration kinship system. But as for applying it to the macro-social phenomena, most scholars including the first proponent feel it needs to be supplemented by analysis of power and class structures.

The more recently presented paradigms are moral economy, and political economy, of which some few interesting and important contributions have been recently came out. (คณาจารย์ มธส)

## 2. The images of rural Thailand, its social structure and stratification.

The idea of Thailand as one single homogeneity has been abandoned while there is a clear and shared sense of a national state of social and ethnic pluralism. There have been several studies on the Chinese Thais and other Thai minorities, hill tribes and the Southern

muslims. Much of these work still take the standpoint from a rather inclusive national security view. There are growing interest in folk cultures of various region. Interestingly enough, the Bangkok Bicentennial on the country-wide basis prompted several local historians and intellectuals to look back on their own regional historical and socio-cultural contexts resulting in several interesting publications yet to be gathered.

Concerning social and class structure in rural Thailand, there are few studies on local elites in specific historical and regional contexts such as those on provincial tax collectors, landlords, etc. There are however few studies on the present rural elite or leadership and fewer on the negative functioning of local power structures upon organized development efforts. On social differentiation among peasantry, there are few research such as one by a Japanese and another by a Thai research, while there is no systematic research on social mobility be it up-down or horizontal patterns among rural population.

### 3. Values, Worldviews and Religion.

The writings on these topics are one of the most numerous. Most are however not based on research. The interests in the role of Buddhism and its institutions in various economic, and especially political sphere during the 'legitimation crisis' in 1973-6. There is a growing interest in the role of local Buddhist monks in social development either as institutions. On the other hand there is persistent interest on worldview and social values though the approaches

employed seem to be not yet sufficiently adequate and dynamic.

In recent years, upon reflections of the complexus of socio-political and cultural contexts of the disadvantage powerless, there are serious inquiries in to the forms, functions and mechanisms of responses; several meaningful efforts employing the historical method have been made both locally and in comparative reference. (Tanabe and Turton 1984)

#### 4. Rural political economics, science and technology.

There are several studies on rural economic problems although useful but most are done with disciplinary approach. There are recent researches by the Agricultural Land Reform Office on the problem of landlessness in Central and Lower Northern parts. There are yet no serious studies on the really poor in the rural areas, the agricultural laborers and the tenants farmers. There are several evidence showing that all the past development projects and public investment have rarely if ever trickle down to their hands. Often their responses to the problem of livelihood are observed in various kind of adult labor migration, youth urban exodus and the worsening childlabor. There is a definite need for systematic research on such patterns of response and the outcome for the people and families. The knowledge situation of off-farm employment is improved by the countrywide research on rural off-farm employment.

There are growing realization on the relationship between the rural villages economies to the wider context of national and international political economy. Firstly, certain pattern of rural urban relations come to be seen as major source of the rural problems.. Secondly, technology, such as new varieties, mechanization, pesticides, etc. could result in produced also negative impacts on rural institutions, employment and health if not fully grasped and put under control of the respective local societies. Thirdly, the impacts from foreign actors, i.e., until lately the military bases, agribusiness, and foreign' assistance development projects, have not been given serious attention in research yet, with one recent exception. ~~Watan Chiravit, 1974~~.

In this specific period, there are some notable researches on rural conflicts, protests and farmers' movements, the phenomena of considerable magnitude and various in forms after the major political change in October 14, 1973. Rural Thailand could offer no simple conflict-free uniqueness anymore. On the other hand, a major focus among political scientists has still been in political participation. which in their terms limit only to electoral forms, while some upon reflection on the departicipative nature of such views turn interests away from simply formal to participatory politics also.

##### 5. Rural Organizations.

One main cause of rural poverty is the lack of effective organization for farmer to maintain certain definite bargaining power. While there are some studies though of decreasing members pointing out

the problem of compatibility between the "looseness" of rural socio-culture and modern organizational forms, there are growing interests in the possible compatibility between exogenous principles of organization and the age-old endogenous forms. Centralized bureaucracy imposes standardized forms and principles of organizations without considering ecological and historical conditions of the specific areas. Furthermore, imposition of detailed supervision on the established rural organizations for example, agricultural cooperatives and farmers' groups stiffen the farmers's initiatives, thus inactivate the organizations.

On the other hand, it is during these years that paramilitary and other forms of statal organizations and groups such as village scouts, defense volunteers etc., have been established with the purpose of countering subversive elements and promoting national security. These have been under the direct supervision from the central and military authorities. Although there are reports on the negative effects on participation, but local Thai scholars are yet to be able to systematically engaged in genuine research into such impacts both intended and unintended.

#### 6. Rural Social and Development Policies

As capitalist economy penetrates into rural communities, and technological change and better communication provides modern convenience to rural people, there appears to be more and more farmer parents who aspire other urbanite or salary occupation for their sons and daughters. On the problem, there is very limited research.

With respect to studies on the impact of government policies on various groups and classes, apart from the area of health there are no research done on the disadvantaged rural groups, namely the small farmers, the tenants and landless. Government policy on these possible "target" groups have not been definite. Research on the effects on government development projects such as Rural Job Creation Programme which turn out to be benefited more to the well-off and the village elite's kins. The problem of accessibility to government services is thus still to receive systematic attention.

Due to the sharpening of disparities in the metropolis -- the-rest-of-the country, rural-urban, and between rice-farming and other occupations, there have been some serious retrospective evaluation of the past rural development policies by a group of leading scholars and technocrats, Rural Development Policy Study Commission in 1980, by some technocrats at the National Economic and Social Development Board, and by some concerned personalities in the growing non-governmental development circles. There yet are few serious research on the adverse impacts of modernization on rural communities, while more people still cling themselves to the reductionist motivational approach to development. Rural development thus far has meant to most concerned people as a planned change for the improvement of rural people's livelihood by the external agents (mainly government agencies). Yet there are some serious work pointed out the overcentralized bureaucracy with several departments competing one another down to local level with several overlapping organizations in one

village. The urban-biased rural development policies and the limitations of rural development administration with no substantial decentralization and reforms have been pointed out, but for many people hopes have been raised following the claims of new rural development planning. For more concerned people, rural development means much more than actions by the external agents from government, but non-governmental development organizations and voluntary organizations as well. What counts here is the people's self help efforts which could be sustained and independent from detailed supervision from the knowledgeable and powerful external agents.

Rural Studies As Responses to The Development Problems.

In the context of such development problems, we can designate three trends of rural studies based on how the rural development problems are perceived and how the perceivers proceed to tackle with the identified problems or work style?

First, Conventional scholarship which is often externally-oriented, single disciplinary, and employing foreign hand-over categories with little, if at all, reflection on their specific contexts. This include formalistic and schematic Marxist tendencies as well.

Secondly, Technocratic social science which emphasis value-free science as instrumental to all potential users, who often turn to be foreign consultancies or the non-biased and neutral state. This often turn the research profession into intellectual profiteering or political climbing activities. By wishing away politics, this tendency could easily endeavour for depoliticisation and thus non-participatory development process.

The conventional and the technocratic tendencies though different in some ways but do often share the non-reflective nature over unintended consequences of their objective and value-neutral scholarship. They could result in elitist or at best partialistic approach to development process.

Thirdly, Emerging scholarship. The tendency is often shared among those observers who feel disenchanting with established grand theories due to the realization of the contextual dimension of social thinking,

and of methodological problems in overspecialized disciplinary and quantitative science.

Based on growing realization that research is not the only source of knowledge, the tendency is rooted in non-established, non-governmental, religious or some academic circles, who are discovering the importance of indigenous knowledge systems. Furthermore, they recognize the often neglected aspect of development, power-relations. They therefore tend to advocate participatory development, which means the process whereby the powerless and disadvantaged people also share decision-making over the working of institutions that affect their lives.

These three trends or rather tendencies are not completely exclusive. Although the researchers might not necessarily be conscious of them, one or the other could predominate over their research work.

#### Concluding Remarks : The Challenges Ahead

1. It could be said that rural Thai studies as a common field of intellectual inquiry came into being rather recently due to the demands from development problems. So far the contributions from foreign scholarships especially American, European and Japanese have been much though different in degrees. Considering the youth the field and the calling from within, the present rather unsystematic and uncoordinated nature and externally orientedness of research enterprises are badly in need of reorientation, restructuring and prioritization with reference to our development needs. There is a definite need to realize that knowledge could never progress and make us more civilized by simple

non-reflective <sup>with</sup> accumulation. To overcome this, it is necessary to start ~~for~~ a shared sense of common intellectual community, and research teams rather than lone scholars should be promoted. I see this as the challenge of indigenization of Thai studies.

2. In order to build a broad based Thai rural studies much work done in foreign languages, including those written by the Thais themselves, should be made accessible back to the researched home. This could be done through common interaction process among Thai studies researches both domestic and foreign, for example, through well planned joint research projects and symposium among concerned institutes and researchers be they international, national or local. This I call the challenge of localization, which can simultaneously mean internationalization.

3: The value of controversies should be highlighted. At present, more than ever, we need to work on Thai studies consciously hand in hand with the development of multiple theoretical paradigms rather than endeavor to construct a single all inclusive theory. The existence of all or none or a monistic claims of theories to be completely general and universally valid could not be a healthy sign for futher development of rural Thai studies.

4. As development process could not be compartmentalized into narrow disciplinary lines, rural studies in that relation should be approached from a historical social science where issues of tensions, conflicts, of variables are also recognized. We need interdisciplinary

research and thinking that go hand in hand with paradigmatic discussions.

May I on this occasion pay tribute to all researchers of rural Thai studies who have paved the way so far up to now. And may I also call on all friends here to cooperate all the more in pursuit of our common thrust toward the hopeful directions.

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