

INTRODUCTION

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Background: Diversification of Indicators to Study Rural Societies

In Southeast Asia, rapid economic growth over the past few decades has led to economic development in the core metropolises, regional cities, and surrounding rural areas. People's living standards have improved significantly. The commercialization of agriculture is progressing rapidly both nationally and internationally, transforming subsistence-based farming to more profitable, capital-intensive agriculture. Non-agricultural employment has also expanded with the development of commerce and industry, contributing to local markets. Furthermore, it has developed with the emergence of factories connected to global markets and improved access to overseas labor markets.

This development of the local economy significantly impacts the livelihood of the rural people, who primarily relied on agriculture. Forms of livelihood in rural areas are diversifying. Many regions have overcome chronic poverty, and basic affluence has been achieved. Amid this change, the social and policy issues are how people can connect diverse opportunities to enrich their lives and how to reduce risks that could lower their standard of living.

Research on rural villages in Southeast Asia has long focused on how class differentiation and diversification have progressed along with economic development in rural societies (there are helpful reviews in Rigg 1994). Previous research on class differentiation and diversification in rural societies has relied mainly on indicators such as land tenure and the role of village communities. Still, today, many indicators and issues exist to consider in understanding rural societies. Those indicators are becoming more diversified, and their interaction is becoming more complex. Income sources for rural households are diversifying, and even the boundaries and roles of the “household,” which used to be self-evident as it overlaps with the management unit of farming, are becoming fluid.

In response to these circumstances, research on rural societies has begun reorganizing increasingly diverse indicators and issues and reconsidering self-evident concepts and frameworks. In in-depth field research, the main interest is to more carefully identify the individual characteristics that depend on each rural society's historical paths and circumstances and to clarify the diversity of social change trajectories. Rigg and his colleagues' achievements exemplify academic struggles in rural studies over decades (Rigg and Vandergeest eds. 2012).

Understanding Diversities in Rural Southeast Asia

Through the research project titled “Preliminary Approach for Research Framework Building for Studying Opportunities and Risks of Residents in Rural Societies of Southeast Asian Countries (from FY2023 to 2024),” the authors have explored and clarified people's responses to opportunities and risks. Furthermore, we have investigated their economic and social backgrounds from the perspective

of transitions in the agricultural structure in rural societies, local industrialization and commercialization, young people's schooling and employment, and the ideal and actual situation of family formation. In compiling the project results in this working paper, the authors consider present rural societies in Southeast Asian countries with the keywords opportunities and risks, mainly discussing opportunities. In line with these undertakings, each chapter shares common viewpoints as follows.

The first viewpoint is to put the situation that rural people face in a historical context. The historical backgrounds, however, are diverse, ranging from villages in northern Thailand, which are said to have a history dating back at most 200 years, to villages in the Red River Delta, which can be traced back to the delta development in the 13th century. In this paper, to discuss more direct historical circumstances, we start from the late 1970s or the 1980s.

Second, we focus on how rural people utilize opportunities or hedge risks. Opportunity is not the same as benefit; risk is not the same as damage. The important thing is to investigate the processes by which people exploit chances or cope with uncertainties. We can observe rural people's active response to circumstances by paying attention to such processes. Some processes can be performed by each household, and others can be performed by collective entities. In this paper, the cases of northern Thailand and the Mekong Delta are examples of the former, and the Red River's case is of the latter. This process analysis will also be done from a time perspective, such as life history. The notion of capital accumulation in northern Thailand's case can explain the internal factors within each household that affect the deployment of opportunities they face.

The third thing we consider is the agricultural environment and institutional factors. The former is not the same as a natural environment. It is a product of the interaction between nature and people, and is closely related to institutions. On the other hand, institutions in this paper refer to broad economic and political entities that influence people's behavior, such as administrative institutions at each level and markets at various scales. These external factors are discussed such as enhancing or restricting people's manipulation of opportunities.

Using these viewpoints—historical backgrounds, processes of exploiting opportunities, and influential external factors—this paper attempts an experimental and exploratory comparison through three case studies. The studies intend not to set strict criteria for comparison but to contribute to rural studies, which have been grappling with diversities in rural societies, by open discussion crossing differences in political regime, natural environment, and historical and cultural backgrounds. However, the way each case study is compiled and the emphasis on them vary depending on the amount of time spent or that which is available to be spent in each research village, the various restrictions surrounding the field research in each site, and the researcher's perspectives and expertise. Nevertheless, we hope our attempt to explore the diverse rural societies of Southeast Asian countries provides a valuable contribution to further studies.

Three Case Studies

The first two case studies written by Fujikura are about rural villages in northern Thailand and the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Road access is a common issue in these areas. It provides opportunities

on one side and risks on the other. The social impact of roads has been discussed in Colombijn and his colleagues' articles (Colombijn 2002). By focusing on market integration brought by roads, Rigg (2002) argues, "Road became a quiescent force in the process, proving an avenue out of poverty, but not the means." On the other hand, Windle conducts comparative studies among villages in different areas of Sarawak, using spatial and other indicators to investigate the diverse consequences of road impacts (Windle 2002). These studies are helpful to discuss the two cases in this paper.

Northern Thailand's case indicates that improved market accessibility benefits the interviewed household. Paved roads improved accessibility for the first generation in their 50s. As laterite roads were replaced by paved roads, electricity, motorization, and a great wave of commercialization came. Moreover, information technology also provides accessibility for the second generation, the family's primary income earners. The author discusses how the household has accumulated capital and deployed investment throughout its life history. The study describes villagers' active response to opportunities.

The second example is a village in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The development bottleneck grounded by the restricted agricultural environments was resolved by favorable accessibility to the newly emerged industrial sector, not by intensifying agriculture. However, the same top-down industrialization and resulting commercialization now have devastating impacts on villagers. Development projects are bringing the surveyed village to the verge of disappearance. The author refers to the case as an authoritarian solution in rural transformation.

Yanagisawa wrote about a village in the Red River Delta, Vietnam. Though this area has a centuries-long state-oriented irrigation history, the author focuses on the role of a cooperative after the market-oriented policy shift in the 1980s. By depicting the cooperative's practices prior to national policies, it argues the collective action of people through a cooperative to create opportunities. In this case, a cooperative is referred to as a mediator between the nation-state and local villagers. Compared to other studies in other areas in the Red River Delta (see, for example, Kerkvliet. 2005), which argue the people's struggles against the nation's pressure on collective farming as "everyday politics," this chapter suggests an example of cooperatives' long-standing role as a community mediated between nation-state and individual villagers in the commercialization process.

In addition to the main chapters above, this paper has two short reports. Niimi has written one on overseas workers from one of the provinces on the north-central coast of Vietnam, and Takahashi has written another about the gap between the provincial election campaign pledges and the reality of rice cultivation in a lower northern province of Thailand. These reports conduct quick reviews of other rural areas in the two countries.

References

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