

CHAPTER 1

Northern Thai Village in Chiang Mai

FUJIKURA Tetsuro

Following my first contact with villagers in northern Thailand in December 2023, I conducted a preliminary survey intermittently from August to December 2024.

General Information about Surveyed Village

The village in this chapter is a quintessential northern Thai village, as Forsyth and Walker illustrate (2008: 27-32). It is located at the bottom of a valley, receiving rainwater via forests on the upper mountain slopes. The area is one of the small intermontane valleys among the mountain ranges centered on Doi Pui Summit (1,665m). Administratively, the village belongs to the Mae Rim district of Chiang Mai province. The village center is about 750 meters above sea level and about 30 kilometers from the Chiang Mai city area. The main road connects to a neighboring Christian Hmong village at an elevation of about 950 meters.

According to a joint inter-department research project of Chiang Mai University, the village has a 200-year history (Chiang Mai University 2018). The villagers are Thai Buddhists. As of 2018, the total population was 1,147, with 392 households. The village head, in 2024, stated that the total population (only Thai nationals) was 1,147, the same as in 2018, with 221 households. While the project mentioned above didn't detail the number of non-local residents, mainly Tai-yai or Shan ethnics, the village head informed us that there are 400 non-local residents in 155 households.

The village's total area is 6.36 square kilometers, and its population density is 180 people per square kilometer, compared with 187 people per square kilometer in Mae Rim district. Non-local residents are not included in this calculated population density in the village because the population information published for each administrative district likely does not include them. As I will mention in the later section of this chapter, such a high proportion of non-local residents in relatively sparsely populated places implies a pull effect of the village economy.



FIG. 1.1 Landscape of the village from one of the upper slopes

Source: Photo taken by the author in October 2024

Agricultural Landscape

Dense forests in the mountainous terrain, covering nearly 45% of the total area, store rainwater and supply abundant water for agriculture and daily life in the village. There are gravity-fed irrigation systems with five springs. The springs overlap five sacred areas of spiritual worship. The villagers have established a community-based water management system for each resource. These informal organizations are called “weir groups” (*Klum Mueang Faay* in Thai) (Chiang Mai University 2018: 36-39).

There is a stream along the bottom of the valley that joins the Mae Sa River downstream. As a villager in her late 50s reminisces, there used to be a strip of rice fields on both sides of the stream. Since the early 1980s, however, many farmers in the village have moved away from subsistence rice cultivation. Now, you can see rows of greenhouses and hydroponic facilities. Vegetables such as paprikas, tomatoes, and cucumbers are grown in the greenhouses, while leaf lettuce is grown in the hydroponic facilities. The woman’s family stopped planting rice 15 to 16 years ago (i.e., 2008 to 2009). Two areas of rice fields remain in the village, but they serve as tourist attractions.

The forests, both community and state-conserved, are found from 950 to 1,300 meters above sea level along the mountains’ ridge lines surrounding the village. Steep slopes between those forest areas and relatively flat areas, which used to be rice fields, on the bottom of the valley are used for horticulture and growing perennials such as macadamia. There are also some greenhouses. The slopes were used for taros and sweet potato cultivation before the wave of commercialization hit the village in the mid-1980s.

Besides macadamia and other perennials, such as fruit trees cultivated at relatively high elevations near the forests, villagers look for flat plots on the bottom of the valley and on slopes to build agricultural facilities like greenhouses. As a result of such actions, capital and facility-intensive agricultural landscapes can be seen everywhere. Our respondent farmer’s tomato greenhouse is nearly 950 meters above sea level, reached by pickup truck along a steep slope.

Life History of Farming Household

In this survey, I contacted a three-generation farming household. In this section, I reconfigure their 40-year life history.

First Generation: Launching Agrarian Capital Accumulation

The first generation of this household is in their late 50s – they were born in the late 1960s. The wife has retired as the principal farming laborer in the family. She now primarily supports her son and daughter-in-law with their farming and raising their children. Her husband has contracted with a seed dealer company to grow paprika seeds in a neighboring district. Four years ago, he started this now lucrative business to compensate for rising agricultural investments and costs. He has handed over the family’s farming in the village to his son and daughter-in-law. Now, the primary producers



FIG. 1.2 Greenhouses on the slopes

Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2023

of this family are the second generation, who are in their early 30s - they were born in the late 1990s.

The first-generation wife's grandparents, except her maternal grandfather, were born in the village. Ten of the eleven siblings of the first-generation couple have lived in the village and are farmers. They are deep-rooted in the village. As the wife says, among her family and relatives, nobody has experienced going far from their families to work. Unlike other rural areas such as northeastern Thailand, this trend seems to be a characteristic of this village.

The role of the first generation in the history of their family is evident: agrarian capital accumulation. The generation's education was limited. The wife only graduated from non-regular high school courses primarily due to the accessibility of a school – it was 2.5 kilometers away and elementary school classrooms were turned into non-regular junior high and high school classrooms on weekends. It was unrealistic for her to go to the nearest regular high school about 17 kilometers from her home. Her husband was fortunate to have a sponsor – the owner of an elephant camp near a high school – who provided accommodation for him. The owner worried about the husband and allowed him to go to school from the camp. When the first-generation couple was around 20 years old, they got married and started their own farm.

The wife's parents had about ten rai ¹⁾ of farming land with three or four plots. Due to her many siblings, she took over only two rai. Her husband and three of his five siblings were given land by their parents. He took over one rai of house ground and three rai of farming land. The couple's starting point was five rai of farming land and one rai of housing ground.

Their parents had planted wet rice in the fields alongside the stream and tubers like taro on the slopes. The former was for subsistence, and the latter was for the market. The socio-economic situation began to change when a paved road reached the center of the subdistrict 2.5 kilometers from the village, and electricity came to the village in 1984. This was a few years before the woman in question married. She said villagers began considering converting subsistence crops into commercial ones in those years. A few years after she married, a strawberry boom occurred in the village. It was

1) One rai is equivalent to 1,600 square meters.

the first of a great wave of commercialization that continues today. However, the price collapsed after six to seven years due to overproduction.

Once commercialization triggered villagers' motivation, crop conversion continued repeatedly. To be precise, commercialization may have created obsessions among villagers to switch crops. When villagers went out of the village and witnessed land use in other villages, or when dealers of agricultural products came to the village, the villagers came up with ideas for new crops. In 2004, the respondent couple began to plant flowers and paprikas. Four or five years later, they started growing tomatoes. Around the same time, starting to cultivate hydroponic leaf lettuce signaled the end of their rice field.

Growing paprika seems to have been lucrative and helped the household accumulate capital. It is estimated that paprika was sold for 100THB/kg in the first few years. It is now 50THB/kg. Ten years ago, the couple bought 20 rai of land for 2.5 million baht to expand their paprika and tomato cultivation. She took out a loan using her siblings' land as collateral. Last year, she paid off the debt after her husband's paprika seed growing became profitable.

This paprika story also indicates the transformation of the labor market in the village. As Chiang Mai University's project points out, in the past, agricultural labor was shared in the community through the exchange of labor (2018:16). In the first commercialization phase, labor exchanges were changed to the hiring of other villagers through payment. However, since other villagers also undertook commercial farming and more educated young generations started to work in the non-agricultural sector or were not happy doing the most arduous agricultural tasks, the labor shortage became evident, and villagers began to employ outside labor. This is why non-local agricultural workers now account for approximately one-third of the village population. The respondent household has employed Tai-yai workers for more than ten years.

Second Generation: Investing for Next-generation

As mentioned above, the primary agricultural work was taken over by the second generation in the family about ten years ago, except for contracted seed production, which took place in a neighborhood district. Both the son and daughter-in-law attained a university education. The son majored in engineering, the daughter-in-law majored in English (hereafter, the son will be referred to as the husband and the daughter-in-law will be referred to as the wife). As of December 2024, while this survey was still in progress, it was not clear why the husband decided to take over his parents' farming in the village having attained a university degree in teaching engineering in high school. However, he seems to have successfully taken over his parents' business, using his engineering expertise, particularly in establishing agricultural facilities such as greenhouses and hydroponic systems. The villagers highly regard his skills and he frequently receives requests from other villagers and newcomers to the village to build agricultural equipment.

His wife was born in a province neighboring Chiang Mai. This implies the expansion of the marriage area of villagers compared to the first generation. She met her current husband when they were university students in Chiang Mai. After getting married, she came back with her husband to the village to help with his farm. She is familiar with rural living because her grandparents were relatively wealthy farmers, having some lands and a rice mill. However, her farming roles as a member of her

husband's family are in supervision and marketing, not actual work in the fields.

As they depend on non-local workers for the daily care of produce in the fields, their work on the farm does not involve so much manual labor, but it doesn't mean their farming is free from hard work and intense stress. The husband manages nearly 40 rai of fields equipped with advanced facilities, while the wife manages the marketing and shipping schedules for the agricultural products. The only relief is that her retired mother-in-law looks after their children. She says their strong motivation to improve their household income is generated by the strong desire to give their children the best education. I would like to point out here that their motivation is not simply to get rich or practice their ideal agricultural methods but to realize any ordinary parents' aspirations.



FIG. 1.3 Hydroponic leaf lettuces

Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2023

Findings and Discussion

Opportunities and Social Base to Exploit Them

In this section, I will briefly review around 40 years of the respondent household's life history to explain what opportunities came to the village and how the recipient villagers exploited them to improve their lives.

The most decisive change in the village probably occurred in the mid-1980s when paved roads and electricity became widely available. According to a map in Vanpen (1986: 19 Fig.2), the national road, which was about 2 kilometers from the village, was still a laterite road as of May 1984. The road was paved shortly after this. The village head says that the village's main road connecting this national road was paved in 1986, and this improvement in accessibility brought a transportation shift from oxcarts and motorbikes to cars. Moreover, he said that agricultural mechanization began after

electricity came to the village around 1984. As for the respondent family, they bought a pickup truck around 1990. It was the first vehicle to transport their agricultural products directly to the market. Before that, they sold their products to dealers coming to the village. It also opened villagers to information about the outside world. As the first-generation wife says, along the road, which they came to use more frequently, villagers could witness what products sold well in the market.

Not only physical accessibility, such as roads and transportation, but information technology, such as the internet, mobile devices, and social media, also improved their accessibility to know-how and the market in the 2000s. Devices like smartphones are indispensable for the young generation to help them get a wide range of agricultural know-how, from technology to skills and tips. Although some community-based farming groups are in the village, this couple does not belong to any of those groups. Clarifying the reason is a further research topic. However, for farmers not joining any agricultural organizations, agricultural know-how, including studying modular farming technologies through the internet, will significantly help improve their farming.

Moreover, mobile phones help them access and negotiate more directly with trading partners close to the retail market. They say, “We now rarely deal with buyers who come directly to our villages. They do so when there is a shortage in the market and their prices are not as good. Instead, we value continuing to do business with our regular customers in Bangkok, who buy our products at prices that are not that different from before, even when market prices are falling.”

Another factor helping Thai villagers take advantage of opportunities is non-local labor. The socio-economic situation, such as demographic aging and the younger generation not wanting to work in agriculture, could ruin farming opportunities, thus non-local workers are filling labor shortages. The relationship between Thai villagers and non-local Tai-yai workers seems cordial on the surface. The Thai villagers even admire their diligence and hard work. However, the relationship is certainly paternalistic and patron-client-like. Moreover, the capital accumulation of these non-local workers in the village is carefully restricted by limited citizenship. For example, the sudden influx of non-local workers due to external and internal labor market fluctuations is blocked by village administration through the residence registration system for non-locals, backed by villagers worried about “diligent competitors.” In addition, non-locals are not allowed to own land.

Such a hidden labor force and its hierarchical structure have been reported throughout Thailand. The case of the village surveyed may show less rapacity than the overt capitalism seen in the manufacturing sector. Villagers manage to take advantage of their opportunities based on their surroundings. To the young couple interviewed, their capital accumulation is not an end but a means to give their children a good education.

Finally, I will discuss the trend in the development of services and tourism in the village and its future. According to the village head, some newcomers without any previous connection with the village have been coming for about five or six years to purchase land and open service facilities such as cafés, restaurants, and homestays. As the head says, there are wealthy people in Bangkok, and disasters, such as flooding in the city and the COVID-19 pandemic, have intensified the abovementioned trend. One of the reasons villagers are selling their land is the aging population of the village. Households without anybody to take over family farming are potential targets of buyers.

To the villagers, the model case of rural tourism development is the Royal Project-related Doi Moncham Resort, several kilometers from the village. The resort's brilliant white accommodations on a hill ridge can be seen from the village. Some villagers also have invested in this sector in the village, such as campsites and homestays. As for the interviewed family, they opened a mini supermarket a few years ago with a rich assortment of products and refrigeration facilities alongside the village's main road. Unlike semi-open grocery stores typical in rural areas, their shop is clean, tiled, and bright like an urban convenience store, making it comfortable for tourists from cities.

The village head says the village considers it a priority development plan to meet the current demands for the services industry and tourism. However, it is also a worry that the village's geographical characteristics would prevent the plan from being fulfilled as the villagers expected. One characteristic is that there are state-conserved forests that the villagers alone cannot decide to develop. Another is that the village's main road cannot effectively connect to other centers. These characteristics will likely limit the development of services along the line.

Future Risks

Let us now turn our attention to future risks facing the villagers. The first concerns are related to the present capital-intensive, equipment-intensive model of agriculture in the village. This highly intensive form of production is lucrative but brings the high risk of sudden or gradual damage. An example of such sudden damage comes from natural disasters. In the 2024 rainy season, the village suffered from heavy rains and whirlwinds. Winds badly damaged greenhouses, and landslides occurred on slopes. According to the wife of the first generation of the interviewed household, natural disasters seem more concentrated in time and location and are more hazardous these days.

Another example of sudden damage comes from the decline in urban demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the early 2020s, the lockdown in big cities like Bangkok dramatically reduced vegetable demand. As for the interviewed household, there was no demand for paprikas for two consecutive years. One way to address these sudden risks is by establishing stable income resources. For the household interviewed, the grocery store is such a choice. The interviewed wife realizes the role of the shop in their family's budget. The budget for farming operations seems to be separated from the daily life budget, which is usually covered by income from the store.

On the other hand, gradual risk is related to crop science and water resources. The cultivation methods used in greenhouses and hydroponics are examples of modular farming. They are isolated from the natural environment outside as much as possible. For paprika cultivation, for example, farmers plant them in pots with disposable palm shells and carefully prevent pests from entering the greenhouses. Despite these efforts, the interviewed wife explained that there has been a decline in production over the years. Water supply is also a concern of the villagers. The wife pointed out there have been water shortages in the dry season compared to previous years. As a response, her household built a piped well to ensure water for their paprika cultivation. The village head is also concerned about the water shortage due to increased demand from the service sector and tourism development.

The second risk is the land issue. As in other areas of Thailand, state-conserved forests generate conflicts over issuing land titles for rural residents (Forsyth and Walker 2008: 37-50). Moreover, in the



FIG. 1.4 Greenhouse tomatoes

Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2023

surveyed village, the emergence of newcomers who purchase land has caused a surge in land prices. The village head mentions that land prices nowadays are beyond the reach of ordinary villagers. The interviewed wife says she felt relieved as her family had bought land in the village to expand their farming before the prices surged. She says that the current land prices make farming investment difficult. Although foreigners, such as Tai-yai non-locals, can't purchase land because of Thai law, there is no way to prevent villagers from selling their land to Thai newcomers. Such newcomers, who are more affluent than villagers in many cases, are seen by villagers as both opportunities and risks.

Regarding land issues in other areas, a Singhanetra-Renard's study (1999) shows the more devastating impact of rural development. Her research site is also in Mae Rim district but much nearer to the Chiang Mai city area. Massive land buying began there due to land development and tourist-related enterprises in the mid-1980s. Due to demographic pressure over the years, most villagers owned only small plots that were inefficiently farmed, and many sold their rice fields when the land prices rose rapidly. In this village, rural development excluded villagers from using agricultural resources in their village, resulting in villagers seeking non-agrarian jobs in the newly established service sector or outside the village. In contrast, the surveyed village in this chapter benefited from the economic boom from the mid-1980s. However, current land purchases in the village can prevent villagers from investing in or using farming land in the future.

The third and last risk mentioned here is related to the status of non-local workers. As mentioned above, agricultural accumulation partly depends on migrant workers. The present national legal system allows the village to control the influx of migrants and prioritize Thai villagers' benefits. Owing to international concern about human rights, however, in seeking resolutions to address longstanding citizenship and residency issues of migrants and ethnic minorities, the Thai government approved a policy to grant Thai citizenship to over 483,000 people (*Bangkok Post* 2024). This policy includes the same right to land and property ownership as Thais. This policy may change the socio-political relationship between Thai villagers and non-local migrants. To Thai villagers, the situation may create potential competitors, who are said by villagers to be more hardworking than Thai people.

Epilogue

This chapter roughly depicted more than 40 years of rural transition in the village surveyed through the life history of the interviewed household. Focusing on opportunities that have emerged in rural development, we can observe villagers' active response to rural changes. Although rudimentary commercialization had come earlier, the interviewed family benefited from road access and a great wave of commercialization from the mid-1980s and succeeded in accumulating capital.

Compared with the research record of villages in other areas near Chiang Mai city, the surveyed village's advantageous point seems to be its distance from the city center. Although paved roads and motorization usually cause drastic changes in rural society, it won't make geographical factors meaningless. In the case of the village surveyed, significant change was seen, while keeping resources within the villagers' reach and helping them exploit opportunities. This point resonates with Windle's discussion mentioned in the introduction part of this paper. She concludes, "[W]here households retained control over their natural resources, new roads opened up new economic development opportunities that did not impinge on the sustainability of their livelihood system (Windle 2002: 833)."

On the other hand, land purchasing by wealthy urban residents after COVID-19 laid the grounds for the introduction of new technologies and the resulting social changes, such as digesting information from the internet and remote working through web conference systems, which help to overcome the physical constraints that kept rural society in its safety zone. While information technology also benefits the villagers, it may lead to future conflict between the villagers and newcomers over village resources.

Many rural areas in Southeast Asian countries have experienced de-agrarianization and what I have termed the second generation have received higher levels of education. As for the interviewed family in this chapter, the de-agrarianization process may continue in the next third generation if they receive more educational investment from their parents. It depends on whether rural changes can preserve rural resources that are favorable for them to be able to utilize for household capital accumulation.

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