



Takashi Tomosugi. *Changing Features of a Rice-Growing Village in Central Thailand: A Fixed-Point Study from 1967 to 1993*. Tokyo: The Center for East Asian Cultural Studies for Unesco, The Toyo Bunko, 1995, 124p.

This book presents observations of the changes in village life in Central Thailand from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, a period of great economic transformation in the country. The book contains 100 photos, each of which has a short explanation. When I was going through it, I felt as if I was watching a slide show accompanied by a crisp narration in a dark room. The story begins in 1967 when the author visited the village Tonyang (a pseudonym), situated 24 kilometers from Singburi (130 kilometers from Bangkok). Then the author describes change in the following two decades. The book is generally easy to read and gives microscopic views of village life and its change, which cannot be obtained from the literature on national issues.

The major strength of the book lies in its objective description of socio-economic change in a Thai village. This book contains none of the dogmatic denunciation of market forces that is often presented by leftists, who argue that market forces are the instruments with which the strong exploit the weak. The author shows that the peasants are not as vulnerable as leftists argue. For example, the peasants do not necessarily have to borrow money from traders at usurious interest rates, since they can borrow up to 30,000 baht from the agricultural cooperative at 12.5 percent interest per year. Nor are they easily cheated by traders because they are well informed about prices through the mass media (p.66). The author also gives profiles of many peasants who

have successfully adjusted to market forces and improved their lives (chapters 7 and 8). Since the market economy has benefited the villagers, the author states: "The idea of development has been so eagerly accepted that it is a kind of a target for all to attain by any means" (p.99).

Nor does the author deplore the effects of the market economy on village life. He shows how villagers' beliefs and way of life are changing with the spread of the market economy. For example, they do not gather at the temple as often as they used to because many people do not live in the village any more and come back only for certain occasions; they do not often get together in the evening any more, since they watch TV at home; they do not much believe in spirits (*phi*) any more since the lighting of the village with fluorescent lamps has reduced the area of darkness at night where spirits were believed to be lurking; nor do they believe much in the deities related to rice growing (such as *mae phosop*), because chemical fertilizers are more effective (pp. 97-99). Economic development (increased income and electrification) changed the traditional village life and brought about new problems, but the villagers are "creating" a new life by combining the new (e.g., TV and other household electric appliances) with the old (e.g., Buddhist beliefs).

There are a couple of ambiguous terms which are used repeatedly in the book: they are "periodic market" and "substantive economy." For the Japanese, the former can be understood as the English translation of *teikiichi*, but a market held at a specified time and place is normally called a "fair" in English. The author does use the term "fair" for a gathering at a temple which is accompanied by entertainments (e.g., p.42). This is a correct meaning of "fair," but it is not the only meaning. The author may be using the term "periodic market" for a gathering for the buying and selling of goods only, but I wonder whether this is an acceptable usage. The second term is

used in contrast with "market economy." Normally the term "subsistence economy" is used, but if the author is following Fernand Braudel's French term, it should be translated as "the material economy." (See Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, 3 vols., New York, Harper & Row, 1981-84.)

Chapter 5, entitled "Recent Economic Change," is confusing because of the word "recent." Consider, for example, the leading sentence of the chapter: "There has been a considerable amount of economic change in Tonyang since my first visit in 1967." Since the sentence is written in the present perfect, I thought first that the author is discussing the change up to the mid-1990s, but, as I went on reading, I began to doubt it. Then, I remembered the author saying in the Preface that Part I, which includes Chapter 5, is a reproduction of one of the chapters in the book he published in 1980. So, I went back to the Preface, but could not clear my doubt since the author says that it was reproduced "with many revisions" and that "the description, written in the present tense in Part I, actually signifies the past twenty years." Having read this part, I wondered whether the change he discusses in Chapter 5 "signifies the past 20 years." But as I read Part II, I found that changes in the 1980s are not included in Chapter 5. The word "recent" in Chapter 5 then must refer to the period roughly from 1967 to 1980. So, a better title for the chapter would be Economic Change, 1967-1980. But with this change, the author cannot use the present perfect tense; he has to change it to the past tense. This in turn requires the author to reconsider the use of the present tense in the preceding chapters in Part I. After all, we are reading the book in the mid-1990s.

There are some problems when the author puts his observations in a wider perspective. For example, on p.106, the leading sentence of a section reads: "The economic development at

present was triggered by a radical introduction of foreign capital under the Sarit regime, but the road to it was already paved by the formation of nation-wide commercial networks." If the author means that without commercial development before Sarit, the Thai economy would not have progressed as it did after Sarit, he is completely right, but it is so obvious that he does not have to say it or, if he feels strongly that he has to say it, he should say it in a way which does not give rise to another interpretation (for example, "... but one should keep in mind as its precondition the existence of nation-wide commercial networks formed in the pre-Sarit period."). But if he means that the development after Sarit would have taken place without Sarit, he is wrong, or needs to defend his claim, because it is not a widely accepted thesis. The issue here is how to interpret the role of political leadership in economic development — an issue which is beyond the scope of a village study. The section headed by the sentence quoted above is an interesting one: the author argues that commercial networks have extended with the spread of temples where fairs were held. But the leading sentence disturbed me a little since it can be interpreted in the second sense.

Consider another problem the author examines. In the section on the transformation of peasants to wage workers starting on p.99, he discusses a few factors which explain why the transformation came about. But my reaction is why it is an interesting problem to analyze. Hasn't such transformation taken place in many other countries? When I was going through this part, I felt that a more interesting question is why Thai peasants now handle rice cultivation "like a modern business"(p.65). "A village farmer contracts out nearly all aspects of cultivation to some laborers. The relationship between farmers and laborers is mainly stipulated in terms of money, not by traditional intimacy"(p.65). The author may

argue that this can be explained by the scarcity of labor (he says that “only the elderly and children are left in the villages,” and that laborers come to the village by motorcycle from nearby villages), but is that all there is to it? In contrast with peasants in other countries, Thai peasants seem to be rational in the sense that they sell or lease their land as if it were a commercial asset when rice cultivation ceases to be financially attractive. More broadly, I was perplexed by the ease with which the money economy penetrated the village. I wish the author had explored this problem further. The transformation of peasants to laborers and some other issues the author discusses in the concluding chapter seem to be of limited interest.

In 1992 I reviewed in this journal Benedict Kerkvliet's *Everyday Politics in the Philippines: Class and Status Relations in a Central Luzon Village*. As one can see from the word “class” in

the subtitle, the author's focus is on the poor working of the market economy in his Philippine village. Although he may be ideologically inclined against the market economy, he seems to be right in saying that the market economy has not raised the living standard of the villagers. Many people who studied such villages in Southeast Asia or other developing areas attributed underdevelopment to the market economy, but Tomosugi gives an entirely different picture. The problem of underdevelopment seems to arise from the institutions which hinder the working of the market economy — a thesis which has been gaining popularity in the literature on economic development. Tomosugi's book shows the efficacy of the market economy when it is not much constrained, but it is a disturbing finding for those who have been denouncing the market economy.

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