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From Poor Peasants to Entrepreneurial Farmers: The Transformation of Rural Life in Northeast Thailand

A. TERRY RAMBO

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About the Author

A. Terry Rambo is a professor in the Program on System Approaches in Agriculture, Faculty of Agriculture, Khon Kaen University, Thailand, and an adjunct senior fellow at the East-West Center. Trained as an anthropologist, he has done fieldwork in Central America, Malaysia, and Vietnam. He made his first visit to Northeast Thailand in 1979 and has lived in Khon Kaen since 2004.

He can be reached at: trryrambo@yahoo.com

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INTRODUCTION Over the past 30 years, a transformation has occurred in the lives of the people of Northeast Thailand (Isan), and of many rural areas in East and Southeast Asia. Historically regarded (and even derided) as “simple peasants,” concerned only with growing enough food to feed themselves, they have embraced the marketplace and thrived, setting off a cascade of changes, including increased education, and feeding aspirations. Agricultural advances allowed a shift from subsistence to entrepreneurial farming, and off-farm employment has become more common. These transitions have been accompanied by a shift from a village-centric social system to a more broadly connected social network. The resulting changes have dramatically altered the social fabric, including demography, social organization, culture, health, education, and employment, as well as aspirations and identity. The transformation is still in progress, but given the willingness of the Isan people to embrace change, the increasing globalization of the region can be expected to continue.

From 2005 to 2014, when a military coup brought all political activity to a halt, Bangkok was kept in near-constant turmoil by massive street demonstrations that pitted the mostly agricultural population of the Northeastern Region (commonly called *Isan*) against the governing elite and the urban middle class. On one side of the barricades were the red-shirted supporters of populist prime ministers Thaksin Shinawatra (who was ousted by a coup in 2006) and his sister Yingluck (who was overthrown by the army in 2014), many of whom were farmers from the Northeast. On the other side were their yellow-shirted middle-class opponents from the capital city. Although the Red Shirts asserted that they were defending popular democracy, and the Yellow Shirts proclaimed their loyalty to the King and distaste for Thaksin's corruption, the real struggle was as much over regional, class, and cultural identity as it was differences in political ideology. At stake was the allocation of power and prestige in Thai society, which had traditionally privileged urban over rural, rich over poor, and the Central Region over the rest of the country. The predominantly rural people of Isan felt particularly aggrieved by their long-standing social and cultural subordination to Bangkok. They had appeared to be politically passive peasants for a long time, but that was clearly no longer the case.

The Northeastern Region covers one-third of the Kingdom's land area and is home to 22 million people, who constitute one-third of Thailand's total population. The mostly Lao-speaking inhabitants have historically been subsistence-oriented rice farmers, characterized by Thai elites as poor and unsophisticated, ignorant peasants who sold their votes to the highest bidder because they lacked the education and values needed to be good citizens.

In fact, however, the Isan villagers have never been the "simple peasants" conceived of in the elite imagination. Today their life as farmers is even more removed from that persistent historical stereotype, due to a process of very rapid change, one that has broadened their economic base and provided greater profits and increased social mobility. This process is referred to by social scientists as an "agrarian

transformation." It involves a major restructuring of agriculture from subsistence-oriented to market-oriented. It also involves changes in all aspects of rural life, including technology, economics, social relations, and cultural values.

Despite the magnitude of these changes, however, the perceptions of the region held by policymakers, the mass media, and the urban public in Thailand have lagged behind changes on the ground¹ so that many still conceptualize the situation of the rural Northeast according to an outmoded model ("the conventional model") that depicts the region as it was before it entered into a period of very rapid development beginning in the late 1980s.

According to this conventional view, the rural Isan people are poor, uneducated, and ignorant, insultingly referred to as "khwai" (buffalo) by some urbanites.² In this view, the Isan farmers live their lives within the confines of their native villages, with their time horizon limited to the next crop and their only aspiration for the future being to produce sufficient rice to keep their families alive. It is true that Northeast Thailand is a relatively poor region because its rain-fed rice farming is so unproductive. Yields are low and unstable due to the poor resource base (infertile sandy soils, very limited availability of surface water) and unfavorable environmental conditions (limited and erratic rainfall).

Despite these severe constraints, people in rural areas of the region have survived by employing time-tested environmental adaptations, especially reliance on a "diversified livelihood portfolio."³ This adaptation minimizes risk by avoiding over-reliance on any single source of income. This portfolio includes low input (limited labor and capital) subsistence-oriented production of sticky (glutinous) rice to meet household needs, growing of upland crops (such as cassava and sugarcane) to earn cash income, heavy reliance on wild resources that can be collected from fields, forests, and streams, out-migration to find new sources of income by working outside the region, and reliance in times of scarcity on a local safety net based on kinsfolk and fellow villagers.

Isan villagers have never been the 'simple peasants' conceived of in the elite imagination

The 'conventional' model of life in the Northeast has given way to the 'transformational' model

The rural social system associated with the conventional model was characterized by a relatively high degree of egalitarianism, with little economic differentiation among households, low educational levels, limited integration into the larger national social and economic systems, and high levels of community solidarity.

Although the conventional model was a useful framework for understanding the Northeast until the end of the 1980s, the situation has changed so profoundly since then that it no longer reflects reality and a new "transformational" model has emerged. Adoption of a high-quality glutinous rice known as RD6, combined with mechanization and small-scale supplementary irrigation has largely solved the problem of rural food security while allowing farmers to plant a larger share of their land to jasmine rice, which is raised as a cash crop, providing rural households with a new source of income. Sale of jasmine rice to the market is now the largest single source of agricultural income of farm households.⁴

Agricultural intensification, diversification, and specialization have occurred to an extent unimaginable a few years ago. Relying on remittances sent back to their families by migrant workers as well as cash earned by engaging in off-farm employment in new factories and service jobs in local urban centers, Isan farmers have been rapidly adopting modern agricultural technology. Households continue to rely on a diversified livelihood portfolio. However, it is increasingly based on production of high-value cash crops and livestock, with increased dependence on off-farm employment as the main source of income. There is also a growing dependence on social networks extending far beyond the boundaries of the villages, with connections outside the villages and government assistance providing a safety net to replace the weakened village solidarity.⁵ The rural social system is also changing, with declining rates of poverty, increasing levels of economic differentiation, improving levels of education, declining community solidarity, and ever-deepening integration with national and global social and economic systems.⁶

The agrarian transformation is deeply affecting every dimension of rural existence, including

demography (out-migration, declining fertility, population aging), social organization (increased economic stratification, emergence of new types of household structures, expansion of external social networks, and weakening of village solidarity), culture (erosion of indigenous knowledge, adoption of cosmopolitan cultural patterns), health (increased prevalence of obesity and diabetes, drug addiction and alcoholism), education (increased number of years of mandatory schooling, increased valuation of education as a route to upward mobility), employment (scarcity of agricultural labor, off-farm employment as a main source of income), to mention only some of the most evident types of change.

Changes in Agricultural Technology

In recent years, Northeastern Thai farmers have adopted new technologies at an ever-accelerating rate. Motorized two-wheeled hand tillers displaced buffalo for plowing in the 1990s and are now, in turn, being displaced by four-wheeled tractors. Mechanical threshing machines and combine harvesters are widely used. New improved rice varieties, notably RD6 and KDM105, have replaced thousands of traditional local varieties, while the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has greatly increased. So it is evident that Isan farmers are not innately conservative or resistant to change.

For example, it had long been assumed that mechanization of rain-fed rice farming in the Northeast was unlikely to occur very fast or proceed very far. Adoption of modern machinery was constrained by the subsistence orientation, low productivity, and cheap labor that characterized rain-fed rice farming. In recent years, however, spurred by the growing shortage of agricultural labor, mechanization of rice agriculture has been occurring at an ever-accelerating rate.

A number of interacting factors appear to be driving the process of mechanization, including a shift from production of sticky rice for home consumption to production of non-sticky rice for market; the out-migration of workers seeking jobs in urban centers and the movement of rural laborers

Table 1: “Conventional” and “transformational” models of the agricultural system of Northeast Thailand

	Conventional Model (1980s-early 1990s)	Transformational Model (mid-1990s-present)
Mode of Production		
<i>Type of agricultural system</i>	Survival-oriented “peasant” agriculture	Profit-oriented “semi-capitalist” agriculture
<i>Objectives of production</i>	Production of glutinous rice for household consumption with supplementary production of cash crops	Production of cash crops, including non-glutinous rice, for market with production of glutinous rice for household consumption
<i>Household adaptive strategy</i>	Reliance on a diversified portfolio of primarily local sources of income	Increasing reliance on specialized sources of income, both local and extra-local with more than half of household income from off-farm sources
Productive Technology		
<i>Type of agricultural technology</i>	Traditional technology with some use of modern technology	Mostly modern technology
<i>Mechanization</i>	Two-wheeled hand tillers replacing buffalo-drawn plows	Four-wheeled tractors, combine harvesters, water pumps, pickup trucks
<i>Rice varieties</i>	Many different local varieties adapted to specific conditions in different types of fields.	RD6 and KDHM105 are dominant varieties
<i>Chemicals</i>	Limited use of chemical fertilizer	Heavy use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides
Livelihood System		
<i>Rainfed rice</i>	Low and unstable yields, traditional glutinous varieties, limited use of chemical fertilizer, hand tillers used for plowing	Higher and more stable yields, improved glutinous and non-glutinous varieties, increased use of chemical fertilizer and pesticides, mechanization of all steps of cultivation, supplementary irrigation
<i>Cash crops</i>	Low value kenaf and cassava in upland fields	High value sugarcane, rubber, and specialty crops in upland fields, gardens, and upper paddy fields
<i>Wild products</i>	Heavy reliance on edible wild plants and animals collected from forest, water bodies, and fields	Decreased reliance on wild products; specialization in collection for urban markets
<i>Local off-farm employment</i>	Very limited	More than half of household income obtained from off-farm sources
<i>Extra-local off-farm employment</i>	Short-term circular migrants bring back savings to improve living standard of rural households	Long-term migrants send back remittances to help support rural households and invest in agricultural production
<i>Emergency welfare assistance</i>	Reliance on help from kindred and neighbors in village	Reliance on help from extended extra-local social networks and government agencies
Social System		
<i>Demography</i>	Young population with low dependency ratio	Aging population with high dependency ratio
<i>Family structure</i>	Nuclear households are dominant form	An increased number of skipped generation and truncated households
<i>Cultural values</i>	Shared poverty within village community. Limited aspirations for upward social mobility. Low value placed on formal education. Children expected to become farmers like parents	Individualistic struggle for wealth. Greatly expanded aspirations for upward mobility with formal education of children seen as main means for improving status. Children expected to obtain jobs in urban centers
<i>Equitability</i>	Relatively little economic differentiation among households. Most households own sufficient land to meet subsistence needs.	Increasing economic differentiation with a few wealthy households owning large land areas and the majority of poorer households having insufficient land to meet needs
<i>Solidarity</i>	Numerous local-level institutions (temple, formal and informal social groups, labor exchanges, food-sharing with kin and neighbors) bind village households together	Declining role of local-level integrative institutions and growing importance of incorporation of individual households into extra-local social networks
<i>Autonomy</i>	Households capable of meeting most subsistence needs from local resource base with limited dependency on inputs from extra-local sources	Households heavily dependent on extra-local sources of income, production inputs, and information

into local non-agricultural employment with a consequent sharp decline in the size of the agricultural labor pool and a steep rise in wages paid for farm work; the decline in use of labor exchange arrangements among neighbors; and the increased access of farm households to capital due to cash remittances received from members engaged in off-farm employment.

Many village households have also invested in purchasing motor vehicles. Motorbikes have become virtually a necessity of life in the countryside, and wealthier households often own pick-up trucks, which they use for personal transportation and also to earn income by hauling their neighbors' crops to market.

Social System Changes

Changes in agricultural technology and practices have been accompanied by multiple changes in the rural social system, including human health, the nature of rural-urban interactions, the distribution of age groups within the population, household composition and livelihood systems, community social organization, and cultural values, aspirations, and sense of identity.

Traditional Versus Modern Health Problems.

The rural population in the Northeast is in the midst of an "epidemiological transition" in which traditional diseases and health problems such as malnutrition, anemia, and goiter are declining but modern diseases and health problems including obesity, type II diabetes, AIDS, alcoholism and drug addiction, and traffic deaths and injuries are rapidly increasing.

While malnutrition and the prevalence of underweight and stunted children have greatly declined over the past 20 years, recent changes in diet and lifestyle have led to an explosion of obesity. A diet that formerly contained only small amounts of fats and sugars has been transformed by greatly increased consumption of "fast foods." Village shops sell many high-calorie packaged snacks and soft drinks. At the same time as calorie consumption is rising, human energy expenditure in farming is declining as machines replace human muscle power. Instead of walking, villagers use motorbikes to visit neighbors'

houses, even those located close by. Children spend much more time sitting in school and less time helping their parents doing chores than in the past. Associated with the increase in the number of overweight people is a rapid increase in the incidence of diabetes mellitus. The Northeast now has one of the highest rates of type II diabetes in the world.⁷

Changes in the Nature of Rural-Urban Interactions.

Tighter integration of rural villages into larger economic and social systems has led to a form of "rural urbanization," in which many goods and services that were formerly only available in large cities are now readily accessible in villages. Mobile telephone service is available everywhere except in the remote mountains, and almost every villager in Isan has a mobile phone.

At the same time as their villages are becoming urbanized, rural people are developing closer relations with regional cities, which play an ever-increasing role in their lives. Until very recently, cities in the Northeast were quite small and had a relatively limited influence on agricultural activity in their hinterlands. In recent years, however, growth of urban populations and expansion of urban settlements into the surrounding countryside has been very rapid. Urban sprawl is exerting especially high pressure for change on agricultural systems in the peri-urban zone of transition between the cities and the countryside, where suburban housing estates compete with farms for land. Expansion of the area of urban settlement is pushing up the value of agricultural land in the peri-urban zone, leading many farmers to sell their land to developers for quick profits. Some invest this capital in buying land further away from the city where they continue farming but others spend the windfall on immediate consumption and end up as landless laborers. The growth of the urban market also creates new opportunities for those peri-urban farmers who are able to shift from growing rice to the production of high-value specialty crops (e.g., organic vegetables, flowers, and dairy products) desired by affluent city people. Access to urban employment opportunities is facilitating development of what might be called

The Northeast has one of the highest rates of type II diabetes in the world

“weekend farmers,” i.e., rural people who work in urban jobs on weekdays but carry out agricultural activities in the evenings and on holidays.

Population, Household Composition, and Livelihoods. The rate of population growth has slowed while average life expectancy has been greatly extended from about 50 years in the 1960s to over 70 years in the 2000s. The population is aging, with the share of children and young adults declining and the share of those over 60 growing. In the Northeast, the effects of changes in fertility and mortality on the distribution of age groups within the population are accentuated by the high rate of out-migration as young adults move to Bangkok in search of employment opportunities. One major consequence of these demographic changes is that rural households are much smaller than previously. There are growing numbers of households composed only of grandparents and grandchildren and those made up only by an elderly couple or a solitary widow or widower.

Accompanying these changes in household composition are profound changes in sources of household income, including a growing share of income from non-agricultural sources. For the region as a whole, more than half of rural household income now comes from non-agricultural sources.

Changes in Community Social Organization. Until the 1980s, Northeastern rural villages were relatively cohesive communities with shared values, limited economic differences among households, and a high level of solidarity based on kinship ties and participation in community social activities, often centered on the temple. In recent years, however, village solidarity has markedly declined. Exchange labor has virtually disappeared, with farmers relying exclusively on hired workers to assist them at peak periods in the rice production cycle. Village households increasingly depend for social support on government assistance and their own extended family networks and rely much less on assistance from neighbors or village welfare institutions. One major social change that may contribute to the decline in community solidarity is the increasing tendency for

households to move out of densely populated villages to live independently on their own farmsteads, where they are physically quite isolated from neighbors.

Cultural Values, Aspirations, and Sense of Identity. The prevalent image of Isan people in the Thai mass media is of tradition-bound and village-centered peasants having only very limited involvement with or knowledge of the larger world,⁸ the Isan equivalent of the American “hillbilly” stereotype. This image is almost the opposite of reality. Rural people in Isan may well be the most dynamic and receptive to change of any people in the Kingdom.⁹ Although often referred to as “peasants,” the people of Isan were never fully incorporated into the absolutist Siamese feudal system. Instead, until the administrative reforms of the 1890s, they lived in relatively autonomous villages that were under the rule of local chiefs with very limited coercive power to control the lives of their rural subjects.¹⁰ Consequently, Isan villagers never developed the “dog-eat-dog” competition for resources among individuals and families typical of peasants in highly developed feudal societies, neither was individual initiative suppressed by communal pressure for conformity as it was in these societies.

Since the 1970s, they have eagerly embraced globalization, both by finding employment in export-oriented factories in Bangkok and on the east coast of Thailand and by migrating in large numbers to live and work abroad. Many Isan laborers are employed in construction, agriculture, and factory work in the Middle East, Taiwan, and South Korea. Many Isan village women have married foreign husbands and live abroad with their spouses, who are mostly Western Europeans and Americans. These women send a steady stream of remittances back to their families in the villages. In many cases, the foreign husbands have moved to reside in their wives’ home villages. No official data are available on the numbers of foreigners involved, but almost every village now has at least one foreigner in residence. Although many in the Thai elite view women who marry foreigners as being little better than prostitutes who are immoral seekers after material wealth (although they are also sometimes presented as naive victims of

The image of Isan people as equivalent to the American ‘hillbilly’ stereotype is almost the opposite of reality

neocolonialist sex trafficking), an alternative view is that these women, who are often widows or divorcees with little chance of finding a Thai husband,¹¹ have found an innovative way to expand the diversified portfolios of their families, by tapping a new source of income.¹²

The underlying character of the Isan people has not changed, and the willingness to take risks to find and exploit new resources is still highly valued. Recently, however, there has been a major shift in the attitude toward education which is reflected in the investment preferences of rural households. Parents used to favor investment in land, hoping to increase their holdings to have a sufficiently large area to be able to give each of their children a farmstead when they became too old to work it themselves. Thus, they tended to pull their children out of school as early as was legally allowed, so they could augment household labor resources. Now, parents prefer to invest in educating their children so that they can obtain non-farm employment in the cities that will allow them to support their elderly parents with remittances. At Khon Kaen University, for example, there are many graduate students from Isan farm families. Their parents, most of whom have only a few years of primary education, definitely do not expect or want them to return to farming after getting their degrees, and they themselves have no desire to do so.

One of the most important recent changes in the culture of Isan villagers is the change in the way they perceive themselves and their place in the world. Although never the servile peasants that many in the urban elite imagine them to be, increased education levels and the experience of participation in mass political movements, first the communist mobilization of villages in the 1960s–1980s, then the organizational work by NGO community development activists in the 1990s, and most recently the Red

Shirt movement and the formation of “Red villages,” have profoundly affected the villagers’ sense of self.¹³ Several professors at Khon Kaen University who have been conducting research in rural areas in Isan since the 1970s have observed that rural people, while still almost always friendly and helpful, no longer treat them with the automatic deference that used to be granted to any educated outsiders visiting their villages. Accompanying this change in sense of self is a new-found pride in being “luuk Isan” (children of the Northeast). Gone are the days when Isan children, going off to Bangkok to pursue higher education, would be cautioned by their parents against speaking Lao in public for fear that they would be ridiculed as country bumpkins. Given these changes, it is hardly surprising that the majority of the core participants in the Red Shirt demonstrations in Bangkok were members of the newly emerging Isan rural middle class¹⁴ who had gained considerable education and become entrepreneurial farmers.

No Turning Back

Because the agrarian transformation of Northeast Thailand is still very much a work in progress it would be foolhardy to try to predict in detail how it will turn out in the future. What is already evident, however, is that the traditional subsistence-oriented agricultural system has largely been replaced by a capitalist market-oriented one that is inextricably linked to the national and global markets, just as the old village-centric social system has been subsumed into a multiplicity of extended networks that tie the Isan villagers ever more closely into the larger world. Barring a catastrophic meltdown of the global system, it can reasonably be expected that the rural people of Northeast Thailand will become ever more deeply integrated into national, regional, and global economic and social systems.

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Parents used to favor investment in land, and now prefer investing in educating their children

Notes

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- ⁸ Keyes 2014, *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Hayao Fukui, pers. comm.
- ¹⁰ Keyes 2014, *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Orathai Piayura, "Thai Women, Cross-cultural Marriage and Sexuality" *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 2 (2012): 156–158.
- ¹² Chai Podhisita, pers. comm.
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Publications Office
East-West Center
1601 East-West Road
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96848-1601
Tel: 808.944.7197
EWBooks@EastWestCenter.org
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