

Chapter 6

Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate claims that the rural Thai peasant family was not a cohesive and discrete unit, with formal organizational principles, in regards to its economic production processes. Theoretical perspectives on peasant economies, posited by economic anthropologists and economists, which argued for the economic cohesion of peasant family units, were supported by Thailand village scholars through meticulously recorded empirical details. Chayanov's theory of the peasant family farm argued that peasant families were completely cooperative units of production and consumption, which increased its rate of self-exploitation when necessary, and as an alternative to capital outlays. The literature on Thailand's peasants revealed populations of family units who formed economic centers of production and consumption.

Through my fieldwork in Chaiyaphum Village, where I interviewed over 40 villagers during a 16 month period (the bulk of which was conducted intensively in 2 months with the aid of an interpreter), I found that the family

was a unit with formal organizational principles guiding its economy. It relied on cooperative family labor to produce the bulk of what it needed to subsist. It was a discrete unit, with membership limited to those contributing to the production process, consuming the bulk of their diets from the unit's work products, and living within the unit as it was or as if it was their own family and home. Family members who broke off into new units, or joined other pre-existing ones, were no longer considered a part of their former family unit. Adult children no longer a part of the natal household were given land to use outright (not to sharecrop), and were entitled to consume products without contributing any portion to their former units. There was, however, a slow transitional period for the new households, with much social and economic support from the natal household, demonstrating stability in social relations within the family, even after transformation and change.

The socio-economy of the family was dominated by the production of rice, which was supported by both family labor and socially based relations in production. Labor division was based on ability and availability. If a member was strong enough and physically available to help (and if production demanded it), they would clear, plow,

plant, seed, harvest, etc. Ego-based friendships with outsiders provided the family with sources of assistance in the fields during peak periods with time constraints.

Kemp's argument disputing this family as a cohesive and formally organized unit of economic production speculated that the state created the family unit, or at least its significance in terms of labor and social power. However, from the time of a population's migration from Wiang Chan to this one, it was a group made of families, working together within their respective family units. Their production and consumption activities were much more discrete than they were communal. While in the earlier periods, kindred families assisted each other more, in order to survive in the wilderness, the central point in production was always the family unit. They migrated not as clusters of individuals but groups of families. Likewise, they claimed, cleared, and operated their land husbandry activities as family units, not communal groups or individuals. Labor inputs and consumption outputs were also based more completely on the family unit, without any input needed from the state to make this delineation.

When the family unit in Chaiyaphum Village, typical of other rural Thai peasant families in Isan, is viewed

in terms of its discretion in membership, the continuity of its social relations beyond immediate circumstances, the family's production and consumption activities, and the extent of impact ego-based relations had on the entire family unit, it can be interpreted that the rural Thai peasant family in Isan as a formal unit of economic organization was a historical reality, and not a seductive mirage.

The Isan Peasant Family Economy Since the 1960's

The 1960's saw a period of intensified national and Western interests in Thailand's "peasant" zones. Isan was particularly affected because of the region's geographical importance in terms of the Vietnam War conflict. The result of these interests was a tremendous expansion of infrastructure and communications. This increased the number of job prospects and possibilities. Prior to this time, it was usually more cost effective to pick up wage work at home, and much less risky.

Starting from the 1960's, increasing numbers of migrants went to these new jobs, but they still sought wages in terms of use values. Wage work, as always, was a supplement to an unreliable and inconsistent agricultural base. These workers were migrant laborers, but they were still peasants, to observe a statement by

Shanin with "one man in town, the rest on the farm". This outstanding demographic feature, of "parts" of families going away to do wage work, defined many aspects of the migrant labor situation during the first several decades subsequent to the 1960's. There were only enough job prospects for some of the family, and families tended to send a daughter, a son, or a husband. These members usually sent home as much money as they could. Expenses for migrants were low because their standard of living was still low. While some indulged in luxury goods, there was still the focus for most on making money to supplement and support agriculture work. They were seasonal, circular, or otherwise temporary wage earners who always returned to agriculture

From the mid-1980's onwards, Thailand experienced enormous economic growth. More job opportunities, and the prospect of "making it rich" encouraged more numbers of peasants to try their luck as migrant laborers. While the earlier streams of migrants went as seasonal, circular, or otherwise temporary workers who were still fundamentally peasants, these newer streams included increasing amounts of semi-permanent and permanent wage workers who only went home for the holidays. Newer migrants, particularly during the past five years, have

sent home decreasing amounts of money. Papers and articles speculate a "breakdown" in the traditional family system. Perhaps that is one of the factors. But I speculate that there are perhaps two other possible explanations: 1. Many newer, younger generation migrants live in Bangkok and other large cities as family units. Couples come together, where as in the past it was mostly single young men or women, and older, married men. Job opportunities have expanded to provide more lucrative (when compared with farm work) employment for both husbands and wives so many decided to come together. As new family units, they as a traditional rule do not regularly contribute to their natal households. Cultural values and the closeness of their relationships with their natal households may encourage them to deliver something, but it is not their domain to have to provide for their former households as they are now a part of a new one. Their children, in cases of those being sent to live with their grandparents, become absorbed into the natal household. The second reason for the decrease in contributions, particularly among those who are still single and should contribute has to do with the increase in purchases of luxury goods, many of which are shared by the family. New televisions, refrigerators, cars,

tractors, motorcycles, as well as fashionable clothing and entertainment are now the targets of these workers. No longer are they simply concerned with use values to provide subsistence and subsistence only, they want a higher standard of living for themselves and their families.

According to the current headman in Chaiyaphum Village, the biggest change in the past forty years, from his perspective, is in the hearts of the people. No longer do they share and help each other. They only help those in their family units. Even kindred members don't help each other as much as they used to. Part of this has to do with the acceptance of wage labor into the community. Younger generations may forge friendships in Bangkok and other cities where they work, but the strong social relations of the community in the past were bound by economic cooperation, a variable no longer present in the village or in the city. In the village, no longer do most people help each other out with harvests through labor exchange; these days help comes with a money exchange.

Perhaps this decline in social cooperation has resulted in a stronger family unit, which must rely more on itself. However, trends suggest that it is not and

will no longer be a cohesive unit of production, even if communal consumption is maintained.

According to Cancian, peasants are distinct from non-peasant ethnic minorities in that they are agriculturally based. Even that "man in town" is a peasant because when the market is unfavorable, he or she can return to agriculture. During the economic crisis that began in 1997, I was able to observe the subsequent actions of dozens of migrant laborers living and working in Bangkok. Their responses to being laid off and to pay-cuts differed along generation lines. Those who were parts of agricultural household units, who were the "one man in town" or one of a few, and were generally at least 35 years old, occasionally went home to work in the fields. These people had already considered themselves temporary, even if they only returned home a few times a year. They were the ones who sent money home more frequently and had a stronger connection to their relations in the village. Younger generations, especially those who considered their family unit to be in Bangkok, but also those who were single, went home only to relax and regroup. They looked for new work in Bangkok and other large cities, never considering for too many moments the prospect of returning to agriculture.

They were too use to receiving monthly wages and working in other sectors. Even those who were vendors continued to sell things in the face of the economic depression, which was perhaps the same logic applied by family farms in the past in response to low market prices (continue, even intensify production). The future of the family economy is not as a peasant one, and perhaps not necessarily in Isan unless the Thai government can increase employment opportunities in the provinces.

Limitations

This study was heavily influenced by the works of economic anthropologists and economists. However, I have not been trained at the graduate level in either discipline and perhaps there were technical flaws in my understanding and application of the materials. The strength of this work was the opportunity to conduct the entire thesis project within Thailand (literature review, field work, and writing) with the assistance of Thai scholars, which I hope was able to balance the flaws in this work.

Future Research Directions

Many Thailand scholars of Isan and the other traditionally "peasant" areas have turned their focus to the present situation of changing communities and

migrating labor. While many of them do refer to the past, and have some picture of what it was, most of these references are sweeping statements and ideas while the answers are in the details. Details about the economic production processes, the approach to the market, the delineation of the family unit, the social relations of production, etc., can explain much about current attitudes and behaviors of present day migrant laborers and their natal families in the village. Understanding the details can reveal more convincingly the connection between the past and present than the sweeping ideals of peaceful, symmetrical communal labor groups dancing and singing in the rice fields coerced into capitalist wage work in the city. More research on migrant laborers should recognize relevant qualities of the past that may contribute to the present.

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