

Chapter 1

Introduction



Peasants make up a quarter of the world's population. They number over one billion people in over one million villages, representing a "distinctive kind of economic situation" (Cancian, 1989: 127), and a "socio-economic category of major global importance" (Clammer, 1985: 135). According to Shanin, peasants are family farmers, whose families form the basic, multidimensional unit of social organization. They practice land husbandry and face social, political, and economic domination by nonpeasant outsiders (1987: 3). This peasant family unit has been the focus of socio-economic inquiry for nearly a century, two early highlights being Chayanov's analysis of the Russian family farm, published in 1925 (Chayanov, 1966) and Arensberg and Kimball's look at Irish family farms in 1937 (Arensberg, 1937; Evans-Pritchard, 1994). Tanabe writes that Shanin's delineation of peasantry and peasant economic systems is applicable to South East Asian villagers, citing that "especially in Thailand, most empirical field studies...have not always grasped the

basic importance of the family farm in cross-cultural and historical perspectives" (1981: 44).

Snit writes that Thailand's peasant population in 1975 numbered 28 million people, a full 70 percent of the national figure (Snit, 1975: 214). Thailand peasantry scholars, through their village-based studies, have amassed a large body of literature, describing the centrality of the peasant family economy. These studies have taken place for almost a half century, with more serious, analytical projects being produced subsequent to the 1973 student-led uprising which challenged both traditional political and academic systems that were previously biased against the peasants.

Despite the evidence of peasant family production units within these studies, Kemp, beginning in 1988, argued that the traditional Thai peasant family system, in historical terms, was not one of political, economic, or social importance, in terms of intrinsic organization and structure. This thesis, then, proposes to investigate Kemp's story, of whether the Thai peasant family, through the literature and as supplemented by field research, was one of, in this case, intrinsic economic importance.

Background of Thai Village Studies

Rigorous Thai peasant village studies have been undertaken by scholars for only a few decades. Before the 1973 student-led uprising, which challenged forces of politics and academics, scholars were officially warned by the state not to conduct work on the life ways and culture of rural populations. Rural people and culture were considered inferior to the central court culture (Chatthip, 1985, public lecture). And while foreign visitors had been keeping detailed logs and presenting descriptive works on peasant life and ways, academic analyses about the family unit and village system were not attempted until the late 1950's (Chayan, 1993: 9).

The state bias

Prior to the 1973 student uprising, which challenged historical and academic traditions, comparatively few Thai scholars looked at the peasantry. This left large gaps in the historical record, which was flooded with material on the official court society. Thai scholars were officially discouraged from recording peasant culture, economics and history. In 1985, Chatthip delivered a public lecture to Tokyo University's economics faculty, where he summarized the biases of the past:

Thai studies in the past were restricted among circles of the royalty and the aristocrats. Thai studies unfortunately lacked the village dimension. The study of Thai society was the study of the royal chronicles, court politics in the past, glorification of court culture, and the state version of Buddhism. (1985: 1)

Chatthip's lecture described scenes of virtual persecution of those who attempted to study local peasant and provincial culture. In some places, local chronicles and histories were destroyed. In the words of Chatthip, the historical record of Thai studies completely omitted "descriptions on the earning for living, everyday life, and opinions and aspirations of the peasants" (Ibid: 2).

Pre-Village Studies of Thailand's Peasants

While most Thai scholars prior to 1973 did not study its peasants, early foreign visitors did, and in great detail. Travelers, Christian missionaries, foreign officers, as well as several high ranking Thai officials, wrote books describing the topography, culture, religion, and economic processes of Thailand's peasant and other rural populations. Notable in this class are the works of missionaries Hallet, published in the 1880's, and Curtis, published in 1903 (Curtis, 1998: ii). In 1920, the Siam Society established a "Subcommittee on Anthropological and Linguistic Research", where it collected data about ethnic groups for publication

(Chayan, 1993: 10). In 1926, foreign advisor, le Mays published his account on Northern Thai history, customs and folklore (1986: ii). During the early 1930's, Zimmerman (1931) and Andrews (1935) published economic surveys of the entire kingdom, with emphasis on rural areas, in order to assist the government with planning (Suthep, 1963: 2). The first trained anthropologist to study Thailand was Hugo Adolf Bernatzik, who also came during the 1930's. Finally, two Thais wrote about the nation's rural populations, specifically Prince Damrong Rajanupham, during the end of the 1800's and early 1900's, and Prince Rangsit Sanidh, who published in German journals in the 1940's (Chayan, 1993: 11).

These studies appeared before the time of "village studies". Its writers presented descriptions about life ways, production figures based on household units and provincial units, religion, social values, and customs. For example, Curtis's missionary logs report in painstaking detail the nature of the topography, production activities, social affairs, and spirituality amongst the populations, with no village unit as a center present (Curtis, 1998).

Five Decades of Village Studies

These pioneers of Thailand's peasant studies were followed by decades of village studies, all occurring since World War Two. Fordham explains the reason for the sudden increase in interest in Thailand's peasants:

This was a period of decolonisation in the colonised South-East Asian states; it saw the rise of the Vietnam War and increasing fears regarding the spread of communist influence throughout South-East Asia. As a result the efforts of many social scientists were directed to this area and to the raising of living standards of the peasantry in order to quell potential social unrest. However, due to social disruption in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia caused by the Vietnam War, and a closed door policy on the part of the Burmese government since the 1960's, most research on the South-East Asian peasantry has been carried out in Thailand. (n.d.: 3)

Chayan describes US research initiatives in Thailand:

The [Thai] military was following the policy of anti-communism led by the US, who generously poured military and technical assistance into Thailand. Such assistance included research grants and facilities such as the Advanced Research Project Agency, which aimed mainly to collect information for counter-insurgency purposes. In 1964, the Tribal Research Centre was established to collect information about the hilltribes who were then regarded as a potential threat to national security. During this time, then, Thailand attracted, among others, American advisers, Peace Corps Volunteers and anthropologists. Keyes notes that, during this period, there was a large number of research grants given to those who conducted community studies, both lowland and upland, in Thailand. However, the number decreased drastically when the Vietnam war ended. (1993: 13)

Chayan identifies five major approaches to village studies since World War Two. They are: 1) the Loose-Structure Village Study; 2) Critique of the Loose-Structure Model; 3) The Economic and Social History Approach; 4) The Political Economy Approach; 5) Development Workers' Village Study Model (1993: 9-10).

The first two approaches, the loose-structure model and the critique of the loose-structure model, both emphasized the strength of a corporate village entity. The loose-structure model was hallmarked by the Cornell-Thailand Project, which focused on Bang Chan near Bangkok. It was here that the village community study was born, with researchers later conceding that they approached their village study sites "expecting to find an 'organized village'" (Ibid: 11). Prominent scholars of the approach include Embree, Sharp, Hanks, and de Young. Kaufman's Bangkhud work could also be represented under this approach (Suthep, 1962: 2). The second approach, the opponents to the loose-structure orientation, led by Potter, actually strengthened the concept of the village community proposed by the original orientation, through their argument that the village was a "highly structured society" (Chayan, 1993: 14). Chayan writes that in addition to this, Potter even used the

same structural-functional analysis to present the village community as an isolated unit (Ibid: 15).

The third and fourth approaches, namely Economic and Social History, and Political Economy, while different in their points of analysis, were the first approaches to include a predominant number of Thai scholars (Ibid: 18). Both developed after the 1973 student-led uprisings, which challenged both political forces and those of academic scholarship (Thongchai, 1997: 11). Thongchai writes that Thai scholars of local political economy, from both approaches, have adopted and modified "various kinds of Marxism, social science theories, and Western critical theories (Ibid). In 1978, the first seminar on local history and culture took place in Nakorn Sri Thammarat. Prominent Thai scholars led the interest in the peasantry, and include M.R. Akin Rabibhadana, Anan Ganjanapan, Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, and Srisaka Vallibhotama. They were followed by scholars in provincial teacher's colleges. Collectively, they attempted to increase the relevance of village studies in Thai studies (Chatthip, 1985: 5).

Chatthip and Suthy founded a Political Economy school (distinct from the Political Economy Approach). This school's thoughts make up the bulk of the Economic

and Social History Approach. Through studies of the evolution of village economies, scholars attempted macro-level analyses of the village political economies, including issues like "village relative autonomy" and "village cohesiveness". This school, however, attempted to place the village within a larger rural context (Chayan, 1993: 16). The Political Economy Approach also attempted to put the village into context, of which works by Turton dominated.

Chatthip's interests in village economy inspired anthropological interest in "Village History". Chayan describes its objectives:

The main concern of these anthropologists of Thai village community rests not on certain world views that are unique to Thai culture manifested at an individual level...but the social relations that bind villagers as well as outsiders together...The social relations approach implies two other things. First, it suggests that there are complexities and differentiation involved...Second, there are levels of articulation that play a part in shaping social relations: between individuals who participate in relations of production, between individuals, village and state (Hirsch 1989), or between village and village in the network of exchange. Thus, the village community is not a territorial/administrative boundary, but a social space where social relations take place and whose boundary can shift according to the nature of social relations. (Ibid: 18)

These new approaches were improvements on the earlier village studies of the loose-structure and critique of the loose-structure models. However, when

Kemp's Criticism of Village Studies

While much has been learned by these village studies, according to Kemp, several problems persist. In his 1988 work "Seductive Mirage", Kemp challenges previously interpretations by village unit studies, because he feels there is no cause to identify the historical village as no more than a state creation. Additionally, he writes that the historical family unit, presented in village studies as a significant unit of production and organization, is no more than a theoretical misinterpretation of the empirical reality. In other words, the family unit, like the village unit, was not an essential cell of the communities.

In his first argument, Kemp writes that the social theory used in these decades of village studies have misled the way scholars study the Thailand's peasants (1988: 2). He writes that the family and its kindred, these "constituent parts" that make up the "so-called village", are not discrete and internally solid groups. The family is a collection of individuals with a minimally authoritative head. Ownership of the house and land are vested in individuals, not households (Ibid: 16). One of Kemp's arguments is that the household did not operate as a unit of taxation. In his own words:

The rolls kept by government for the extraction of labour or goods contained the names of individuals, not families or households. (Ibid: 32)

Once the founders of this household die, the household no longer exists (Ibid: 16).

The Thai peasant family is then compared to the Japanese, which Kemp remarks is, by contrast, a permanent landholding corporation, that affects the inheritance system and many features of family life and village life (Ibid). Quoting Maeda, he argues that the Japanese family is a "definite fixed group or corporation" because:

...Every Japanese belongs to only one family group with no overlapping of membership. A wife loses membership in her natal family group, at least ideally, although she may retain personal relationships with her parents. Moreover, there is a clear demarcation between family members and relatives. 'My family' is not 'my relatives.' (Ibid: 17)

Thai peasant families, on the other hand, are ego-centered units of individuals (Ibid: 17). The kindred is not a solid, cohesive force of mobilization and exchange. Mobilization and exchange come instead, with wealth and distance (Ibid: 15). The gist of Kemp's debate on the Thai peasant household is this:

Households can be, and often are, socially, economically and politically important, but this is not because of some formal organizational principle but because of the numbers, wealth and prestige of those living with them. Like the other examples

discussed above they are not permanent legal entities. (Ibid: 18)

He further comments that the state was responsible for the "delineation, even in some senses the 'creation', of the household as a major social group, source of labour, and unit of social control".

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this thesis was meant to be an investigation into Kemp's argument that the family unit in peasant societies of the past, was not one of intrinsic organizational and economic importance. Through both an extensive literature review of works published by Thai village scholars, and original field research in one peasant village (using oral history), the thesis attempts to evaluate whether or not Kemp's argument should be supported or rejected.

The primary research site is Chaiyaphum Village (not its real name), one of the first villages to be established in Muang Chaiyaphum, in Isan (the Northeast). It was selected, because it is representative of typical ethnically Lao villages in Isan, in terms of language, traditions, and production activities. Chaiyaphum Village was established in the early 1800's and was more a settlement destination for continuing migrants than a stopping point en route to another home. This would

allow the population to establish deeply rooted traditions.

As the point was to be historical, the time-period under study extends from the period of settlement and expansion, to just before the period of intensified Western and capitalist inputs into the communities. As these changes came to different areas at varying times, the closing date was adjusted accordingly. In Chaiyaphum Village, investigations were extended to the early 1960's, which was identified by villagers as the starting point of rapid and dramatic, externally influenced, changes.

Hypothesis

My hypothesis posited that Isan family units, as argued by village scholars, were the fundamental units of production. Its economic activities were in part guided by the following formal, organizational principles: 1) Production and consumption was done almost completely by integrated family units. 2) Social relations in production were important, but supplementary to this family unit. 3) Relationships with members of other families were ego-based, however because the family was such an integrated unit, these ego-based relationships affected the entire family unit and aspects of its

economy. The family was the central economic unit of production, but was in form and function influenced and shaped to some degree by its social relations in production.

Introduction to the Research Area

The Isan Region

Thailand's northeast region is commonly referred to as Isan, which, according to Keyes, means "northeast" in Pali-Sanskrit. While the term refers to the region as a whole, its more accurate connotation to Central Thais and Northeasterners, applies to the people and the cultural materials of the dominant Thai-Lao ethnic group (Keyes, 1966:24). In area, Isan covers 170,226 square kilometers (66,250 square miles), or 105 million rai (2 1/2 rai = 1 acre). The bulk of the region is made up of the Korat Plateau and the Sakol Nakhon Basin (Seri and Hewison, 1990: vii). There are three predominant mountain ranges, the Petchabun and Dong Phrayayen, which divides the region from the rest of Thailand, and the Phanom Dong Rek, which separates it from Cambodia. The Khorat Plateau curves downwards, from the northwest to the southeast. The altitude in the northwest is about 700 feet, while the southeast corner is only 200 feet (Keyes, 1966: 21-

23). Keyes writes that the surface is of "gently undulating land", and is drained by the Mekong River and its tributaries, especially the Mun and the Chi (Ibid). Until recently, 90% of Isan's population depended on agriculture, though Rogers argues that its climate and topography make it "the land no farmer would wish to farm" (1996: 2). The rainfall is erratic, the region is subject to frequent droughts and floods, and most of its soils are so poor in fertility and organic matter, that they are physically, chemically, and biologically unable to retain water (Kamol, 1968: 51). Pendleton summarizes the regions topographical challenges:

The topography is largely one of low relief, and vast expanses are covered with slow growing forests of hardwood, on soils usually too infertile and insufficiently watered to be worth clearing for agricultural uses. Most of the lowlands and the lower valley slopes, on which suitable depths of rain water can be held during the summer, are laid out in small diked fields planted to paddy. Here and there are open grassy plains...with thorny bamboo along the creeks. These remain uncultivated, because in the wet season they are flooded too suddenly and deeply to make their use for paddy practical and in the dry season they are too dry. (1966: 23)

Chaiyaphum and Chaiyaphum Village

Chaiyaphum is located in Thailand's geographical center, 330 kilometers northeast of Bangkok via the national highway. In 1968, the province was divided into 11 amphurs (districts), 63 tambons (communes), and 739

villages, with a cumulative population of 848,607 people. There were 125,454 households, and of these 102,905 (82%) were farm families (Cornelius, 1970: 1). The capital district, of which Chaiyaphum Village is a part, makes up 1,495 kilometers (Ibid). It includes 12 tambons with 106 villages. The tambon with Chaiyaphum Village includes eight other villages (Ibid: 5). Term writes that the majority of populations living in Chaiyaphum were originally from Wiang Chan, with significant portions also arriving from Nakorn Rachasima (1987: 17).

Chaiyaphum Village, located eight kilometers to the capital center, was founded in approximately 1814. It covers an estimated 5,936 rai ($2\frac{1}{2}$ rai = 1 acre), with the following divisions: agricultural lands, 5,174 rai; housing settlements, 372 rai, public lands, 390 rai. There are two creeks and two lakes, which were used as the primary water supplies. In 1986, the population numbered 1715 persons, with 358 households. Its principle occupation was still paddy farming (Rawat, 1986: 1-2).

Methodology

Formal interviews were conducted in Chaiyaphum Village as the primary method used in this thesis. Searching for written documents related to the history of

the village resulted in one brief chronicle, the pertinent information filling less than one page. Hanks' experience in

Bang Chan also summarizes some of my experience:

There are no records, thanks to mildew, centipedes, and termites with their appetite for paper. Even if these documents could have been preserved, no local government records go back that far, for in 1850, government did not exist in that area. No living person has resided in Bang Chan for more than 90 years, and if fathers or grandfathers told tales of their pioneer days, they had been forgotten when we inquired during the 1950's. (1972: 72)

The literature on oral history recommends that interviews be placed within the local context, using local language and local history, to connect those being interviewed to historical and cultural events. Peasant concepts of time are different, and thus need to be linked to something they can relate to, such as marriages, births, and other significant events (Chatthip, 1986: Public Lecture).

This thesis included intensive field research conducted in Chaiyaphum Village over nine visits, the longest lasting two consecutive months. During the two month visit, an interpreter was used, to clarify points and assist in mutual understanding. I interviewed a total of 42 villagers from Chaiyaphum Village, with 38 still residing in the village. Four people worked in

Bangkok, but were still able to provide information about their economic histories. Most interviews lasting between 30 minutes to an hour, and many people were interviewed repeatedly, over several weeks. My primary informant was in the Bangkok group, and offered me formal interviews for over 60 hours in 16 months. The oldest person interviewed was 88, and the youngest was 31.

My interview questions were geared towards identifying the following patterns:

1. Who controlled the land?
2. How did a family member get access to land?
3. Who plants what?
4. How was family labor allocated/distributed?
5. Who worked for whom?
6. Was there a difference between affinal and consanguineal relations?
7. How was wealth accumulated?
8. How did wealth differentials affect kindred relations?
9. What were the productive cycles and do they affect kindred relations?