



# More farmers, less farming? Understanding the truncated agrarian transition in Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on rural field research in three provinces of Northeast Thailand, the paper seeks to understand the ways in which life course, generational, era-defining and developmental change intersect, and why rural smallholders and smallholdings continue to persist notwithstanding deep structural change. We outline the creative ways that households and their members have sought to address the scissor effects of declining land holdings, rising needs, reduced relative returns to agriculture, and often precarious non-farm work. We posit, drawing on this work from Thailand, that while Asia's 'truncated agrarian transition' goes some way to explaining the current empirical fact of persistent smallholders, we raise doubts whether the rural development agenda of modernisation, marketisation and rural exit will have the traction that governments and some scholars anticipate. A focus on production obscures how rural livelihoods also embody acts of consumption, care, reproduction and redistribution. Our study finds that the current experience of occupational multiplicity where households' livelihoods comprise farm and non-farm, commoditised and quasi-subsistence, *in situ* and *ex situ*, production and care, and reproduction and redistribution will likely also persist, if non-farm occupations remains classically precarious and social safety nets thinly woven. The paper contributes to debates over agrarian and rural livelihood transitions in Asia, and sheds explanatory light on why the farm-size transition has not taken hold.

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## 1. More farmers, less farming: setting out the puzzle

One of the enduring agrarian puzzles of the development era has been the persistence of the Asian smallholder (Rigg, Salamanca, & Thompson, 2016). Of course in some countries this is more puzzling than in others. Across the piece, however, we have seen Asian countries make the transition from low income to middle income, lower-middle income to upper-middle income, and even to high income. The share of agriculture in GDP has dropped markedly, as too has the share of the labour force in farming. But we have not seen the farm size transition take hold. Rather than the number of farms declining and their average size growing, as experience of and theory from the global North might lead us to expect, the reverse is occurring: the number of farms is often growing and their average size declining.

Lowder et al. (2014) assembled data on trends in average size of landholdings across eleven Asian countries between 1960 and

2000. Eight show a decline in the average size of landholdings, and for the remaining three the increases have been marginal.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the smallholder across a wide range of Asian countries at varying 'levels' of development is persisting in the face of deep socio-economic transformation. This quite straightforward observation raises a set of important applied and conceptual questions regarding: the direction of agrarian change in Asia, and its regional distinctiveness; the reproduction and sustainability of the farm household as a social and economic unit; local, national, even global food security; and the evolving nature of rural livelihoods and the likely trajectory of poverty transitions. These are all significant questions pertaining to how we frame and understand agrarian change and its implications for people, production and place. Moreover, the

<sup>1</sup> These eight are: India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Of the remaining three, Japan saw its landholding size remain constant at 1.2 ha between 1960 and 2000; Vietnam's data are for only two time periods, 1990 and 2000, and show a small increase from 0.5 to 0.7 ha (likely due to the opening up of poorer quality frontier land away from the main centres of rice cultivation); and Myanmar's data are also only for 1990 and 2000 and likewise record only a marginal increase in average landholding size, from 2.4 to 2.5 ha (Lowder et al., 2014).

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fact that the farm-size transition has not taken hold is often seen as a ‘problem’ by policy-makers because it is viewed as impeding the modernisation of farming, thus holding back agriculture.

The prevalent view of the expected direction of agrarian change globally is, as is so often the case, informed by the experience of the global North. The ‘farm-size transition’ has taken on almost normative, teleological status:

“As per capita income rises, economies diversify and workers leave agriculture, rural wages go up, and capital becomes cheaper relative to land and labour. It then becomes more efficient to have progressively larger farms. Economies of scale in mechanized farming eventually kick in, accelerating this trend. The result is a *natural economic transition towards larger farms over the development process*, but one that depends critically on the rate of rural–urban migration, and hence on the growth of the non-agricultural sector”.

[(Hazell & Rahman, 2014, p. 3 [emphases added])]

The empirical puzzle and intellectual challenge is that while most of the elements of this sequence of cause and effect have become evident across East and Southeast Asia (see Fig. 1, for Thailand), the ‘natural economic transition towards larger farms’ has not yet taken hold. Two of the authors of this current paper have considered this question at a general level in an earlier piece (Rigg et al., 2016); here the intention is to tackle the question by ‘writing it small’. We do this in two ways. First, we focus on one country – Thailand; and second, we illuminate the question by situating it at the village and household levels. While the paper is, in these ways, narrowly framed we argue towards the end that our tentative ‘answers’ to this puzzle shed light on these broader issues and are of wider regional significance. We do not suggest that our view onto the puzzle of the persistent smallholder in Thailand – in fact, a view informed by research in just three villages in one region of Thailand – is likely to be the final word on the matter. Far from it. But we do think that the tenor of our core conclusion, namely that it is necessary to think about the place, meaning and significance of land in rural livelihoods in transforming countries of Asia *differently*, does have wider regional purchase.

## 2. The evolution of the smallholder in Thailand

There are a range of overlapping terms that are used to refer to rural people operating farms that are limited in area: smallholders, family farmers, owner-operators, and peasants. The Thai term that comes closest to smallholder is *kasetakorn raiyoi* which means ‘small-scale farmer’. This does, however, beg the question of what constitutes ‘small’.

In much of the international literature, ‘small’ is often a farm of 2 hectares or less, with this delimitation often applying irrespective of land productivity (see Lowder, Scoet, & Raney, 2016). The shortcomings of such an approach are evident in Thailand: two hectares of irrigated, double-cropped wet rice land in the Central Plains cannot be equated with an equivalent area of sandy, infertile, upland in the Northeast. If small has production and therefore livelihood implications, then the productivity of a given piece of land is clearly important. And in this respect, one size does not fit all.

Notwithstanding this common sense standpoint, government agencies in Thailand – as they have in other countries – have tried over the years to set down size markers for small or large farms, and policies sometimes make reference to certain upper limits on ownership. At one time, for example, rural households in poverty were identified as those owning less than 10 *rai* (or 1.6 ha) of land. At the other end of the spectrum, the terms of the 1975 Land Reform Act put a ceiling of 50 *rai* (or 8 ha) on the amount of land a farmer might

own before he or she was under threat – on paper – of having the excess land seized (Ramsay, 1982, pp. 183–184; Larsson, 2013, p. 117).<sup>2</sup> From 1981, farmers squatting on Forest Reserve land could be issued with temporary land utilization rights for areas up to 15 *rai* (or 2.4 ha) (Feder, Onchan, & Chalamwong, 1988, p. 486) which, coincidentally, is also the area that Jacques Amyot in his early study in Ayutthaya in the Central Plains thought was the minimum area on which a full-time farmer could survive (Amyot, 1976). So despite the dangers of specifying ‘small’ when it comes to farming, two hectares is probably not too far off the mark.

That said, what might have been a sufficiency of land in the past does not hold true given today’s livelihood pressures. Rerkasem, for example, has estimated that a household requires 10 hectares (62.5 *rai*) of irrigated rice land to make a “decent living from rice in 21st century Thailand, when self-sufficiency no longer means producing enough rice to meet the family’s requirements” (Rerkasem, 2016, p. 111). This means that 2 hectares, even of the most productive land in Thailand, constitutes a sub-livelihood farm. One 44-year old farmer in Ban Lao (Ban Lao phase 3 #06, 04.08.16) with 10 *rai* (1.6 ha) of rice land put it like this to us as he explained the difference between ‘then’ and ‘now’:

*It was a lot better in my father’s time. We had common land and woods that we could use in many ways together for the benefit of the whole community. We could find fish, frogs and edible insects and could find vegetables from the surrounding upland and common land. We didn’t need to spend money on such things. We could live without money. We had the food we needed. But not now! We have to buy everything. It’s such a huge difference.*

Fig. 2 shows that the average area of land holdings in Thailand between 1960 and 2013 changed little. It rose slightly between 1960 and 1980 as Thailand’s farmland frontier extended into less fertile areas suited to dryland crops rather than wet rice (thus necessitating larger holdings if basic subsistence was to be assured), and since 1980 shrinking somewhat as the frontier in farmland expansion was reached, and fragmentation of holdings began to take hold. Even so, the story – or at least the story that can be recounted through these data – is one of surprising consistency, rather than of significant change.

If we look not at the average size of holdings but at their distribution across size categories a similar picture is revealed. In the 35 years between 1978 and 2013, the proportion of holdings above 20 *rai* (3.2 ha) in size *decreased* from 45 to 36 per cent, while those owning less than 20 *rai* increased from 55 to 64 per cent. There is no sign, on the basis of these figures, of the farm-size transition taking hold in Thailand. This is all the more surprising because so much else in Thailand has been in a state of flux, reflected at an aggregate level in Fig. 1. And yet this sense of ‘all change’ is not echoed in these raw data on landholdings and farm size.

## 3. The field sites and methods

The empirical basis for the paper is derived from a three-village study undertaken between 2014 and 2017 in the Northeastern region of Thailand. Ban Kao is a long-established, rice-growing village in the province of Nakhon Ratchasima. Ban Lao is also quite long-established, but is environmentally more marginal with poor soils and uncertain rainfall. The village is, however, just 15 km or so from the important regional centre of Khon Kaen which has helped to provide a wide range of alternative wage earning opportunities within quite easy reach of the village. Ban Nam is on the banks of the Mekong in the newly created province of Bueng

<sup>2</sup> Or 100 *rai* for those farmers engaged in livestock raising. This land ceiling was not to be applied retroactively.

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