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Joining the Dots of Agrarian Change in Asia: A 25 Year View from Thailand

JONATHAN RIGG
Durham University, UK

ALBERT SALAMANCA
Stockholm Environment Institute – Asia Centre, Bangkok, Thailand

and

MICHAEL PARNWELL *
University of Leeds, UK

Summary. — Following 77 households over 25 years, the paper traces agrarian change in two settlements in Northeast Thailand. This is distilled into three processes: a delocalisation of living, a disembedding of households, and a dissociation of the village-community, seen in a geriatrification of farming, the re-working of livelihood footprints, the generational drift of non-farm work, and increasing complexity in household form. Policy interventions need to acknowledge the mixed and mobile nature of rural living, the split personality of households, people's hyrbrid identities, and the diversity of activities in the countryside.

Key words — Asia, Thailand, agrarian change, livelihoods, village and household transformations

1. INTRODUCTION

(a) *Agrarian transitions and agrarian transformations*

The Asian countryside has been profoundly re-worked over the course of the last four decades. The apparent stasis of the rural landscape—in visual terms at least—belies the turbulence that has infiltrated and affected almost every corner of rural society, economy, and ecology. This turbulence can be seen, *inter alia*, in gender and generational relations, labor practices, employment patterns, livelihoods, demographic structures, mobilities, technologies, the distribution of natural resources, consumption desires and practices, and patterns of land use. Whether framed in terms of agrarian change, agrarian transitions or agrarian transformations, the Asian countryside is much altered.

To observe that Asian rural spaces are changing—and often in quite significant ways—is not new; in this paper, however, we seek to reveal the inter-locking nature of change through the experiences of two villages in Northeast Thailand over 25 years, during 1982–2008. In other words, we take a systems approach to delineating agrarian transformations and, in so doing, highlight the cascade of contingent social, economic and cultural forces, and outcomes that such changes induce and entail.

Scholars and development practitioners have inevitably interpreted agrarian change in different ways. Some have seen market integration and economic restructuring in the Asian countryside as deeply disruptive, even anti-developmental (see Bello, Cunningham, & Poh, 1998; Bullard, Bello, & Malhotra, 1998; Davis, 2004, 2006; Glassman, 2004). For Davis the "brutal tectonics of neoliberal globalization" and the "forcible incorporation into the world market of the great subsistence peasantries of Asia and Africa" has led to "rural 'semi-proletarianization', [and] the creation of a huge global class of immiserated semi-peasants and farm labourers lacking existential security of subsistence" (Davis, 2006, pp. 174). [1] In the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, the "silent process of commercialisation in almost every sphere of the rural economy...has eroded the legitimate entitlement of the poor..." (Sharma, 2004, pp. 3087). Artisans and farm laborers have been usurped and displaced by machines, and small farmers and fishers have struggled to sustain themselves with unsustainable debt burdens and a deteriorating natural resource base. When the strain has become unbearable, some have

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committed suicide—an astounding 100,000 in India, it has been reported, during 1993–2003 (Thornton & Thornton, 2006). Turning to Thailand, Bello *et al.* (1998) consider that the Thai countryside is caught in "the grip of a profound crisis" (pp. 134; see also Keyes (2010a,b)) arising from the government's subordination of agriculture to the urban-industrial sector and the integration of rural areas and agricultural production into the world market through invasive commercialization. The decline in agriculture has resulted in a social crisis as livelihood pressures have fueled the distress migration of millions of villagers to urban centers, dividing households, scattering families, and hollowing out settlements (UNDP, 2007).

Other scholars identify a more developmentally positive series of processes operating in rural areas. New crops and market opportunities have raised farm incomes, machines have improved efficiencies, modern seeds and other technologies have increased yields, and new and better paid non-farm employment opportunities have provided work beyond the farm for a population that is becoming increasingly better educated, as well as farming-averse (see for example, Cramb, 2012; De Koninck & Ahmat, 2012; Molle & Srijantr, 1999; Wittayapak, 2012). As an alternative vision to those who see rural–urban migration dismantling rural families and communities, Bird and Deshingkar (2009) argue that "there is overwhelming evidence that internal migration [in India] can lead to positive change in both sending and receiving areas" (pp. 3). Rather than dividing families and hollowing out communities, migration raises rural incomes and reduces the slide into poverty, enhances savings and assets, permits investment in the development of human capital through education, and improves food security. Migration is, therefore, a force for poverty reduction and development (Deshingkar, 2006), not marginalization and attendant immiseration.

We are aware of the centrality of the question of the welfare effects of agrarian change on rural populations and settlements, but in this paper we focus on identifying the scale and scope of the transformations underway and, more particularly, on their intersections and interrelationships. In this way, we aim to shed some light on the processes that scholars of agrarian change have interpreted in such starkly different ways—even when working on the same country. We do this through an exploration of the development experiences of two villages in Northeastern Thailand, which have been studied over a period of a quarter of a century from the early 1980s. We use the experiences of these two settlements and their families and households as a "window" to comment on processes and patterns of rural change more widely, in Thailand and beyond. As the experience of the study villages and households show, "communities" are selectively impacted by migration, households reveal sharply different responses and experiences to such processes, and the wider shaping milieu is constructed from the sometimes very particular ways in which national context, local environment, and personal situation intersect and interact.

This paper also pursues an argument that is currently somewhat unfashionable: that, increasingly, the rural world we encounter is *qualitatively different* from that of the recent past. In writing this we recognize that we are at risk of compressing time periods, generalizing across individual sites and national contexts, and privileging present processes and events over those of the past. We are well aware (see Rigg, 1994) that the rural past was not a sedentary and subsistence world, but embodied many of those elements that are emblematic of modernity, such as mobility, market relations and inequality (see Hoadley & Gunnarsson, 1996; Kemp, 1988, 1989, 1991; Walker, 1999a,b). Nonetheless, we suggest that the following changes increasingly characterize the Asian countryside:

- *a delocalization of life and living, reflected most obviously in heightened levels of mobility;*
- *a dis-embedding of households and families as social and economic relations are stretched across space; and*
- *a dissociation of the village-community as the village "covenant" is frayed and interests diverge.*

These three statements, framed as they are as generalized propositions, are inevitably open to the charge of reductionism. There are examples of rural settlements that have remained economically resilient and reliant on local resources; where households and families largely coincide as co-residential dwelling units; and where the village settlement and the village community can be seen as sharing a social "covenant" that extends beyond their members' propinquity. Putting those cautionary caveats to one side, however, we identify in the villages discussed here, and in rural studies more widely, a resonance with these three generalizations. Toward the end of the paper, we go onto suggest that these ructions—which we regard as much more than mere wrinkles—in rural living require a re-consideration of the way that agrarian transformations are understood and development interventions are constructed and shaped.

(b) *Vantage points in rural research*

How do scholars view "the rural"? Where do development practitioners draw the lines around what counts as the countryside? What units of analysis do we use to frame and understand rural transformations? What are our objects of enquiry and the entry points for analysis? These questions, as we will attempt to show, are not self-evident and, even if they once were, have been rendered increasingly problematic not least due to the turbulence created by the development process. So, for example, when it is claimed that there is a crisis in the Asian countryside, as briefly set out in the introduction to this paper, what form does the crisis take, and where is it situated? Is it a crisis for rural people, for agriculture, for the rural economy, for the countryside, for rural livelihoods, or for rural settlements ("communities")? A crisis for one is not a crisis for all; indeed, not infrequently the reverse is the case.

There are two sets of reasons, we suggest, for the failure of scholars, development practitioners, and government agencies to anticipate or adequately and effectively to address many of the challenges of the contemporary Asian countryside. First is because of a set of generalized (but of course far from universal) tendencies in how we approach the rural context; and second, because of a general inclination to adopt a partial view of agrarian change arising from the "vantage point" that is adopted. In terms of the embedded tendencies that characterize rural scholarship, we highlight four:

- *A sedentary tendency* to see people/households and livelihoods/activities as spatially situated—the "sedentary peasant paradigm"
- *An economic tendency* to see outcomes as manifestations, primarily, of economic forces and incentives
- *A sectoral tendency* to situate or pigeonhole individuals and households according to pre-determined sectoral categories—agriculture, industry, services
- *A spatial tendency* to assume that certain activities operate in certain spaces—farming in rural areas, industry in urban areas