

# Thai Society and Culture

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## I. Introduction

For outsiders, Thai people are mostly described as easy-going, fun-loving, friendly and passive. This is partly true. One explanation given by a social scientist is that the belief that all is determined by one's karma, one of the tenets of Buddhism, provides the Thai with resiliency that keeps the society stable (Neher 1987). One has to be satisfied with one's lot. Some people might possess a great deal while others have very little. This is the result of one's karma. Nobody can change it but have to accept and be satisfied with. On the other hand, what you do in this life will affect your next life. Buddhists believe in re-birth. So you have to do good and be responsible for your own life. Your next life is determined by your present deeds and thoughts; and this is karma. There are good and bad karma. In this life, it's a duty for one to accumulate good karma and avoid bad karma, so that your next life will be good. So responsibility and seriousness are also the other part of Thai personality. Merit making, for example, is part of everyday life of the Thai people. Wealth should be shared with others especially to the poor. Thus, Thai people are also seen as generous and considerate.

What that has been said, depends very much on one's own experiences. It is not an easy task to understand other people's society and culture. Ethnocentrism tends to dominate our ideas and thinking and the interpretation of other cultures. My views about Thai society and culture might be unavoidably ethnocentric and, to a certain extent, theoretically bias. I would like to stress here that all what have been written in this paper is mainly derived from the works of anthropologists of Thai society. It is, however, selective, the selection of which is my whole responsibility

## II. Rural-urban Relationship

My impression when I first came to Japan was that there is no clear-cut division between rural and urban areas. If you drive along the road, houses look similar. On the T.V. programmes, you can see rural houses equipped with all modern facilities similar to

those in the city. In Thailand, on the contrary, the distinction between life in the city and that in the village is quite remarkable. Bangkok, for example, represents the modern city, the metropolis, in every aspect. What you find in Tokyo you can also find it in Bangkok. A problem of Bangkok is that it is a primate city --the over-populated city and the center of economic wealth and political power of the country. In terms of population, Bangkok is more than 10 times larger than Chiang Mai city, the No. 2 city of the country. Many problems in Bangkok have remained to be solved, such as road traffics, air and water pollutions, housings and land squatterings, and even city poverty.

Indeed, such differences between Bangkok and the rest of the country characterize the differences between any provincial city and the countryside. Khon Kaen city, for example, represents wealth and modern living of the province. There are quite a number of 5-star hotels for tourists, a modern regional university, a first-rated hospital and a large number of restaurants and food-shops. Outside the city, not more than 10 kilometres away you will see a sharp difference. If you get into the village, houses are in poor conditions, women dress in traditional clothes, and a few unimpressive food shops. All these physical appearances might deter you, perhaps. But as a matter of fact, the present day rural conditions in Thailand are not as bad as 30 years ago. Transportation and communication have been improved considerably. All villages can be reached by pickup cars. Roads getting to the villages are all paved and in good conditions. Most villages are exposed to the outside world. People travel daily to and from the city by local pickups. Modern facilities such as T.V., radio, refrigerator are not unusual and can be found everywhere. A large number of village people has experienced city life particularly those who used to work in the city. During the off-farm period, young people migrated to the city to seek jobs for extra income. So, changes have occurred in the villages remarkably during the last three decades.

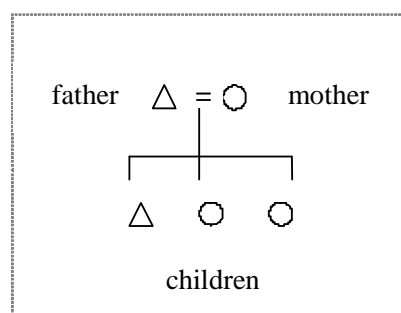
What should be noted is that though Thailand has been, to a great extent, developing during the last three decades, the gap between urban and rural economy in many aspects --education, income and occupational opportunities, infrastructure, social welfares and the likes-- remain so great. For example, a village in the North where I visited shortly just before I left for Japan, its household income per year is as low as 28,167 Baht or 84,501 Yen, whereas in the city, a taxi driver earns at least 10,000 Baht or 30,000 Yen a month. This explains why the high rate of rural-urban migration in Thailand, as it is in other developing countries, remains high. The previous governments actually gave priority to economic problems of the city --dwellers, only the present government that a “war against rural poverty” policy has been announced. The uneven development means to tackle economic problems simultaneously in the city as well as in the rural village area.

I raise the question of city --village relationship, because there are differences between city life and village life. Under the forces of the process of globalization, Bangkok and other cities have been affected by the global trends. At the same time villages have also been affected by the cities. City life has penetrated into the rural villages in all aspects. The influences of the cities upon villages cannot be overlooked and have to be taken into account in the analysis of village life. The problem might arise if the economic conditions in the rural area have not been improved, and social and political expectations cannot be met. In general, however, village life has been improved tremendously in the last three decades.

### **III. Village Social Organization.**

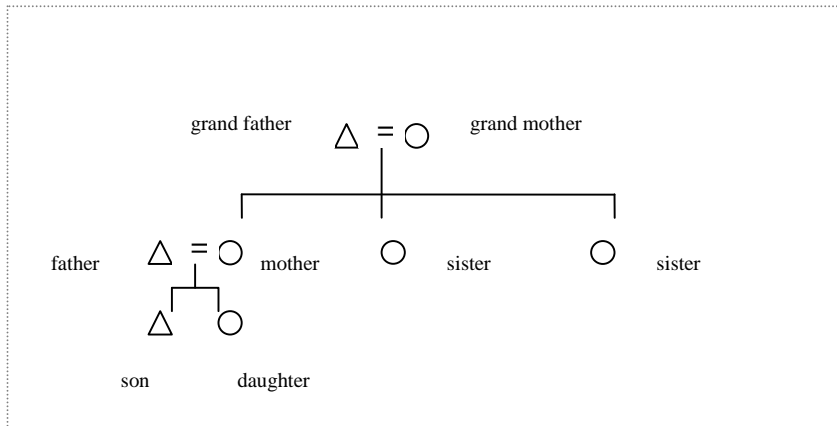
A village as an administrative unit is actually composed of a number of households ranging from 50-200. Members of a household may include people of three generations: grandparents, parents and children living in the same compound. A family may or may not coincide with a household. One household may have two families living together.

Most of the family in the village, nowadays, are predominantly nuclear families including husband and wife and their children.



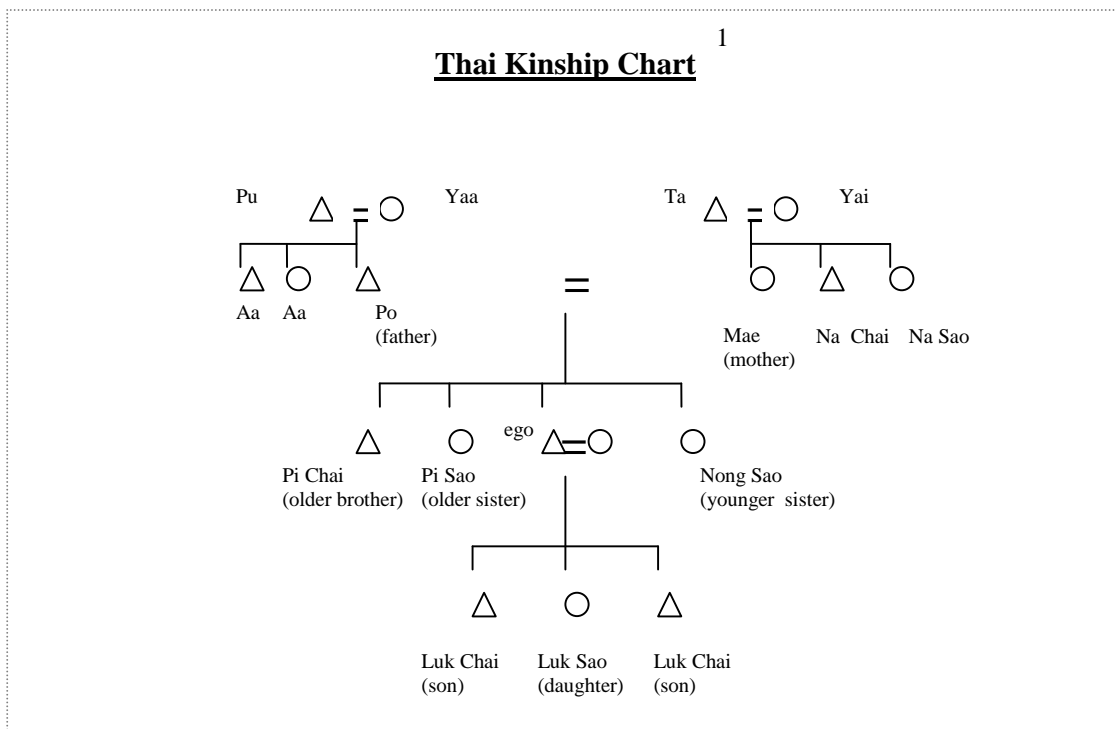
Nuclear Family

Extended family, comprised husband and wife, with their grandparents or siblings and their children, is not uncommon



### Extended Family

Big land holding is, at present, rare due to the pattern of land inheritance. Actually, land will be inherited equally to both son and daughter when they get married. The daughter who remains with the parents will inherit the house and the compound land with the last piece of farmland. Thus, land is divided into small plots which normally do not need much labor to look after. Husband and wife with their children can manage the land themselves to grow rice and other cash crops. If they need more labor force it is easy to get hired-farm laborers in the village. So, there is no need to have a large extended family when the family holds just a small plot of land.



Thai kinship system is bilateral, i.e. we trace our relatives from both father and mother lines. Patrilineal descent, such as that of Chinese and Japanese where relatives from only the male line is included, does not exist in Thai kinship system. We do not have a clan or lineage system where members are descended from a single line of common ancestry.

Kinship principles provide a basic foundation for co-operative working groups and other activities. Rice planting and harvesting, for example, is organized around kin and close friends. People in the same village will actually think of themselves as relatives and kin, even though some are not kin and no formal kinship relations can be traced. Everybody knows everybody else business still holds true in the Thai village as in any other rural areas in the developing countries. Within the village all types of relationships will be based on and followed the same pattern of kin relations.

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<sup>1</sup>. The works on kinship system can be found in the works of John De Young (1955), and Howard Kaufman (1976). The more recent one is that of Jeremy Kemp (1976) which also provides a long-length discussion on contemporary Thai kinship system.

Age and sex provide another basic principle for village social organization. Using kin terms, younger people will address elder one as Phi (elder brother and sister). Phi then calls the younger one as Nong (younger brother or sister). For people of different generations, kinship terms also apply. One calls elder people of their parent generation as Loong or Pa (uncle or aunt). Thus, kinship terms are widely applied in addressing each other. If one is introduced to someone who is not known before, one will try to locate oneself in kinship position arrangement. One will be either Phi or Nong and/or other pair of relationships and then act accordingly. The inferior (Nong) will have to pay respect to the superior (Phi). At the same time the superior must show their kindness and considerateness to the inferior, i.e. to look after him or her as his own brother or sister.

Thai society is a hierarchical society with flexibility. Each person occupies a certain position in the hierarchy according to age, sex, wealth, power and education. Without such information, it must be very difficult to carry on a long-term interaction. One must try to locate oneself in the hierarchical order. Government officials, for example, assume superior roles (Phu Yai) over villagers who are Phu Noi or the inferiors. Relationships will base on superior-inferior category whereby villagers have to respect and listen to officials who, on the other hand, must show their benevolence to the villagers. Such differences in status are also expressed through various gestures. Villagers have to wai, a gesture that shows respect to the officials. Appropriate words have to be used when spoken with and seats have to be properly arranged for them. Normally, villagers can not sit high above of the officials and so on.

Such words in daily use as Phi - Nong (brother – sister), Dek - Phu Yai (younger-elder), Phu Yai - Phu Noi (superior- inferior) all signify importance of superior-inferior relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Expectations upon the roles of men and women or boys and girls are also different. Actually, men occupy higher status than that of women in almost all activities. It is men who lead the family, the community and even the country. Very few restrictions have been put over boy in his adolescence as long as he learns how to make a living from his father. Girl, on the other hand, is restricted by many rules and norms. Her life is centred around the house, looking after her family along with her mother. Husband is head of the family and the one who makes decision on important matters concerning the family. Nevertheless recent studies have shown that women's roles in the

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<sup>1</sup>. These concepts are lengthy elaborated in the work of Lucien Hanks (1962, 1975).

household and community economy cannot be overlooked. In addition to looking after the family, women are involved in all kinds of economic activities of the family. Wife works alongside with her husband in all farm activities. She is even involved with non-farm jobs to earn extra income for the family. Women are also active in all government sponsored women occupational groups. It is asserted that incomes contributed by women in the household are considerable high. It is not so surprised to find that women earn more income than that of men. The changing role of women in economic activities thus constitutes an interesting area of studies, i.e. gender studies.

In general, however, in rural area wife is still subordinated to her husband and women are still following the lead of men. But there is no any serious barrier against women in participating in any kind of activities.

#### **IV. Political Organization**

It is suggested that politics is the domain for men, whereas women are more active in economic activities. It is women's job to look after the family activities while men are responsible for the outside tasks. Most of the village headmen are actually men, though during the last two decades some women have managed to get into the village headman posts. Even at the national political level, there are quite a few female politicians in the cabinet. There is no barrier in Thai society against women to get into a higher education. However, women in politics are still limited in number. Men still constitute a majority both at national and local levels.

The village headman (Phu Yai Baan) is locally elected. He is responsible for activities concerning order and regulations. He is semi-official responsible directly to the district office. His salary comes from the government and his duty is to transfer and interpret government messages to villagers. At the same time, he is the representative of the village in dealing with outsiders and government officials. He thus actually has been caught in the middle between being a lowest rank government official and a village head man responsible for village interests.<sup>1</sup> A successful village headman must perform both of his roles effectively. He must serve both government demands as well as that of his village people. His power and authority is derived from government officials so long as he is accepted by his village fellows.

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<sup>1</sup>. Moerman (1969) provides a valuable discussion of village headman as a synoptic leader.



Phu Yai Baan is by no means the only village leader. Other leaders include school teachers, abbot as well as some respectful elders. In practice, these people are included as members of village council of which the village headman is the chairman. The village council is a local administrative body, functioning to help the village headman in matters concerning with well being of villagers. Anything concerns with community development will be discussed within the council to call for cooperation. If the headman is successfully and strongly authoritative, consent can be easily reached. Matters concerning with village security is of prime importance. If something has gone wrong within his village, the headman has to report himself directly to the district officer or police chief of the district at once.

A meeting of all village headmen in the district will be held once a month at the district office. Government's requests and orders will be passed down to the village headmen who, in turn, will inform their village men when they return to their villages. Any petition from the villages, on the other hand, will also be submitted to the district officer. Through such a channel that communication between the government and people is officially made possible. In addition, it is a duty of the district officer to visit villages in the area under his responsibility regularly.

In the village, political faction is not uncommon. Conflicts of interest between individuals and groups do often occur.<sup>1</sup> Individual conflicts can be easily solved by village headman with the help from village elders. If the headman is not a strong man, group conflicts may be showing outwardly. Actually, the village will be divided into factions during the campaign for headman post. Such factions may be dissolved after the campaign is over or still remains for some time. The division is also apparent during the general election when several informal political groups of villagers are formed around local leaders. Each leader is connected with outside political party actually through the politician he gives support to. The involvement with such local and national politics of the villagers can make the political campaign becomes more fiercely. Money will be paid for votes and threats will be put forward. In that case, violence is sometimes difficult to avoid.

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<sup>1</sup>. The application of the concepts of political factions and social network in analyzing village social organization has been adopted and discussed in the work of Chartchai Na Chiangmai (1983).

During the last decade, decentralization of power and authority has been the government main policy toward local government. At the tambon level (tambon --an administrative unit, one level above village organization normally covers a number of villages) a new body of local administration has been established. Members are locally elected and form a new organization called Tambon Administrative Organization or TAO. The TAO is independent organization with its own budget and administrative personnel. Each village has its own representatives elected within its own constituency to sit in the TAO. The village headman does have no role in TAO but remains with the official domain and is responsible directly to the district officer. At present, some TAOs may be administratively viable on their own, but there still be many TAOs which need guidances and supports from government officials. Whatever is going to happen, the TAO is underway and that Thai society is seen to be approaching to a more democratic society. Talk about good governance and popular democracy is not uncommon and it is the topic widely discussed in daily newspapers and weekly magazines distributed all over the country.

The final note on village politics is on the role of NGO in social and economic development in Thailand.<sup>1</sup> The recent widespread changes in social and political development are partly the results of social movements organized by NGOs both in the city and the countryside. For the government, they are considered to be the troublemakers. In general, the NGOs along with the academics play important roles in raising the level of political awareness and consciousness of the rural people. To date, marching to the government house to petition their grievances are a common phenomenon to the extent that one cannot say that Thai people are politically passive. This is not to say that there is a political chaos. It is rather the fact that people now knows their right and duties as well as the channels to make their voices heard.

## **V. Religious Organization**

Traditionally, village life is centred around the Buddhist temple (the Wat). All rituals concerning birth and death have taken place in the Wat. Wat functions as a centre for education, ordination, social gatherings in all important religious ceremonies and festivals as well as village social welfare. It is a place where rich and poor and people of different social and economic statuses meet and participate in all kind of wat activities.

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<sup>1</sup>. There are a number of studies on the NGOs. Most of them are carried out by Thai social scientists.

Buddhist monks enjoy the highest status in the Thai social hierarchy. In religious ceremonies, even the King and Queen themselves have to Wai, i.e. to pay respect to the monks. Boy who is ordained acquires a monkhood status; and in that position his parent and all other villagers have to wai or pay respect to him too. The Sangha organization is separated from that of the state. The King, as head of the state, appoints the Sangharacha, the Supreme Patriarch of the sangha. The King's legitimacy has been, in turn, approved through the rituals performed by the sangha during the Coronation Day. According to the constitution, the King is supposed to be protector of Buddhism. He must be a devout Buddhist.

At the village level, the abbot or Chao Avas is the head of the Wat and is responsible for all the wat ritual ceremonies and all the property, such as land and houses that belonged to the wat. In the wat, monks are hierarchically ranked according to their seniority. The youngest ones are those of novices (Nen) who have just been ordained. Senior monks are appointed to be mentors looking after and giving advices to younger monks and novices. The Thai believe that every man should enter the monkhood, at least, once in their manhood life regardless of the duration of their stay but normally at the period of 3 months. In the old days, it is believed that one should be ordained before getting married and having a family. After sometimes in the monkhood, the man will be considered as "ripe" and he then can judge, by his own, what is right or wrong in pursuing his worldly life. His mother also gains most merit in this way. In rural areas, ordination of a man is thus considered a duty of his parent, and the ceremony of which is also socially considered an expression of social and status of the family in the village. The wealthy family can afford a large and grand ordination ceremony, involving a large number of villagers. The ceremony can last a couple of days.

To assist with the wat activities, a group of laymen is appointed to form the wat committee. Members of the wat committee are mainly elders and respected villagers. The most important position is the wat treasurer (Makkhathayok) who is responsible for the matters concerning with the donated money and revenue earned from land rents and other wat properties. However, the abbot is in charge of all wat expenditures such as in building and repairing of the wat halls. Monks are not legally allowed to own any property. He can carry but a small sum of money at a time. It is not uncommon, however, that there are abbots and monks who become rich from money donated to the wat. Anyway, this is rare in the rural areas for donated money is rather in small amount; and monks are closely observed by villagers in the community.

Social and economic changes in the last three decades have provided grounds for the emergence of development monks, particularly young monks, who have been exposed to the modern world and have been influenced by the idea of development.

These monks are known as Phra Nak Phatthana and are outspreaded throughout the rural areas, especially during the 1970s and 1980s. They perceive themselves not only as the spiritual leaders but also the leaders in development works. They devote themselves to all kind of development projects even in collaboration with the government officials sometimes. As a monk, he can influence villagers to cooperate. Main success of development monk depends very much on his personal devotion as well as his own personal charisma.

Relations between village community and the wat are congruent. The well being of the villages reflects in the environment and conditions of the wat compound. If the wat is well kept, the village economy is actually prosperous.

One important question raised by anthropologists, concerning the economic development, is that belief in Buddhism is a hindrance or a favor toward economic development. Most agree that Buddhism is neutral to economic development.<sup>1</sup> It does not motivate people to the accumulation of wealth. One fate is determined by one's own karma. One way to improve one's karma is through merit making. One works not only to live but also to be able to make merit. Part of the income of poor farmers will be spent on making merit, particularly donating to the wat. Wealth accumulation is not for economic investment only but it has always been invested in religious activities. Accordingly, it is not profit seeking that drives people to work. People make merit by donating money to the wat in the hope that one's position in society will become better, if not in this life perhaps the next life.

Nevertheless, Charles Keyes argues that the money donated to the wat has been, in fact, spent wisely by the wat on construction of various buildings in the wat for the good of the community. Furthermore, villagers are normally hired for such constructions. The result is an improvement of employment conditions in the village, i.e. more jobs available for villagers. The wat is also seen as a centre for social welfare, particularly for those who need helps. As many ceremonies are held at the wat, it is thus normal for the wat to collect all necessities, such as tables, chairs, dishes, pots and pans and even blankets, pillows and bed sheets for uses in community ceremonies. Such necessities are often lent out to villagers on many occasions, such as house blessings, marriage ceremonies and the likes. Finally, it is found that money donated by the poor may, as has been claimed, amount to twenty percent of their incomes. But the rich spend

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<sup>1</sup>. See for example Manning Mash (1965). Charles Keyes (1983) also takes up this issue in Thailand.

less probably not exceeding 5% of their incomes, though the amount of money is larger. This means that savings and investments in economic activities, i.e. economic motives, are not lacking. Buddhism teaches people not to be greedy, but at the same time one has to carry out one's own life in a rational way.<sup>1</sup> During economic downturn of 1990's, Buddhism provides a way out to the Thai rural people. One has to be content and satisfied with one's lots. Those who work in the cities lost their jobs and returned to their hometowns. They have managed to live in a simple way and have not lost their faith and hope to have a better life economically again. They will certainly go back to work again if the economic conditions are favorable. Buddhism, therefore, is not a hindrance though not a direct stimulation for economic development. It teaches people to live in a simple life and be satisfied with all they have got. Anyway, I am not saying that village people are all happy. What I am trying to say is that the rural economic niche helps to lessen the hardship of the life of people. In the village, people do have "social capital", to use the term coined by the World Bank, to maintain at least a minimum level of living standard. That is they can, at least, survive during the period of economic downturn.

Associated with the belief in Buddhism is the worship of spirits (Pi), especially widely performed in the villages in the Northeast. Pi puta is the ancestral spirit and protector of villages, land, forest, and life of villagers. The worship of Pi is widespread throughout the rural areas, particularly among villages in the Northeast. This has been recorded and analyzed thoroughly in the works of Tambiah (1970), Charles Keyes (1989) and the more recent one of Tegbaru (1997)

With the changes brought into village life, rural people are more tempted and exposed to modern way of living. Material gains seem to have influenced their worldviews. They are drawn more and more to the worldly things of the city life, away from that of their predecessors to the extent that the traditional Buddhist way of living has been affected or sometimes disregarded.

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<sup>1</sup>. See Keyes (2002) for the discussion of Thai farmers as a rational as well as moral-oriented agency.

## **VI. Economic Organization**

Rural and urban economy cannot be separately considered. Development of the city has brought about changes in rural villages. Marketing networks have linked these two economic sectors together. Diffusion of new technology, knowledge and capitalist ideology influenced by the city, has turned rural village economy into a market-oriented economy with profit seeking motives. Most agricultural products are marketed to cities or other market centers for export or for domestic consumptions. Rice growing is not only crop grown in the village. Diversification of cash crops has been increasing, for more than three decades. Shortage of land and increasing number of rural population give rise to agricultural labourers. Landless farmers have to seek other non-farm jobs to earn their living. Many farmers have migrated to cities to get jobs during the off-farm period. Rural-urban migration constitutes a main problem to the city. It is not uncommon, nowadays, to find that in some villages only women and children remain at homes, while men have often migrated into the city or even abroad where higher wage can be found.

Besides farmers and wage-labourers, other occupations are wealthy landowners, crop buyers, pickup owners, rice millers, carpenters, barbers, shop and food stores owners. Fishing and animal raisings --cattle, pigs and chicken-- are also common in any villages. Within a single household one can find a combination of occupations, such as being farmers as well as pickup owners for transportation, or being farmers and rice millers. Having various occupations means that the village economy is no longer self-sufficient and degree of specialization has been increasing. Villages have to rely more on outside market, actually a district town or provincial city, for selling their products as well as obtaining household necessities and the likes. Travelling to and from the city can be easily done through local pickups, buses and other transports. Local middlemen are also obvious. They buy crops from farmers and further sell them to big city-based merchants. These middlemen entrepreneurs are also innovators who introduce new cash crops to farmers whenever they see a market opportunity to trade on such crops. Relationships between farmers and middlemen trades are ambivalent. Many traders are at the same time moneylenders. A number of farmers are indebted to middlemen traders. Debts are paid in kinds after harvesting. Interest rate can be exorbitant. Rural indebtedness has long been a main problem for farmers in rural area.

Attempts have been made by the government to solve the problem. Farmers' cooperatives as well as Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) have been set up to release farmers from their debt-burden conditions for more than three decades. Problems, however, remain. Rice farming is a risky and no profit business. But for farmers having rice for household consumption is a priority. They feel comfortable if there is still rice to feed their families. With the help of modern technology and the provision of local wage labourers, rice farming does not require labour from all members of the household. This allows for young people --men and women-- to leave the village to work in the cities, as construction labourers, house maids, hawkers and vendors, taxi-drivers, workers in factory plants and many others. The incomes derived from such works have helped to lessen economic burdens of the family in the countryside.<sup>1</sup>

Village nowadays is thus no longer a closed-community. Farmers are exposed to the outside world. They have made an ally with city workers through various channels. A number of political and social movements have been set up --the most popular ones are, for example, the Assembly of the Poor, the Federation of Farmers of Thailand, etc. Their grievances cannot be ignored by the government. Marching to protest at the government house is a common phenomenon in the city nowadays. The role of NGOs is crucial. They have their nationwide networks and have branched out all over the country, in city and rural areas alike. Protests against government projects, such as construction of irrigation dams, relocation of village settlement and others, which they see as threats to their livelihood, have not been unheard of anymore.

To conclude, problems in rural areas are closely related to those of the city. Cities, in particular the industrialization, have to be developed in order to absorb labours from the rural area. At the same time, rural economic conditions have to be improved. City-rural relationship is symbiotic and has to balance against each other. Over-developed in one area can be under-developed in the other. Economic gap and inequality will be widened. The government duty is to manage and distribute equally resources and wealth of the country for both rural and urban areas. No immediate solution can be given but understanding among all concerns is of prime importance.

Final remark: It is rather risky to make a brief and swift generalization about village life in Thai society. One can only hope that such generalization will provoke others to make further investigation on a more specific question. This is always problematic for social sciences. I hope I have raised enough conceptualized issues, practically and theoretically, to be developed into specific topics for further and more specific research studies.

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<sup>1</sup>. Recent works of rural economic organization have concentrated on class analysis, see for example Andrew Turton (1978), Anan Kanjanapun (1984).

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Changes have taken place rapidly during recent years. So far no publication, which synthesized various aspects of changes, has been printed. This selected bibliography is primarily for those who are not familiar with the works on Thai society and culture. All cited materials provide grounds for the above conceptualization of the problems and discussion.

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