

# Thailand's rice bowl: perspectives on agricultural and social change in the Chao Phraya Delta

Review >  
Thailand

The tsunami of December 2004 reminded us that most people in monsoon Asia still live as they have for generations. Despite the changes and economic developments of the globalisation era, many remain dependent on fishing and agriculture. Understanding changes within these sectors and their relationship to processes such as industrialisation and urbanisation are essential to a balanced understanding of contemporary Southeast Asia.

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The basin of the Chao Praya river system in central Thailand has long been known as one of the great 'rice bowls' of monsoon Asia. In the mid-nineteenth century, visitors were amazed by the scale of production there, much of it for export. Over the past fifty years, however, rice cultivation has been transformed by new seed varieties, increased mechanisation and lower labour requirements. At the same time emigration from the main rice-growing areas, urbanisation and diversification of agriculture have led to very different patterns in the Thai rural landscape, economy and society.

The book's fifteen chapters contain literature reviews, overviews and detailed case studies, and cover topics such as ethnography, ethnicity and local government structures, with the main focus on ongoing processes of transformation. This focus is neither on Thai agriculture in general, nor on local communities, but on the natural/ecological unit of the water-

shed - appropriate given the historical and increasingly critical role of water supply and management in the region's economy. The watershed also contains Bangkok, a huge concentration of people, and industrial and commercial development that puts massive pressure on resources, giving rise to a 'critical competition between agriculture, industries and urban domestic consumption' (p.203).

## Persistence and change

Two chapters on land tenure and labour in the agricultural economy form the core of the book. Both show mixed patterns of persistence and change. The first, by the editors, critically evaluates the assumption that land has been progressively concentrated into larger units and that tenancy rates have increased. They find instead a complex pattern of demographic change, migration and changing tenancy arrangements, all related to wider economic processes. The second, by Isvilanonda and Hossain, completes this picture with an analysis of the dynamics of technological change and labour, based

on comparative case studies of three villages with different water-supply characteristics. The village study by a Japanese research team addresses similar issues on a smaller scale.

Other chapters focus on a single sub-district where agriculture is increasingly the mainstay of the economy and examine aspects of agricultural diversification, paying attention to both the vulnerability of small economies and the environmental risks involved in large-scale production. Looking at the rural-urban frontier on the northern fringe of ever-expanding Bangkok, Marc Askew argues that local communities are not passive victims but active agents in processes which blur the boundaries between rural and urban environments.

## The local level

Ssirirup and Kammeier, looking at agricultural diversification in the context of the interaction between government policy and farmers' decision-making, stress the need for flexible approaches that are

sensitive to local conditions. To address the relationship between local social and administrative structures and development, Shin'ichi Shigetomi (missing from the list of contributors) constructs a three-tiered model of kinship/community organisation, local administrative structures and 'development organisations'. Michael Nelson focuses on the current decentralisation of government functions and asks whether this has a real democratising effect.

The book, the product of joint research between Kasetsart University, Thailand and Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, France, emerges from a conference held in 2000. The contributors, from diverse disciplines and nationalities, include development practitioners as well as academics. *Thailand's Rice Bowl* accomplishes the traditional task of agrarian studies: detailed documentation of the various dimensions of agrarian systems in a defined, if large, area. However, any attempt to cover such a large field is bound to have gaps and weaknesses. The book could have benefited from a more thematic organisation - perhaps by grouping chapters in terms of scale of focus and/or by paying attention to purely agricultural and

wider socio-economic factors. The lack of an index is surprising and potentially problematic for serious users of such a large and comprehensive volume.

A further weakness of the volume is its cursory treatment of environmental and alternative/sustainable agricultural development issues, both of which are significant for rural development in Thailand. Given that the unit of analysis is a watershed, and in particular, a network of related economic sub-systems linked by a common water supply, this could have provided a stronger and more interesting framework for the book. There is perhaps a case for a companion volume based on water and environmental issues. <

- Molle, Francois and Thippawal Srijantr, eds. 2002. *Thailand's Rice Bowl: perspectives on Agricultural and Social Change in the Chao Phraya Delta*. Studies in Contemporary Thailand No. 12 (Series Editor: Erik Cohen) Bangkok: White Lotus Press. pp 450

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