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village life  
in modern thailand

John E. deYoung



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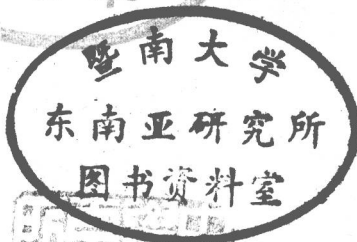
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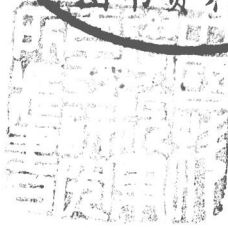
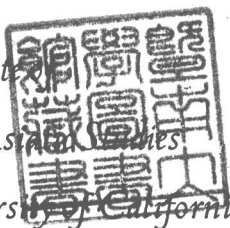
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# in modern thailand

John E. deYoung

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## **village life in modern thailand**

## *Foreword*

This report is an attempt to present a descriptive account of the life of the Thai peasants who live in that vast area of Thailand which lies outside the Bangkok delta plain. It deals mainly with the north, the northeast, and those parts of the central area not in the delta region, but, except for minor variations, the pattern of life described is representative also of the villages of the southern peninsula. Thus, this account covers almost 80 per cent of the peasants of rural Thailand and over two-thirds of the entire geographical area of the country. In addition, most of the basic patterns described are applicable to the peasants of the Menam Plain, although there they have been modified by a differing economic structure.

The Menam Plain, which includes eighteen of thirty-two provinces of the central area, has a peasant population of roughly 3,800,000—a little more than 20 per cent of the total

peasant population of the country—less than half of whom live in the immediate Bangkok delta area. Though having only one-fifth of the total peasant population, the Menam Plain is of tremendous importance, for from there come millions of tons of export rice, the basis of the nation's economy. Intensive, commercialized rice cultivation has wrought important changes in the social and economic life of the peasants of this area during the past fifty years. Compact village units have broken down—farmhouses are now scattered—and a rice crop raised for cash has brought about increasing dependence on a money economy.

An extensive study of peasant life in a rice-crop money economy now is under way. A team of American and Thai social scientists, headed by Dr. Lauriston Sharp of Cornell University, is at work on a detailed analysis of a commercial-rice-producing village community in the Bangkok delta. Only preliminary and fragmentary reports on this study have as yet been forthcoming, for the project is not scheduled for completion until 1956. Until the time when the final results of this study are made available, it would be pointless to try to depict the changes in the pattern of life for the peasants of the delta region. It is for this reason that I have not attempted to include the peasant of the lower Menam Plain within the scope of this study but have concentrated on those peasants who live in long-settled, compact village units, who practice a self-subsistent rice economy, and depend on secondary crops and other sources for their small cash income.

This account is not meant to be a detailed economic analysis of village life, such as the Zimmerman survey of 1930, which surveyed 41 villages by the questionnaire method and prepared numerous elaborate statistical analyses from the raw data collected. Here a synoptic account of the daily activities in a Thai village is presented, designed to give the lay reader a picture of how a Thai peasant and his family live and work in present-day Thailand, to show how the life of the peasant has changed in the last half century, and to point out some of the possibilities for his immediate future. This descriptive account has been based largely on direct first-hand field observations. I spent almost three years in social research in Thailand, one year

(1948-49) of which was spent conducting an integrated social study of a northern village community under a grant from the Social Science Research Council. Although many of the examples used for illustration have been drawn from this study, no generalizations have been made unless the pattern described was verified from field notes taken in other parts of the country on my frequent survey trips to villages in the central area, in the northeast, and in the south.

I wish to express special thanks for assistance in this phase of the study to former colleagues in the field, notably to the late John F. Embree and to Lauriston Sharp, under whose guidance my original field work in Thailand was begun.

The research following this field work and the first draft of the manuscript were completed as part of a Modern Thailand Studies Project of the Institute of East Asiatic Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, in 1952-53. During this period I held an appointment as Associate Research Anthropologist in the Institute, and I deeply appreciate the guidance of its director, Dr. Woodbridge Bingham, in the planning and execution of the study.

I am indebted to many persons who gave special assistance in preparation of the final manuscript: those research assistants of the Institute of East Asiatic Studies who helped gather source material, and the other staff members who aided in many ways; Walter Vella, my co-worker on the Modern Thailand Studies Project, whose work on Thai history gave me a fresh insight into the historical aspects of governmental and administrative patterns that touch on village life; Richard Marcus and Jean Esary of the Institute staff and John Gildersleeve of the University of California Press, for their painstaking work in preparing the manuscript for publication; and Dr. Choh-ming Li for his careful reading of the manuscript and valuable criticisms.

To Dr. Mary R. Haas I am particularly grateful, for the present book would not have come into being without her assistance, encouragement, and critical evaluation at various stages in its preparation.

JOHN E. DEYOUNG

*Quezon City, The Philippines*  
*January 5, 1955*

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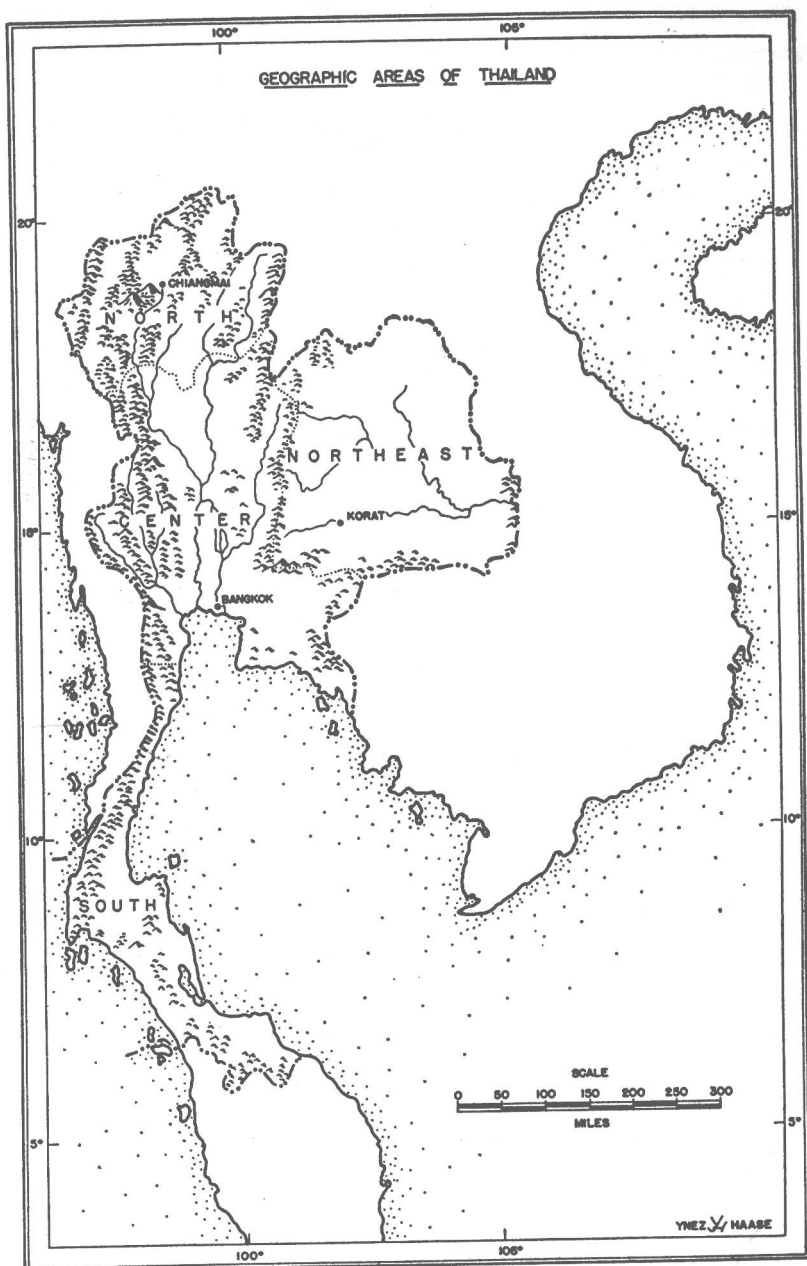
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## *Village Organization*

Bordered by Burma on the west and north, Indochina on the east and north, and Malaya on the south, Thailand consists of an irregular-shaped main body and a long, thin peninsular finger jutting deep into the Malay Peninsula. In crude outline the irregular shape of the country is not unlike that of the profile of an elephant's head; the main part of the country forms the head and ears, and the long, narrow southern peninsula represents the animal's trunk.

The country is slightly smaller than Texas or France, having a total area of roughly 513,000 square kilometers (approximately 200,000 square miles). The latest census, in 1947, set its population at 17,343,714; but taking its past annual increase of 1.9 per cent into account, the total population today should be close to 20,000,000. Considering the area of the country, this is a relatively low population. The official population density is



*Geographic areas of Thailand*

about thirty persons per square kilometer, which is one of the lowest population densities in all of Asia.

Though all of the country lies between the Tropic of Cancer and the Equator, stretching from 5 degrees to 21 degrees North latitude, its length of 1,020 miles and its extreme diversity of terrain have resulted in a marked variation of ecology and climate in the various sections of the country. Geographically, the country is divided into four major areas: South, Central, North-east, and North Thailand. Within these regions climate, topography, and ecology vary, and minor cultural differences have resulted, mainly from economic adaptation to environment.

#### THE LAND

The heart of Thailand, the central plains region, is a vast alluvial plain whose upper reaches are drained by the four major rivers of the north which join at Paknambo, some 350 kilometers from the Gulf of Siam, to form the Chao Phya or Menam River, whose branches and channels intersect the fertile delta area. This vast alluvial area, often called the Menam Plain, consists of roughly 55,000 square miles of low-lying land, and makes up a little less than 25 per cent of the total land area of the country. The altitude of this alluvial plain varies only from a low of 1.80 meters above sea level near Bangkok to a high of 44 meters in its northern portions. The low, flat topography is characterized by yearly floods of the Chao Phya and other rivers and the flood depth may be as much as 3 to 4 meters in some parts of the delta. The Menam Plain today is the great rice bowl for all rice-deficient countries of southeast Asia, and the area under most intensive cultivation is the delta north of Bangkok, a fertile, triangular-shaped flood plain with each side some 200 kilometers long, containing some 6,000,000 acres of paddy land, or more than 55 per cent of the paddy land of Thailand. From this limited region come the millions of tons of rice that the country exports each year and on which the nation's economy largely rests. Approximately seventeen provinces of central Thailand are in the Menam Plain and it is here that roughly 20 per cent (about 4,325,000) of the peasant population live.

The confines of central Thailand have long been a subject of controversy: Credner and others limited the region to the Menam Plain proper and classified the portion west of the flood plain as West Thailand and the region southeast of Bangkok (the Chandaburi region running to the Cambodia boundary) as Southeast Thailand.<sup>1</sup> Zimmerman and Andrews include these areas under Central Thailand.<sup>2</sup> Thai government officials follow much the latter classification, extending the lower part of the central area as far as Prachuab-Kirikhamin the south; it is this classification that is followed here. All told, some thirty-two of the country's seventy-one provinces make up the central area, and about 41 per cent of the population of the country live here.

South Thailand is made up of the northern two-thirds of the Malay Peninsula, a section of the peninsula with a narrow, high mountain chain flanked by narrow strips of land. Rivers and numerous small streams create watersheds in the valleys on each side of the mountains, and it is on these valley floors that wet-land rice is grown. Heavy rainfall and abundant soil make this one of the most fertile areas in all Thailand, but it is not a commercial rice-producing area; the peasants grow rice only for local consumption. Since many villages are on or near the coast, fishing ranks with rice-growing in importance; much of the known mineral wealth of the country is in this peninsula; here most of the country's 665,000 Malays live, the population south of Pattani being primarily Malay, north to Songkla half Thai and half Malay, and beyond Songkla principally Thai. A large Chinese population is in this region, particularly in the Kras Isthmus; the Chinese work in mines and on rubber plantations or are shopkeepers and vendors, and do not compete as small independent farmers with the Thai peasant. There are 14 provinces in south Thailand and approximately 2,400,000 people.

Northeast Thailand, often called the Korat Plateau, is a huge saucer-shaped basin bounded on the north by the Mekong river and the Dong Phya Yen mountains, which rise about 1,000 feet above sea level; it is the largest of the four regions of Thailand, consisting of 167,000 square kilometers (64,500 square miles),

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<sup>1</sup> For notes to chapter 1 see page 215.

or about one-third of the entire area of the country. Here in 15 provinces more than five and a half million peasants, or 35 per cent of the country's population, eke out a living. By far the greatest part of the plateau is undulating or flat, and in general is very poorly watered; the greatest part of the region is covered with jungles and grass plains. Some regions of the northeast remain unexplored. In the flood area of the river lowlands rice is the principal crop, and although the northeast lacks water and has poor soil, it does supply a small amount of rice for export. Dry-land rice is grown on jungle hillsides and wet-land rice in the lowlands, and more cattle are raised here than elsewhere in Thailand.

North Thailand, geographically, begins north of Raheng, Utaradit, and Petchabun and extends to the Burmese and Indo-chinese border; it contains seven provinces and approximately 2,000,000 peasants. The terrain is hilly or mountainous, divided into four major valleys by the Ping, Wang, Yom and Nan rivers, all of which flow to the south. Rice, the chief product here as elsewhere in Thailand, is planted along the low-lying regions of the rivers, whose annual flooding provides water and enriches the light sandy soil. Since the northern rivers flood relatively late in the year and since the monsoons occur later here than in central Thailand, June rainfall is not enough to give the rice a suitable start. Northern farmers long ago developed well integrated irrigation systems, so that many valleys have a constant supply of water throughout the year and farmers can grow a secondary crop of tobacco or soybeans after the rice is harvested.

#### CLIMATE

Thailand has a tropical, monsoon climate. In central Thailand the temperature rarely falls below 15 degrees C (59 F) or rises above 32 degrees C (89 F). The mountainous topography of the north and northeast drastically affects the temperature there during the cool season; although the days will be warm, the night temperatures may fall as low as 10 degrees C (50 F); in the hot season between March and May temperatures during the day may rise above 38 degrees C (100 F).

For all of Thailand except the southern peninsula, the seasons are determined by the direction of the prevailing monsoon winds and fall into three periods—the hot season from February to May, the rainy season from June to November, and the cool or winter season from November to January. In the southern peninsula there are only two distinct seasonal periods, a hot season from February to August, and a rainy season from September to January, the heaviest rains coming in December. The climate of the peninsula is milder than the rest of the country and the temperature is not so variable.

The rainy season for Thailand, except for the south, falls mainly between May and November, slackening off by the end of September. In central and north Thailand, there is little rain after October. The rainy season begins when the southwest monsoon winds from the Bay of Bengal and Gulf of Siam bring in the rain-laden clouds. The rains occur mainly as heavy afternoon and evening squalls and only rarely will there be a day or days of continual rain. The vast northeast has a rainfall similar to central and north Thailand, except that this region receives relatively less rainfall because mountains to the southwest and west act partly as a rain barrier. The western part of the Chaipum province is semi-arid.

#### THE PEOPLE

Only the Thai-speaking, lowland, wet-rice agriculturists, who make up the bulk of the country's population, will be described in this report. These peasants, who are scattered throughout all regions of the country, are concentrated in the river valleys where they can practice their wet-rice agriculture, and the great bulk of the peasant population is located in the central plains and the northeast. Accurate statistics are not available but analysis of the crude population data of 1947 would appear to indicate that perhaps 80 per cent of all the peasants of the country live in these two regions. The north with its approximate 2,000,000 inhabitants is also predominantly peasant. The peninsula region has large numbers of Chinese who are non-agriculturists, yet except for this group the remainder, both Malay and Thai, are predominantly a peasant folk.

Regardless of what region of Thailand they live in, all peasants are Thai in language and origin. The peasants of the north and northeast, who are half of all the peasants of the country, have long been referred to as Lao, but this is an arbitrary designation used in the past by the central Thai to refer to northerners and picked up by European writers. The Thai-speaking peasants of the two northern areas do not refer to themselves as Lao but as Muang Thai, as do the rest of the peasants of the country; and these so-called Lao are as Thai as the central and southern groups, all having drifted into Thailand from the Yunnan provinces of China between the first and fourteenth centuries A.D., bringing with them a tropical wet-rice paddy culture adapted to the lowlands. Over the centuries, owing partly to geographic isolation and partly to external forces, minor cultural differences among the various Thai peasant groups developed—differences in dialect and costume, for example. In recent times, many of these have been erased; even the dialectical difference, which is always among the last to change, is being whittled away by the compulsory village school, in which the central-Thai dialect is spoken as the standard language of the country. Therefore, although the peasants of the north and northeast may still be called Lao by outsiders, the term has little real meaning any longer; by government order, this term is no longer used officially, and it lingers in Thailand only as a cultural remnant.

The last half century, particularly the years since the 1932 revolution, has brought about a remarkable degree of similarity in patterns of life of the peasants of all Thailand. Certain of the overt cultural earmarks, easily observable a generation ago, (e.g., the tattooing of northern men) have been completely wiped out among the present generation. The central Thai woman has given up her traditional *panung*, a diaperlike Siamese version of the Indian dhoti, in favor of the northern woman's skirtlike *pasin*, making for uniformity in women's dress. Only her distinctive hair style sets the northern woman apart from her southern sister, and today only older women retain this hair style.

This is not to say that regional differences exist no longer;