

# A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THAI ECONOMIC HISTORY

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INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING ECONOMIES

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# A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THAI ECONOMIC HISTORY

Case Study of a Northern Chao Phraya Delta Village

by

Takashi TOMOSUGI

INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPING ECONOMIES

Tokyo 1980

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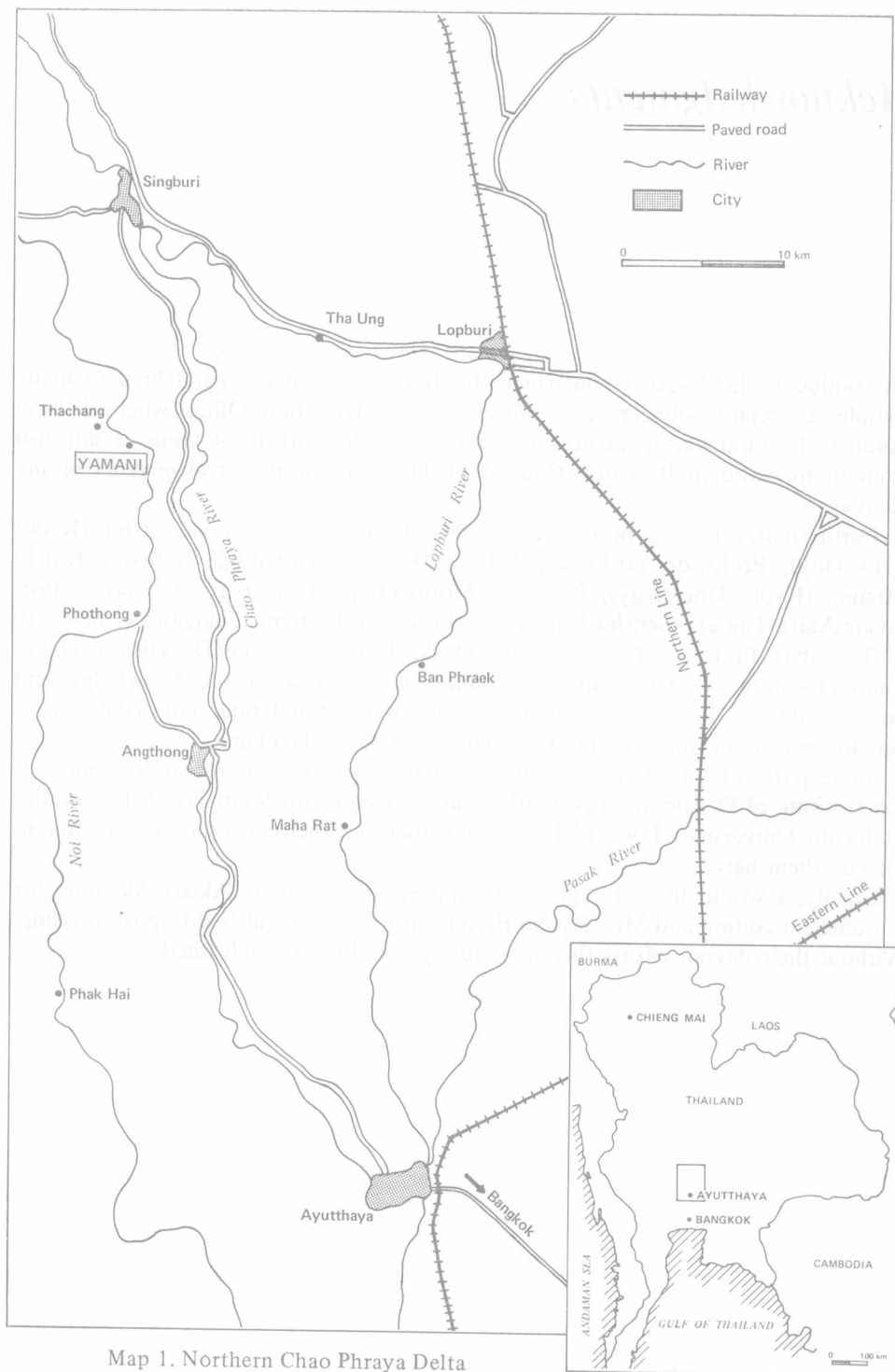
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## *Preface*

The present work is based on five surveys on rural societies undertaken during the period 1967–78. At first the primary attention of the author whilst conducting these surveys was mainly directed toward the economic activities of these rural societies. The objective of the surveys was to gather concrete information on economic activities and rice cultivation, as well as gathering facts on a general approach to such conditions rather than to view the situation in terms of economic development. During the process of the surveys, however, the author's attention was increasingly drawn to various noneconomic aspects of the rural society as well, which consequently widened the field of study. There was a clear realization in the interim that, although the economy of rural society is indispensable, it is by no means the entity. An awareness of this fact was not self-emanating but rather it was silently imparted by the Thai peasants to the author. The economic activities of rural folk come to signify meaningful behavior only if they are grasped in relation to other activities such as rituals and pastimes. It is Buddhism that teaches them the ultimate meaning of life and leisure that infuses the energy needed for work. Thus, a risk is entailed when reducing a multidimensional rural society to a singular one by examining economic activity in complete isolation from other aspects of life in rural society. In view of the fact that in the modern market economy economic activities are relatively independent of other activities, it is perhaps possible, to a certain extent, to consider economic activity in isolation to other activities. The economies of rural societies in Thailand, however, do not necessarily coincide with the modern market economy. The author's interest, therefore, lies in grasping economic activities in relation to other activities in an attempt to develop an overall picture of Thai rural society.

While conducting these surveys on rural society in Thailand, a considerable amount of research was carried out on the history of that country. Despite the fact that the results of historical research in Thailand are, by no means, inadequate, there are too many nonverified historical facts when it comes to an understanding of Thai rural society in its historical perspective. In order to pursue the objective, therefore, the author had to examine historical data and make an historical description. The results of previous historical research proved to be very helpful. There were, however, great difficulties involved in the process

of a historical description. A simple application of such general categories as feudalism and patrimonialism to Thai history had to be avoided. The author, first, became keenly interested in ascertaining which historical facts are concrete. Secondly, universal problems inherent in the concrete historical facts had to be found. A mere application of such general categories as feudalism and patrimonialism would have meant a description of Thai history using the criteria of European history, which first saw the emergence of the market economy. Instead of formulating a unilateral model of social development taken after the European pattern, the author was intent upon investigating the possibilities of diversified social development. The market economy was made possible by a fictitious conversion of labor, a part of the human mental and physical energy, and land, a part of nature, into commodities. This denotes that the market economy contains inherent difficulties. Moreover, the author has made a point of bearing this in mind as well as the fact that the market economy is an historical phenomenon peculiar to modern times.

Needless to say, this approach raises the problem of how to integrate the recordings of rural society with the historical description of my studies. It is not sufficient merely to say that the historical description serves as a background for research on rural society. A description of a particular phenomenon in modern rural society merely in terms of its historical origins does not necessarily explain the significance of the role played by this phenomenon in modern rural society. Rather, its present significance must be clarified in terms of its interaction with other concurrent phenomena. Thus, there lies a need to make a strict differentiation between a historical description and that concerning rural society as belonging to entirely different levels. This does not, however, solve the problem. Although they are differentiated, the interrelationship between them must also be demonstrated. An attempt has been made by the author to integrate the two by demonstrating that structure derived from the analysis of rural society can also serve as a valid framework for a historical description. In this connection, the author has been influenced considerably by structural analysis and semiotics used in anthropology.

The approach described so far can also serve as an explanation of the constitution of this book. Part I describes Thai rural society. Although the emphasis is on economic life, the domains pertaining to rituals and leisure are also woven in, in an attempt to present it in all its diversity. One topic that is dealt with, for instance, is that of spirits (*phi*). If one dismissed spirits as superstition from the point of view of modern science, one would lose sight of multi-realities of Thai rural society. Since spirits dwell on the borderline between order and disorder in that society, the decoding of their significance provides clues to recognize the possibilities lying within the society. Leisure is another non-economic activity of life, which nurtures the energy needed to maintain social order through work and other activities. For example, leisure nurtures the energy needed for labor, and chaos which pastimes symbolize is transformed into order through rituals.

Part II deals mainly with theoretical frame of reference. Since the aim is to

integrate a historical description with that concerning rural society, the focus here is in between the two. In general terms, this section first bridges the gap between the cultural anthropological and the historical point of view. In other words, there is a transition from a synchronic to a diachronic description, using structure as its common denominator. Then the factors triggering the unfolding of diachronic events, including the roles of kings, monks, and merchants, are examined. The second half represents an attempt to reconstruct the foundations of Thai economic history, discussing economic accumulation, possession, exchange, social division of labor, and social change. Generally speaking, events of the past are recognized as historical facts only after some significance is attached to them and this raises the necessity of examining various categories by which this can be accomplished. In order, however, to avoid a simple assimilation of Thai economic history into world economic history as well as the opposite mistake of overstressing its uniqueness, the author has revealed new categories or new interpretations of established categories. For instance, the category "accumulation" generally means capital accumulation. The author, however, has treated the categories of arable land accumulation and accumulation of labor competence as being independent categories. If only capital accumulation were to be considered, there would hardly be any accumulation to speak of on the part of Thai peasants. The fact remains, however, that they have always lived fairly comfortably in terms of such basic needs as food, clothing, and housing. Thus, it is easier to understand their economic activity if one also takes these other kinds of accumulation into consideration. The same can be said of other categories. Such an attempt on the part of the author does not stem from a propensity to favor novelties but rather is an effort to formulate categories that are better suited for analysis of the problem at hand. Put in more general terms, in order to formulate a diversified pattern of social development by making the unilateral European model into a relative one, it is necessary to be intellectually adventurous enough to employ new categories or new interpretations of existing categories. The present work is nothing more than an attempt at this approach. Whereas economics presupposes a market economy, there is a field of intellectual pursuit called economic anthropology which is interested in economic activity in nonmarket economies. The author has a deep interest in the latter. In fact, as a whole, Part II of this book can be considered an attempt to build a theoretical framework for economic anthropology.

Economic anthropology examines symbolism for the purpose of throwing light on hidden meanings of economic activity, which is an undercurrent of economy. Private ownership, for example, is regarded by modern economists simply as a prerequisite to modern economic activity. In the economic anthropologist's view, however, it is an institution through which social order is maintained and should be examined in terms of its origin, foundation, behavior, and so forth. Economic anthropologists even find a similarity between such possession as was prevalent among the ancient nobility who could privately secure things owing to taboo, and private ownership in modern times, although



their appearances seem quite different. This book deals with the origin of private ownership.

Part III consists of a specific historical description based on the categories examined in Part II. The two themes dealt with are landownership and farmer's organization. The fact that land is indispensable to agricultural production holds for all places and periods of history, but the significance which peasants attach to the land has varied greatly. To the Thai peasant, for instance, land is not only for the purpose of agricultural production but also it is the domain controlled by the spirits. Its significance can also vary according to the mode of agricultural production. If land becomes a commodity that can be transacted, its significance changes. This book reveals the process of transition from land occupancy to the development of private ownership on the basis of historical data. Agricultural cooperatives are mainly examined as the theme of farmer's organization. The stronger the control of the market over the farmer's economy, the more indispensable money becomes to the farmers. Agricultural cooperatives are established in order to meet the need for the money economy, and it is important to remember that the existing farmer's organization gave the framework for the establishment of such agricultural cooperatives. In fact, this movement is an attempt to reinforce the social relationships among farmers that have been eroded by the market economy. The development of such agricultural cooperatives has not been easy. In spite of the many difficulties experienced, however, the farmers have persisted in such efforts on the basis of the realization that they need some kind of organization to protect themselves from the immense pressure brought to bear on them by the market economy.

Although the three parts of the book are closely interrelated, they are at the same time relatively independent in their themes. The reader can, therefore, select whichever part or parts he is most interested in. The reader interested in rural society, for example, can read Part I of this book.

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Part One

Anthropological  
Descriptions



## Chapter **I**

# *Contemporary Village Life*

### I. THE SETTLEMENT

Yamani Village that has been studied since 1967 by the author is located on the right bank of the Noi River which is a branch of the Chao Phraya River. It is situated in the boundary area between Angthong and Singburi provinces, the distances being 28 kilometers from Angthong, 24 kilometers from Singburi, and approximately 130 kilometers from Bangkok. It can be reached by taking the bus from Bangkok to Angthong, changing there for the bus to Singburi, getting off at the triad intersection, and going westward for about 4 kilometers on the unpaved Irrigation Department road by bike. Before generalized motorization, it was not a very accessible place. About twenty years ago, it took more than fifteen hours to get there from Bangkok by ferryboat, and the runs were extremely infrequent. Now it takes only about three hours by bus, and a frequent bus service is available.

First, a brief look at the landscape in the Noi basin where the village is located. The Noi River branches off from the Chao Phraya River at Chainat and rejoins it downstream south of Ayutthaya. Most of the Noi basin is, therefore, contained in the north Chao Phraya Delta and occupies approximately the central region of the delta. Let us consider the landscape of the north Chao Phraya Delta from the viewpoint of settlement, particularly in terms of agricultural production. Probably the most important factor in considering the natural environment from the viewpoint of agricultural production is water. Needless to say, water is indispensable to agricultural production, and in fact, its utilization transforms a natural condition to a social condition. Rainwater is a natural condition, but irrigation water has a social character. Generally, this is because construction, maintenance, and control of irrigation channels and distribution of water for use are determined by social practice. When natural conditions are

examined with emphasis on the utility of water, the most important factor to be studied regarding agricultural production in the north Chao Phraya Delta is its topographical characteristics. This is because there is an absolute shortage of water for rice cultivation in terms of the amount of rainfall brought by the south-west monsoons. In spite of the fact that the rainfall is fairly evenly distributed over the entire delta, rice cultivation is easier on the lowlands where rainwater collects rather than in the highlands. Topographical features, therefore, determine the geographical distribution of rice cultivation in this area.

The delta, which has an area of about 500,000 hectares, can be divided into two parts in terms of its topographical features:<sup>1</sup> the Singburi plain and a lower basin. The plain was formed in the Pleistocene Epoch, when the Gulf of Siam extended almost to Ayutthaya. It is supposed that the lagoons and rivers in this region turned into basins with the southward recession of the sea. Particularly representative of such basins is the one extending west from Phak Hai to Bang Pla Ma and the area stretching from Bang Pa Han to Maha Rat and Ban Phraek and on to Tha Ung.

The altitude of the Singburi plain is five to fifteen meters above sea level, with the land sloping downward from northern Chainat to southern Ayutthaya. Over the distance of approximately one hundred kilometers between the two areas the land incline is about ten meters. The main rivers flowing on this plain are the Chao Phraya, the Noi, the Suphan, and the Lopburi. Along these rivers natural levees have been formed as long narrow ridges behind which lie back swamps. The traces of river turbulence are still to be found throughout the plain, and some are now being used as irrigation and drainage channels, while others are marshland.

The basin is two to five meters lower than the Singburi plain. There is no sharp topographical delineation between the two such as terrace scarps. Instead there is a smooth transition from the plain to the basin. Nevertheless the distinction between the two is clearly visible in terms of the scenery around the rice fields. On the plain, the rice fields have stands of trees and anthills, and they increase in number towards the mountain skirts. The most frequent tree types are *khoi* (*Streblus asper*, *Urticaceae*) and palmyra called *ton tan*. *Khoi* bark was used for paper. Strong drink and sugar can be obtained from palmyra. Another important function of these trees is the shade they provide as temporary respite from the burning sun for tillers of the soil and domestic animals alike. In the basin, however, the rice fields have neither trees nor anthills. They stretch out as far as the eye can see without any accentuation. There the toiling peasants can find no shade.

This basin is a unique one in hydrological terms as well. At the end of the rainy season, namely in October, great volumes of water begin to flow into the northern delta from the northern mountains as well as from the adjoining mountains. Overflowing the natural levees, these waters inundate the basin, which turns into a gigantic water jar. It should be emphasized that this overflow is not torrential. Rather it is a slow, steady process that gradually raises the level of water over the vast expanse of the basin. There is none of the kind of damage

TABLE 1  
ANNUAL RAINFALL IN THE NORTHERN DELTA

	(mm)			
	1964	1965	1966	1967
Singburi	1,542	1,211	1,389	886
Lopburi	1,655	1,385	1,595	1,099
Angthong	1,097	1,523	1,781	914
Ayutthaya	943	1,536	—	866

Source: National Statistical Office, *Statistical Year Book, Thailand*, No. 28, p. 22.

that is usually associated with floods. In fact, rice cultivation and the location of villages in this area presupposes this overflow. If it were not for the overflow, the basin would have suffered much from a poor water supply due to various natural conditions. Although the standard rainfall requirement for rice cultivation in Thailand is considered to be in the vicinity of 1,800 millimeters a year, nowhere in the northern delta is this figure attained (Table 1). Furthermore, the rainfall brought by the monsoon fluctuates annually. In 1967, for instance, Singburi, Angthong, and Ayutthaya all recorded a rainfall of less than 1,000 millimeters. Even Lopburi, which usually gets plenty of rain due to its proximity to the mountain skirts to the east of the delta, only received 1,100 millimeters. The overflow of the rivers in this area which is transformed into a vast water jar has made it possible for this region to serve as Thailand's number one granary in spite of its inadequate rainfall. Owing to the extremely gentle gradient from this basin south to the Chao Phraya Delta (1/100,000), the water jar retains its water for quite some time. This water not only covers the deficit in rainfall for rice cultivation but also brings with it natural nutrients. It, thus, prevents the fertility of the soil from falling below a certain level and makes it possible to grow crop after crop of rice without administering any fertilizers.

The Singburi plain, on the other hand, collects little such overflow. Together with inadequate rainfall, rice cultivation there has been unstable. Particularly, because the large fields on rugged higher terrain depend entirely on rainfall, their harvests have been poor. In fact, much of the terrain has remained mixed woodland. In order to make the most of what little water is available on this plain, the ridges bordering the fields have been well developed. This is not enough to compensate fully, however, for the shortage of water. Therefore, the main rice cultivation area of the northern delta has always been the basin, which has since ancient times served as the principal economic foundation of Thai society. This circumstance was reflected in the arrangement for collecting *kha na* (*kha* means value, *na* rice field), the agricultural land tax of ancient times. There were two categories of rice fields: *na khukho*, which were to be found in the basin, and *na fangloi*, which were to be found outside its periphery. In the case of the *na khukho*, the entire rice field was taxed, but in the case of the *na fangloi*, only the area that was harvested was subject to taxation.<sup>2</sup>

Let us continue with our observations on the landscape features of the basin.<sup>3</sup>



PLATE 1. Although the scene seems to portray mere wilderness, this, in fact, is the best type of field for floating rice from ancient times. There are no dikes and ditches which characterize irrigated rice fields. This pattern of cultivation is similar to that of shifting cultivation with little improvement or investment in land. At the end of the rainy season, however, the scene changes to something like an enormous lake and only ears of paddy float on the surface of the water. At Phak Hai.

Owing to the fact that the basin transforms into a gigantic water jar at the end of the rainy season, it is nearly impossible to build or maintain roads, and thus boats have been the main means of transportation. This makes observation of the hamlets most convenient from a boat. Along both sides of the river are natural levees without any artificial earthwork. The settlements are perched upon the levees, with the houses facing onto the river. In some places boats are used even to reach neighboring houses. Fishing in front of a house with a four-arm scoop net is often witnessed. The basin is a treasure house of fish, which are prepared in many different ways and become an invaluable source of animal protein. Near the houses are fruit trees and vegetable gardens which provide papaya, bananas, mangoes, and an assortment of vegetables, primarily for home consumption. The surplus, however, is sold. In the evenings people bathe in the rivers. It is not only the villages that are located on the levees but also the towns which, with such facilities as local administrative offices, police offices, rice mills, markets, and large temples, serve as service centers for the surrounding countryside.

An observation of the rice fields that stretch out behind the houses from the river is as follows. Getting off the boat and crossing the natural levee on which the houses stand, one is first of all struck by the vastness of the rice fields. The rice fields look like a vast stretch of endless grassland without a single tree standing, probably because there are no ridges between them and no irrigation canals and the rice has been harvested to be replaced with a growth of weeds.



A closer observation, however, reveals long, narrow ridges less than ten centimeters in height that are meant to demarcate the rice fields rather than to retain water. In fact, they could hardly serve the latter purpose in view of the fact that after the rainy season the rice fields are inundated by more than three meters of water. Even if higher ridges were to be built, they would, no doubt, break down under so much water. The usual species of rice cannot be used here, again because of the tremendous amount of water that covers the rice fields. The only type which can be cultivated is floating rice. The Thais call this type of rice *khao ni nam* or *khao khun nam* (*khao* means rice, *ni* to escape, *khun* to rise above, and *nam* water). It is a very particular species that keeps its head above the water by having its stalk grow to whatever length is necessary. Only this type can be grown under such conditions. A further examination of the surface of the rice fields reveals that they have not been levelled horizontally. The natural undulation of the terrain has been left as it is. It is unnecessary to level the terrain of the rice fields here as in the case of the usual rice fields, as the massive overflow of river water nurtures the rice. Naturally, there is also no need for irrigation canals. Only the natural flow of water linking the lowest levels of the terrain form waterways which function as drainage courses. This can be termed as a "natural" irrigation system, which is quite different from an intensive type agriculture in which huge amounts of capital and labor are invested. The low land productivity due to minimal investment in it is compensated for by the use of vast areas for cultivation: an extensive type agriculture. What makes rice cultivation using vast areas possible is dependent upon the utilization of intensive labor during the busy season. Rice cultivation in the northern delta, thus, depends more upon the availability of skilled agricultural labor rather than upon high land productivity. The peasant's life there is rich in everyday foods and materials. It is noteworthy that there is no record or memory of famine.

Another factor concerning the location of Yamani Village is that it is positioned on the right side of the natural levee formed by the Noi River. Thus the village occupies a long strip of land extending to about 800 meters in a northwest-southeast direction, bordering Thon Samo Village of Thachang District at its northern extremity. The boundary line which demarcates the two villages coincides with that of the respective provinces that these two villages belong to. Although there is a boundary post, it is hardly recognizable as it is hidden among the copse. People, however, carry on their daily lives irrespective of this administrative demarcation which is crossed every day and the villages thereby form an unbroken chain. It would, therefore, appear that the administrative boundary was determined accidentally without taking the people's lives into consideration. At the southern end, however, the village limits are marked by the grounds of Irrigation Department Office which adjoins neighboring Ban Ho Village at the northern extremity where two big rice mills are built along the river. Although Yamani Village used to directly adjoin Ban Ho Village, after the construction of the sluice and the Irrigation Department Office in the 1950s based upon an irrigation program, those who lived in the southern half of Yamani Village were relocated. Consequently, despite the fact that the part of Yamani