

4. Canals, Landlords, and Peasants: Post-Bowring Transformation of Thai Peasants

Topics

- Post Bowring: changing context
- Canals and landlords
- Peasant colonization
- The decline of forced labour
- The two regimes structure

4.1 Post-Bowring: changing context

With China facing problems, the trade with China slumped in 1840s. The King (and nobles) responded by encouraging the growth of European trade. Bowring Treaty in 1855 gave the British trading rights and imposed limits on trade dues. Similar rights were later expanded to other European nations.

Initially, it was thought the main trading commodity would be “sugar”. But Bangkok could not compete with the cheaper Javanese sugar. Rice then became the main exporting product.

The boom in rice export started from mid 1870s. Over the next 60 years, rice export increased 15 times from 100,000 tons to 1.5 million. The boom in rice export instigated a crucial change in Thai peasants. Paddy tract expanded to cover almost the whole of Chaopraya Plain. New agrarian society of individual peasant proprietor was born.

4.2 Canals and landlords

The increased revenue from rice production made “land” much more valuable. From 1850s, king, aristocrats, and peasants contested to own the newly cultivated land for producing rice.

The original condition of the lower-delta in the central region required earthwork for draining away excess water. The area was in fact a jungle of swamp grass populated by crocodiles. Therefore, the key for transforming the area for rice production was building canals.

Before 1850s, canals were built mainly as highways, with some benefits for cultivation. But after 1850s, canals became projects for Kings and nobles to claim property rights over land alongside canals. Klong Mahasawat, Klong Damnern Saduak, Klong Premprachakorn were digged and land rights were distributed to Kings and nobles.

With rising rice export demand, the process of cultivating new land accelerated. Prospective tenants also were flocking into the new canals tracts. Areas around Klong Sansaeb, for example, became populated between 1878-1885. With plentiful supply of tenants, the nobles petitioned for rights to build canal and own lands.

With increased importance of land, “property rights” eventually gained legal status, contributing to rise in land value. Receipts of land tax could be used as a proof of land ownership. Sale of land was enabled. Land along Klong Prawet in 1877, for example, cost 1-1.5 baht per rai.

It seemed a system of landlords and tenants was going to be created. But the creation of the system of landlords and tenants, especially by the nobles, faced opposition from 1) peasants; and 2) king

(1) Peasants settlers were not easy to control. And the nobles were not skilled in managing their land. It was not long until the canal tracts fell in disorder. Landlords and peasants disputes were so widespread.

(2) The King and nobles were competing in trade, collection of taxes, and control of people. From mid 1870s, the King attempted to stop nobles from expanding land ownership. King also turned to support colonization by individual peasant households. Land in Royal scheme were distributed for peasants'

The King and his closer circles of nobles continued to expand the control over new rice tracts, but deny other nobles from doing the same. Royal related companies such as Siam Land, Canals, and Irrigation Company, built a gigantic Rangsit project on 1.5 million rai.

With the King and close associates taking control of canals building, they were able to accumulated land. This pushed for a new legal rules for land ownership. They rejected the use of tax receipts to end challenges from tenants. Land registry and certificates started to develop. But this new system applied only to the land claimed by King and nobles.

4.3 Peasant colonization

In the 1900s, investments in canal-building ceased. But the frontier moved beyond the canal tracts. Outside the land owned by King and nobles, the legal framework favoured individual peasant settler. For the lands not claimed by King and nobles, certificates of tax payment remained in used to claim rights to use land, to support customary rights to jab-jong.

The irrigation department was created. Dutchman, Van der Heide, was hired as its first director. Large-scale irrigation project was neglected, but the smaller drainage projects were expanded, especially around Rangsit area.

With the government undertaking irrigation roles, the roles of landlords declined. Colonizing peasants moved to use the areas.

Peasants moved into land even beyond irrigation. By 1900, the frontier created by peasants moved much beyond the canal project lands. Swamp and jungle were cleared and turned into paddy land. Every area in Chaopraya Delta eventually turned into paddy field. Settlers travelled by boats along river to find new sites.

Frontier society of peasants was highly mobile. They moved to find new opportunities. They abandoned places with difficulties in production. Many families made several moves in a single lifetime.

In 1900, 98% of rice export came from the central plain. It was only after WWI that process extended to other regions such as the North and the Northeast.

Due to the difficulty in transportation, the North initially did not face early impact of paddy expansion. But this eventually changed with the train. The northern rulers, however, were allowed to “grab” lands with little restraint from Bangkok.

In the Northeast, the railway link to Korat opened up some paddy cultivation, making Korat the center for rice trade. But area further away were beyond reach, and developed as suppliers of livestock.

The frontier surge led to the rapid increase of population in Chaophraya Delta, contributed by falling death rates and mass immigration. Captives from military campaigns, and voluntary migrants sought for opportunities by moving into the new areas. Northeasterners who moved to take labour jobs also settled. Terwiel estimated that in 1830s, population of central plain was 375000. By the 1920s, the number was 3.3 millions.

4.4 The decline of forced labour

The expanding frontier prised people away from the corvee systems of labour control.

Phrai actually were always resentful of corvee. Scarcity of labour in early Bangkok period led to the tightened of control. But despite numerous attempts, including the reduction of the corvee period, the system still failed. By 1870s, as much as 80 percent evaded corvee.

From 1870s, the King initiated the process to end the corvee system. This was contributed by the broader attempt to restraint the power of the nobles. Corvee for phrai-som was gradually being replaced by the cash payment. The king demanded such payment from the nobles. Eventually, all of the corvee system was replaced by the cash payment. In a similar fashion, the King announced the end to the That system.

4.5 The two regimes structure

In the late 19th century, with Rama V attempt to create power for his absolutism, the result was the two regimes existed side by side.

- 1) a society of landlords and tenants developed in early canal projects and northern valley
- 2) A new peasantry of independent cultivators, growing beyond the canal areas.

In the society of landlords and tenants

Landlords held over 90% of land. Three families held 1/3 of total area under tenancy in 4 provinces around Bangkok.

Land ownership in this area were legalised through land deeds. Productions were closely connected to export. Landlords usually employed managers to help, but conflicts with tenants were frequent.

Tenants in the landlords system faced insecurity of tenure and occupancy rights. Many had set up their own protection system, asking for help from nak-leng to fight against landlords and others. Military expeditions had to quell riots and perform the role as policemen.

Tenants also faced uncertainty from drought (as canals were mainly for drainage), and from the fluctuation in international price for rice. Thus, they were prepared to leave during bad times.

In the society of independent cultivators

In districts beyond canal tracts such as Supanburi and Chantaburi, over 90% of population were independent cultivators. They avoided holding a large piece of land to avoid paying land taxes. Most holding were in the range of 12-25 rai.

Independent cultivators allocated land through the family system. Landless farmers and import labour were rare. Production was for self-consumption first before the surplus was sold to market. Their holding of land not legalised through deeds. Older system of using tax-payment certificate was used. The village control allocation of land. The lack of legal framework prevented the land from being bought.

Summary and implication

The co-existence of two regimes

Landlords controlled land that produced most exports. But independent cultivators expanded their settlement, quickly controlling more area of cultivated land. The two regimes were connected through migration of peasants. They moved to settle as tenants in years of high prices. But when faced with failures from price and weather, they fled to be independent cultivators. Until the tax collectors forced them to come back to produce for market.

The poor but not disintegrated peasants

Under the two regimes structure, Thai peasants faced limited changes from the market expansion. With low yields, they are not particularly successful economically. But with the state lack of support for expansion of smaller landlords and rice merchants, peasant society still do not face destruction from markets. They were still not turned into landless farmers, and the internal division remain limited.

Reading

- Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2002). *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, KL: Oxford University Press. (Chapter 1)