3. The Thai Village Economy in the Past (Chattip Nartsupha)

Topics

- Primordial village communities
- Subsistence village communities under the sakdina system (1455-1855)
- Shifting away from subsistence economy (post-Bowring)

3.1 Primordial village communities

Thai primordial communities were mainly rice producers, occupying low-land basin. They did not settle in mountainous area. This is in contrast to some tribal communities in the nearby area, who were highland farmers, and grew products other than rice.

Social structure of primordial communities

Ownership of land belongs to the village. The leader of a village allocated entitlement to different families. But the entitlement can be reallocated.

Villages have their own ruling system. The elders had roles in resolving conflicts. Self-rule by the communities were sought for. The peasant rebellions in later times, for example, always sought to re-establish villages' independence from the state.

3.2 Subsistence village communities under the sakdina system (1455-1855)

The relationship between the Sakdina system and the villages is characterized by the Sakdina system trying to establish itself over village communities. The King claimed to own land and allocate land to nobles. Commoners did not have entitlement over land. Their status was more or less like renters. They had no ownership rights, and could not sell land. Commoners lost entitlement to their land if they did not use it.

But the sakdina system was not actually interested in owning the land. Their claiming of land was more to legitimise their extraction.

Communities were bonded in their subsistence production, but needed to give suai and their labour to the state.

The sakdina system, therefore, did not penetrate into the village. It only acted at the surface level. Thai sakdina only extracted suai and corvee. But did not act as actual landowner like the European owners of manors (as in European feudal system). The lack of direct encounter between nobles and villagers helped prolonged the Thai sakdina system.

Thai village communities under sakdina

Thai villages communities, even under the sakdina system, continued to be self-reliance. Their production lacks use of technology. It was labour intensive and relied on natural source of water (river and rain). In addition, other forms of productive activities were also self-reliance, such as hunting and weaving. Textile weaving was an important activity for every household. Women had to be able to do weaving. Each village weaved their textile for their own use.

Villagers produce mostly for their own consumption, only little were for exchange. The only activity beyond self-reliance was collecting forest products to pay suai for the state to trade.

As observed by Ammar Siamwalla, this allowed the trade in Pre-Bowring times to have little impact on the domestic economy. International trade co-existed with subsistence economy.

Villages' production under sakdina

Crucial to the villages' production system was "labour". But there was limited division of labour, and no selling of labour. Plenty of land enabled villages to sustain their subsistence by cultivating new land. Villages' production relations were characterised by (1) inner cohesion; and (2) state's extraction.

(1) Villages' inner cohesion signified by villagers helping and sharing with each other.

Whole villager moved together. Membership of a group was crucial in a village's allocation of land. Family ties were important. Thai families extended their lineage through women. The sense of community was more important than the sense of being individuals. The strength of inner cohesion meant there was not much division in villages. Divisions was mainly villages/state and peasants/nobles. Landless farmers were rare.

(2) State extraction happened crucially through the extraction of labour.

Corvee was feared by villagers, as they had to faced risks in travelling through forests. Some villages flee together as a whole.

Villagers' beliefs indicate the significance of their self-reliance and self-rule. “Ghosts of ancestors“ were important. They had ghosts for their own villages. But there was no "national-level ghosts". Buddhism was used to justify the right to rule of the elites. The teaching of Karma helped justify the extraction.

But villagers' everyday life still dominated by non-Buddhist beliefs.

Implications of this period

- Bourgeoisies did not develop from villages. Villages did not produce merchants or craftsmen.
- Even travelling traders were doing it only as supplement jobs.
- Interaction between villages occurred, but only to help each other.
- It was only until the Chinese settled that the domestic trade grew. But the Chinese did not expand to all regions and to rural areas.

3.3 Shifting away from subsistence economy (post-Bowring period)

The Central region in the post-Bowring period

Bowring treaty led to free-trade. The Western demand for rice led to Siam's increased rice production. Rice increased from 5% of export to 50%. The land used to produce rice increased from 5.8 millions rai in 1850 to 9.2 millions in 1905.

The central plain was the main production area. Production was increased through expanding land use. Farmers were brought to settle along newly dig canals. The replacement of corvee by cash payment created new need for cash. With the newer settlements, the common ownership of land started to lose significance.

But evidence suggested that Thai village communities tried to remain subsistence. They did not fully embrace the market system. They still produce for self-use. They did not search for new production technology.

It was mainly the Chinese who engaged in market activities. Chinese became the middlemen who linked villages to capitalism. They made villages more dependent on the external markets in both production and consumption. The Chinese played role as lender. Peasants who failed to pay loans and interests to the lenders had to become landless. The emergence of landless farmers, in the long-run, would caused the villages to disintegrate. Landless farmers will have to leave their villages to make their living.

Parasitic-capitalism (Chinese merchants + Thai Feudal), therefore, was the main threat to the self-sufficiency of village communities.

Northern region

There were export of timbers and forest products, but these did not affect village communities. The difficulty in transportation slowed down the penetration of the market system. But the building of train would eventually change this.

Southern region

Main export was tin. But operation of tin-mine was owned by outsiders (Chinese and Western capitals). Subsistence economy existed until WWII, when rice production, fruits farming, and rubber planting grew.

Isan region

Highest degree of subsistence. Trade in Isan was mostly trade in forest product. The access of Chinese merchants were limited. Isan peasants were the most rebellious to the penetration of the state and market.

Summary and critques

Village economy in the past was subsistence economy. Village communities were dragged into capitalism, but they resisted. State and markets were aliens to the village communities. Villagers resisted the extrusion of state and market. Thai capitalism was parasitic of state. Their extraction relied on privilege, and limited their effect in changing rural communities.

Counter-arguments to Chattip

Overall criticism: Romanticising rural life by putting too much emphasis on persistence, rather than on transformation and adaptation. His stressing of the value of “subsistence” becomes too normative. Both the timeline (400 years+) and the source of information (oral history) are loose.

J.Kemp (The dialectics of village and state in modern Thailand): village communities was in fact more of the unit of public administration that began after Rama V reform. The system actually born out of the reform of public administration, and were means to rule peasants.

Reading

Chattip Nartsupa (1999) *The Thai Village Economy in the Past* Bangkok:Silkworm Books