

## **Chapter 2**

### **Knowledge in the making: a brief retrospective of village-level studies in the Chao Phraya Delta during the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

François Molle

#### **2.1 Introduction**

An important part of the knowledge acquired about societies (and in the present case about the Chao Phraya Delta) is derived from local surveys and research which could be termed micro studies, as opposed to macro approaches which rely on the analysis of aggregated statistical data or observable general trends. Some of these micro studies have not only significantly contributed to the creation of common knowledge but have sometimes also sparked intense scholarly debates. The observations and the theorisation, often bordering on generalisation, drawn from such local studies are, of course, strongly shaped by the specificity of the village considered, but also by the idiosyncrasies of the researcher himself, and more generally by the wider intellectual context at the time when the study was carried out. The interpretation and the extrapolation of the information are therefore biased by these different factors, but also tend to linger on and to endure even though new radical transformations may already have taken place.

This chapter sketches a retrospective picture of micro studies carried out in the delta<sup>1</sup> during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It primarily intends to mirror the transformations undergone in this region by assembling a series of chronological observations and reflections, but it will also comment on their contribution to the making and shifting of paradigms through the course of time. It is also hoped that this chapter will facilitate the endless and time-consuming process of unearthing bibliographical sources and be of use to those scholars willing to contribute to the development of rural studies in Thailand. Obviously this inventory does not claim to be exhaustive

and, in particular, has not explored disciplines such as archaeology, architecture, religious beliefs, or psychology. Its focus is more on the social and economic history of the rural delta<sup>2</sup>, although it also covers the delta's increasing integration within the urban domain. The main studies are listed in Table 2.1 at the end of the chapter and are also represented on a map<sup>3</sup> (Figure 2.1), in which there is evidence of some interesting geographical patterns. The studies include fieldwork undertaken by Ph.D. students or academics on rather long term or in-depth research projects (indicated by a square), and other studies which have given rise to one or several scientific papers (indicated by a circle)<sup>4</sup>.

## 2.2 Fragmented information prior to WW II

No scholarly micro-study was carried out in the delta prior to WW II. Fragmented information comes from travellers or official reports, or from the compiled observations of a few foreigners living in Siam at that time. Two exceptions are the nationwide economic surveys undertaken by Zimmerman in 1930 and Andrews in 1934, but they are not strictly speaking village studies but collections of data from a limited sample of villages.

Glimpses of rural life are afforded by historical archives, which provide official letters and reports from provincial or Bangkok officers, petition letters, inspection trip observations, etc. As such written documents are often motivated by the occurrence of some problem (flood, drought, banditry, land dispute, economic slump, etc.), they tend to emphasise difficulties. The limited information available about daily life or social relationships often focuses on farmers' exploitation by landlords, Chinese middlemen, officials or bandits, on the vagaries of the climate and hydrological regime, indebtedness, or cattle rustling (Chatthip and Suthy, 1978; Chatthip *et al.*, 1978; Sunthari, 1978; and Johnston, 1975). These accounts tell us of a peasant frontier society in a process of emancipation from lords and rulers trying to further their position in the expanding capitalist economy. They mirror a world in rapid mutation where the physical environment was being transformed, the social and political relations redefined, and where the reshuffling of access to land, capital and labour engendered new tensions, conflicts, interventions, and laws.

To be sure, hardships related to health, security, and economic exploitation were attached to these transformations. Most accounts, however, originate from the east bank, most especially Rangsit. Little is known about those peasants who had been engaged in floating rice cultivation since Ayutthaya's time in the flood

plain of the delta (see Map 3 in Appendix); about settlers in the old delta, who lived more on lumber, bamboo products, and charcoal making than on agriculture, very often moving back and forth between the land frontier and more populated areas (Gisselquist); and about this “silent frontier”, far from the landlord area of the east bank. As is typical of frontier societies with an abundance of land, most problems could be overcome by moving further on. Beyond the commercial interests of those engaged in the rice market, the rice industry also fuelled a tremendous human drive towards peasant farming. Its integration in capitalist circuits, rather than its development as a subsistence economy, may be only partly explained by the necessity to buy goods, hire labour, or pay taxes. The swift response of the Thai countryside and the “post-treaty euphoria” suggest that commodity production and the monetisation of exchange were already well developed in central Siam (Seksan, 1989). Many of the settlers were from Bangkok or its outskirts, “accustomed not only to sustaining themselves from the fields and gardens, but also to considerable exchange with the markets” (Hanks).

While rice production was subject to uncertainty, fishing also developed along with the canal network and the paddy fields, and was often more than a complement (Hanks); extra patches of land were cleared for sugarcane, eggplant, or beans and a few fruit trees; chicken, ducks, and pigs complemented the diet. Over the course of time, communities grew and temples were built. Stories tell us about the mobility of small groups, interconnected by links of kinship, battling against mosquitoes or bandits, clearing the land and testing the appropriateness of the water regime for rice cultivation, moving again to other areas (Hanks; Kaufman; Gisselquist).

As early as 1930, Montri observed “conditions of congestion which exist in many of the best rice producing districts . . . where a very large number of persons [are] working 5 *rai* of land and under. . . . This condition has been produced by the growth of families living on ancestral land, which have been gradually divided up amongst the new generations.” While abundant land was available in the 1910s, in only 20 years or so the situation reversed, although pressure was first felt in areas with older settlements. The 1930 crisis also came at a time when yields were declining and rice prices would not recover before the middle of the century. The delta’s peasant society retreated towards subsistence, continued expanding the rice frontier into marginal lands (water-deficient uplands or ill-drained swamps), grappling with climate and market vagaries but protected by the “constructive neglect” of the government to administer property rights, which limited the possibilities of accumulation (Pasuk and Baker, 1995).

### 2.3 Post-war investigations on the rural delta (1945–1960s)

Except for the collection of impressions and scattered observations published by some westerners such as Virginia Thompson (1941) or R. L. Pendleton (1946, 1962), virtually no scholarly work is available on the culture and socio-economy of rural livelihoods in this era. The first agricultural census (1950) and a large scale rural economic survey (1953) provided interesting statistical data but it seems that little use was made of them at the time. Until the 1960s, no Thai person had ever formally studied sociology or social anthropology (Amara, 1998). The first well known benchmark of systematic ethnography in Thailand was the launching of the Thai-Cornell Bang Chan Project, conducted by a team of researchers from different disciplines. The project not only addressed the social history of a community (Sharp and Hanks), the farm structure and economy (Kamol), psychology and behaviour (Phillips), but also a series of other issues such as religion, nutrition, and child-rearing. The project yielded a description of rural life close to Bangkok which contrasted with the more general picture of Asian culture mostly derived from East Asia. This lent support to the “loosely structured society” concept put forward by Embree (1950) and gave rise to the well-known scholarly controversy.

Bang Chan village was a cluster of several hamlets, with a significant degree of interaction with nearby Bangkok and other markets (only 52% of the products consumed originated from the village). Farmers engaged in more consumption than their production would allow<sup>5</sup>. Income tended to remain low because of limited land supporting a growing population, the lack of other activities to undertake, the constraints which soil conditions and inadequate water control imposed on rice production, and the scarcity of cash and credit.

A similar anthropological study was carried out by Kaufman in 1954 in Bangkhud, a village 14 km from Bang Chan. Kaufman depicted farmers as preoccupied with rice and religion, and placed emphasis on two main changes: the building up of agrarian pressure, and the growing influence of the centralised state. Population growth and land fragmentation by inheritance triggered the intensification of rice cultivation (with a shift from dry broadcasting to transplanting and mechanisation), an increase in the labour demand, and a growth of hired labour, landlessness, and migration to Bangkok or other areas, and the alteration of the socio-economic patterns of access to land and labour. At the same time, the village was increasingly integrated to the centre through district services, the growing dependence of the *wat* on the Department of Religion, the new schools

under the control of the Ministry of Education, and the development of roads and transportation services.

As Kaufman drew a picture which was complementary and similar to Bang Chan, the study of rural economy seemed to lose its attractiveness. Field work was redirected to religion, beliefs, and folklore (Attagara; Terwiel; Bunnag; Ingersoll), reflecting the interest of foreign academic research in exploring cultural and religious diversity rather than in substantive economic issues.

## 2.4 The rise of an agrarian crisis (late 1960s–early 1980s)

We must wait until around 1967 to see the almost concomitant launching of four new important village studies carried out respectively by Steven Piker (near Ayutthaya), Takahashi Tomosugi (Sing Buri province), Jeremy Kemp (Phitsanulok province), and Jacques Amyot's team (Ayutthaya province, in 1969). At that time, several studies had already suggested the emergence of a crisis resulting from growing indebtedness (Uthit, 1958), pressure on land and the shift of bargaining power in favour of landowners (Chuchart *et al.*, 1965), and landlessness and stagnation of productivity despite the advent of irrigation (FAO/UNDP, 1968).

Piker's study confirmed the increase in agrarian pressure. It showed that the breaking of the family cycle and of the relative balance between land and labour within households had significantly weakened kinship ties and the security they offered to members. Landlessness (half of the village households) and social and economic differentiation were on the rise but there were still "no pronounced class differences within the village." Migration to the uplands or to Bangkok had caused an impressive decline of the population by 25% between 1945 and 1960, increasing the availability of wage labour in the village. Urban culture was encroaching. Traditional life styles and goals appeared decreasingly attractive. His interpretative framework accounts for both "structural regularities" and normative principles (bilateral reckoning of descent, matrilineal residence, partition at inheritance, etc.) and for the prevalence of ad-hoc dyadic relationships, including patron-client relationships and flexible, voluntary patterns of relationships ("the pattern is one of shifting and unstable, not durable alliances; and this is true for kin-based as well as non-kin based alliances").

Tomosugi's village is located in a different ecological setting. While most of Piker's Banoi was planted with floating rice, Tomosugi's Yamani was supplied by irrigation canals constructed ten years earlier. The completion of the Greater Chao Phraya Project contributed to several changes in rural life, including the growth of

wage labour (a huge labour force was mobilised for the construction), improvements in transportation and public safety, and increasing commercial activity. Although he mentions the permanence of features commonly associated with traditional peasant life (labour exchange, use of animals for ploughing the land, subsistence-oriented economy, and importance given to chatting, rituals, or spirits), his description “shows how such categories as peasant, trader and wage labourers are all bound together in the village, suggesting transitional phases from a substantive to a market economy.”

Kemp's study of Hua Kok village led him to several conclusions on the Thai social structure. A large part of his work is devoted to showing the absence of groups, the predominance and stability of dyadic relationships including patron-client relationships (while opposing Hanks' generalisation of the concept), and the illusions attached to the concept of the village or the community. His picture of the village economy also emphasises population pressure relieved by the development of upland agriculture, increasing commercialisation and economic differentiation, and the resulting changes in the social organisation of production.

In 1969, the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute launched its “Ayutthaya Village” study, consisting in the comparison of three villages. The findings synthesised by Amyot (and by Fuhs with regard to labour utilisation) yield a picture of rice-based agriculture severely constrained by ecological factors and already seeking to alleviate population pressure by migration and non-farm activities (1976).

The 1970s and early 1980s can be seen as a period of transition between a crisis and new opportunities. Local studies span a much wider range of interests than pure anthropological village studies and their scope is often narrowed down to a specific salient aspect of rural transformation. A first set of studies was devoted to the green revolution and to the modalities of the intensification of agriculture. They include perspectives on rice cultivation and on the adoption of innovations (Green; Jerachone *et al.*; Fujimoto and Matsuda; Tanabe), institutional change (Hara), village level contractual arrangements (Gisselquist), land issues (Tongpain and Jayasuriya; Wiwatchai; Tanabe), marketing (Pranee), and social organisation for water management (Duncan). Another set of studies focused on ethnicity (Foster; Snit; Sams), while Riley and Lauro documented demographic change, fertility drop, mobility, and population control.

Pooled together, these studies afford us insight on the complexity and diversity of the rural world and on the profound transformations at work. After more than a decade of tension, the mid-1970s brought some relief on such diverse aspects as

the land market (local landlords shifted to urban areas and non-agricultural investments), the labour market (rice intensification, notably double cropping, raised labour requirements), the capital market (institutional credit became widely available, at least to landed farmers), water supply (drainage and on-farm facilities were gradually improved), population growth (decreases in fertility, emigration), and rice prices. Studies point to a high level of geographical mobility. Farmers in richer areas moved to buy land in less developed portions of the delta, land-hungry families moved temporarily or permanently to the upland frontier, and others gave up farming to enter non-agricultural sectors. All this tended to reshape the patterns of poverty which could no longer be simply equated with indebtedness and landlessness. While Snit sees rice farmers exploited by middlemen, most studies emphasise relatively efficient social control of interpersonal relationships<sup>6</sup>. The growing influence of the state is seen bringing some benefit in curtailing autocratic or capitalistic local powers (land title establishment, public security, institutional credit, etc.) and providing new services in terms of electrification, roads, and irrigation infrastructure. After the limited and disappointing impact of irrigation in the 1960s, the advent of High Yield Varieties (HYVs) and the surge of double cropping brought about a sweeping restructuring of the factor markets, mechanisation, and an increase in income for those who could grow irrigated crops in the dry season. These changes, however, were felt chiefly in the irrigated areas. Follow-up studies of Ayutthaya villages by CUSRI showed that the situation in the flood-prone area had progressed little.

In 1976, Thiravet complemented the research in urban anthropology undertaken by Akin (1975) and Johnson (1978) with a study of the northern rural fringe of Bangkok (Pak Kret). He showed how farmers managed the transition from farming to urban life and gradually found their place in the city. While old people remained in the farming sector, 33% of households entered the bazaar economy (household industry, petty trading, intermittent jobs), and as many as 42% entered the capitalist sector (construction, transport, government work, etc.). Such an economic continuum between the rural and urban fringes echoes that in social organisation shown by Akin in his study of a slum. It also strengthens the pervasive impression that most farmers are neither attached to their land nor to their occupation. Even as early as the 1940s, Virginia Thompson (1941) noted that "Bangkok is so far in advance—in the western sense—of the rest of the country that provincial Siamese dream of nothing but going there," an impression later confirmed by Kaufman. A 1972 survey revealed that 65 to 77% of the peasants interviewed expected that their children should have another occupation than their own (Douglass, 1984).

Amyot noted that farmers see “no prestige in farming” and Snit reported that 60% of farmers in his village near Lop Buri already thought of changing occupations, while wanting their children to achieve higher education.

The village studies carried out by Utong and Sams in the 1980s in the Mae Klong area provide insight on the process of agricultural diversification and the integration of the village economy to the wider economy. While authors such as Chayan (1993) are preoccupied with the possibility “to have a self-reliant village economy under a capitalist system trying to penetrate every corner of the village,” these studies suggest that the prosperity and even the social integrity and cohesiveness of the village might well be contingent upon a (controlled) process of opening to the outside world. In the case of Nong Ngam village, Utong shows that the cultivation of cash crops could provide enough job opportunities and income to villagers to make out-migration unnecessary. In the case of the village studied by Sams, the introduction of a highly successful commercial venture (the Lao Song Handicrafts Project, initiated by a Catholic NGO) not only succeeded in alleviating temporary hardship but revolutionised the village economy, relegating rice cultivation to a secondary occupation. On his part, Snit observed that economic change from a relatively subsistence system to a market economy stimulated the social mobility and assimilation of the Lao Phuan peasants.

This counterbalances the common viewpoint that the commercialisation of agriculture and of the village economy as a whole has increased the spread of individualism, the waning of labour exchange and reciprocal obligations, and the downfall of indebted small farmers to landlessness and factory labour. While such concerns rightly pinpoint crucial changes of village life, it is unclear whether they are adequate to typify the overall transformation of the rural world. For example, it is doubtful whether traditional reciprocity could have coped with the range of increasingly complex contracts needed for an irrigated agriculture in a process of intensification, requiring more capital, faced with a sharp decline of its labour force and the spread of pluri-activity<sup>7</sup>. Lamenting the loss of the original “village” might be a question of personal feeling but cannot overlook the fact that a closed agrarian system under growing population pressure, as was the case in the 1960s, can only survive with some kind of “vertical” growth (intensification), and that such a growth can hardly be conceived outside the market economy. Likewise, it is not obvious that the transfer of labour from agriculture to non-agricultural activities is perceived as coercion or a downfall. From a situation of agrarian pressure sensed as far back as the 1970s, where the diversification of activities was driven by a mix of pull and push factors, the last two decades are best



characterised by a pull from the city, both economic and cultural (see Molle and Thippawal, 1999).

It is useful here to borrow Rigg's distinction (1997) between "those studies which regard rural households as unwitting victims of a process beyond their control—pawns on a macroeconomic chess board—and those which view farmers as independent actors in their own right." It is readily apparent from the literature on the central plain that few, if any, local studies draw a picture that fully accords to the view of the former type. Studies which have adopted the approach of critical social sciences, Marxism or political economy, are in general inspired by a macro and historical perspective on production forces and capital development from which they derive an interpretation of local processes. Typical examples are the works by Witayakorn (1983) and Douglass (1984). Although all village studies report differences in households regarding resource endowment, family structure, income, and occupations, there is little convincing evidence that the economic stratification observed can be couched in terms of social classes and social polarisation. Even Siwarak, in search of "class stratification" in Nakhon Sawan province, eventually found that "harmony and unity existed within the communal society," sustained by several factors including a "unique tradition of class reconciliation." Two studies, nevertheless, show widening social division. Naruemon Bunjongjit's study of a village in Nakhon Nayok province identifies a "polarisation of farming society" and sees social differentiation as reflected by land tenure status. The need for cash and money borrowing is the mechanism by which smaller farmers become dependent on wealthier absentee landlords. These patron-client relationships, however, do not give way to severe antagonism, partly because each party needs the other and contracts can be broken at will by both parties. In the Chachoengsao village surveyed by Ananya, it is the new market opportunity provided by contract chicken breeding, as well as the introduction of HYVs, which have created imbalances in the village, favouring those who could respond to it and increasing their wealth and power in the locality. Smaller farmers end up indebted and are gradually left no other choice than working as wage labourers.

It is also not fortuitous that these works have been issued in the particular political and intellectual context of the 1970s and early 1980s, when the awareness of social problems and ideological confrontation were at their highest, both in Thailand and in the region. Kanoksak (1987) sees the working methodologies of early American scientists as a "form of ideological practice" in that they fostered the image of the easy-going, apolitical, unconcerned, and "happy peasant." He

sees the events of October 1973 as a watershed in the making of an indigenous ideology. With hindsight, the 1970s now appear as the culminating point of an agrarian crisis in the delta (Molle and Thippawal, 1999).

### **2.5 A post-agrarian society? (mid 1980s to the present)**

With the defusing of the agrarian crisis and the further appreciation of rural real wages from 1985 onward, agricultural problems lost much of their appeal. Interest in agricultural change shifted to issues of agricultural diversification. The transformation of rice farming was documented by Fujimoto and Matsuda, while Molle and Jesda reported on the transformation of deep-water rice cropping systems into HYVs. They documented technical change, mechanisation, changes in labour use, and household income. Rangsan (Suphan Buri province) and Thippawal (Nakhon Pathom province) have explored the diversification of farming systems in upland conditions and have shown the benefits in terms of labour absorption and regular income generation. Farm strategies such as choice of cropping systems, investment, and risk management appear strongly dictated by the farms' factor endowment and ecology. However, as risk also tends to be higher in a commercialised economy with high cash input and unstable crop prices, the most fragile farms are prone to failure. This process has been eased by the relatively high supply of job opportunities in non-agricultural sectors, triggering a spectacular occupational shift in the younger generations. Cheyroux has concentrated on the lowlands where drastic land development converted areas to growing fruits and vegetables. Raised bed systems are a typical feature of the lowlands and now cover more than 100,000 ha in the delta, with the bulk located along the Damnoen Saduak Canal (Kasetsart University and IRD, 2001). The picture there appears similar to that of the uplands but with much higher levels of intensification in cropping, capital, and labour use. Benefits per land unit can be extremely high (as for grapes or orchids, for example), but much capital is required to weather the risk inherent in the most profitable crops. All these agricultural activities, in both the uplands and lowlands, are tightly integrated to the market. Better control of the marketing process (cooperatives, contract farming) appears desirable in order to lower risk and increase benefit margins.

In 1977 and 1993 Tomosugi revisited Yamani, the village he had studied in the late 1960s. He outlined the deeper and quicker transformations which followed the development of double cropping and the introduction of electricity from 1975 onwards. He described the drastic out-migration of young villagers to Bangkok

and its periphery, or to the Middle East. The market economy had developed, not solely through a growing dependence on marketed goods, but also through the mobilisation of the village labour force in home industries (notably artificial flower making). Demographic changes (out-migration, decrease in fertility) and cultural changes (the “eagerly accepted” idea of development) translated into several concomitant evolutions, among which Tomosugi emphasised the induced technical change in rice cropping (response to decreasing labour availability), the decline of the importance of farming activities (growth of pluri-activity and wage labour), and the decrease of the social and psychological distance between the village and Bangkok’s factories and way of life. He pointed out the significant geographical and social mobility, and the efficiency of commercial networks based on kinship. He posited that “the incredible development of the money-oriented economy throughout the country, which has been attained by a driving power derived from the strong desire for a better life, could be construed as a positive endeavour to escape from the horrible, negative spirit of former days.”

This commercialisation of agriculture has been paralleled by a process of integration of the countryside into the urban world. A second set of studies has examined the blurring of the frontier between rural and urban domains. Chantana Banpasirichote described the integration of a community near Chachoengsao and its embracing of both shrimp farming and factory work. Young generations “have become a part of the production process of a wider world, and less part of the community.” However, the proximity of factories (daily commuting is the rule) has also made them part of the local world and factory life has even allowed a kind of re-socialisation. Rural industrialisation helps provide more alternatives when agricultural development is constrained and, in return, impacts on the agricultural sector (labour shortage). Strategies oriented towards rice cropping, shrimp farming, or factory work also appear to be governed by land and capital endowment, education, and age class.

Several similar observations were made in the area surrounding Ayutthaya where ecological constraints to agricultural development and the development of industrial estates have radically altered the traditional vision of the province as the cradle of rice and water (*ou khao ou nam*)<sup>8</sup>. Yos reported on the adaptive response of a peasant community to industrialisation. He opposes the way of life and communitarianism of the traditional village to what he terms the “industrial culture” (*watthanatham utsahakam*) which is seen as antagonist (*khvam chareon ma su chumchon*) to peasant values. The development of local industries results in the pollution of air and water, in social disintegration (*pho mae thing luk pai tham*

*ngan*), and only benefits a few local agents and capitalistic networks interested in the export of cheap goods. Arghiros also touched upon the process of differentiation<sup>9</sup>. Land sale in the province was accentuated by both supply (the precariousness of rice cultivation and the demise of agriculture in general raised willingness to sell) and demand factors (the area is crossed by the Asian Highway and industries were developing, thus encouraging speculation). One of his fulcrum questions is whether the personalised village-level relationships, which hitherto limited drastic social imbalances, are being weakened, and whether one's position in the society is increasingly perceived along lines of class. This is reinforced by the fact that local elites are now competing over access to supra-local resources, typically state-derived ones, and are increasingly able to control local elections.

A research team from CUSRI furthered the longitudinal survey of three villages initiated in 1969. Wathana emphasised the demise of agriculture, paralleled by the development of industrial occupations. Although manufacturing and commercial establishments in Ayutthaya trebled between 1976 and 1990, the supply of jobs remained well under demand. While considering the shift from an agrarian society to an urbanised/industrialised one as "forced," Suriya and Amara reckoned that the positive aspects outstripped the negative ones.

A similar process was observed in Lan Laem village, Nakhon Pathom province, by a group of Japanese researchers led by Kitahara. Although the village is not directly located in an industrial area, a good road connection to the Nakhon Chaisi and Phetkasem road allowed the village to integrate itself to the non-agricultural world. In Lan Laem, middle aged and old villagers tend to continue farming, or engage in cottage industries and other informal activities, while the young commute to factories. Segmentation of activities seems to be the rule, rather than the pluri-activity commonly found in East Asia. Noteworthy is the emergence of local entrepreneurs, who increased the local supply of jobs and further accentuated the penetration of non-agricultural activities and values into the village.

Two other recent studies have addressed similar questions on the urban fringe closer to Bangkok. Sowatree Nathalang emphasised that "far from being conservative peasants in a once stable subsistence village, the present population in the Bangkok peri-urban regions has undergone decades of opportunistic adjustments as the macro-level capitalist world-system has exerted overwhelming impact on their everyday lives." She stressed the adaptive capacity of the population to a settlement pattern characterised by an intense land-use mix, where agriculture, industry, housing, and recreation all impact upon each other. This was by and large echoed by Askew who focused on farmers' strategies in Nonthaburi on the western

bank of the Chao Phraya River. He contended that smallholding farmers had never been insulated from the wider society and that, well before housing estates and factories encroached into formerly rural landscapes, the farmers' strategies were already diversified and shaped by the opportunities provided by the city. The metaphor of the threatening urban frontier, with farmers as victims of external agents of change, appears a mistaken one.

In parallel with these two focal points of investigation on agricultural and economic diversification, the late 1980s and 1990s were marked by the emergence of political science studies (Nelson; Arghiros; Murashima; Takaji; Ryo; Nakharin, 1993) focusing on processes of democratisation and decentralisation. These studies show the weakness of political discourse and party ideology, and the prevalence of inter-personal relationships in the access to power, largely mediated through *phuak* (cliques). Vote buying and patronage appear widespread in all local elections. Increasing responsibilities and budgets made available at the *tambon* level attract the interest of local businessmen. Decentralisation is also placed in its historical and cultural context and often appears more like an expansion of administrative control to lower levels than a real process of democratisation.

Altogether the local studies of the last 15 years are telling indicators of the commercialisation and diversification of agricultural activities (in phase with the demand of urban markets and agro-industries), of the de-agrarianisation of the delta (younger generations rejecting agriculture, surge of factory work and other local non-farm activities, consumerism, and urban values), and of the overall political transformation (decentralisation, however ambiguous it may be, and democratisation). The recent study of three villages by Molle *et al.* (2001c) provides an outlook on how village economies adapt to different agro-ecological environments which define the potential for agricultural intensification. The access to water largely governs the rice cropping intensity that can be achieved and the share of rice production in the village income. The study shows how constraints on rice production dictate farm land size and how alternative economic strategies are devised, both on-farm (animal breeding) and off-farm (factory work). The income gap encountered between the three villages is thus partly, but significantly, bridged.

Piker (1975) described the situation in the late 1960s as a post-peasant society, characterised by the surge of landless wage labour, weakening kinship ties, migration, and growing off-farm work. This was indicative of agrarian pressure and the end of a peasant economy where production was in line with the labour resources of each household. At the beginning of the new century, the landscape has changed into what could be termed a post-agrarian society, characterised by a

blurring of the economic and cultural frontiers between the urban and rural spheres. Although in the delta this frontier has never been as sharp as sometimes assumed, improved transportation and communications, constant population flows to and from the capital, rural industrialisation, and the expansion of state services (police, irrigation, roads, electricity, health, etc.) have now defined a mixed economy where agriculture is specialising in high value cash crops and where the younger generation has little commitment to farming. The full consequences of these changes still remain to fully materialise and will appear along with the gradual retirement of farmers (especially rice farmers) over 50 years old.

## 2.6 Concluding remarks

One is obviously apprehensive in attempting a synthesis of all these variegated “building blocks” of knowledge. This would have to be done within a wider framework of analysis of agrarian and societal change and is much beyond the limited ambition of this chapter. A few remarks, however, can be made by way of conclusion. Two interconnected themes appear across the different studies. The first one—more anthropological in scope—covers the characterisation of folklore, beliefs, social structures, relationships, and contractual arrangements between fellow villagers, and between the village and the outside, spanning issues such as labour allocation, marketing, patron-client relationships, and political life.

The second overarching theme is the role of agriculture in the village economy and culture, and its transformation, or demise, in an ever opening world where social and economical changes are driven by a growing exposure to markets, intrusion of the state, and consumerism. Overall these studies are tinged with a negative vision of the agrarian transition. Markets, monetary exchanges, wage or non-agricultural labour, land sale, mechanisation, emigration to cities, and so on are essentially seen in a negative fashion. This can be understood from several viewpoints. From a scholarly perspective, it can be traced to the common prejudice of anthropologists against changes which tend to alter the assumed cultural integrity of their object of study<sup>10</sup>. In the same vein, this echoes a more Jeffersonian urban-based idealisation of village life, as expressed by the strength of the ideology of “community culture” (*watthanatham chumchon*)<sup>11</sup>. Commercialised relations, it is said, impinge on the traditional peasant culture by replacing labour exchange, reciprocity or free land rent, by increasing consumerism, by generating economic imbalances, and by accentuating social differentiation between landlords and landless farmers. From a political and economic perspective, changes are also seen

negatively in that mechanisation appears to be labour displacing, and farmers are forced to participate in a market economy where they are dependent on cash inputs and do not control output. In brief, autonomy and self-sufficiency are bartered for a status of either rural or urban proletariat, where the fruits of labour are appropriated by external agents. Knitted communities are disintegrated and kinship bounds swapped for impersonal and individualistic endeavours in a profit-oriented world. In ideological terms, it is evident that the dominant vision of farming is one inherited from the waves of populism and political economy of the 1970s. This is most apparent in the discourse of many intellectuals and NGOs, but also in the media, which periodically issue reports on the rural world laden with “miserabilism”<sup>12</sup>.

It would probably be equally wrong either to discard the reality uncovered by this discourse or to remain confined to it. Viewpoints couched in terms of darkening realism are of little help in capturing the diversity, complexity, and dynamism of the situation in the countryside. As such, they lead to a simplistic vision of reality and tend to elicit judgements, actions, and policies which are poorly attuned to real needs. In retrospect, many of the accounts provided by the studies only give limited support to a wholly negative vision. Authors repeatedly stress that even the poorer strata “never really lack food or other basic needs” (Kaufman), and remain at a “level far above poverty which prevails in the rural areas of some other Asian societies” (Piker). Visser holds that “inequality has not been imported with the market economy culture” and that “entrepreneurs also existed formerly and so did patron client relations.” Gisselquist also considers that nothing points to a formerly more equal village society and he describes how local powers have been curtailed by the presence of the state. Sams, Thippawal, and Cheyroux show that the linkage with markets is an ambiguous process which enhances individual differences in factor endowments, but also in skill, risk taking, or industriousness, generating increased wealth but also a more skewed distribution. Utong, as well as Chantana and Kitahara in the case of factory work, show that this outward economic diversification is not always tantamount to social disruption and can even contribute to keeping the community alive by limiting the emigration of youth. Foster makes the case that in times of crisis, the villages with more connections with the outside world and more occupational diversity fared much better.

To be sure, “an erosion of traditional social and economic phenomena is taking place, but of course other things are taking their place,” observed Visser, considering that “there is definitely no question of cultural or social disruption.” If there is a single word common to all studies, this word is probably *adaptation*. Adapting to new conditions and circumstances is not necessarily done willingly, nor

accompanied with benefits or gains. However, if a macro trend is to be derived from all these micro studies, it is probably that the agrarian transition in the delta has been relatively smooth.

It is not superfluous to issue here a caveat regarding the scope of the above interpretation. Thailand's four main regions offer contrasting human, ecological, historical and socio-economic settings. The production of a uniform discourse on Thailand as a whole is a well known trap which some analysts regularly fall into. On balance, it appears that the Chao Phraya Delta—although typified as the region which developed through the commercialisation of rice production and where less social cohesion is to be found—has been able to overcome the crises which have surfaced at various points in its history. Of course much of its relative success is due to the significant comparative advantages it enjoys with regard to the other regions (Parnwell and Arghiros, 1996). Soil and water conditions are good, irrigation networks cover 2 million ha, excellent roads connect villages with markets and outside work opportunities. Social tensions or disruptions never reached the situation reported in other regions. If Turton (1987) and others are probably well founded to analyse the situation of the north in the 1970s in terms of class struggle, history is much more parsimonious in providing evidence of such a radical situation in the delta<sup>13</sup>. The more recent works by Holland and Arghiros, however, suggest that this might change in the future and that such an eventuality needs to be further scrutinised.

As in most cases when dealing with locality, we are always confronted by some degree of exceptionality which mirrors the specific ecological, social, historical, and human features of the place under study<sup>14</sup>. In addition, these spatial heterogeneities are not fixed but, rather, constantly reshaped and redefined during the course of time. Just as the early “Rangsit bias” generated by a focus on this area distorted the view on the whole delta, it is also possible that classical studies on the Bangkok periphery and on Ayutthaya's flood prone area have influenced the making of common knowledge. As Amyot recognised in 1994, “Having used the province of Ayutthaya for more than twenty years as my window to observe the heartland of the central region, I should perhaps find it somewhat disturbing to discover . . . that it is not typical of the region as a whole. . . . the central region is not homogeneous. In fact, it displays considerable variation from province to province and, in some cases, from district to district.” The study by Molle *et al.* (2001c), indeed, showed that the response and evolution of farming systems are very varied and predicated upon several micro and macro factors.

The overall impression conveyed by the studies (and this will be abundantly shown in the following chapters) is that the Chao Phraya Delta has moved from a

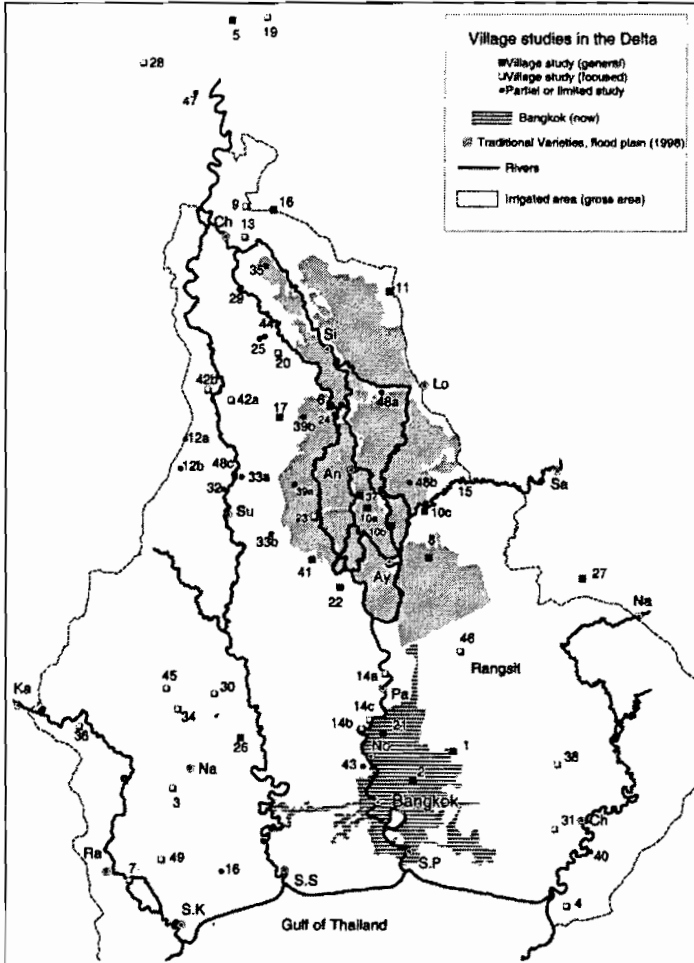


seemingly undifferentiated rice bowl to a complex and highly integrated sub-region that epitomises the blurring of the frontier between urban and rural domains widely observed in Southeast Asia (Rigg, 2001). The “dipole” formed by Bangkok and the delta exemplifies the striking “densification” of flows across sectors, regions, and countries. People move freely between Bangkok and their village, either temporarily or permanently, or commute daily to nearby factories; villagers go to the Middle East while several hundred thousand Burmese work in the delta; flows of capital include remittances, cross-investments, institutional credit, and state investments; land and water resources are re-appropriated; information in forms such as technical innovations, market prices, education, news, and advertisement flow back and forth; political and administrative networks expand and strengthen the links between the local and the national levels; rice and orchids are sent abroad while imported electric appliances flow into the villages; “rural culture” is idealised and becomes a political construct in some urban quarters, while rural youths dream of nothing but swapping it for the neon lights of the city.

This redefinition of the agricultural sector and the evolution of rural household economy take us to the classical “agrarian question” on the interrelations between agriculture and capitalist development. In an age of globalisation this not only refers to the relationship between peasant farming, state policies, and the urban economy, but also to their intersection with the global economy and the pervasive ethos of modernity that comes along with it. As neatly phrased by Rigg (2001), “processes of agrarian change are embedded, at the local level, in political, social and cultural relationships, as well as in environmental contexts through and upon which the forces of globalisation are reworked in unique and place-specific ways.”

In conclusion, I would like to leave open the following question: do we know enough? Judging from our inventory, which gathered 49 studies spanning half a century, the answer could be mixed: on the one hand they amount to considerable effort and time but, on the other hand, our patchwork obviously still has gaping holes<sup>15</sup>. This is reminiscent of Kamol’s warning, issued in 1955, that “ignorance of the most simple facts about rural conditions result in wrong or doubtful popular concepts; and ready popular acceptance of biased concepts promulgated by various interest groups.” There remains little doubt that the body of knowledge<sup>16</sup> produced by rural studies in Thailand, and most particularly in the delta, is still insufficient to depict the rapid transformations under way, and to orient policy makers to their implications. The sweeping changes observed over the past decade or so, together with the specificity of local processes alluded to above, make the task of documenting them arduous and demanding.

**Figure 2.1 Spatial distribution of local studies in the Chao Phraya Delta (1950–2001)**



From north to south: Ch: Chai Nat; Si: Sing Buri; Lo: Lop Buri; An: Ang Thong; Sa: Saraburi; Su: Suphan Buri; Ay: Ayutthaya; Na: Nakhon Nayok; Pa: Pathum Thani; No: Nonthaburi; Ka: Kanchanaburi; Na: Nakhon Pathom; Ch: Chachoengsao; Ra: Ratchaburi; S.P.: Samut Prakan; S.S.: Samut Sakhon; S.K.: Samut Songkhram.

**Table 2.1 Inventory of local studies in the Chao Phraya Delta (1950–2001)**

No.	Year 1	Year 2	Place	Main reference	Topic
1	1950	1947–56	Bang Chan	Sharp (1953); Sharp and Hanks (1978); Phillips (1974) Kamol O. Janlekha (1955)	Village study
2	1954	1954	Bangkhuad	Kaufman, Howard Keva (1960)	Village study
3	1960	1960	Tambon Sra Kathiam	Ingersoll, Jasper C. (1963)	Religion
4	1964	1964	Na Pa	Attagara Kingkeo (1967)	Customs, culture
5	1966	1966–67	Hua Kok	Kemp, Jeremy (1992)	Anthropology
6	1967	1963+ 1967	Ban Noi	Piker, Steven (1983)	Anthropology
7	1967	1967	Yamani	Tomosugi, T. (1980)	Anthropology
8	1967	1967 +1977	Wat Sancaw	Terwiel, B. J. (1971, 1979)	Religion/rural change
9	1968	1968	Manorom	Greene, B. A. (1971)	Agriculture, rice cultivation
10	1969	1969/70	Ban Chung	Amyot, Jacques (1976); Fuhs, Friedrich (1979)	Village study, labour
11	1971	1971	Old pavillon	Riley, J. N. (1972)	Demography, anthropology
12	1971	1971	Ban Sao	Snit Smuckarn (1972)	Cultural change, village study
13	1971	1971	Don Chedi	Jerachone Srisvaslidek <i>et al.</i> (1975)	Farming systems, rice cropping
14	1972	1972	3 villages	Foster Brian L. (1972)	Village study, ethnicity
15	1973	1973	Tha Rua (fictitious)	Wiwatchai Attakor (1975)	Land tenure
16	1974	1974	Ban Dong	Visser, R. (1980)	Anthropology, village study

No.	Year 1	Year 2	Place	Main reference	Topic
17	1974	1974	Wang Nam Yen	Gisselquist, D. P. (1976)	Technical and institutional change
18	1975	1974-77	<i>Tambon</i> Yokkrabat	Akin Rabibhadana (1983)	Development process
19	1975	1974-76	Wang Thong	Preecha Kuwinpant (1980)	Anthropology, markets
20	1975	1975	Chanasutr	Duncan, H. S. (1980)	Irrigation, water management
			Irrigation proj		
21	1976	1976	Pakret	Thiravet Pramuanratkarn (1979)	Village study, urban fringe
22	1977	1974-79	Ban Nom Kho	Tanabe, Shigeharu (1994)	Ecology, farming systems
23	1977		Bang Chang	Lauro, Donald J. (1979)	Demography
24	1977	1977	Onkarak	Hara, Yonosuke (1981)	Technical and institutional change
25	1978	1978	Phakthan, Singburi	Tanabe, Shigeharu (1978)	Rice growing communities
26	1980	1980 +1996	Lan Laem	Kitahara, Atsuchi (2001)+ publ. in Japanese	Village study
27	1980	1979-81	Pa Kha	Naruemon Bunjongjit (1987)	Land-labour relations
10	1980	1980	3 villages	CUSRI (1983), Chantana (1982)	Various (rural and cultural change)
28	1981	1981	Nakhon Sawan	Siwarak Siwarom (1984)	History, agrarian change
29	1981	1981	Sankhaburi/ Sanphaya	Tongpain, S. and Jayasuriya, K. (1982)	Rice, land tenure
30	1982	1982-83	Ban Laem Kam	Sams, Bert (1987)	Anthropology, history

31	1983		Theparas	Ananya Bhuchongkul (1985)	Agrarian change
32	1985	1984-85	Phophya, Suphan Buri	Fujimoto and Matsuda (1987); Fujimoto <i>et al.</i> (1990)	Farming systems, rice cropping
33	1987	1987 +1998	Sri Prachan	Somporn Isvilanonda and Sarun Wattanutchariya (1990)	Rice cropping
34	1987	1987	Nong Ngam,	Utong Prasasvinitchai (1993)	Farming systems, sociology
35	1989	1988-89	Khaw Kaew	Montesano, M. J. (1992)	Land system, anthropology
10	1990	1989-93	3 villages	Napat (1998); Nitaya (1998); Kobkul (1998); Pinit (1982); Suriya (2000); Wathana (1993, 1998); Suriya and Amara (2000) (CUSRI project)	Various (rural and cultural change)
36	1990	?	Saen To	Holland, S. (1990)	Social differentiation
37	1990	1990-2000	Ban Thung	Arghiros, Daniel (1993)	Political science
38	1991	1991-2000	Chachoeng-sao	Nelson, Michael (1998)	Political science
39	1992	1989-92	Huai Khan Laen	Shigetomi, Shin'ichi (1995)	Social structure, groups
40	1992	1992	Klong Ban Pho	Chantana Banpasirichote (1993)	Community change
7	1993	1993	Yamani	Tomosugi, Takashi (1995)	Anthropology
41	1994	1994?	Sena, Ayut.	Yos Santasombat (1996)	Agrarian change
42	1995	1992-93	Don Chedi	Rangsan Pitipunya (1995)	Farming systems, rice cropping
43	1996	1995-6	Nonthaburi	Askew, Mark, in this volume	Sociology
44	1996	1996	Chai Nat	Molle, Francois and Jesda Keawkulaya (1998)	Water management, land use
45	1996	1994-96	Thung Lung Nok	Thippawal Srijantr (1998)	Farming systems

No.	Year 1	Year 2	Place	Main reference	Topic
46	1997	1997	Rangsit Project	Sowatree Nathalang (1999)	Anthropology, urban fringe
47	1997	1997	Nakhon Sawan	Ryo, Takagi (1999)	Political science
48	1999	1999	3 villages	Molle <i>et al.</i> (2001c)	Farming systems, village economy
49	1999	1997-99	Damnoen Saduak	Cheyroux, Blandine (this volume)	Farming systems

Year 1: reference year; Year 2: period of field investigations.

Only the principal publication is mentioned in the table. Other references from the same authors can be found in the general bibliography of this volume.

## 2.7 Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a spatial definition of the delta, see Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Even with such a focus, several studies may have escaped my attention. Such omission is, of course, not intentional and only reflects the unfortunate incompleteness of my knowledge. The focus on local studies obviously captures only a portion of the accumulated knowledge on the region and may not do justice to other seminal historical investigations. The limited ambition of this chapter, however, did not allow their inclusion in this tentative inventory. For convenience, the studies referred to in this chapter are indicated only by the name of the author(s), while the reader is referred to the bibliography for further details on other publications. Other cited references are indicated with their year, in accordance with conventions.

<sup>3</sup> A few studies do not specify accurately the location of the village studied and the position is therefore approximate: this holds in particular for Riley, Visser, Siwarak, Yos, and Lauro. The latter two intentionally disguised the location of the village. Hua Kok village and *amphoe* Wang Noi, studied by Kemp and Pranee, have been situated at the top of the map for convenience of scale but they lie in reality to the east of Phitsanulok, further north.

<sup>4</sup> Ph.D. theses and research reports or books tend to be more comprehensive than the papers which present results, in general, more limited in length and scope. However, some of them are often focused on a single issue (e.g. land transactions or folklore), whereas some papers may give a wider vision of the village. Therefore the distinction does not necessarily reflect the amount and the quality of information made available by each study.

<sup>5</sup> The Bang Chan research team's check list of consumption goods could not catch up, in the course of four or five years, with "new items of consumption including wrist watches, fountain pens, hair do, Coca-cola, invitation cards, admission to Miss Thailand contests, etc." (Kamol)

<sup>6</sup> The rare investigation in economic anthropology carried out by Gisselquist in Ang Thong province, unfortunately and intriguingly widely ignored, provides insights on the socio-economic transformations at the village level in the complex decade of the 1970s. For an historical analysis of landlord/tenant relationships see Molle (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Tipaporn (1976) observed that, with double-cropping, labour exchange was disappearing because it did not provide a satisfactory means of organisation in face of new exigencies for quicker and more flexible farm operations. Hanks

(1972) sees labour exchange between neighbours as “a symptom of underpopulation, for it disappeared as soon as hired labour became available,” while Hara reckons that wage labour is a “more efficient form of labour allocation than the traditional mutual exchange of labour.” Kemp (1992) also reports that farmers don’t see the change as imposed but, rather, as desirable.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to observe that, until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the comparative advantages of the floodplain—where labour was scarce, land abundant, and water control technology limited—turned out to be a liability when the situation later reversed (in particular when irrigation facilities and HYVs allowed the intensification of rice cultivation in the upper parts of the toposequence); see Molle, Chapter 10.

<sup>9</sup> Arghiros refers to the thesis by Holland on social differentiation in Kanchanaburi province. I was unable to access this document which is nevertheless included in the list.

<sup>10</sup> This was part of the criticism directed at Potter’s study of a village in northern Thailand, which was conceived with little reference to the outside world.

<sup>11</sup> I do not wish to expand here on the several facets of these ideological movements (see Chatthip, 1991; Pasuk and Baker, 2000; Rigg, 1991 and 2001). They can be construed, in broad lines, as a cultural response to globalisation and to the destructuring aspects of the market economy on the local social fabric. To what extent population growth, agrarian pressure and the world integration make such changes inevitable, desirable, and controllable or not, or what are the shares of both internal and external agents of change and the autonomy of people to respond to them, are of course highly controversial issues.

<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that the vision, commonplace in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century at least until the 1960s (see Kamol, 1955), of farmers as lazy, indulging in gambling and drinking, and idle half of the year, while those apparently poor are stupid, stubborn, and self-indulgent, has been replaced by one where farmers are pictured as victims, and where their virtues are extolled to the point where they are presented as a normative alternative for a society in crisis. The shift corresponds to the emergence of “urban bias” theories and of populism in general, together with political economy.

<sup>13</sup> Putting aside the specific case of Rangsit and other landlord areas before WW II, Visser considers that “There is also no question of class distinction, or rather of classes per se. The local elite does not form a unity. They do not work together. They make no agreements on their economic actions as far as each other’s clients



are concerned and, they do not meet on the village political scene. Neither do the poorer farmers form a class.”

<sup>14</sup> I have surveyed groups of neighbouring villages in the delta which, if studied in detail, would have yielded very contrasting pictures. In some villages, the farming population was reduced to less than 10%, while in adjacent ones intensive rice farming was still dominant. The choice of the “village” is thus necessarily oriented by the focus adopted for the investigation. The articulation and consolidation of local studies must therefore be achieved in parallel with a macro spatial characterisation of the most important variables (land use, farm structure, demography, etc). For the delta, the reader is referred to Kasetsart University and IRD (1996).

<sup>15</sup> There are many significant issues and topics which have never been addressed in detail, including the following. What is the real competitiveness of marketing channels down to the consumer level? What factors govern the response to engage in the different categories of activity? What is the importance of temples in the social and economic life of communities, and how does this change? What is the performance of groups fostered by the government? What are the real extent and causes of indebtedness? What are the causes of land sale and how is the decision taken to give up farming? How does the world view of the peasant change? What are the socio-economic trajectories of households over the generations (how does accumulation work and does it endure, what is the degree of social mobility)? The answers to these questions will, of course, vary over time.

<sup>16</sup> This prompted Vandergeest (1987) to state that “what is required in future work is less deductive theorising on the mode of integration into the market from a point of view of the logic of the centre, and more inductive research ‘from the periphery’ through which we can more clearly understand how peasants have a hand in shaping the trajectory of capitalist development.”

**Studies in Contemporary Thailand No. 12**

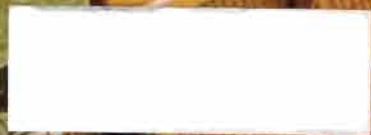
# **Thailand's Rice Bowl**

**Perspectives on Agricultural and Social  
Change in the Chao Phraya Delta**

François Molle  
Thippawal Srijantr  
editors



**White Lotus**





Francois Molle and Thippawal Srijantr are affiliated to, respectively:

Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD); 213 rue Lafayette 75480 - Paris CEDEX 10, France. Website: [www.ird.fr](http://www.ird.fr)

Kasetsart University; 50 Phahonyothin Road, Chatuchak, Bangkok, 10900, Thailand. Website: [www.ku.ac.th](http://www.ku.ac.th)

---

© 2003 François Molle and Thippawal Srijantr. All rights reserved

White Lotus Co., Ltd.  
GPO Box 1141  
Bangkok 10511  
Thailand

Telephone: (662) 332-4915 and (662) 741-6288-9  
Fax: (662) 741-6607 and (662) 741-6287  
E-mail: [ande@loxinfo.co.th](mailto:ande@loxinfo.co.th)  
Website: <http://thailine.com/lotus>

Printed in Thailand

Typeset by COMSET Limited Partnership

ISBN: 974-4800-25-9