

Land, people, and state in Thailand, 1600 to the present day

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This paper makes a brief survey of the relationship between land and people in Siam/Thailand over the last four centuries. It is well-known that at the start of this period population throughout Mainland Southeast Asia was very sparse, but little attempt has been made to explain this sparseness, especially in contrast to the growing populations in India and China in the same era. The first section of this paper looks at the role of warfare – and the particular nature of arms and warring – in constraining the growth of population. The second section traces how the imposition of peace in the nineteenth century reduced this restraint, and how connection to the colonial trading economy sparked a movement of frontier land settlement, probably of greater scale than anything outside the “new” colonies in the same era. The third section argues that the legacy of this frontier expansion has helped to shape the highly uneven nature of Thailand’s economic development, and the social division underlying recent political upheaval.

The seventeenth century: sparse population

The Europeans and Persians who visited Siam in the seventeenth century were struck by the wildness of the landscape. Schouten found much of the country “mountainous, woody and moorish.”¹ Gervaise noted that “The forests of this kingdom are so enormous that they cover over half of its area and so dense that it is almost impossible to cross them.”² La Loubère found the territory “almost wholly incultivated and cover’d with woods.”³ Today this area is triple-crop paddy land, with almost no space unused.

The population of the Chaophraya Plain was very sparse—probably less than half a million people, about a fortieth of the number today. People were not spread evenly across the landscape, but concentrated in the major towns and along the rivers. Gervaise noted that the banks of the Chaophraya “are densely populated and permanently covered with the most beautiful greenery in the world.”⁴ But away from the rivers, as Gervaise also noted, “there are fearful deserts and vast wildernesses where one only finds wretched little huts, often as much as 7 or 8 leagues distant from one another.”⁶

Possibly as much as one half of this population lived in or around the capital city of Ayutthaya. European visitors estimated the city population at two hundred

¹ Schouten, *True Description*, 95.

² Gervaise, *Natural and Political History*, 23.

³ La Loubère, *New Historical Relation*, 11.

⁴ Gervaise, *Natural and Political History*, 12.

⁵ Tachard, *Voyage to Siam*, 193.

⁶ Gervaise, *Natural and Political History*, 45.

thousand or more, and perhaps “as big as London.”⁷

The Europeans saw rice cultivation close to the city. Outside Ayutthaya, Choisy saw “broad landscapes of rice.”⁸ Traveling from Ayutthaya to Lopburi, Tachard saw “vast plains reaching out of sight covered with rice.” But in all their writings, there are no descriptions of a “farmer” or a “peasant.” Of course, and these European and Persian visitors were nobles, merchants, and clerics with a strong urban bias to their perceptions, and their writings are sparse. Still, the utter absence is striking. Instead of farming, La Loubère found that “The most general Professions at Siam are Fishing for the common People, and Merchandizing for all those that have wherewithal to follow it.”⁹ From their other descriptions, it is clear that a very high proportion of labor was devoted to what we would now call service occupations, including transport, personal service, and so on.

Strikingly, in the few mentions of agricultural labor in these writings, those working are women. La Loubère observed, “The women plough the Land, they sell and buy in the Cities.”¹⁰ Van Vliet wrote “the women, (who are well built and pretty), do most work in the fields. These women also row the boats on the river and besides many other things.”¹¹ The scribe of a Persian embassy to Ayutthaya in 1685 observed, “It is common for women to engage in buying and selling in the markets and even to undertake physical labour.”¹²

There survives a very detailed verbal description of the city of Ayutthaya in the mid eighteenth century. This document lists forty markets around the island, four on the rivers, thirty-two in the outskirts, and another twenty specialist craft settlements where people from far-flung places offered services ranging from rope making to cloth dying to metalwork.¹³ None of the markets seem to specialize in foodstuffs. Many are described as “everyday markets,” which probably sold food, but there is no sign of a wholesale market for rice or vegetables. Some of the craft settlements processed agricultural goods such as pressing oil or brewing liquor. But there is no mention of a rice-milling center, slaughter house, or similar. And there is no description of market gardening. Chinese who immigrated in the early nineteenth century started a business of market-gardening, importing their seeds from China. Prior to that, vegetables had been grown in back-gardens or gathered from nature.

In short, this does not look like a peasant economy or society at all. Rather it seems to be a heavily urbanized population which was provisioned through domestic or household production.¹⁴ This was possible because of easy access to highly fertile land close to the capital. Rice could be produced by low-intensity cultivation; vegetables gathered; fish easily caught. This production regime in turn depended on a very low man-land ratio.

⁷ The estimates are summarized in Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, 2:71. Gervaise noted, “The city is so densely populated that, when the king is there, it could easily supply him with sixty thousand men of an age to bear arms, and this number could be doubled, if the inhabitants of the villages on the other side of the river, which can be considered as suburbs, were included” (*Natural and Political History*, 33).

⁸ Choisy, *Journal*, 172.

⁹ La Loubère, *New Historical Relation*, 71.

¹⁰ La Loubère, *New Historical Relation*, 50.

¹¹ *Van Vliet's Siam*, 162.

¹² O’Kane, *Ship of Sulaiman*, 139.

¹³ APA, 94–95, 110–14.

¹⁴ The king levied grain taxes on land near the capital, and resorted to seizure in cases of shortage or need to provision an army. Great noble households maintained grain-growing land close to the city.

The conundrum

The conundrum is, why was this ratio so low; why was so much potentially highly productive land left waste? The population densities in India and China in the same era were very different to that found in Siam (and mainland Southeast Asia as a whole). Maritime Southeast Asia also seems to have been more crowded. Why was the population so sparse? Recent studies from India and China have described the destruction of forests and advance of cultivation proceeding relentlessly over many centuries. Siam had close connections to both areas through trade and migration. In old Siamese literature, the forest appears as an enemy of civilization, not very different from its portrayal in Chinese poetry. Why in Mainland Southeast Asia did the forests remain, and the population continue to be so sparse?

Perhaps one way to answer the question is to work backwards. In the modern era, the population curve has seen two spurts of increase. The second of these came after the Second World War and can easily be explained by medicines to overcome malaria and by an upturn in economic growth. The first spurt occurred in the early nineteenth century. What changed then was a new political regime, and the ending of a phase of interstate warfare. To explain the region's low population, we probably need to look at warfare and politics.

Warfare

There seems to have been a long era of warfare in Mainland Southeast Asia from the late thirteenth century to around 1600. There was then a lull, followed by another, shorter phase in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

The first era began with a culture of marauding warriors. Some flavor of the time exudes from a description of one such warrior in the chronicles:

Some [domains] he conquered and some he did not, taking one domain in some years and nine in others; sometimes taking two or three years for one; sometimes taking one without a battle. Those he took, he ruled, killing the rulers he conquered. When he killed the rulers, he would have one of his officers govern there, and sometimes he would maintain [the previous ruler] in charge.¹⁵

From the late fourteenth century, this warrior conflict was overlain by competition between rising urban centers (including Ayutthaya) to expand their sway over a larger economic hinterland. Perhaps key to this upnotch was greater use of elephants which extended an army's range. Rulers devoted considerable time to hunting these beasts. Apart from elephants, the technology of warfare was extraordinarily simple. Guns and explosives were introduced by the Portuguese and from China towards the end of this phase, but were not present in enough quantity to be very significant. Fighting was done with swords, spears, and pikes with metal blades, and also spears and lances made from sharpened wood. Armor was almost unknown. The military manuals were devoted to various kinds of prediction and geomancy. With the technology so simple, sheer numbers became critical to success. At the end of the thirteenth century, Mangrai's army was reported as over 700,000 but this is obviously excessive. Vasco da Gama relayed the information from 1497-8 that the Ayutthayan king could field a force of 400 elephants, 4,000 horsemen, and 20,000 infantry.¹⁶ This may be a little conservative. Around 1400, the Chiang Mai chronicle reported that six northern muang could field 52,000 men.¹⁷ With the increase in

¹⁵ Wyatt, 'Relics,' 46, from Tamnan CM CT

¹⁶ [Campos]

¹⁷ [CMC 52].

conflict over the fifteenth century, armies increased in size. Varthema around 1505 reported that the Tenasserim ruler had 100 elephants and 100,000 armed men. Barros estimated the Siamese army as 200,000 foot soldiers with 25,000 on horse and 10,000 on elephants.

Societies were organized to provide these armies through various systems of servitude and unfreedom. These systems can easily be described, but understanding the coercive power that kept them in place is more difficult, though there are glimpses. The Ayutthaya Law on Warfare prescribed fierce and horrific punishments for avoiding call-up or failing on the battlefield, while itemizing rewards for military success. Early European accounts describe generals keeping their best troops at the rear to drive deserters back into the fray.

Given the low technology of arms, the mortality on the battlefield might not have been so large. But dragging massive armies across the landscape was devastating. Many recruits died from forest fevers. The areas traversed were devastated by troops marauding for food and pleasure. By a terrible logic, one of the main aims of warfare came to be capturing people to restock the home population, leading to yet further battles and further treks through the malarial forests.

This phase of warfare petered out around 1600, largely because of improvements in defensive technology, especially construction of city walls. Around this time, several sieges failed. Also there are mentions of massive slave revolt in Ava, though details are scant. For the next 150 years, wars were few and small. Probably the population increased in this era, though the sources are too slight to give any confirmation of such a trend, let alone its magnitude.

Another phase of warfare began in the eighteenth century. The triggers seem to have been both princely ambition and commercial competition. The enabling technology was large-scale cannon able to breach city walls. In this era, the armies seem to have been much smaller, yet devastation came in another form. The military fashion of the time was not to capture the enemy's city, but to wipe it off the map. The Burmese destroyed Ayutthaya. The Siamese destroyed Vientiane, and tried to destroy the Cambodian capital.

With better sources, we can get some idea of the scale of devastation to populations that had probably been occurring all along. Around Ayutthaya, some previously long and densely settled areas seem to have been deserted for forty to sixty years. Chiang Mai, a regional capital for four centuries, was effectively abandoned for almost half a century. Some of its dependent territories to the north did not recover for almost a century. Certainly displaced people could build new homes in people-starved polities. But just the process of relocation was probably fatal for many.

The ending of this phase of warfare may have had many causes. First, there was a rising trend of revolt (and evasion) against systems of coercion. Second, there seems to have been a revulsion against military expansionism, expressed in the language of Buddhism. Third, and perhaps most importantly, a handful of centers (including Bangkok) established dominance and imposed their own version of peace. Fourth, the arrival of Europeans added another deterrent complication.

1830 to 1980: The land frontier

The transition point to a new era came in the 1830s. In the face of Burmese attacks beginning in the 1750s, Siam revived its systems for marshalling people for warfare, fought the Burmese to a standstill, and then used its revived military power to extend its reach over a much broader territory than ever before – down the

peninsula, up into the northern hills, and eastwards onto the Khorat plateau. This revived military era came to an end after failures to extend control over Cambodia in the 1830s, and the arrival of Europeans with territorial ambitions. From the mid 1830s onwards, there was very little military adventurism by the new Siamese capital at Bangkok, and systems of labor control went into rapid decline.

The second key to the change was the growth of export demand for agricultural produce. Siam began exporting rice to famine-prone southern China in the eighteenth century, and these flows revived in the early nineteenth. Colonial demand provided another pull. By 1850, Siam was exporting 12 million tons of sugar a year. The big upturn came from the 1870s as neighboring colonized states drew people out of agriculture into urban and plantation economies, creating demand for rice. Between 1850 and 1930, Siam's exports of rice multiplied a hundredfold, from 15,000 tons to 1.5 million.

The freeing of labor and upturn of external demand created the conditions for an extraordinary expansion of a land frontier lasting for a century and a half. The paddy area in the Chaophraya plain expanded from 1.6 million hectare in 1850 to 24 million a century later. It also spilled out from the plain into areas newly under Bangkok's control, reaching a total of 60 million by 1980, an average growth of around 50,000 hectares a year.

The population grew in parallel with that expansion. At the end of the second phase of warfare, even old centers of settlement in the Chaophraya Plain were described as "now very scantily populated, and almost a desert."¹⁸ Cautious estimates reckon there were around half a million people living in the Chaophraya Plain and around a million in the expanded Siam. By the 1920s, the population of the central region had grown to 3.3 million, a rate of increase of around 1.8 per cent a year. It then doubled over the next thirty years, and doubled again over the following twenty.

The state's role in the early years of this expansion was largely passive. Several canals built as military highways helped to open up some regions for agrarian settlement. Most importantly, the state lacked the will to maintain and enforce old systems of labor control. In addition, the state lacked any orientation, experience, or machinery for taxing land. The frontier was largely left alone. As agrarian exports became an increasingly important generator of wealth in the later nineteenth century, the state took a marginally more active role in facilitating the expansion. The king and leading nobles became involved in building canals to open up new areas of settlement, as well as investing in banks and steamships.

At the turn into the twentieth century, the state adjusted the legal framework to match the living realities. The old systems of controlling labor were formally abolished. New systems of land titling and land law were put in place. Some attempts were made to impose taxes, but then abandoned in favor of the easier option of levying revenue from the wealth made in the urban sector growing on the back of agrarian exports.

Peasant society

While the society of the earlier era scarcely merited the description as a peasant society, the society created on the land frontier was a prime example of the type, and uniquely expansive for the era. The state played some role in shaping this society by restraining the growth of landlordism. This was important around the capital and other major cities where old nobles and new merchants had ambitions to accumulate large

¹⁸ *Burney Papers*, II, 4: 51–3, quoted in Sternstein, 1993: 16.

holdings. But beyond these inner areas, the society was shaped more by the remoteness and again by the state's neglect, particularly the failure to create a functioning judicial system for enforcing superior land rights. Thus by and large the farms were household-based. Most of the labor was provided by the family. The size of landholding was adjusted to suit the labor resources of the family, averaging around 3 to 4 hectares. Households produced for their own subsistence, and sold any surplus. The technology was very simple using buffalos, metal-tipped wooden ploughs, and simple devices for water management. In comparison to other parts of Asia, yields per hectare were low. At 1950, these peasant households made up around 80 percent of the national population. At 1980, there were around 6 million households of small-scale farmers.¹⁹

After the Second World War, the state resolved to push agrarian growth to generate the foreign exchange and the capital to initiate industrialization. However, it was still possible to do so through extensive rather than intensive methods. Building roads into the uplands surrounding the Chaophraya Plain gave access to vast new areas of forest that could be cleared for planting paddy and more diversified crops. A major project to stabilize the water flows in the Chaophraya system through dams and canals opened up more land that had been susceptible to flooding. Import of tractors also helped advance cultivation into areas out of reach with old technology. Investments in intensifying agriculture were rather meager, only some conventional crop breeding, small irrigation schemes, and limited extension services. There was no Green Revolution, not even a serious attempt to lower the high price of fertilizer. Yields remained low. Paddy yields advanced rather slowly, doubling on average over the second half of the century. With population growth racing up to 3 percent, and land still becoming available even faster than population, agriculture delivered the desired surplus on the old extensive pattern.

This trend finally ended in the 1980s. The population entered a rapid demographic transition, with annual increase slumping from 3 to 1.5 percent over the next two decades. A social decision was made to halt the land frontier in order to protect the remaining, highly diminished area of forest. The state turned more decisively to seek growth and employment from the urban economy.

1950 to present: Industrializing with extensive agriculture

In the late 1950s, the US played a crucial role in integrating Thai economy into the global system and helped nurturing capitalism there as the US wanted Thailand to succeed as an industrializing country to escape being drawn into the communist world led by China and the Soviet Union as well as being its close ally in the war against communism in Indo-China. The burgeoning urban middle classes and other elites at the time welcomed this coalition.

The US design on Thailand was facilitated very much by the Thai state led by General Sarit Thanarat. Sarit, who came to power by coups in 1957 and 1958, with support of the US. His keen interest to promote economic development in Thailand along capitalist lines, through indicative planning and establishing a slew of institutions to promote this development may qualify the Thai state at this time as "semi-developmental". He ruled Thailand as a military dictator from 1957 to 1963, and his successors, also military men, from then to 1973. Through these years, the Thai state embraced the idea of development and cooperated with the US and the World Bank to accelerate economic change under a series of 5-year economic plans,

¹⁹ Pasuk and Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics*, chs. 1-2.

starting in 1961, with the first three plans virtually written by the World Bank. “Progress and modernization were expressed in terms of having enough to eat, a place to live and work to do.”²⁰ Sarit promoted the idea of economic development with the slogans, “Work is money, money is work, giving rise to happiness,” and “Flowing water, bright lights, good roads.”

Like most emerging countries of this era, Thailand pursued “import substitution industrialization,” promoting establishment of industries to replace imports with domestic manufactures. “Infant industries” were given state subsidies, and protected from foreign competition by tariffs. The policy was financed by forcing agricultural growth (as noted above) and raising taxes from agriculture, especially the tax on rice exports, known as the rice premium (until the early 1960s). In terms of growth, the policy appeared successful. From the 1960s to 1980s, the Thai economy grew at a sustained rate of 6-7 percent a year, one of the fastest in the developing world. By the late 1980s, Thailand was predicted to become a “newly industrializing country” or “Asian tiger”, following in the wake of the East Asian economies of Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. In pursuit of that goal, the development strategy was switched to “export-oriented industrialization,” to produce manufacturing products for the world market.

Failed industrialization

This strategy aimed to emulate the rapid growth achieved by Japan thirty years earlier, and Korea and Taiwan some twenty years earlier. But it failed.

One reason for this failure lies in the agrarian background, and so-called “resource curse.”²¹ Japan, Taiwan, and Korea were all resource-strapped economies. All of them had a low land-man ratio, and so were forced to intensify their agriculture and tried hard on growing their industries. Japan in particular has a long history of agricultural innovation and intensification to provide more food and other agricultural products. In the colonial era, Taiwan and Korea were forced to intensify their agricultural sectors to supply food and raw materials to Japan. In the late 1940s and 1950s Taiwan and Korea undertook land reform, while retaining institution of private property. Japan was obliged to follow the same route under American tutelage after the Second World War. As a result, when all three countries embarked on policy-led industrialization in the post WW II period, they had already undergone land and agrarian reform, and were able to raise the resources to finance the early stages of industrialization by continuing the intensification of agriculture. The farming sector was relatively well-off, and developed as a growing market for industrial goods in parallel with the growth of domestic manufacturing.

As noted above, Thailand followed a very different pattern. By the 1940s Thailand was still a land abundant country. So the pressure to intensify agriculture and to pursue land reform at the start of its industrialization was absent. It was possible to increase the overall output of agriculture by extending the cultivated area and multiplying the number of small farms practicing low-intensity agriculture. Rural per capita incomes increased only slightly, and were insufficient for buying anything but the simpler and cheaper products of the new domestic manufacturing industry. Instead of trying to correct this imbalance, the government’s instinctive reaction was

²⁰ (Thak:105).

²¹ The other reason may be the much less rigorous industrial policy pursued by the Thai government. In particular some writers have argued that while foreign direct investment has helped Thai industrialization, Thai government did not create suitable institutions to ensure that foreign investment contributed to improvement in technological capabilities of Thai industries. See for example Doner (2009), Hirose (1996).

to force-feed urban growth to expand the market for domestic manufactures – especially through biasing its spending on infrastructure and other public goods towards the urban sector. Even so, the urban market was small and quickly saturated, long before domestic industries had acquired the scale to become efficient, to develop their own technology, or to develop their own internal linkages.

When the country switched towards a strategy of manufacturing for export, local firms were much less sophisticated and capable than their counterparts in East Asia at the same turning point. Meanwhile, of course, the world market for manufactures had become more competitive in the interval as well.²² As for agriculture, as the government turned towards developing industry to earn foreign exchange, it was more or less left behind to fend for itself. Government spending on rural development was focused on road-building and other infrastructures for industries, and very little was spent on developing agricultural technologies and R&D.

After turning towards export manufacturing, several firms in the East Asian economies drew on the scale and challenge of the international market to grow, develop technological capabilities, and emerge as competitive multinationals. The experience of Thai firms was very different. Recognizing the need to acquire technology from outside, the government opened up the country to foreign investment. At first, it made some attempt to force foreign capital into joint-venture alliances with local firms, but only in a few cases did this result in any technology transfer into domestic hands. As the urban economy accelerated on the inflow of foreign investment, many domestic entrepreneurs diverted into property development, service industries that were still protected from foreign competition in various ways, and speculative investment. In the financial crisis of 1997, Thai capital was virtually eliminated from the dynamic sector of manufacturing, particularly those geared to exporting. To prevent widespread bankruptcy, the government removed the controls forcing foreign firms into joint ventures, and most of these joint ventures were promptly dissolved. The Thai manufacturing sector, especially manufactured export, is now utterly dominated by multinational capital.²³

Thai firms have developed little technological capacity, and no international brands. Charoen Pokphand is an outstanding exception. Starting from importing seeds, CP had grown into a diversified food manufacturer with dense internal linkages. It had built scale by extending laterally into many other countries in Asia, and making an early entry into China after its opening. It had initially purchased technology, but then developed its own capacity, and has begun to build international brands. But CP stands as an exception that proves the rule.

Agrarian stagnation and inequality

As noted above, in the 1980s, the land frontier was closed. Also from 1970 onwards, prices for agricultural products trended steadily downwards throughout the world. Logically speaking, the conditions were created for a turn towards a more intensive pattern of agricultural growth. To some extent this came about. Farmers diversified into higher-value crops, especially fruit and vegetables, and aquaculture. Yields accelerated slightly, especially for paddy. Contract farming introduced better seeds and cultivation practices for several crops. But these changes added up to something far short of an agrarian revolution. From 1985 to 2005, the total output of agriculture grew at an average of 2.4 percent a year in real terms.

²² There were several other reasons for the contrast between Thailand and the East Asian states, particularly in the nature of the state and the policy-making apparatus.

²³ Pasuk and Baker, ed, *Thai Capital*.

Why intensification failed to materialize remains something of a puzzle. Part of the reasons lies in the fact that any significant intensification would have required intervention by the government – to expand irrigation, develop technologies, and improve R&D. But government viewed agriculture as a sunset sector, and believed it could achieve faster growth by concentrating on manufacturing and services such as tourism.

Instead the mobility that had helped to drive the land frontier was diverted into labor migration. The net addition to the population migrated away to the cities. Farming families countered the fall in agrarian prices and incomes by distributing their family labor between the village and city. Wage income and remittances provided a steadily growing fraction of total household income for the rural population. Now the overall fraction is over half, and significantly higher in some backward areas.

Yet industrialization geared to export in the hands of multinational companies failed to increase the demand for labor at the same rate as the growing supply. Multinational firms tend to import their best technology, rather than the technology that is suitable to the factor endowment of the host country. Even while manufactures expanded to 40 percent of GDP and around four-fifths of all exports, it employed only around 15 percent of the labor force. Most migrants from the rural areas hence finished up in casual laboring or various informal jobs such as vending and petty service industries. The excess supply of labor to these sectors mean that the returns were very low. Some go overseas to work in Japan, Korea and other places.

As Thailand becomes more industrialized the share of agriculture in GDP declined quickly from around 80 percent of GDP in 1960 to less than 10 percent in 2008. Meanwhile the share of employed labor in agriculture also fell but more slowly. By 2008 about 40 percent of employed labor still reported their major occupation in agriculture.²⁴

Despite rapid economic growth rates, income distribution has become worse. In 1975/76 the share of the poorest 20 percent in GDP was 6.05 percent falling to 4.2 percent in 2004. Meanwhile the share of the top 20 percent rose from 49 to 55 percent in the same period. By 2008 the gap between the top and bottom quintiles was about 13 times. This is worse than Thailand's neighbors in Southeast Asian or China (where the gap is around ten times), and much worse than East Asia (four to six times), and better only than Latin American and African countries with endemic social conflicts. In Thailand the wealth distribution is even more skewed. The gap between the top and bottom quintiles was 69 times in 2008.

²⁴ However, most of these would earn a part of their household income from non-agriculture as well. Some may migrated to the cities to earn wages in the off-farm season and returned again in the farm-season. This circular pattern of migration is common.