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# Are Thai Peasants still Farmers?

## The Socioeconomic Transformation of Two Villages of Northeastern Thailand

FORMOSO Bernard\*

Aix Marseille Univ, CNRS, IrAsia, Marseille, France

Between 1984 and 1986 researchers from CeDRASEMI/CNRS and the University of Mahidol (Bangkok), including myself, had jointly carried out a detailed socioeconomic study of two rural villages of Khon Kaen, in the heart of the Northeast (Isan), the largest region of the kingdom which is also the main stronghold of the Thailand's small peasantry (Formoso ed. 1997; Taillard 1997). The two communities, Ban Amphawan and Ban Han, were chosen taking into account two main considerations. First, a previous socioeconomic survey of these villages had been carried out in 1969-1970 by Jacques Amyot, Friedrich Fuhs and the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute (CUSRI 1976), thus offering a precious basis for a diachronic comparison. Second, they were sampling the two main types of farming systems to be met among Thai lowland rice-growers, namely irrigated versus rainfall agriculture. They also represented two levels of integration into the market economy due to their uneven distance and transport connection to Khon Kaen city. Ban Amphawan was a suburban village, while Ban Han was located in a remote area, then poorly linked to the district town of Phu Wieng and more than one hour's drive from Khon Kaen.

Although I returned periodically to the villages for short visits in the 1990s and 2000s, my centers of interests were at that time rather directed towards the Thailand's Chinese minority and issues on ethnicity. In 2013-2014 however, my

\*Bernard Formoso is a professor of social anthropology at Paris Ouest – Nanterre – La Défense University, and is affiliated to Aix Marseille Univ, CNRS, IrAsia, Marseille, France.

involvement in a research program on Southeast Asian civil societies and the statement that northeastern peasants were increasingly asserting their rights to participate in the reshaping of national polity made me question the changes that the farmers of this region were experiencing in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. I then decided to conduct a new socioeconomic survey of Ban Amphawan and Ban Han in order to use them as a reality check of the past and present condition of the Thai peasantry, on the ground of a solid and unique corpus of data covering more than forty years.

The research was aimed to substantiate or to qualify some general assumptions by specialists of Thai rural society (Suphannachart & Warr 2011; Walker 2012; Keyes 2014). According to them, Thai peasantry has experienced dramatic change during the last three decade and small farmers have in the 2010s a more diversified economy than in the 1980s. On the basis of national statistics, these authors argue that subsistence cultivation has become a modest component of the rural households' economy, and non-agricultural incomes are now more significant than farming for a great many rural households. In his book entitled *Thailand's Political Peasants*, Andrew Walker contends that for a large part of them peasants would be no longer poor. They would have become "middle-income peasants", even though they confront a new form of economic disparity. In comparison with the urban middle class, their relative poverty would be becoming much worse, because of uneven economic development and of low productivity in the rural economy.

These specialists of Thai rural society also argue that the imbalance of the households' economy in favor of off-farm activities—for many of them carried out in large urban centers—goes hand in hand with a greater openness of the peasantry to the global world and a higher degree of involvement in national policy. According to Charles Keyes (2014: 182), Isan villagers have become "cosmopolitan peasants", while for Andrew Walker (2012: 9), a new political society has emerged in contemporary rural Thailand, as part of a gradual process in which surplus extraction through taxation has given way to state's subsidization. Engaging with programs provided by the state rather than seeking autonomy from it, and developing morally ambivalent strategies to build connections with holders of diversified forms of power would be the main salient features of this new political society. In line with the discussions by Partha Chatterjee (2004) of the kind of political involvement which characterizes the Asian rural communities, Andrew Walker notes that for the Thai "political peasant" "benefits flow primarily from connections, manipulation, calculation, and expediency, not from the universal rights of modern citizenship".

In the present paper I confront those assumptions that relate directly to the changing economy of the rural households with the data provided by the restudy of the two villages. The survey was carried out between September and December 2014, exactly thirty years after the socioeconomic census of the population that the CeDRASEMI/Mahidol team had made as the first output of its research (1984). I have collected quantitative data by interviewing all household heads in the two villages, on the basis of questionnaires recording systematic information about

past and present members of the households, their marital status, level of education and occupations. Costs of production and annual incomes from farming were also recorded as well as the incomes coming from allowances and off-farm activities. A section of the questionnaire was also dedicated to debt, loans, and donations to the Buddhist clergy.

## THE TWO VILLAGES: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Before providing a brief account of the history and current situation of Ban Amphawan and Ban Han, some key features of rural villages in northeastern Thailand should be outlined. The spatial organization of the two communities follows the dominant pattern in Isan, namely a *mu ban* ("cluster of houses"), assimilated to a human body (Formoso 1990), whose head is symbolized—at the eastern end of the habitat—by a Buddhist monastery (*wat ban*). This temple-monastery is the spiritual center of the village and a major symbol of its identity (Condominas & Gaudillot 1959: 92; Zago 1972: 70). According to Charles Keyes (2014: 138), Isan villages may be seen as "moral communities" united by common worship of guardian spirits and collective support of the local *wat* (*ibid.*: 138). Buddhist festivals, organized according to the Lao tradition of the *hit sip song* ("rituals of the twelve months"), are highlights of such support and of the moral community's embodiment. Although strong socioeconomic inequalities may exist in rural communities, whose social structure is moreover based on the elder/younger hierarchical pattern, a strong emphasis is however put on the equality of households' rights in the public sphere. Authoritarian processes are excluded in the local exercise of power. The village headman (*phu yai ban*) and his assistants usually exert a great influence, but they must obtain the consent of the majority of their fellow citizens, if not unanimity, to validate their proposals (Taillard 1977: 80-81).

To close these preliminary remarks it should be pointed out that rural Northeast has long been the main labor reservoir of the kingdom. Faced with limited opportunities to increase their incomes through agriculture, more and more villagers—men and women—have migrated to Bangkok in search of wage employment from the 1960s on (Klausner 1972: 105). If the dominant pattern was, and remains, for the laborers to spend from several months to several years working away from their home village, the percentage of the northeastern population who are lifetime migrants has gradually increased from 11 percent in 1960 to 17 percent in 2000. As a consequence, the Northeast has seen a net loss in population for decades, which was estimated by the National Statistical Office to more than 900.000 between 1985 and 2000 (Huguet et al. 2011: 14-15).

If we turn now to the two villages. Ban Amphawan is located in Samran sub-district (*tambon* Samran), Muang district (*amphoe* Muang). It lies twelve kilometers north of Khon Kaen city, and about four kilometers of the main road, the Friendship Highway, which connects Khon Kaen to Udon Thani and to Nong Khai, on the border with Laos. Most of the houses of Ban Amphawan are cluste-

red around a main street. Its rice fields are embedded with those of Ban Khok Na Ngam, an adjoining conglomeration of three villages. After the commissioning of the Ubol Ratana dam in 1966, irrigation canals brought water into the village' rice fields all year round. However, most farmers had to wait 1981 and the full completion of the irrigation infrastructures to start double cropping. The village was equipped with electricity in 1975 and with domestic water supply in 1985. Since 1986 an asphalt road serves Ban Amphawan and it was connected to the GSM network in 2000. The community was founded in 1918 by a group of Isan families originating from Roiet. It had 79 households and 514 inhabitants in 1969, 123 households and a total population of 773 in 1984, and 184 households for only 711 inhabitants in 2014.

For its part, Ban Han is located in Nong Khung Thanassan sub-district, six kilometers northeast of the Phu Wieng district administrative center, and 73 kilometers of Khon Kaen. Its houses are clustered along a road that runs from Phu Wieng to the reservoir of the Ubol Ratana hydroelectric dam. When the road was asphalted in 1987, the commercial activity has progressively moved to it from the center of the village. Similar to Amphawan, Ban Han is situated on an elevated outcropping in the midst of lowland rice paddies. However, in its case a significant part of the village territory is made of upland covered by scrub forest, interspersed with plots of cash crops. Farmers rely on rainfall to supply their rice fields with water, and on artesian wells to feed their sugar cane plantations during the dry season. Ban Han has been supplied with electricity in 1981 and domestic water in 1991. Its connection to the GSM network dates back to 2004. The community was founded in 1907 by Isan families coming from Ban Rua, a village of the neighborhood, who were later joined by migrants from Khorat, Khon Kaen and Vientiane (Somnuk Payasing 1997: 54). Ban Han had 144 households and 927 inhabitants in 1969, and 208 households for a population of 1,137 in 1984. In 1997, the village, considered to have become too big and hardly manageable, was divided into two new administrative units: Ban Han (vill. 4) and Ban Han Noi ("Little Ban Han", vill. 14). For the need of the diachronic comparison, I decided to cover the two villages. Accordingly, in 2014, Ban Han and Ban Han Noi, put together, count 267 households (198 + 69) for a total population of 898 inhabitants (685 + 213).

## HOUSEHOLDS' SPATIAL DISAGGREGATION

The significant decrease in population which affects both villages appeals few comments. Between 1984 and 2014, Ban Amphawan has lost 8 percent of its residents and Ban Han 22,1 percent, while in the meantime the number of households increased by 50 percent in the first village and by 28 percent in Ban Han and Ban Han Noi put together. These figures offer a good illustration of what Charles Keyes (2014: 5) calls the households' *spatial disaggregation*, partly due to increasing mobility and migration of their members, and partly due to an accelerated access of the young couples to residential autonomy. Whereas couples or individuals over

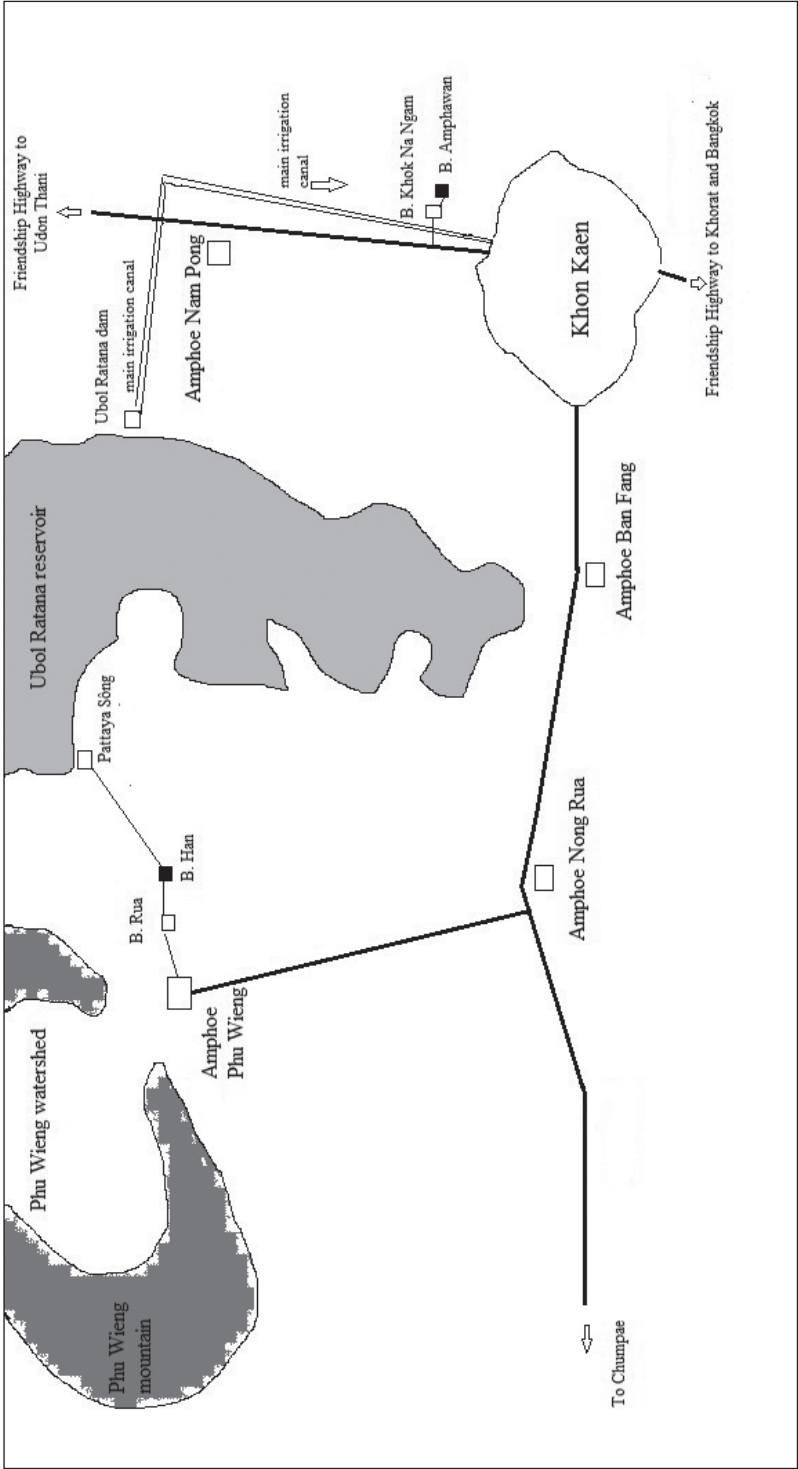


Fig. 1. Location map of the two villages  
Source: Map by the author.

60 years old living in isolation did not exist in 1984, they now count for 5,4 percent and 16,5 percent of the total number of households in Ban Amphawan and Ban Han respectively. At the same time, the rate of extended families, with married kin of different generations living together, has decreased from around 40 percent in 1984 to only 18-20 percent in 2014. Higher achievements in education and an easier access to off-farm employment have led a significant part of the labor force—mostly young or mature men and women—either to found precociously their own household or to desert the village and to turn to urban livelihoods.

Because of its proximity with Khon Kaen, which is an important source of local employment, Ban Amphawan is less affected by the process of rural depopulation than Ban Han. It has maintained almost unchanged its rate of adults from 20 to 44 years old (30,1 percent in 1984, 31 percent in 2014) (Tab. 1), whereas Ban Han is facing an important loss for this category of population (from 39,4 to 23,4 percent) (Tab. 2). As a consequence of this phenomenon and of steady progress in life expectancy at birth,<sup>1</sup> the rate of people aged of 65 and over has increased from 3,5 percent in 1984 to 12,9 percent in 2014 in Ban Amphawan, and from 4,7 to 14,6 percent in Ban Han.

The villagers who work in cities and towns are prompt to adopt the urban way of life. They claim earlier than before their economic autonomy by founding new households as soon as their level of incomes allows it. They easily involve themselves in marital unions outside the institution of marriage. As a result, the union being not secured by formal arrangement between families is fuzzy concerning the residential status of the husband or wife, and more unstable. A frequent experience is for unofficially “married” men or women to live separately from their partner, the latter still living with his/her parents. It is also quite common to find women whose union has failed and who live with their children within their native family. In comparison with 1984, the number of men and women either separated or divorced has more than tripled in Ban Amphawan (from 8 to 26), while in Ban Han it has almost doubled (from 10 to 17).

Villagers, of the young or intermediate generation, who have experienced urban ways of life also tend to adjust their childbirth expectancies to urban standards. Hence the fact that the proportion of the population under the age of 20 has significantly decreased in both villages. In the case of Ban Amphawan, people under 20 counted for 54,7 percent of the total population in 1969, 50,5 percent in 1984, and only 24,4 percent in 2014. In Ban Han, the figures are about the same: people under 20 counted for 56,1 percent of the population in 1969, 43,5 percent in 1984, and 24,5 percent in 2014. In their combination these new behavioral patterns explain both the increase of households, and the decrease of the total population in the two villages.

Table 1. Ban Amphawan: population distribution by sex, age and percent of total population

Year	1969			1984			2014		
Age group/sex	Male (%)	Fem. (%)	Total (%)	Male (%)	Fem. (%)	Total (%)	Male (%)	Fem. (%)	Total
[0-5[	35 (7,0)	39 (7,8)	74 (14,8)	31 (8,0)	41 (10,6)	72 (9,3)	15 (4,3)	13 (3,7)	28 (3,9)
[5-10[	36 (7,2)	39 (7,8)	75 (15,0)	47 (12,1)	52 (13,5)	99 (12,8)	24 (6,7)	24 (6,9)	48 (6,7)
[10-15[	31 (6,2)	33 (6,6)	64 (12,9)	64 (16,5)	56 (14,6)	120 (15,5)	22 (6,3)	25 (7,0)	47 (6,6)
[15-20[	34 (6,8)	25 (5,1)	59 (11,9)	53 (13,6)	47 (12,3)	100 (12,9)	24 (6,7)	27 (7,6)	51 (7,2)
[20-25[	19 (3,8)	24 (4,8)	43 (8,6)	37 (9,5)	33 (8,6)	70 (9,0)	24 (6,7)	16 (4,4)	40 (5,6)
[25-30[	23 (4,6)	14 (2,8)	37 (7,4)	39 (10,0)	35 (9,0)	74 (9,6)	26 (7,3)	26 (7,3)	52 (7,3)
[30-35[	10 (2,0)	15 (3,0)	25 (5,0)	18 (4,6)	18 (4,7)	36 (4,7)	19 (5,4)	14 (3,9)	33 (4,6)
[35-40[	10 (2,0)	14 (2,8)	24 (4,8)	33 (8,5)	30 (7,8)	63 (8,1)	26 (7,3)	33 (9,2)	59 (8,3)
[40-45[	11 (2,2)	11 (2,2)	22 (4,4)	17 (4,4)	12 (3,1)	29 (3,7)	41 (11,5)	32 (9,0)	73 (10,2)
[45-50[	13 (2,6)	8 (1,6)	21 (4,2)	10 (2,6)	13 (3,4)	23 (3,0)	34 (9,5)	35 (9,8)	69 (9,7)
[50-55[	5 (1,0)	9 (1,8)	14 (2,8)	10 (2,6)	13 (3,4)	23 (3,0)	21 (6,0)	23 (6,5)	44 (6,2)
[55-60[	6 (1,2)	8 (1,6)	14 (2,8)	10 (2,6)	11 (2,8)	21 (2,7)	19 (5,4)	24 (6,9)	43 (6,0)
[60-65[	6 (1,2)	3 (0,6)	9 (1,8)	10 (2,6)	7 (1,8)	17 (2,2)	19 (5,4)	15 (4,2)	34 (4,8)
[65 or +	9 (1,8)	8 (1,6)	17 (3,4)	9 (2,4)	17 (4,4)	28 (3,5)	41 (11,5)	50 (14,0)	91 (12,9)
Total calculated	248 (49,8)	250 (50,2)	498 (100,0)	388 (50,1)	385 (49,9)	773 (100,0)	355 (49,99)	356 (50,01)	711 (100,0)
Unknown*			16						
Total			514						

\*The CUSRI team had unfortunately lost part of the questionnaires after the completion of the survey.



Table 2. Ban Han (vill. 4 + 14): population distribution by sex, age and percent of total population

Year	1969			1984			2014		
Age group/sex	Male (%)	Fem. (%)	Total (%)	Male (%)	Fem. (%)	Total (%)	Male (%)	Fem. (%)	Total (%)
[0-5[	41 (5,1)	60 (7,4)	10 (12,5)	61 (10,7)	53 (9,3)	114 (10,0)	15 (3,5)	22 (4,7)	37 (4,1)
[5-10[	65 (8,1)	67 (8,3)	132 (16,4)	64 (11,3)	54 (9,5)	118 (10,4)	29 (6,9)	32 (6,7)	61 (6,9)
[10-15[	56 (6,9)	57 (7,0)	113 (14,0)	68 (11,9)	48 (8,5)	116 (10,2)	28 (6,7)	33 (6,9)	61 (6,9)
[15-20[	44 (5,4)	64 (7,9)	108 (13,4)	60 (10,6)	87 (15,3)	147 (12,9)	28 (6,7)	31 (6,5)	59 (6,6)
[20-25[	36 (4,5)	39 (4,8)	75 (9,3)	67 (11,8)	63 (11,1)	130 (11,4)	16 (3,8)	16 (3,4)	32 (3,6)
[25-30[	25 (3,1)	22 (2,7)	47 (5,8)	58 (10,2)	55 (9,7)	113 (9,9)	23 (5,5)	14 (2,9)	37 (4,1)
[30-35[	22 (2,7)	21 (2,6)	43 (5,3)	25 (4,4)	29 (5,1)	54 (4,7)	16 (3,8)	14 (2,9)	30 (3,3)
[35-40[	26 (3,2)	24 (3,0)	50 (6,2)	46 (8,0)	45 (7,9)	91 (8,0)	28 (6,7)	28 (5,9)	56 (6,3)
[40-45[	18 (2,2)	23 (2,8)	41 (5,0)	34 (6,0)	27 (4,8)	61 (5,4)	29 (6,9)	30 (6,3)	59 (6,6)
[45-50[	14 (1,7)	17 (2,1)	31 (3,8)	30 (5,2)	21 (3,8)	51 (4,5)	36 (8,5)	61 (12,8)	97 (10,8)
[50-55[	13 (1,6)	12 (1,5)	25 (3,1)	18 (3,1)	22 (3,9)	40 (3,5)	41 (9,7)	47 (9,9)	88 (9,8)
[55-60[	7 (0,9)	4 (0,5)	11 (1,4)	11 (1,9)	20 (3,5)	31 (2,8)	47 (11,1)	50 (10,5)	97 (10,8)
[60-65[	3 (0,4)	11 (1,4)	14 (1,7)	9 (1,6)	9 (1,6)	18 (1,6)	21 (4,8)	32 (6,7)	53 (5,6)
[65 or +	7 (0,9)	9 (1,1)	16 (2,0)	19 (3,3)	34 (6,0)	53 (4,7)	65 (15,4)	66 (13,9)	131 (14,6)
Total calculated	377 (46,7)	430 (53,3)	807 (100,0)	570 (50,3)	567 (49,7)	1137 (100,0)	422 (46,9)	476 (53,1)	898 (100,0)
Unknown			120						
Total			927						

## NEW FORMS OF SOLIDARITY BETWEEN CLOSE KINS

The phenomenon of spatial disaggregation observed in the two villages has not necessarily entailed a weakening of family ties or a breakdown in the out-migrants' attachments to their native community. As Charles Keyes (2014: 3) rightly puts it: "The village remains to this day the bedrock of Isan identity and has shaped the moral basis of that identity." The solidarity between parents and children remains strong, but it takes new forms adjusted to the basic needs and concerns of the labor force that has durably migrated to urban centers.

Thus, a new trend has emerged in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century which was insignificant in the 1980s. It consists in migrants relying on parents left behind in the village for taking charge of their progeny. The arguments put forward to justify this delegation of authority and educational duties is that the migrants are subjected to harsh work conditions which do not let them enough time to take care of the children, and that the urban social environment is unpropitious to a good moral education. In return, the migrants usually send monthly allowances to parents in charge of their progeny.

This new pattern of intergenerational solidarity is of particular significance in Ban Han where monthly allowances sent to old parents—in charge or not of grand-children—have become a major component of the local economy. As figures of the Table 3 show it, in this village one in four households are hosting grand-children and draw a major part of their net annual income from money sent by close kin working in distant urban centers or living abroad. At least two factors explain these high figures. First, local incomes earned from farm and off-farm activities are lower in Ban Han than in Amphawan, making it more dependent of external sources of cash inflow. Second, Ban Han is far less integrated into the provincial and regional labor market than the village close to Khon Kaen. As a consequence, a large part of its migrant workers move to Bangkok and to the Central Plain. While in Ban Amphawan 50,6 percent of the households' previous members involved in off-farm activities have found a job in Khon Kaen or other cities of the Northeast, in Ban Han, 54,4 percent of them are working in Bangkok, Chonburi or other places of the Central Plain.

## THE STRUCTURE OF INCOME IN THE TWO VILLAGES

While in 1969 and 1984 farming was the main occupation of more than 80 percent of the labor force of the two villages, and the major source of income for an equal proportion of households, the imbalance between farm and off-farm activities has progressively evolved during the last three decades to the point that in 2014 only 37,5 percent of the workers of Ban Amphawan and 60 percent of Ban Han declare farming as their main activity (Tab. 4 & 5). Based on these figures, Ban Amphawan is closer to the current national trend than Ban Han, in that the rate of the Thailand's labor force primarily involved in agriculture was about 31% in 2014<sup>2</sup>. In the suburban village only 3,9 percent of the households derive all

Table 3. Proportion of household heads who host grand-children and/or receiving allowances from children living elsewhere

	Ban Amphawan	Ban Han (vill. 4 + 14)	Total two villages
Number and percentage of household heads who host grand-children	(A) 14 (7,6%)	(A) 68 (25,5%)	82 (18,2%)
Number and percentage of households whose net annual income depends for more than 50 percent of allowances sent by children living elsewhere	(B) 10 (5,4%)	(B) 61 (23,2%)	71 (15,7%)
Number and percentage of households whose net annual income depends for less than 50 percent of allowances sent by children living elsewhere	(C) 34 (18,5%)	(C) 80 (30%)	114 (25,3%)
Total and percent of households receiving allowances (B + C)	44 (23,9%)	141 (53,2%)	185 (41%)

Table 4. Ban Amphawan: main and subsidiary occupation of labor force  
1969, 1984, 2014

Date/	1969		1984		2014	
Occupation	main	subsidiary	main	subsidiary	main	subsidiary
Agricultural	232 (80,8)	33 (36,7)	364 (80,3)	30 (18,4)	167 (37,5)	55 (31,4)
Trading	3 (1,0)		14 (3,1)	59 (36,2)	77 (17,0)	25 (14,3)
Home industry	1 (0,3)	8 (8,9)	2 (0,5)	23 (14,1)	7 (1,5)	38 (21,7)
Construction	15 (5,2)	6 (6,7)	21 (4,6)	24 (14,7)	25 (5,5)	5 (2,9)
Government service	5 (1,7)	-	22 (4,8)	1 (0,6)	70 (15,5)	8 (4,6)
Transportation	-	-	3 (0,7)	3 (1,8)	16 (3,5)	5 (2,9)
Industry	2 (0,7)	2 (2,2)	25 (5,6)	6 (3,7)	35 (7,7)	-
Casual labor	27 (9,4)	41 (45,5)	-	15 (9,2)	23 (5,0)	39 (22,2)
Other (service jobs)	2 (0,7)	-	2 (0,5)	2 (1,2)	32 (7,0)	-
unemployed	-	-	-	-	10 (2,2)	-
Total	287 (100,0)	90 (100,0)	453 (100,0)	163 (100,0)	453 (100,0)	175 (100,0)
Unknown	8	8	-	-	-	-
Rate of workers with subsidiary occupa- tion		31,3%		36,0%		38,6%

their income from agricultural activities (farming and/or agricultural wage labor), against 12,1 percent in Ban Han. More significantly, in 2014, 87,5 percent of the households of Ban Amphawan and 65,4 percent of those of Ban Han draw the main part of their income from off-farm activities or money sent by relatives. Trading is now the main occupation for more than 15% of the labor force in both villages, while civil servants account for 15,5 and 5,9 percent of it in Ban Amphawan and Ban Han respectively (Tabs. 4 & 5).

It should be noted that a majority of households in these villages still practice subsistence cultivation. However, the economic returns in the rice sector are modest, despite the substantial allocation of labor and land to its production. Questioned about maintaining a so little profitable activity when not in deficit, farmers explain that in so doing they have not to buy their rice to a higher price and that rice growing is part of their identity. The low benefits to draw from rice cultivation result from a constant increase in production costs combined with modest yields and low market prices, whatever the efforts by successive governments to subsidy the sector. Concerning input costs, most farmers have abandoned rice transplanting in 2002, when the Thaksin's government imposed a minimum wage per hour to several provinces, which pushed up the cost of hired labor force to 200 baht per day in Khon Kaen, and latter (2013) to 300 baht for the whole country. They now rely on hired four-wheel tractors and harvester-threshers for the main operations of the agricultural process. As hiring prices for tractors and harvester-threshers are around 700 bahts/rai in 2013-2014 (4,410 bahts or about 134 US dollars per hectare), most small or middle-range farmers draw very few incomes from paddy. Since 2004 Ban Amphawan has focused its cash cropping on the production of lotus and other flowers by using the irrigation water supply for that purpose. The impetus for this production was given by the creation fifteen years ago of a provincial market for this kind of products which is located in Ban Samran, along the Friendship Highway. In connection with this cash crop, many households in the village draw incomes from the craft of prawns and garlands of flowers (*roi ma lai*).

In Ban Han, sugarcane has been the mainstay of the cash-cropping sector for at least fifteen years. Contract-farming with the sugarcane milling company, Mithpol, which has built a big milling unit in the neighboring district of Nong Rua, concerns only few farmers who can devote sufficient land to this production. Usually the contracts specify the inputs that will be provided by Mithpol and the cost of the inputs that will be deducted from the contract payment for the produce. Other farmers rely on local traders and brokers to sell their crops. Finally, paddy and cash crops are in both villages the main source of income for less than one in three households.

Logically, the proportion of households whose main income comes from off-farm activities is higher in the village close to Khon Kaen, a city which has known a fast economic growth since the early 1990s, and provides many employments in both public and private sectors. Khon Kaen also offers many opportunities for

Table 5. Ban Han (vill. 4 + 14): main and subsidiary occupation of labor force  
1969, 1984, 2014

Date/	1969		1984		2014	
Occupation	main	subsidiary	main	subsidiary	main	subsidiary
Agricultural	485 (96,2)	8 (7,4)	574 (80,4)	34 (9,0)	355 (60,0)	79 (31,9)
Trading	8 (1,6)	26 (24,0)	23 (3,2)	30 (3,2)	90 (15,2)	27 (10,9)
Home industry	2 (0,4)	27 (25,0)	5 (0,7)	220 (58,3)	11 (1,9)	43 (17,3)
Construction	-	6 (5,6)	12 (1,7)	27 (7,2)	21 (3,6)	23 (9,3)
Government service	5 (1,0)	-	17 (2,4)	-	35 (5,9)	11 (4,4)
Transportation	-	1 (1,0)	11 (1,5)	14 (3,7)	15 (2,6)	4 (1,6)
Industry	-	3 (2,8)	54 (7,6)	10 (2,6)	32 (5,4)	-
Casual labor	4 (0,8)	32 (29,6)	14 (2,0)	37 (9,8)	17 (2,9)	59 (23,8)
Other (service jobs)	-	5 (4,6)	4 (0,5)	5 (1,5)	12 (2,0)	2 (0,8)
Unemployed	-	-	-	-	3 (0,5)	-
Total	504 (100,0)	108 (100,0)	714 (100,0)	377 (100,0)	591 (100,0)	248 (100,0)
Unknown	75	75	-		-	-
Rate of workers with subsidiary occupation		21,4%		52,8%		48,6%

petty trading and various services. As a consequence Ban Amphawan is now becoming a kind dormitory for a significant part of the village's labor force that makes a livelihood in the city and are weakly involved in the community's activities. In both villages, off-farm activities are far more diversified today than in the 1980s. They include government employment and positions within the sub-district administration, but also clerical works, jobs as driver, gardener, watchman and cleaner at the Khon Kaen university and in local hospitals in the case of Amphawan, skilled or unskilled employment in factories, construction entrepreneurship and hired labor, and various forms of trade and services in Khon Kaen, Phu Wieng or at the village level. While in Ban Amphawan and Ban Han there were five and ten shops respectively in 1984, their number has doubled in 2014. In Ban Han, which is a stopover village between Phu Wieng and the Ubon Ratana lakeside resort of Pattaya Sông, there are now six miscellaneous shops selling an array of basic consumer durables, six car or motorcycle repair shops, two agricultural inputs retailers, three crop traders, four stall holders selling *som tam*, *kwitaiw*, or other prepared dishes, two tiny petrol stations, a cyber-café, and even twice a week a periodic market (*talat nat*) which sells meat, vegetable, prepared dishes, and proposes entertainments to kids.

As Andrew Walker rightly pointed out: "rural households are increasingly multifunctional and multisited, combining an economically and spatially stretched portfolio of livelihood activities" (2012: 75). Domestic economy is now becoming more complex than thirty years ago, not only because household members are frequently involved in separate lucrative pursuits, but also because they tend to combine one main occupation with one or several subsidiary sources of income they develop depending on opportunities.

## SIZE OF HOLDINGS

The decline of agriculture in the two villages correlates with an increasing pressure on land. Landless households were a marginal phenomenon in 1984 (they accounted for 6,5 percent in Ban Amphawan and 7,2 percent in Ban Han). They now reach significant proportions in the two villages. In 2014, forty households in Ban Amphawan (21,7 percent) and thirty-four in Ban Han (12,7 percent) are not involved in farming, partly because they have no more land of their own (Tab. 6). If we add to this figure those who are landless but do farming by renting in all their holding, we reach the proportion of 28,8 percent of households in Ban Amphawan which are excluded from land ownership.

Overindebtedness and land selling for those who have completely shifted to non-farm activities partly explain the phenomenon. More generally, between 1984 and 2014 the average size of holdings has decreased significantly, and a growing number of households must combine several kinds of land tenure to secure a sustainable production of paddy. In 1984, 36,1 percent of Ban Han households cultivated more than 30 rai; in 2014 they are only 12,8 percent to do so. In both





Fig. 2. A harvester-thresher, Ban Han, 2014

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Table 6. Distribution of farm size group with percentage distribution (including all types of land tenure)

Village/date Size of the farm	Ban Amphawan			Ban Han (Vill. 4 + 14)		
	1969 nb (%)	1984* nb (%)	2014* nb (%)	1969 nb (%)	1984 nb (%)	2014 nb (%)
0 rai*	?	8 (6,5)	40 (21,7)	?	15 (7,2)	34 (12,7)
]0-2 rai[	-	-	2 (1,1)	1 (0,7)	4 (1,9)	1 (0,4)
[2-6 rai[	8 (10,6)	10 (8,1)	24 (13,1)	5 (3,5)	9 (4,3)	31 (11,6)
[6-15 rai[	27 (36,0)	31 (25,2)	55 (29,9)	39 (27,0)	38 (18,3)	75 (28,0)
[15-30 rai[	26 (34,7)	40 (32,5)	42 (22,9)	52 (36,1)	67 (32,2)	92 (34,5)
[30-45 rai[	10 (13,3)	21 (17,1)	14 (7,6)	23 (16,0)	44 (21,2)	21 (7,9)
[45-60 rai[	2 (2,7)	9 (7,3)	5 (2,7)	13 (9,0)	16 (7,7)	7 (2,6)
[60-140 rai[	2 (2,7)	4 (3,2)	2 (1%)	11 (7,7)	13 (6,2)	5 (1,9)
[140 -[	-	-	-	-	2 (1,0)	1 (0,4)
Total	75 (100,0)	123 (100,0)	184 (100,0)	144 (100,0)	208 (100,0)	267 (100,0)

\*Taking into account the system of double cropping; 1 rai = 0,16 hectare.



villages, the transfer of land ownership to heirs has become a major issue for large families with small holding. Some of them circumvent the problem by giving land in free use to heirs but by postponing *sine die* the formal transfer of land rights. Others sell part or the totality of their holding to those among the potential heirs who can afford the price. The argument is that they need money to secure incomes for their old days.

## POVERTY SITUATION AND INDEBTEDNESS

Overall poverty has continuously declined in Thailand over the past thirty years. Poverty line was established by the National Statistical Office (NSO) to 30,864 baht per person and per year for 2013. According to the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), during the last ten years the share of the kingdom population under this poverty line fell from 32,4 percent in 2003 to 10,9 percent in 2013, with nevertheless variations from regions to regions (NESDB 2014 : 3). The same source notes that in 2013 the poverty rate was 17,8 percent for rural Northeast. It needs to be said that the NESDB's calculation does not include the costs that households face when borrowing funds from financial institutions. With regard to these figures and the NESDB's basis for calculating, the situation of the two villages is quite different. Whereas the poverty rate in Ban Han is 32,2 percent, that is about twice the figure for rural Northeast, the rate of poverty in Ban Amphawan is slightly below the national figure, with 8,15 percent (Tabs. 7 & 8). Therefore, the case study of the two villages provides evidence of sharply contrasted situations regarding poverty from one village to another, depending on location, farming system, and off-farm employment opportunities.

The data collected in the two villages tend to qualify the assertion by Andrew Walker that middle-income peasants have become the largest group in rural Thailand. According to Walker, middle-income peasants have incomes at least 50 percent above the poverty line. While Ban Amphawan substantiates the author's thesis with 64 percent of households ranging in this group, in Ban Han, the so-called middle-income peasants count for only 47,2 percent.

The concept of "middle-income peasant" should also be discussed in relation with indebtedness. A survey conducted in 2011 by the NSO shows that 70,1% of households in the Northeastern region were indebted, with an average debt of 137,663 baht per household<sup>3</sup>. Both villages are above these figures. In Ban Amphawan 72,8 percent of households were indebted in 2014 and for 64,9 percent of them the debt was over 137.663 baht. For 47 percent the debt exceeded 250,000 baht and 500,000 baht for about 30 percent. In Ban Han, 82,4 percent of households were indebted, and for 38,7 percent of them the debt was over 137,663 baht. In this latter village 15,3 percent of the households had a debt over 250,000 baht. It needs to be said that higher is the annual income of the household, higher is its rate of indebtedness. Thus, in Amphawan, 45 percent of the households whose annual income per capita is above 100,000 baht have a rate of indebtedness superior to

their net annual earnings, while only 10 percent of households under or near the poverty line are in this case. The same trend can be observed in Ban Han.

Table 7. Distribution of the households according to their net annual income per capita. Ban Amphawan 2014

Net annual income per capita	]0- 30,864 baht] (under poverty line)	[30,865- 46,298 baht] (less than 50% above the poverty line)	[46,299-61,730 baht] (from 50% to 100% above the poverty line)	[61,731 baht – [ (more than 100% above the poverty line)
Annual repayment of loans per capita undeducted (A)	15 (8,15%)	22 (12,0%)	42 (22,8%)	105 (57,05%)
Annual repayment of loans per capita deducted (B)	29 (15,7%)	37 (20,1%)	31 (16,9%)	87 (47, 3%)
Economic category (A)	Low-income households 37 (20,15%)		Middle-income households 147 (79,85%)	
Economic category (B)	Low-income households 66 (35,8%)		Middle-income households 118 (64,2%)	

Overindebtedness may transform middle-income peasants in near-poor or poor, due to important mortgage repayments which put a big strain on their budgets. In my view, a comprehensive assessment of the households' economic status involves taking debts into account. When we deduce from their annual net income per capita the mortgage repayments to be made by most households, the proportion of middle-income peasants falls from 79,8 to 64,2 percent in Ban Amphawan, and from 46,8 to 43,1 percent in Ban Han (Tabs 7 & 8). If we consider that Amphawan represents the small minority of well-off villages which enjoy double cropping and the close proximity of an important employment catchment area, the fact that its middle-income peasants hardly account for two households in three suggests that, in actuality and against the Andrew Walker's claim, poor or near-poor families remains the largest group in a majority of villages of rural Northeast which, like Ban Han, are more than one hour drive from a big city and are located in rainfed areas.

According to a study by Solot Sirisai (1997 : 86), in 1984, only 38,7 percent of households in Ban Amphawan and 26,8 percent in Ban Han borrowed money from institutional sources of credit, the resort to informal loans (parents and moneylenders) remaining dominant at that time.

Table 8. Distribution of the households according to their net annual income per capita. Ban Han (vill. 4 + 14) 2014

Net annual income per capita	]0- 30,864 baht] (under poverty line)	[30,865- 46,298 baht] (less than 50% above the poverty line)	[46,299–61,730 baht] (from 50% to 100% above the poverty line)	[61,731 baht – [ (more than 100% above the poverty line)
Annual repayment of loans per capita undeducted (A)	86 (32,2%)	56 (21,0%)	33 (12,3%)	92 (34,5%)
Annual repayment of loans per capita deducted (B)	123 (46,1%)	29 (10,9%)	36 (13,5%)	79 (29,5%)
Economic category (A)	Low-income households 142 (53,2%)		Middle-income households 125 (46,8%)	
Economic category (B)	Low-income peasants 152 (56,9%)		Middle-income peasants 115 (43,1%)	

In 2014, the imbalance between formal and informal sources of credit is completely reversed. Since the 1980s, the government subsidizing policy has considerably enlarged the supply of institutional credit, and high-cost borrowing from moneylenders has become marginal. In line with figures provided by the NSO<sup>4</sup>, it concerns around 10 percent of borrowers. Cooperatives, and the Bank of Agriculture and Cooperatives (*Thanakhan phua Kankaset lae Sahakon*, Tho Kho So) now account for more than 80 percent of loans. The small-scale credit fund of one million baht for every village provided by the Thaksin government in the early 2000s only operates as a secondary source of rural credit in Ban Han. It is the main source of credit for 6,7 percent of the borrowers in this village. In Ban Amphawan, mismanagement of the fund has led to its collapse after only few years of operation. The prime cause of debt in the two villages is household spending, including the purchase of motorcycles and cars, and the building of new houses along the suburban style called *thian samai*. Now every household has one motorcycle or more, while 45 percent of the households of Ban Amphawan and 31 percent of Ban Han are equipped with a car (either a pick-up or a saloon, and sometimes both). Farm and off-farm operations now represent less than 40% of households' debt.



Fig. 3. A *thian samai*, Ban Amphawan, 2014  
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Fig. 4. A session of aerobic in Ban Han, 2014  
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## CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, Ban Amphawan and Ban Han villagers are still peasants, in the sense that most households remain partly the site of both production and consumption. Their “moral community” remains also an important point of social, cultural and religious reference. They are however, for an increasing part of them, becoming sideline farmers. A substantial proportion of their income is now earned off-farm from private sector and government employment. To varying degrees they are also involved into a gradual process of depeasantification. Urban styles and liberal values permeate progressively their way of life. Production is more and more oriented toward profit rather than subsistence; they adopt norms of consumption of the urban middle-class, and accordingly get into debt to purchase costly cars and to build luxury houses. Most importantly, peasants of the older generation complain about individualistic behaviors which are gaining their children and are eroding both family ties and communal solidarity.

This weakening of the community’s cohesion is more accentuated in the suburban village. In the past, under the influence of strong leaders, Ban Amphawan had demonstrated a high degree of unity and solidarity. For this reason it had long been considered by local agents of development as an ideal village to experiment new crops, new forms of animal husbandry and new agrosystems before larger implementation. However, the community’s cohesion deteriorated about ten years ago, when following the great flood of 2002, unscrupulous wealthy shareholders made the village’s rice bank collapse by borrowing large amounts of paddy for retailing it at the highest price to their fellow villagers. The successive failure of the micro-credit bank because some borrowers refused to repay their loan, and of the fund of the housewives’ group (*klum satri*) because her president was convicted of using the fund for personal gain, also generated social tensions within the community, to the point that some of its members decided to escape disputes by moving their house to the rice fields. Growing inequalities between wealthy and poor or landless villagers, and problems linked to the repair of deteriorated irrigation infrastructures by users organized as self-managing units are also a sources of social tension in this village.

Finally, the data provided by the present case study tend to qualify the over simplistic assumption by Andrew Walker (2012: 8): “that improvements in the rural standard of living has raised most of them [the peasants] well above the water level of outright livelihood failure”. This statement may be relevant to villages well-connected to the market economy, such as Ban Amphawan and Ban Tiam, the village of the North that he studied in the 2000s. However, for a majority of Isan peasants who live in rainfed areas, away from major cities, the challenge remains to avoid subsistence disruption whether caused by climatic hazards, market prices’ fluctuations, or overindebtedness. Peasants in Thailand not only confront economic disparity with urbanites, but also from one community to another within the same province, and within the villages themselves between a small class of rich peasants and the cohort of those who are still fighting to maintain their head



above the water level. Moreover, a comprehensive appraisal of improvements in rural standards of living implies to take simultaneously into account economic and social aspects. The case of Ban Amphawan provides evidence that economic and social improvements are far of going necessarily together.

## Notes

1. According to the UNDP's *Human Development Report 2013*, life expectancy at birth in Thailand amounted to 70,1 years in 1985 and to 74 years in 2013.
2. According to the Thailand National Statistical Office (2014: 1), in February 2014, 31,1% of the Labor force was employed in agriculture and 68,9% in off-farm activities.
3. NSO (2011: 19).
4. According to the NSO (2011: 16), 10,1% of the indebted households in the Northeastern region resorted to informal credit in 2011.

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**Abstract:** Thai peasants have lived important transformations during the last three decades, and notably changes in the structure of income for a majority of households in favour of off-farm activities. Through the restudy in 2014 of two villages of the Khon Kaen province which had been subject to a socioeconomic survey in 1984-1985, the author offers a detailed review of these changes. By taking into account household debt, he challenges the view that the vast majority of Thai peasants would no longer face poverty.

***Les paysans thaïs sont-ils toujours agriculteurs ? La transformation socio-économique de deux villages du nord-est de la Thaïlande***

**Résumé:** La paysannerie thaïlandaise a vécu des changements importants au cours des dernières décennies, et notamment une modification de la structure des revenus d'une majorité de ménages au profit d'activités non agricoles. En réétudiant trente ans après deux villages de la province de Khon Kaen qui avaient fait l'objet d'une enquête socio-économique en 1984-1985, l'auteur propose un examen détaillé de ces changements. En prenant en compte la situation d'endettement des ménages, il remet aussi en cause la thèse selon laquelle la grande majorité des paysans thaïlandais ne seraient plus exposés aujourd'hui à la pauvreté.

**Keywords:** Thailand, Isan, peasantry, socioeconomic changes.

**Mots-clés:** Thaïlande, Isan, paysannerie, changements socioéconomiques.