

ON THE FINANCIAL INSTABILITY OF RURAL LIFE IN THAILAND Nov. 14,
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As I become more aware of the economic realities of life in Thailand today, I am becoming more convinced of the long range instability of agriculture as a viable way of life for people. I am now visiting a small village of about 500 people in northwest Thailand, and the village is celebrating the completion of a new house. The house is beautiful, and I wondered how the villagers could afford such an expensive house. I found out that the husband left the village and moved to Taiwan, where he has a job as a laborer. By living simply, and sending almost all his earnings back to his family in Thailand, this man was able to save enough money in seven years to build this nice house for his family. It cost 800,000 baht (about \$23,000 USD), which is much more than could be afforded by the farmers of the village. It is much nicer than any other house in the village.

One thing that is good about Thailand is that most people in the villages at least are able to own their own house plot. And most people are able to own some farm fields. But a large minority have to rent farmland from other landowners. I am convinced that, given the current prices for farm products, that it is economically impossible to sustain a decent standard of living for families who rent farmland. By the time they pay the rent, plus all the costs of farming, there is not enough to live on. They can grow enough rice for the family to eat, so at least they have food. But if they want other things, which require cash to purchase, the life of a farmer is very difficult. As gasoline costs continue to rise, all other costs go up, and the cost of living increases while the price that farmers can earn for their crops does not rise.

How do Thai farmers survive in this current situation? If I visit a nice Thai house in the village, everywhere I go in Thailand, the story is the same. They got this nice house not by profits from farming, but by one or more family members working wage labor in a city. For older people, this means they send their children to take jobs either in a Thai city, or abroad. It is this basic instability of Thai agriculture that is the driving force for Thai people moving to cities all over the world. Typically, a young adult Thai will go to school in their teens or early twenties and then in their twenties take a job in a city, depending on their interests, abilities, and good luck. Cities are popping up all over Thailand, and given the small geographic size of the country there are an impressive number of large cities.

This urban growth is fueled by the instability of Thai agriculture. It is only by exporting family members to earn money in cities that the Thai village economy can operate. If Thai adults suddenly stopped taking jobs in the city, the entire village economy would collapse. Farming does not bring in enough income for people (especially people who do not own land) to survive with any sort of decent living standard.

This whole system operates because Thai people have an extremely strong sense of duty to their family. In sharp contrast to America, where many young adults in their twenties are still economically dependent upon their parents, and would never dream that they

would need to support their parents in their forties or fifties, in Thailand many people in their twenties are already supporting their parents economically. When I first heard of this trend, from Thai friends in America and from those young adult Thais I have met in Thailand, I wondered why Thai parents in their forties or fifties could not still continue working. After all, most Americans continue working until their sixties (or beyond), and are not dependent upon their children until their retirement. Indeed, many Americans are never dependent upon their children for survival, and instead they live on the income from their job pensions, investment savings, social security and medicare for financial support in their old age.

But then I found out the realities of farming life. Farming is very hard work, with backbreaking labor. By their forties and fifties, many Thai people have so many physical problems that it is hard for them to continue working as productively as they did when they were younger. It is understandable that they would not be able to do much work into their sixties. With no pensions, insurance, savings, or government retirement programs, their only hope for their old age is their children. Someone without children in this kind of economy, with no savings, is bound to have a bleak old age. In response to this reality, I have to conclude that farming is not a viable economic way of life for the future.

As a result of the economic instability of agriculture as a means of making a living for Thai families, Thai young adults in the cities send as much money as possible back to their family. Their monthly contributions of cash are integral to the economic survival of the family. If a Thai young adult loses their job, or does not make enough money to send back enough to their family, then this is a major source of stress for them. Many parents are understanding, but the stress levels are high for Thai people who have this strong sense of the need to support their family. It is hard for them to have a happy life when they are so worried about sending money to their family.

This strong sense of duty to provide for parents is a major factor leading young Thai adults to seek a foreign spouse or companion. Compared to the low income levels of Thai people, even middle class Americans and Europeans seem fabulously wealthy by comparison. Marrying for financial gain has long been a strong tradition in Thailand, as in many other countries, and even non-marriage sexual liaisons are commonly used to provide for financial support. This is not merely a crass exploitation of the foreigner, because Thais genuinely are attracted to someone who is financially secure. The term most commonly used to describe a person is to say that they “have a good heart.” This means not only that the person is kind hearted, and pleasant to live with, but also that they are generous and will help the family financially.

With flexible attitudes toward sexuality, and in the absence of a religious ideology that condemns sex as sinful, this accepting attitude of affection and sex for money contributes to the social acceptance of prostitution in Thai society. The prominence of Thailand as a destination for sexual pleasure by foreigners is a large part of the nation’s economy. Income derived from the sale of sex is estimated to be between ten and fourteen percent of the gross national product. Statistics show that nearly half of foreign entries into the kingdom are males unaccompanied by families. While some of these entries are

businessmen who do not pay for sex while in Thailand, this statistic does not include males who come as part of family groups who also engage in exchange of money for sex. It also ignores female tourists who pay for sex. While much publicity has blamed the prominence of prostitution on foreign tourists, exchange of sex for money has a long history in Thai culture. Probably ninety-five percent of the money paid for sex in Thailand is exchanged between Thai persons. It is common for males to visit a prostitute before they are married, and even after they are married. A common statement among Thai wives is that they would prefer their husband to visit a prostitute rather than to take a second wife.

Sometimes the boundary between prostitution and relationships is difficult to discern. It is commonly expected that when a young man has a steady girlfriend that he will make a payment of cash to her every time he sees her. This payment is not considered as a crass payment for sex, but as simply part of the financial responsibility of men to provide for their wife or girlfriend. Accordingly, young adult Thai women or men who have a boyfriend will expect a cash payment after every sexual exchange. This is not considered prostitution, but the younger partner may become highly insulted if a cash payment is not made. There is an unspoken recognition that the person who is in the better financial situation becomes a defacto patron of the usually younger partner who may be a student or may not have financial resources or has family obligations.

I have interviewed young Thai men and women and transgender kathoey who accept these money payments for sex. The idea is that the older more financially established patron should generously share his wealth for the person who is in financial need. This is seen as part of the natural order of things, in which wealth is transferred in exchange for pleasure. This does not mean that the young person does not also enjoy the sex, but that their assets and skills are in providing pleasure. I remember talking to one male masseur, age nineteen, and he explained that he was never very good in school and in fact readily admitted that he was “stupid” and did not have skills that would lead to a good income. He hated the hard work of farming, and he was well aware that the kind of job that he would have if he did not do sex work would likely involve working in a factory twelve hours a day in the presence of dangerous chemicals that could literally kill him, or perhaps washing dishes for twelve hours a day, seven days a week, for about 5,000 baht per month (about \$130.00). By doing sex work, he could sometimes make that much money in a few days. Moreover, he said that he enjoyed sex a lot, and got pleasure out of the compliments he received about his good looks from his patrons. They often took him out to fine restaurants and nightclubs, and sometimes on trips to tourist resorts, that he could never afford on his own. He also felt that he was creating good in the world by providing a pleasurable experience for his customers, enabling them to forget about their troubles and stresses, and to enjoy a relaxing sexual experience. His business, he said, was providing pleasure. He saw his sex work as a more moral occupation than being a greedy businessman who cheated people or exploited workers.

In Bangkok I also interviewed a man who ran a male brothel. I came to the interview with images of a brute who ruthlessly exploited the young men enslaved by him, but all my preconceptions were exploded in the interview. In the first place, the young men who

did the sex workers all lived with their parents, and voluntarily came to the man's modest house in the evening after they had finished their day of work or school. They relaxed in a comfortably appointed special room the man had built for them. They generally just hung out, as long as they wanted to wait around for a customer or enjoying the evening talking to their friends, before going home to their parents' house at night. When they had sex with a man, they kept the entire amount of money given to them. The man who ran the brothel explained that he often received a "tip" from the customers who had a good experience with the young men, but other than that he did not profit from the brothel. Instead, he made a modest income by reading the palms of neighbors who valued his fortune-telling abilities. I asked him to read my palm, and I must say that I was amazed at the accuracy with which he characterized me after having only just met me and knowing nothing about me. While I was there two neighbors, a man and a woman, came to have him read their palm. This man lived in extremely modest circumstances, explaining that he had been a Buddhist monk for several years and did not care about material goods. Instead, I heard from others that he gave practically all his modest income to the young men who were the sex workers. In fact, while I was there interviewing him, three young men (I would guess ranging in age from about 18 to 24) came into the house and asked him for some money: one was hungry and had no money for a meal, another needed bus fare to go to the entrance exam for a university, and a third wanted money to buy some new sandals after his old sandals broke. In each case, the man turned over the money without question. I heard from others that he had a reputation for generosity and caring for others. In reading my palm he advised me that if I am generous to others that I will have a happy life and will be taken care of in my old age by those I helped earlier in life. Needless to say, receiving a lesson in Buddhist ethical approaches to life is hardly what I initially expected when planning this interview with a brothel owner.

Other male and female sex workers I interviewed felt less positively about their work, and did it only because their financial situation was so desperate that they needed the income to survive. Others engaged in it while looking for a generous man who would marry them or at least support them in an ongoing relationship. Most of them used all their money on immediate expenses, with some of them foolishly spending it on alcohol or drugs, but most sent much of it to their family back in the village (and parents commonly do not ask too many questions about where the money is coming from). Others spread their good fortune around in gifts to relatives and friends in order to create reciprocal obligations so that those persons would hopefully help them when they were in need in the future. But a minority of the sex workers consciously realized that this windfall income would last only for a short time while they were young and beautiful, and they dutifully put away a significant part of their income into bank savings accounts to provide for themselves later. Some paid for their college education by their income from sex work, and they reasoned that they would never be able to pay for their expenses with a regular job. In all of these instances, the financial backdrop of the sex work is the financial instability of Thai agriculture.

As a result of the lack of economic opportunities in agriculture, Thai villages are largely populated by the elderly and children. Now, this is not a bad thing for children. I think a

small village is a good place to raise children, and then they can later move to the city when the limitations of village life become apparent to them in their teens or twenties. Also, elderly people are generally very good at raising children, and many grandparents are (because of their long life experiences and calmer demeanor) better at parenting than young adults. So I think it is not a bad system for children to be raised in the villages by grandparents with other extended family relatives nearby.

However, the future does not look good for Thai village life. Maybe the trend in Thailand will be similar to what has happened in South Korea. As the urban wage economy grew in Korea since the 1960s, more and more Korean people left the farms where they lived an impoverished existence. Farms were deserted, and allowed to revert to forestland. This is a good trend, and today there are more forests in South Korea than there were a few generations ago. For the future of the earth, the climate and indeed the air we breathe, it is necessary for humans to replant the world's forests that human expansion has so blatantly been destroying for the past century.

I predict that in the future, more Thai farmlands will be converted to trees. Already, wood has become very expensive in Thailand, because so many of the forests have been cut down. Farming does not pay. It would be better for Thai people to move to the cities to take jobs than to continue the inevitable downward standard of living that is the future of Thai farmers.

It is a pity that Thai village life is, at least economically, doomed. But perhaps Thai villages can be transformed into pleasant retirement centers. So, if the current pattern continues, it might be best for Thai families to either sell their land in the village, and move permanently to the city, or to rent out their village house as a place for someone to live in retirement. Village economy could be based on care of the elderly, and for children, rather than on farming. As time goes on I am becoming more and more convinced that farming is a losing proposition, in Thailand and in other countries around the world. Village life is nice, but farming is not a viable alternative for the future.

Interview with a farmer, in Lampang province, north Thailand, age 70

Before in the past, you don't have to have money, but you have a good life. Now you have to have money to have life. In the past, when we went to the rice fields, we always got plants for cooking. But now the chemicals we use in farming will destroy those plants and we do not have as varied a diet. Before we used cow dung and buffalo dung to fertilize the fields. Now we use chemical fertilizer, and the fish frogs and snails and plants cannot grow. We use chemical fertilizers now because it makes more rice in the field, but we did not realize that it would affect the environment badly. Now we do not grow buffalo any more. Buffalo are a lot of trouble to raise, because they will go everywhere and eat everything.

We also have less cows, because the chemicals destroy a lot of the other plants that the cows eat.

Before the soil was very good, but now the chemicals have destroyed the soil, and the productivity of the soil is not as good as before.

Technology has changed our whole way of life. In the past, you could live a humble life but a good life, without money. It was simple, but a good life. Now you have to have money to live a good life. I think in the future, no one will be farmers. Because now look at young people, who prefer to work in an air conditioned room rather than out in the hot fields. Anybody who will have that choice would choose the new way. No one will choose to be a farmer, they farm because they have no other choice. Farming is the worst way to try to make a living. If you have a better choice, why not choose it? If you work all your life very hard as a farmer, in fifty years you will still be poor. Everybody in the village realizes this. I hope that life will be better in the future, for the next generation. I am still poor, and I realize this is all that I can have in life.

I would like to have more money, since I do not have a pension and have no money for hospital if I get sick. I would like to be able to donate to the Buddhist temple, and have money to pay for my funeral. I do not need clothes, I do not need things for myself. I just would like to have money for these needs.

As a Buddhist, I believe that after I die I will be reborn in a better life. I emphasize that word BETTER. I look forward to a better life next time. Not as a farmer. If I were reborn again I would be a better Buddhist than I have been. Now, the temple has many needs and I cannot afford to donate. And I feel very bad that I cannot donate, and I am too old to do work for the temple.

In the village we have an old people's association, and I am the president. In the evening, we get together to do exercises. I was trained by a specialist to do these exercises. It helps the old people to maintain their health. The government school gives us a room to do these exercises. The group is good because all the people are at the same level, and we can help each other in our problems. It is good to have each other to depend on. Sometimes we go on a trip out of the village. We hire a bus to go visit the old people in another village. Or sometimes the government will sponsor an event for the old people from the villages, and we enjoy traveling to the city to see the things there.

The government is for the rich people, and is in favor of the business class. After the recent army coup, I do not think anything will ever change. I am seventy years old, I have seen many governments replace old ones, but nothing ever changes for the people. The poor remain poor, and the rich get richer and richer. The rich always help their family and friends. It is not about what you know, it is who you know. Thailand remains a poor country. We don't want to be on the TV news, but we wish someone would pay attention to our problems and needs. We need support.

