

# **‘DEVELOPMENT’ IN RURAL NORTHEASTERN THAILAND**

## **A Perspective from a Rural Community over Four Decades**

**Charles Keyes**

**with Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan, Suriya Smutkupt, and Jane Keyes**

### Abstract

In 1963-64 Charles and Jane Keyes undertook field research in the village of Ban Nông Tün, Muang District, Mahasarakham Province in the central part of Northeastern Thailand, then as now the poorest region of the country. This research was carried out just as Thailand was launched into the ‘Development Era’ (*samai phatthana*) following the recommendations of a World Bank team in 1959 and the promulgation of Thailand’s first National Development Plan in 1962. In 1963-64, villagers in Ban Nông Tün were engaged in producing primarily for their own consumption. However, results of household and economic censuses carried out showed that many village men left the village for seasonal work primarily in Bangkok. The censuses also showed that a significant percentage of villagers were engaged in very limited cash cropping.

In 1980 Charles Keyes carried out a restudy of the village, and continued this restudy with Jane in 1983. The results of a household and economic census show that villagers by this time had significantly intensified cash-cropping with emphasis on rice, kenaf, and tobacco. Moreover, many younger women had also joined men in undertaking seasonal migration for work primarily in Bangkok. During this restudy, it was also found that most young couples had adopted birth control methods. Another major change was occurring because of electrification which had taken place in 1980.

During several visits to the village from the mid-1980s through the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it was observed that the material conditions of the village were rapidly changing. Charles Keyes was also told that an increasing number of villagers – mainly men, but also women – were engaged in long-term work not only in Bangkok and other more industrialized areas of Central and Southeastern Thailand, but also overseas.

These observations were the basis for a third restudy. Charles and Jane Keyes and Suriya Smutkupt, a retired Thai anthropologist and a former student of Charles Keyes, carried out field work in early 2005. Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan, who has recently received a PhD in sociology, worked with Charles Keyes in designing a new questionnaire and in analyzing the data from the censuses from all three studies.

The results of a household and economic census carried out in 2005 revealed that villagers had almost all abandoned any type of cash cropping. Instead, almost all village households have some members who are away from the village for extended periods to work in Bangkok, elsewhere in Thailand and overseas. A very significant percentage of men in the age group from 18-35 have worked or are working for three or more in Taiwan. Many of those who have accumulated capital from work outside the village have invested it in such enterprises as shops, small restaurants, motorized vehicle repair garages, or trucking. Wealth generated from outside the village has also been used for new houses and for new buildings in the Buddhist temple-monastery. Households have significantly shrunk in size both because of the adoption of birth control and the permanent out-migration of some members.

Despite the re-orientation of villagers toward wage-labor and away from agricultural production, the village remains a viable community. Rice continues to be produced to ensure that families have basic subsistence. Monies earned from wage labor have been used to improve markedly the living conditions of most still living in the village. The village temple-monastery and a new forest monastery not only continue to be foci of a 'moral community' which includes both current residents of village and those who are temporary and permanent migrants.

This rather unique longitudinal research makes it possible to rethink theories of 'development'. Contrary to some theories, rural people are neither 'beneficiaries' nor 'victims' of development initiated by others. They actively engage in articulating their local worlds with national and global ones.

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