

# Thailand's Agrarian Myth and Its Proponents

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## Abstract

Thailand's agrarian myth holds that culturally-based, small-scale subsistence farming is the most desirable form of community life for rural Thais. This article outlines Thailand's agrarian myth and argues that its current promotion finds support in an obsolete 'sufficiency ethic', rather than from the country's pragmatically-oriented farmers. Proponents of this myth come from Thailand's cultural and bureaucratic elite, urban intellectuals, and religious fundamentalists. Based on field research and secondary sources the article demonstrates how the attitudes and behaviors of contemporary Thai farmers belie the agrarian myth which non-farming elites now advocate. The article concludes that yellow-shirted proponents of Sufficiency Economy, Community Culture, and austere Buddhist fundamentalism should adjust their vision to the reality that Thailand's forward-looking farmers desire a rural lifestyle beyond the agrarian myth.

## Keywords

Agrarian change, political development, Sufficiency Economy, Thailand, yellow–red political cleavage

## Introduction

The 'agrarian myth' is the general belief that culturally-based, small-scale subsistence farming is the most desirable form of community life for rural families (Brown, 2003: 27–29). According to Tom Brass, author of *Peasants, Populism, and Postmodernism: The Return of the Agrarian Myth* (2000), the application of the 'agrarian myth' to third-world farmers is increasing due to the rising distrust of economic globalization and the growing influence of postmodern epistemologies such as discourse analysis, subaltern studies, and the moral economy approach. Conceptually, says Brass, the agrarian myth is tied to the 're-essentialization of "peasant-ness"' (2000: 166) and the idea that large, homogenous populations of 'peasants' exist and that such populations desire to return to the customs, traditions, culture, and practices of a 'pre/non-capitalist "golden age"' (2000: 149). In this sense the agrarian myth is unique to no single country. It is universally 'nostalgic', 'romantic', and 'backward looking': formed by 'reactionary visions of an innate Nature' and 'supportive of conservatism and nationalism' (Brass, 2000: 144). The agrarian myth is not progressive but inhibits farmer autonomy and disparages developments in agricultural science, production technology, and market exchange. Socially static, the myth 'celebrates' the 'innateness

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of peasant cultural identity' and assumes farmers should desire little more than a self-sustaining cycle of food production and consumption, adequate shelter, and nostalgic village tranquility (Brass, 2000: 147).

The agrarian myth is alive in Thailand. This article explores the Thai version of the agrarian myth and its influence on the politics of agrarian change in Thailand. It argues that a Thai agrarian myth has thoroughly evolved and perniciously influences Thai politics by exacerbating the 'yellow-red' political cleavage plaguing the country. The analysis documents how Thailand's agrarian myth is culturally unique and finds its roots in a historically idiosyncratic 'sufficiency ethic' (as distinguished from a Scotsian 'subsistence ethic'). Looking to previous scholarly studies and drawing upon field research,<sup>1</sup> this article describes how Thailand's myth of rural sufficiency remains idealized in culture-specific visions of rural life. That these visions come predominantly from cultural elites, bureaucratic planners, military brass, religious fundamentalists, and seasoned intellectuals – who do not support themselves by means of culturally-based, subsistence family farming – is politically significant. Adding to other studies of agrarian change in Thailand (Rigg, 1991; Rigg and Ritchie 2002; Rigg and Sakunee 2001; Walker, 2008, 2010), the article's findings demonstrate that pragmatism and self-interest guide farmers' decisions about agriculture lifestyle more than do concerns about cultural purity, nostalgia, or religious renewal. As documented below, interviews conducted for this project reveal that most Thai farmers consider new technologies, labor-saving methods, and commercial opportunities based on an evolving preference-risk calculus. Even farmers currently shifting from chemical-based methods to alternative agriculture and organic markets report that they do so because of the expected economic benefits of environmentally sound practices, not because of some renewed attraction to self-sufficiency, Buddhist austerity, or a renewed sense of 'Thainess'. The sophisticated proponents of Thailand's agrarian myth would thus do well to abandon their efforts to push Thai farmers toward the subsistence-sufficiency lifestyle of the past. They should acknowledge that the forward-looking attitudes and practices of modern Thai farmers wholly belie the agrarian myth. Such an acknowledgement could help mollify existing tensions and move Thai society toward a more common vision of Thailand's agrarian future.

## Thailand's Agrarian Myth

Thailand's agrarian myth is the general belief that small-scale, subsistence farming is the most desirable form of community life for Thai rural families, and includes the following interconnected elements:

- **Rural contentedness:** a 'fish in the water and rice in the fields' imagery of rural contentedness derived from top-down official histories of the 13th century agrarian kingdom of Sukhothai;
- **Baan (village community):** a bottom-up view of history held among many in the Thai intellectual community that 'the village community', or *baan*, is the central organizing mechanism around which everyday life properly functions;
- **'Thainess':** a general sense that 'Thainess' (*khwampenthai*) and all things genuinely Thai (*thai thae thae*) emanate from rural village life;
- **Chao naa (farmer peasants):** the notion of *chao naa* (farmer peasants) and similar emic concepts (e.g. *chao rai*, *chao baan*, *khon chonabot*) which statically characterize the rural Thai experience by inseparably connecting people, place, and socio-economic role to cultural identity;

- A **'sufficiency ethic'**: an ethical construction formed by the broad normative use of the concept *'pho'* (enough), and its close twin *'phophiang'* (sufficient/sufficiency), which have influenced actual historical experience as well as modern perceptions of Thailand's own rural past.

### Rural Contentedness

In the popular imagination the Thai agrarian myth begins with the notion of rural contentedness described in Stone Inscription no. 1. According to the official histories taught throughout Thailand, the archeologically significant Stone Inscription no. 1 documents King Ramkhamhaeng's paternalistic rule of 13th-century Sukhothai. Etched in the famous four-sided stele are words that describe an idyllic subsistence-sufficient community where an adequate supply of *'fish in the water and rice in the fields'* produced societal contentment: 'Whoever wants to laugh, laughs; whoever wants to sing, sings' (translated in Seni, 1990: 25). In Sukhothai, a 'distinctively Tai religio-royal center' (Swearer, 1995: 86), subjects were not taxed but enjoyed non-monetary commerce, freely trading in gold, silver, elephants, and cattle. Although the authenticity of the relic is subject to question (Gosling, 1991: 1–6; Swearer, 1995: 90), the imagery of Stone Inscription no. 1 was nurtured by Chakri kings to produce the 'national imaginaire' (Reynolds, 2002: 19–20) of an agrarian-rooted 'cultural populism'. Officially historicized and popularly accepted as the cradle of Thai civilization, none other than the esteemed Thai politician MR Seni Pramoj characterized Ramkhamhaeng's stele as 'a social contract' analogous to the Magna Carta signed by King John: 'the first Thai Constitution' (Seni, 1990: 29).

### Baan (Village Community)

The concept of *baan*, or 'village community', is another crucial element of Thailand's agrarian myth. The idea that village communities function as *the* central organizing mechanism of socio-economic life is widely held in Thai society. Famously articulated by Thai historian Chatthip Nartsupha, *'baan'* (which also translates as 'home') connects the Tai past with the Thai present. Departing from official court histories, Chatthip rejects the state as the primary agent of social change and progress in Thai history. What matters, he argues, are villagers and village life, not royal achievements, kingship, or inscriptions on ancient steles. Chatthip's seminal work, *Sethakit mubaanthai nai adid* [*The Thai Village Economy of the Past*], documents 'a history of the village as seen from the village' (1999: 120). Chatthip's work inspired students and scholars of Thailand to re-interpret the country's agrarian roots from the village up rather than from the palace down. Ironically, the bottom-up interpretations advanced by Chatthip and his students complement the very top-down historical images they sought to eclipse, at least in terms of the Thai agrarian myth. Both approaches to history emphasize the notion of rural sufficiency as the natural state of Tai/Thai village life. Although sourced in the village rhythms of *baan* rather than in the rule of a fatherly king, rural contentedness remains the idyllic condition that appropriately links past and present in Thailand's agrarian myth.

### 'Thainess' (Khwaampenthai)

The third element of the Thai agrarian myth is 'Thainess', or *khwaampenthai*, a subject that the Thai public and scholarly community struggle with but never fully reconcile (Reynolds 2001). Mainstream definitions of 'Thainess' generally begin with Sukothai-era religio-agrarian harmony,

followed by concepts such as kingship, hierarchy, moral leadership, social obligation, and Buddhist ethics and art (Saichol, n.d.). As a construct, ‘Thainess’ has been largely manufactured by state elites attempting to create a Thai national identity. Intellectuals cultivated ‘Thainess’ in further support of a centralized political regime. Thai scholars critical of the concept lament its static nature by arguing that mainstream definitions of ‘Thainess’ inhibit the development of a ‘modern system of social relationships’ (Saichol, n.d.: 33). However contested, mainstream notions of ‘Thainess’ cannot be separated from the rural roots of idealized Thai life. The Thai public generally shares these perceptions and reifies such nostalgic cultural elements when depicting ‘Thainess’ in television programs, magazines, tourist advertisements, and the popular media. In examining the Thai village as a discursive category, Philip Hirsch argues that rural and urban Thais share a popular sense that what is ‘genuinely Thai (*thai thae thae*) emanates from rural life, and this means the village’ (Hirsch, 2002: 263).

### Chao naa (*Farmer Peasants*)

Also characterizing the Thai version of the agrarian myth are a number of emic concepts that couple ‘Thainess’ to the social identity of Thai farmers. Rather than the functional economic term *kasetakorn* (farmer/agriculturalist), terms such as *chao naa* (lit. ‘people of the field’), *chao rai* (upland farmers), *chao baan* (villagers), and *khon chonabot* (ruralites) are more commonly used in everyday speech throughout Thailand. These terms inseparably connect people, place, and socio-economic role into a single, homogenous social identity. Fundamentally static, these terms project bucolic simplicity, quaintness, and a rural inferiority that transcends time, era, or the realities of social change. Even in academic circles, *chao naa* is commonly used to translate both feudal ‘peasant’ and modern ‘farmer’, as if the distinction between the two was not meaningful.

### The Sufficiency Ethic

The last but perhaps most essential normative element tied to the Thai agrarian myth is ‘*pho*’ (enough; adequate; just the right amount). ‘*Pho*’ forms the root of the terms *phophiang* (sufficient/sufficiency), *phochai* (content), and *phopraman* (moderate). Taking on important normative and ethical connotations, the concept of ‘*pho*’ is deeply connected to the nostalgic images of pre-commercial agriculture in Thailand. With respect to its normative dimensions, the concept of ‘*phophiang*’ forms what can be described as a ‘sufficiency ethic’: a culturally Thai value-orientation encouraging one to be satisfied with what is adequate and to refrain from desiring more. Contrasting with ‘subsistence’ – which implies ‘barely enough’ or ‘life-sustaining’ under conditions demanding an involuntary survival mentality – ‘sufficiency’ implies the possibility of contentment where, *a priori*, ‘enough’ in fact exists (a desirable circumstance where an option to consume in moderation exists as a strategic or even spiritual choice). Because of its normative centrality to the Thai agrarian myth, this concept is explored fully in the next section.

### Perceptions and Evidence of a ‘Sufficiency Ethic’

Thailand’s ‘sufficiency ethic’ differs subtly but meaningfully from the notion of a ‘subsistence ethic’, a theoretical concept which James Scott introduced in his seminal work *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Subsistence and Rebellion in Southeast Asia* (1976). Scott notably begins his moral economy argument with RH Tawney’s metaphor of the assumed peasant condition in Asia; that is, “the position of the rural population” as “that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that a ripple might drown him” (1976: vii). Building on Tawney’s

assumption of precarious lack and subsistence-level poverty, Scott's book makes the case that a common 'decision calculus' of 'safety first' drives peasant behavior in Southeast Asia. He labels this decision-driven behavior 'the subsistence ethic'. According to Scott, a subsistence ethic developed historically from frequent 'subsistence crises' which fueled 'insecure poverty' and a 'fear of dearth' at the household and collective levels (Scott, 1976: 24–34). The behavioral ethic thus evolved by necessity to 'reduce the chance of disaster' through 'risk avoidance' and a 'safety-first rule' (Scott, 1976: 24–34). Common throughout Asia, he argues, the subsistence ethic did not emerge from specific cultural norms, religious tenets, or a common moral ethic encouraging one to avoid excess and desire less, but because the vast populations of 'risk-averse' peasants in Southeast Asia *lacked* self-sufficiency. This lack, accordingly, created forms of dependence on elite patrons who bore moral obligations to peasants to adjust taxes, rents, labor requirements, and other enlistments to the variable political circumstances and weather patterns of the time. Elite patrons were thus expected 'to guarantee – or at least not infringe upon – the subsistence claims and arrangements of the peasantry' (Scott, 1976: 188). Scott argues that when elites failed to maintain this 'moral economy', discontent and rebellion followed.

However useful Scott's notion of a 'subsistence ethic' may be to understand peasant behavior in Vietnam, the Philippines, or elsewhere in Southeast Asia, its utility to explain the Thai experience is limited. Although Thai farmers of the past did engage in risk spreading and developed moral economies built around the bonds of village communalism (as Scott suggests), they were also comparatively blessed with an expanding land frontier, lower tenancy rates, sufficient labor, and an abundance of natural resources not available to other Southeast Asian peasantries. This relative overall sufficiency not only affected socio-political relations but also the experiences and narratives of rural life that shaped Thai society.

Thai perceptions of the agrarian past thus do not fully approximate Tawney's metaphor of near-drowning peasants. Neither do Scott's assumptions of insecure subsistence and constant fear completely square with the available evidence, particularly that coming from the communities of the Chaophraya River basin. Thailand's feudal *sakdina* system (which characterized the Ayutthaya and early Chakri periods) may have tied villagers to state patrons, and functioned with little commercial selling, but farmers typically enjoyed higher degrees of subsistence than peasants in Cochinchina, Annam, Lower Burma, or the Philippines. Scott qualifies his own argument by noting that for peasants with 'abundant land, small families, reliable crop yields, and outside employment' the subsistence ethic 'probably is not applicable'; Thai peasants, he admits, were indeed 'relatively prosperous by Southeast Asian standards' (1976: 24–25). In the Thai experience, surplus was common and met the demands of farmers, patrons, and the state more broadly. Co-evolving with relative resource abundance were thus unique Thai norms and expectations that defined 'satisfactory' and 'enough' (i.e. *phophiang*) in cultural and religious terms – a 'sufficiency ethic'.

Scholarly accounts of the past reinforce perceptions with evidence of general abundance. Looking at the early commercial period under Chakri rule, agricultural economist Lindsey Falvey (2000: 122), for example, concludes that 'the culture of rural Thailand approximated the romantic national image' and reflected 'the values of co-existence with all life, self-sufficiency, and hospitality'. Going even deeper, the influential historian Chatthip Nartsupha contends that Tai/Thai farmers, dating back to 'primordial Tai communities' enjoyed a 'high level of subsistence' (1999: 22). Chatthip's research uncovered general abundance in the central region and even found that the North, South, and Northeast, with some variation, were able to maintain sufficient subsistence economies far into the post-war period. His extensive field interviews document that villagers frequently enjoyed 'surplus above subsistence' and felt secure with the inner- and inter-village safety-nets that cushioned them in tough years (1999: 22). Even in years of drought or flood,

'villagers did not lack for food' but could depend on borrowed rice from other villages and survive adequately by bartering with collected forest products or other natural resources (1999: 20–22). Chatthip notes the relative lack of broad-based peasant rebellions in Thailand in response to the encroachment of the state and capitalism as additional evidence of abundance: 'the system of the village was good ... the villagers had no motivation to change, to seek a new system, to make any long-term plan to solve their problems' (Chatthip, 1999: 74–75).

Other widely-recognized field studies of provincial Thailand similarly support with evidence the common narrative of relative agricultural sufficiency. Michael Moerman (1979: 230), for example, describes how his target village of Ban Ping in Chiang Rai was 'rather prosperous' in spite of the fact that 'no villager earns his living outside of Ban Ping'. He attributed this prosperity to 'self-sufficiency, plentiful land, and a stable water supply', noting that 'almost all farming households (89 percent) own over two-thirds of the area they cultivate' (Moerman 1979: 230). As for the Northeast, or Isan, evidence from the rural past produces some unexpected images of sufficiency and safety in community. In *Village Life: Culture and Transition in Thailand's Northeast* (2001), Seri Phongphit and Kevin Hewison document numerous stories retold by villagers and migrants who suffered drought, disease, and the tough soil conditions of Isan farming, but not ongoing suffering. Although they fully document serious peasant hardships, they record that 'in talking with villagers few mention starvation ... nature was still bountiful, and its exploitation was still reasonably balanced with the needs of the local people' (2001: 3). Finally, François Molle (2003) offers perhaps the most significant empirical evidence of general abundance. Molle comprehensively reviewed 49 academic studies of Chao Phraya Delta villages between 1947 and 2001 and reported that scholarly accounts 'repeatedly stress' how the poorer strata 'never really lack food or other basic needs' and subsisted at 'level far above poverty which prevails in the rural areas of some other Asian societies' (2003: 41).

There are other scholarly accounts that challenge the abundance thesis with alternative empirical evidence. Building on Carle Zimmerman's (1931[1999]) depression-era studies, the findings of Ian Brown (1986) produce a more mixed record of abundance and hardship in the early 20th century. Looking at Northern Thailand, Katherine Bowie (1992: 804) argues that the long-standing portrayals of rural utopia stem from 'fabrication through repetition' at the hands of official historians, American anthropologists, and Marxist scholars who 'perpetuate aspects of the view held by the royalist elite' (Bowie, 1992: 804). Bowie's research on rice and textile production pointedly calls into question the 'idea of agrarian abundance' and challenges 'the image of the Thai peasantry as homogeneous, egalitarian, self-sufficient, non-market, and unchanging' (1992: 797).

In brief, whether empirical fact or as a consequence of 'fabrication through repetition', a sufficiency ethic forms the normative foundation of a Thai agrarian myth. Rather than Tawney's imagery of near-drowning peasants, or Scott's description of peasants forever motivated by the fear of insecure subsistence, the most common image that Thais hold of their own past is one of rural sufficiency and basic contentment. Additional research may uncover empirically just how far short actual conditions were from this perceived sufficiency but that question is beyond the argument of this study. For the present analysis, what matters is what is believed, who believes it, and how these beliefs find expression in the power structures that influence visions of rural life and the politics that emanate from such visions.

## Promoting the Myth

The proponents of the Thai agrarian myth include many groups and individuals. The analysis here focuses on three prominent groups: (1) official proponents of Sufficiency Economy (the monarchy,

military leaders, bureaucratic planners); (2) intellectuals and NGO activists who promote 'Community Culture' (*wathanatham chumchon*); and (3) Buddhist fundamentalists. Notably, these groups come from Thailand's elite-based centers of intellectual and cultural power: royal institutions, government ministries, universities, and Buddhist reform movements. The three groups do not necessarily align ideologically or politically on all issues but they have combined to influence oppositional politics during the recent governments of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) political party successors. As documented thoroughly by Kengkij Kitirianglarp and Kevin Hewison (2009), J Giles Ungpakorn (2009), and Marja-Leena Heikkila-Horn (2010), these groups formed the core base and leadership of the 'yellow-shirt' coalition that successfully removed (without ballots) three TRT-led governments elected to office by upcountry voters who, in response to Thaksin's ouster, formed the counter-color 'red-shirt' coalition. Divergent views over the Thai agrarian myth fuels contemporary debate about Thailand's agrarian future and exacerbates political conflict between the yellow-shirt and red-shirt coalitions.

### Sufficiency Economy Proponents

Six months following the collapse of the Thai baht in June 1997, King Bhumibol Adulyadej delivered a call for action in his annual birthday speech to the nation. Among other things, he declared that becoming a 'tiger economy' was unimportant. Rather, he said, having a 'sufficient economy' is what mattered: 'A sufficient economy means to have enough to support ourselves' (Dusit Palace Speech, 4 December 1997). The speech inspired many. Developed by a 'select group' of 'eminent persons' close to the King, a Royally-approved definition of Sufficiency Economy soon emerged; a new 'national agenda' was born (Ampol, 2004):

'Sufficiency Economy' is a philosophy that stresses *the middle path* as an overriding principle ... 'Sufficiency' means moderation, reasonableness and the need for self-immunity mechanisms for sufficient protection from impact arising from internal and external changes ... [It is] a way of life based on patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom, and prudence ... to cope appropriately with critical challenges arising from the extensive and rapid socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural changes in the world. (Priyanut, 2004: 128, emphasis in original)

With respect to rural development, Sufficiency Economy promotes self-reliant agriculture. Following years of his own experiments with small plot farming, and by looking at rural development 'from the angle of ordinary people' (UNDP, 2007: 21), the King developed 'The New Theory,' or *thridsadi mai*, sometimes referred to in English as 'New Theory Agriculture'. This theory asserts that Thailand's small cultivators should seek complete self-reliance on 15 rai (6 acres) of land by dividing it into four zones: 30 percent for pond water storage; 30 percent for rice cultivation; 30 percent for fruits and other crops; 10 percent for housing and animal husbandry. Accordingly, and only after self-sufficiency is fully obtained, farmers could advance to further 'stages' of the theory where surplus could be marketed beyond the village. Going forward, however, farmers must carry no agricultural debt, use no chemical herbicides or pesticides, and farm primarily for self-sufficiency, 'not for commercial purpose' (Ampol, 2004; NESDB, n.d.; Priyanut, 2004).

Sufficiency Economy is also designed to address changes in general lifestyle, not simply agricultural practices. The initiative encourages farmers to derive cash savings by giving up gambling, smoking, drinking, and any kind of 'conspicuous consumption'. To see this lifestyle illustrated, Thais are invited to one of six regional Royal Development Study Centers where demonstration plots, homes, traditional technologies, and organic methods are displayed and taught.

Government-sponsored television and radio campaigns seamlessly blend New Theory lessons with religious attacks on moral vices and incurring debt; and prominent academic and public figures liberally use print and digital media to promote His Majesty's Sufficiency Economy lifestyle as infallible, even as they disparage former Prime Minister Thaksin's rural policy as unequivocally harmful (see Pittaya, 2004; Prawase, 2006; Seri, 2001; or visit <http://www.phongphit.com> and <http://www.prawase.com>).

In an attempt to undo the Green Revolution strategies they once promoted, government planners of the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) incorporated Sufficiency Economy into the country's Ninth Development Plan (2002–2006). Thailand's Ministry of Interior, the military, and other government agencies began to adopt 'Sufficiency Economy thinking' into their goals and operations (Pasuk, 2005). Following the September 2006 military coup that ousted Thaksin Shinawatra from power, the coup-installed government, led by a member of the King's privy council, Ret. Gen. Surayud Chulanont, adopted Sufficiency Economy as the government's 'official guiding philosophy'. For 15 months 'Sufficiency Economy thinking' officially directed government affairs, public policy, and included a plan to create 8,000 'self-sufficiency villages' (National News Bureau of Thailand, 2007). The coup government's push for Sufficiency Economy even drew the attention of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) through its publication of the *Thailand Human Development Report 2007: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development*. The report's lofty and uncritical assessment of Sufficiency Economy included a foreword written by PM Surayud who praised King Bhumibol's sufficiency philosophy as the means to lead the country to 'self-immunity' at the 'community level' (UNDP, 2007: iii). The Democrat-led Abhisit Vejjajiva government installed later in 2008 also adopted the philosophy. Within weeks of taking office Abhisit launched the 'Sufficiency Economy Community Project'. Although the project became the subject of a contracts corruption scandal months later, it continued as part of government rural development policy (*Bangkok Post*, 2009).

### Community Culture NGOs

The advocates of Community Culture represent a second group of sufficiency ethic advocates. Following Chatthip, these advocates believe a return to village-centered economics along the lines of the Thai agrarian myth is achievable, though not necessarily as a result of some royally-defined or state-led approach. Rather, 'the central government should decentralize administrative power to local communities and secure community rights because the villagers should have a chance to take care of their own livelihood, village and environment' (International Network of Engaged Buddhists, 2007). The Community Culture approach, or *wathanatham chumchon*, is explicit in its assumption that communal rural life is superior to other forms of social organization and economic life. The sufficiency ethic of the past, it assumes, has been lost to rising expectations and the commercialization of agriculture. To revive the sufficiency ethic, individuals and local communities need do nothing less than to reverse expectations and desires while returning to the cultural purity of '*baan*' (village communities). A fundamental project of the Community Culture approach, like that of Sufficiency Economy, is to educate Thai farmers to be wary of participation in the global economy. According to Chatthip, 'the primary objective' is 'self-sufficiency for community consumption', with 'a secondary objective of raising the community's productive capacity so farmers no longer need to over-exploit their own labor' (Baker and Pasuk, 1999: 129).

'Thainess' is thus an important measure that advocates of Community Culture apply to promote their view. For example, the Khao Kwan Foundation, operating since 1984 in Suphan Buri province, aggressively promotes the importance of 'Thainess' in tandem with Community Culture. It

views any pesticide or herbicide use by farmers as ‘un-Thai.’ According to its founder and director, Daycha Siripatra:

We’ve reached a crisis on our history. There are very few Thais left ... Most farmers don’t believe in Buddhism. They kill snails, insects, rats, snakes in their fields. The law of nature doesn’t contradict Buddhism and the Dharma ... we must change the program ... you must change from the inside out ... Changing technology is easy; more difficult is changing one’s way of thinking. (2005, interview with author, 19 January)

The Khao Kwan Foundation seeks to re-orient farmer thinking by encouraging self-reliance through organic agriculture and local exchange networks based on mutual understanding between farmers and consumers. By connecting the organic movement with community cultural aims, local NGOs such as Khao Kwan use environmentalism to serve cultural ends. The ‘soul of the village’, it is believed, is the ‘distinguishing feature of Thai society’; restoring the collective cultural soul can only come about by ‘replacing the capitalist system’ with ‘networks of rural communities (*kruakhai chumchon*)’ (Chatthip quoted in Baker and Pasuk, 1999: 126–127).

### **Buddhist Fundamentalists**

Proponents of the Thailand’s agrarian myth also include those who more generally call for a fundamental Buddhist renewal across Thai society. These calls often come from outside the mainstream state-sponsored *sangha*: from reformist figures such as the late rationalist monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the defrocked ecological monk Prajak Khuttajitto, and social critic Sulak Sivaraksa. Nothing, however, epitomizes the link between Buddhist fundamentalism and the Thai agrarian myth as much as the worship centers and agrarian communes of the unconventional Asoke Group. Asoke’s spiritual leader, Phra Bhodhirak – a once famous television figure turned unorthodox monk – founded the Asoke movement after his disillusionment with the country’s dominant Buddhist sects and hierarchical *sangha*. The Asoke Group’s sobering practices require lay followers to eat one meal per day, follow strict vegetarianism, and maintain complete celibacy. In addition to urban meeting centers, the organization has established nine agrarian communities across Thailand where its members gather for communal sufficiency living. Asoke members champion an economics of *bunniyom* (spiritual meritism) in opposition to materialistic capitalism or socialism. They farm organically, produce their own organic fertilizer, keep all property in common, and wear the same style of indigo-colored clothing. Marriage is completely discouraged among adult members and children (adoptees from outside the community) are assigned to ‘parents’. Secular book learning comprises only 25 percent of the educational program for Asoke children because ‘agricultural work, life experience, and Dharma lessons’ are given the greater priority (Sisa Asoke leader, 2010, author interview, 18 January). Communalists describe their lifestyle and the practice of sufficiency economy as being entirely Dharma-centered. ‘Our final goal would be to live without a house, to live like a bird, in the open air’, explains one long-time commune member of a commune in Sisaket Province (Kaenfa Sanmuang, Sisa Asoke leader, 2006, author interview, 16 December).

Members of the Asoke Group take their political cues from prominent politician and Asoke practitioner Ret. Maj-Gen. Chamlong Srimuang. They became strong supporters of the yellow-shirt People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), especially after Thaksin Shinawatra (a former Chamlong ally) began to pursue Keynesian-style rural development policies antithetical to Asoke community values. Chamlong’s ‘Dharma Army’ of anti-Thaksin Asoke members, have allied

themselves with pro-sufficiency government bureaucrats and Community Culture advocates, contributing to mass demonstrations of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the yellow-red cleavage that currently polarizes Thailand (Heikkila-Horn, 2010).

## Belying the Myth

In spite of the rural visions held by advocates of Sufficiency Economy, Community Culture, and Buddhist fundamentalism, farmer behavior over the past 50 or so years belies any serious predisposition toward the sufficiency ethic or belief in the Thai agrarian myth. However sufficient the past may or may not have been empirically, Thai farmers today demonstrate preferences for labor-saving technologies, raising incomes, enhancing production, and modern conveniences. Contrary to what myth proponents would ascribe as desirable, evidence shows that contemporary Thai villagers do not desire the sufficiency lifestyles of their agrarian forbearers.

It is difficult to pinpoint when it was exactly in the Thai experience that rural farmers began to irreversibly experience rising expectations, but as capitalism and the state-led commercialization of agriculture began to eclipse subsistence production, a growing consciousness among farmers of their *relative* poverty emerged. Rising expectations corresponded with an increased awareness of how others outside their own rural communities lived. The arrival of new government programs designed to address rural incomes, coupled with the spread of mass communications, radio, and television, made farmers more aware of how others lived during the post-war period – as described by Wyatt,

what mattered was what farm families *thought* was happening. As much as government efforts to improve conditions may have helped the rural poor, paradoxically, they may have contributed to the farmer's consciousness – especially in the northeast – of just how badly off he was, both absolutely and by comparison with city people. (Wyatt 1984: 289, emphasis in original)

During the economically formative era of Prime Minister Sarit (1959–63), and especially during the Green Revolution of Asia of the 1960s and 70s, rural perceptions as to what was 'sufficient' began to change. An influx of foreign aid due to American Cold War interests combined with new investment in research and agricultural policy to transform national perceptions of Thailand's economic potential in agriculture. Supported by World Bank programs, Thai government officials pushed farmers to title their land 'on the assumption that small-holders would act more commercially' if they became papered property owners (Falvey, 2000: 121). In the late 1960s, Thailand's government sponsored new banks for agricultural credit to encourage greater lending. The government's Third National Economic and Social Development Plan (1972–76) added priorities to build new physical infrastructure in the service of spreading modern production techniques and agricultural commercialization. Government representatives also encouraged farmers to diversify beyond rice into new cash crops during this period. The Rockefeller Foundation, the Green Revolution's major financier, collaborated with the Thai government and the country's flagship agricultural sciences university, Kasetsart University, to promote new crops. Thai plant breeders were even sent by officials to universities in Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana to bring back high-yield technologies and new varieties of maize for experimentation (Phrek Gypmantasiri, University Researcher, 2006, author interview, 25 September). Aware of Thailand's emerging agricultural industry, most farmers migrated to commercially-developed seeds and chemical-based methods. A new kind of agrarian frontier emerged, one not based on land but one filled with new technologies, methods, and hopes. Hand-tractors, packaged seeds, chemical fertilizers, motorized vehicles, electric fans, radios, TVs, and other products became desirable objects and indicators of village status, a lifestyle beyond the

sufficiency ethic. Increasing rural to urban migration and the popular practice of seeking higher-wage contract work abroad (usually in the Middle East) also illustrate the rising material expectations of villagers during this period.

By the 1970s and 1980s, the use of high-yield seed varieties in tandem with mechanization, irrigation, chemical products, and double-cropping were commonplace, especially in the central region (Falvey, 2000; Siriluck and Kammeier, 2003). Many farmers benefited from these changes, at least initially. Quite a few others were left out of the benefits. Many with unmet expectations 'reacted violently against increased exploitation and increased control' and found themselves drawn to the communist insurgency which 'recruited support by fanning resentment' (Pasuk and Baker, 1998: 190). Farmers also created new associations, such as the Peasants Federation of Thailand (PFT), to petition the government to address their new sense of rural poverty (Missingham, 2003).

A Scottsian moral economy explanation of why peasants shifted to Green Revolution methods suggests 'subsistence formulas' had broken down due to land shortages, rising rents, and increasing commercialization; and that these unwanted developments forced farmers to alter their risk-calculations of the 'safety-first rule'. According to this interpretation, local elites – the largest beneficiaries of new commercialization – abandoned their role in the village-based moral economy by putting greater pressure on client farmers and by deepening economic and political ties to others outside the village. The peasant losers, relatively poor before commercialization, became even less economically secure and poorer still in socio-cultural terms. As a 'last-gasp' effort of economic preservation, peasant farmers began to 'strike out for the unknown' by shifting to cash crops, 'taking on new debt', and experimenting with 'risky miracle rice' (Scott, 1976: 25–26). Consequently, the breakdown of the 'moral economy' contributed to subsequent peasant discontent, rebellion, and 'everyday forms of resistance' (Scott, 1976, 1985).

A sufficiency ethic argument, by contrast, would suggest that the rise of rural discontent in Thailand during the 1960 and 1970s, to the extent it emerged, was driven less by farmer anger over disrupted subsistence routines than by an increased awareness of relative poverty and newfound disillusionment with unmet, rising expectations.<sup>2</sup> In relatively resource-rich Thailand, widespread discontent, however, was less developed than in neighboring countries during the same period. In fact, Thailand's record of government activity in rural areas indicates as much evidence of 'everyday forms of compliance' as it does 'everyday forms of resistance'. Many farmers favorably adapted to the technology changes officials promoted in the countryside and continue to do so today (Sudjai C, Agricultural Economics Office, 2006, author interview, 9 September). Indicative of the Green Revolution-era government programs that effectively eclipsed the sufficiency mindset of the past, was a program to phase out water buffalo – water buffalo, or *khwai*, were traditionally used for both plowing and fertilizer. Promoting their modern image as much as their efficiency, officials introduced chemical fertilizers and mechanized hand-tractors called *khwai lek* (literally, 'iron buffaloes').

[the hand-tractor] was introduced by officials of government development agencies to replace the water buffalo. They believed that modern imported technology from western countries is 'superior' to indigenous technology. The use of the buffalo in farming is associated with 'inferiority' and 'backwardness'... People began to believe that the possession of the tractor and/or the 'iron buffalo' is prestigious simply because it is a modern technology. (Iam, 1990: 182)

Field work conducted by the author<sup>3</sup> supports evidence that Thai farmers prefer labor-saving methods to traditional agricultural practices. In their responses to questions about technology, most farmers interviewed exhibited a basic preference-risk calculus centered on balancing innovation,

profit, labor requirements, risk, and a general desire to improve their standard of living. Similar to farmer stories collected by Seri and Hewison (2001), older farmers interviewed for this project never mentioned subsistence insecurity or hunger but commonly complained about how labor intensive farming was in the past compared to today. Interviewees discussed the introduction of mechanization, chemical inputs, and new farm implements as desirable developments. Typical sentiments from middle-aged farmers include the following:

Today's technology is much better than in past. I can do in 15 days what used to take me 30 days. Before I would spend 10 months at this, now it's only four months. (Sukhothai farmer, 2006, author interview, 30 September)

I've been farming since I was 15. We worked a lot harder before. The current times are far better than the past [*dii-kwa yuea!*]. It's faster too; we have tractors and not water buffalo. Harvesting is a lot better and we have more profits now than before. (Chiang Mai farmer, 2006, author interview, 21 September)

Interviewees often contemptuously complained about water buffalo being too slow and difficult. They correspondingly praised 'iron buffalos' for being incapable of acting 'stubborn'. Many farmers interviewed also expressed clear preferences for modern chemical fertilizers in terms of labor-saving calculations, for example:

The fertilizer we used before was natural. It was difficult to obtain, very laborious. Now I can get fertilizer from the company – chemical fertilizer. The chemical fertilizer is faster and lasts longer. (Uttaradit farmer, 2006, author interview, 3 November)

Further explaining the psychology of farmer decision-making, an experienced agriculture officer from Si Saket province turns to simple modeling theory: '*khao hen pheuan tham kor tam pheuan khao*' ('they see their neighbors do it and thus follow their neighbors') (Sombun Sikhum, Sisaket Agriculture Extension Officer, 2006, author interview, 13 December). Contrary to the moral economy argument, farmers' decisions in Thailand are not always systematically filtered through a shared normative lens or representative of some euphemized symbol of subordinate class resistance. Rather, hedged by preference-risk calculations, farmer decisions tend to follow government programs, peer experiences, and ordinary desires to save labor and increase profits. Interviews for this project, supporting other field research, found that farmers make cropping decisions 'based purely on commercial consideration' and seek security by 'embracing new opportunities that are becoming available'; not by 'retreating to traditional forms' of agriculture (Rigg and Sakunee, 2001: 16).

It is also significant to note that among those farmers interviewed who are switching to organic methods many showed the same preferences that mainstream commercial farmers do for labor-saving technologies and increasing profitability. Due to a growing organic movement, natural fertilizers are enjoying a recovery across Thailand – water buffalo, however, are not. In areas of Surin and Si Sa Ket provinces (where provincial government support is helping whole communities shift to organic jasmine rice production), gas-powered hand-tractors, large combine harvesters, and pick-up trucks remain ubiquitous. Organic-oriented local governments enthusiastically invest in mechanized processors to reduce man-hours in organic fertilizer production so that farmers can avoid having to purchase expensive, commercially-marketed fertilizers.<sup>4</sup>

It is analytical folly to confuse the expanding interest in organic production in Thailand with some cultural re-discovery of the sufficiency ethic or a revival of the Thai agrarian myth. Concerns over environmental sustainability and long-term profitability are the main drivers of the organic

movement, at least according to interviews conducted by the author. The most development-minded local governments and market-savvy farmers and NGOs are currently driving Thailand's newfound interest in chemical-free, organic production. Provincial governors in the lower Isan promote organic methods as a means to market-driven wealth (Songserm, 2003).

And though some NGOs employ the rhetoric of Community Culture in their approach, they prudently adapt to global market realities by securing foreign markets so their farmers will increase their incomes and stay loyal to organic production. NGOs such as Earth Net and Surin Farmers Support, for example, have prudently established separately incorporated, for-profit enterprises that link organic growers with buyers in Europe and North America (Michael Commons, Green Net Cooperative, 2006, author interview, 7 August; Thanya Saeng-ubon, Surin Farmers Support, 2006, author interview, 12 December). Because organic consumer markets within Thailand remain limited, advocates of alternative agriculture know that it is difficult for organic farmers in Thailand to survive by selling only to local markets. According to those who manage the cooperatives, Thailand's pragmatic farmers will simply leave organic farming and return to chemical-based methods without reliable access to high-demand, organic markets abroad.

Today, prospects of profitability and market access also influence Thai farmers' attitudes toward controversial biotechnologies. Using the same preference-risk calculus they use when considering a shift to organic methods, many of the farmers interviewed by the author mentioned their desire to experiment or test (*thod long*) genetically-engineered seed, currently banned for use in Thailand. An interviewee who reports that he regularly buys DeKalb corn seed from Monsanto, typifies this experimental attitude by calculating the potential pay-offs involved:

I want to test them out. I'm not sure about them. Most villagers don't know about GMOs. They hear about the controversy and they say they are probably not good. But if I can speak directly, I want to test them. GMOs are mostly to reduce the need for chemical use, especially on worms. I don't know if it's true. I can't answer that until I try it ... the chemical shops in town are the richest around. I don't want to use chemicals; that's why I want to try out GMOs. (Sa Kaew farmer, 2006, author interview, 9 December)

Of the farmers interviewed for this project who had never heard of GMOs, most reacted with curiosity or even favorably to the idea following a brief explanation of the potential benefits. After hearing about the known environmental and economic risks of GMOs, most farmers new to the idea continued to express interest in trying them out. These findings support the results of a 2005 government study which interviewed farmers about the government's existing ban on GMO use. In that study, 64 percent of farmers agreed that Thailand should be open to GMO experimentation or lift the ban outright; only 4 percent believed GMOs would harm Thailand. Of those favorable to experimentation, qualitative responses in the report cited profit opportunities and reduction of chemical use as reasons (Sudjai, 2005: 48). The key criterion used by most interviewed farmers in considering biotechnologies is invariably the extent to which they can be profitable and labor-saving. Concern about environmental dangers and cultural loss were secondary or wholly absent from their responses.

### **The Futile Advocacy of the Sufficiency Ethic**

Given the pragmatism of modern Thai farmers it should be unsurprising that recent calls to restore the agrarian myth have fallen so short. Beyond the model villages under royal patronage or government sponsorship, 'Sufficiency Economy' and 'New Theory Agriculture' have not taken off across Thailand. Beyond sundry media reports of disaffected urbanites who voluntarily retreat to the

provinces for a non-Bangkok life of bucolic farming and self-sufficiency, evidence is scant of any 'sufficiency fever' sweeping across the rural population of Thailand. The model Impeang Network of Sufficiency Economy villages reported in the UNDP's *Thailand Human Development Report 2007* illustrates the problem between government promotion and reality. The Impeang Network in the upper Isan reaches across four provinces and is held up in the report as a model of Sufficiency Economy. Through 'inter-village networking and organization', community leaders and farmers have reportedly moved away from cash cropping cassava to integrated organic farming and agro-forestry. Explicit in the report, however, is the fact that Impeang's success in developing 'demonstration plots for the King's theories' is due in part to significant advisory support from local scholars, NGOs, and a nearby Royal Development Centre (UNDP, 2007: 39). The extent to which Impeang's 'model network' is replicable elsewhere in the absence of extensive royal patronage and technical advice remains unproven. Similarly, the royally-funded Sufficiency Economy promotion centers which dot the country illustrate the superficial record of the Sufficiency Economy initiative. Complete with demonstration plots, model residences, and a museum celebrating traditional technologies, centers are operated by salaried military officials on military-owned land who live on-site and 'model' sufficiency living for the center's visitors.<sup>5</sup> Similar royal-backed projects in Northern Thailand that purport 'sufficiency' also succeed only due to government-backed subsidy (Walker, 2010).

Whether they have visited a training center or not, transitioning to Sufficiency Economy is considered a risky proposition, if not impossible, from the perspective of most Thai farmers. According to 2007/08 government figures from the Office of Agricultural Economics (Apichart, 2009), at least 27.9 percent of Thai farms are too small for the requisite 15 rai (6 acres) assumed needed for self-sufficiency. Thus, without serious land redistribution, it seems sufficiency will never be possible for the most land-poor segment of small cultivators. Moreover, the fact that 42.7 percent of Thai farmers own and operate 20 rai (8 acres) or more creates a New Theory conundrum for farmers and policymakers alike: do they farm beyond sufficiency or should they, in the name of 'moderation', actively limit the commercial production that currently serves domestic demand and contributes to the country's profitable food and agricultural exports?

From the perspective of Thailand's small cultivators who are best positioned to attempt self-sufficiency (i.e. the 30 percent of farmers that hold close to 15 rai [6 acres]),<sup>6</sup> other factors inhibit adoption. If one is already embedded in the cycle of commercial agriculture – as many are – sufficiency farming does not produce the needed cash to settle existing debt obligations. A 50-year-old cassava and corn farmer explained it this way: 'If you don't have money it's not easy to follow Sufficiency Economy'; to survive 'you'll need to go hire out your own labor (*rap chang*)' (Sa Kaew farmer, 2006, author interview, 9 December). Many farmers interviewed for this project mentioned existing debt as an inhibitor to shifting to New Theory practices. 'I'm already in debt, so how can I begin to live sufficiently (*phophiang*)', reported one confused young farmer (Sa Kaew farmer, 2006, author interview, 9 December). It is also untrue that erasing one's agricultural debts, as the Sufficiency Economy initiative teaches, ensures individual farmers will be self-sufficient and debt free. One interviewee, a jasmine rice farmer in rural Surin province, noted that he and his neighbors were deep in debt because of elaborate funerals and marriages, not because of agricultural operations: 'my expenses are already beyond sufficiency', he said (Surin farmer, 2006, author interview, 11 December).

When asked about the Sufficiency Economy initiative's requirement to shift from chemical-based agriculture to organic methods, farmers often reported such a shift as impractical or impossible. Transitioning to the organic methods demanded by Sufficiency Economy is not a simple choice but an elaborate process. It can take five years, or even longer, before organic produce can

achieve technical certification for organic markets. Many farmers express little interest in investing so many years in a system that may promise to deliver debt-free sufficiency, but only in tandem with austere material denial. They will, however, shift to organic agriculture if alternative markets promise them greater profits and material welfare through the market assistance of a local government or an NGO-run cooperative.

With respect to Buddhist-oriented motives, a sufficiency-based lifestyle based on religious renewal and fundamentalism may be culturally attractive to a few spiritually-minded Thais, but for most farmers the concept is too ethereal or undesirable. Even after the spiritual jolt of the 1997 economic crisis, only a few rural Thais shifted from commercial to subsistence agriculture (Amekawa, 2010). The material attachments and avaricious interests condemned by Buddadasa and Sulak remain an enduring feature of modern Thai society. Evidence for the persistence of rising material expectations is found in the favorable upcountry response to Thaksin Shinawatra's policies that flooded rural districts with motorbikes, trucks, mobile phones, and entrepreneurial loans. The minuscule number of rural Thais attracted to the strictness of Santi Asoke is also indicative of farmer attitudes. Indeed, for all the attention drawn to its well-known asceticism and communalism, it is analytically curious that the total number of Asoke commune dwellers is so small. Compared to Thailand's population of 65 million, only a tiny fraction of adult Thais live Asoke-style sufficiency economy lifestyles; in fact, not even one-hundredth of one percent of the country's 13.6 million farmers choose to live in sufficiency oriented villages. The average size of an Asoke commune is only around 150 people (including children). This means that less than an estimated 1,400 people live in the movement's nine agrarian communities in total (Keanfa Sanmuang, Sisa Asoke leader, 2006, author interview, 13 December). Evidence also exists that commune populations are shrinking. Interviewees at a commune in Chiang Mai reported that its 25 members in 2006 comprised only half the community's population at its peak a few years earlier; and from 2006 to 2010 the number of residents of Asoke's commune in Si Saket province declined from 267 to 183 people.<sup>7</sup> The small number of Asoke followers who themselves live in communes suggests sufficiency-style agrarianism is unattractive to even the Asoke Buddhists who promote the agrarian myth. Of Asoke's approximately 10,000 followers, less than one in five (fewer than 2,000) choose to live in one of Asoke's nine agrarian communes; the rest (like Chamlong) live in mainstream society, hold modern jobs, and depend on the agricultural labor of others to meet their daily caloric needs. At its current rate of growth (since its founding in 1975), the number of Thais living in Asoke communes by 2030 would still number less than 10,000.

## **Conclusion**

The agrarian myth is alive in Thailand. Tied to a nostalgic 'sufficiency ethic' – which more accurately characterizes popular perceptions and actual evidence from Thailand's rural past than a Scottsian 'subsistence ethic' – the Thai agrarian myth envisions culturally-based, small-scale subsistence farming as the appropriate rural defense to erratic global markets and materialist values. As Tom Brass's theoretical work would predict, Thailand's agrarian myth is indeed romantic, reactionary, conservative, and inhibitive of farmer autonomy (2000, 144). The ongoing promotion of this myth through the culturally-unique notions of Community Culture, Sufficiency Economy, and Buddhist fundamentalism underlies much of the yellow–red tension in current Thai politics. Belief in Thailand's agrarian myth separates many 'yellows' (cultural elites, bureaucrats, and intellectuals who seek to return rural Thailand to pre-commercial agrarian practices and idyllic self-sufficiency) from many 'reds' (upcountry farmers and ruralites who embrace labor-saving technologies and the promise of a modern lifestyle beyond mere sufficiency). Exhibiting a general value-orientation tied

to rising expectations and materialist values, Thailand's rural farmers have yet to embrace the Thai agrarian myth, even in the face of severe economic crises.

Finally, it is politically ironic that those who promote a return to the sufficiency ethic are among the least likely to embrace it in their personal lifestyle choices. Outside of a few purist Asoke Group communalists who live the sufficiency ethic and cultivate 'Thainess', '*baan*', and *chao naa* identities in search of rural contentedness, very few among those who promote Thailand's agrarian myth do more than tell somebody else to actually live it. Such hypocrisy is not lost on upcountry farmers and passionate red-shirt activists who champion rising expectations, even as state actors, powerful cultural elites, and yellow-shirt demonstrators employ extra-constitutional means to remove the elected officials that symbolize those expectations. From the forward-looking perspective of many farmers, the Thai Rak Thai party's aspiration to turn agriculturally-endowed Thailand into 'The Kitchen of the World' was in tune with actual rural values. By contrast, the Sufficiency Economy propaganda that emanates from 'yellow-shirt'-supported elites, groups, and parties sends the unwanted message that only when Thai farmers learn to 'celebrate' the 'innateness of [their] peasant cultural identity' (Brass, 2000: 147), reverse their long-standing rising expectations, and aspire to little beyond the self-sustaining agrarian life of their ancient ancestors, will they realize their true cultural role and socio-economic identity – a role and identity that red-shirted farmers demonstrably reject.

## Notes

1. Field research included site visits and 103 qualitative interviews over a total of seven months (January 2005, July–December 2006, and January 2010). Interviews took place in Bangkok and 11 provinces in the North, Northeast, and Central Thailand. Fifty-four of the interviews were with farmers, the remaining included government officials, NGO leaders, monks, MNCs, business owners, and others (see note 3 below). Field notes are documented and in the possession of the author. Of special interest to this article are visits and interviews at two Asoke Group communities in Si Sa Ket (2006 and 2010) and in Chiang Mai (2006), as well as two visits to a Chiang Mai Sufficiency Economy promotion center (2006 and 2010). The author acknowledges The J William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board, The Thailand-United States Educational Foundation (TUSEF), Payap University, and the Faculty Growth & Development and NEH Committees of The College of Idaho for financial and institutional support for field work. Appreciation is extended to Stephen Reynolds, John Brandon, Bryan Hunsaker, Jeff Rutherford and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions this article.
2. Although this argument echoes that of the famous response to Scott's thesis by Samuel Popkin in *The Rational Peasant* (1979), the emphasis here is on the changing preferences and norms among farmers over time and not some intrinsic compatibility between markets and the 'rational' behavior of farmers.
3. Over a total period of seven months in Thailand (in 2005, 2006 and 2010), the author conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews of fifty-four farmers (44 male; 10 female) from 11 different rural provinces: Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lamphun, Phrae, Sa Kaew, Si Saket, Sukhothai, Suphan Buri, Surin, Ubon Ratchathani, and Uttaradit. Of these respondents, 40 grew rice and/or other grains (corn, soybeans, cassava, vegetables, fruit, herbs, and agroforest products) and 14 specifically cultivated non-rice cash crops of various kinds; eight of the fifty-four farmers had switched to organic methods in recent years. Owing to the wide diversity in operations, farm size, ownership, production, and market support (commercial, government, NGO), open-ended questions were preferred to a common survey. The vast majority of interviews, nevertheless, followed a set of eight open-ended questions about how farming has changed over time in terms of technology use, chemical use, the return of organic methods, Sufficiency Economy, and the prospects of GMO use; questions were also asked about farmer perceptions of government support for agriculture, private sector interaction, NGO support, and basic perceptions about the benefits of electoral democracy to farmers. See Dayley (2008) for a full list of interviewees, names, dates, and locations of respondents interviewed in 2005 and 2006.

4. Author observation on a visit to the offices of Tambon In-lam, Amphoe Uthumphon Phisai, Si Saket Province, December 2006.
5. The author conducted two interviews with military officials during site visits to the Chiang Mai center in 2006 and 2010.
6. 2007/08 data from the Office of Agricultural Economics identifies that 29.37% of farms are between 10 and 20 rai (4–8 acres) (Apichart, 2009).
7. Figures reported to the author during site visits to communities in 2006 and 2010.

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