

PROBLEMS OF TENANCY AND LANDLESSNESS IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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NORTHERN Thailand shares with the other regions of Thailand a number of problems related to tenancy and landlessness. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate that these land problems are more severe in the North because of the distinct ecological characteristics of this region and that they have been exacerbated in recent years by technological changes. I shall also offer some explanations for the failure of the Thai government to make any significant headway toward the solution of these problems.

My data and conclusions are based largely on periodic anthropological research over the past fourteen years in Baan Talaad and Sankham in Sanpatong District, Chiang Mai Province. Baan Talaad is a small market town of several hundred households (364 in 1978). About a third of these are made up of landowners and tenants who cultivate wet rice and other irrigated crops. The rest are traders, officials, and landless laborers. The nearby village of Sankham depends entirely on agriculture and the 157 households comprise cultivator-landowners, tenants, and landless laborers.

I. NORTHERN THAILAND: A DISTINCT ECOLOGICAL REGION

Northern Thailand includes the seven northern provinces of Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Chiang Rai, Nan, and Phrae. These provinces constitute a distinct ecological region. About two-thirds of the total area is hills and mountains. These highlands are dissected by four large rivers: the Ping, Wang, Yom, and Nan, tributaries of the Chao Phraya, the largest and longest river in Thailand.

With respect to rice growing conditions, Takaya has characterized northern Thailand topographically as an intermontane basin region [21]. The other four regions of the Chao Phraya basin are the fan-terrace complexes, the constricted river channel, the young delta, and the old delta—all in the Central Plain. In terms of suitability for the natural growth of rice the river basin plains of the North have several favorable features. There is plenty of water during the wet season (May–November) due to a relatively high catchment-to-area ratio. But flooding is not excessive because the sloping ground allows rapid drainage. Moreover, during the dry season the main rivers and streams don't dry up

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completely because surrounding mountains bring occasional showers and ground-water returns to the watercourses as their level drops [21, p. 177].

Topography determines the mode of irrigation. The topography of northern Thailand encourages a system of gravitational irrigation. Because the natural flow of water is rarely excessive it is diverted along canals with relative ease by local communities by means of small dams of simple construction (bamboo, hardwood, stones, earth). In the early 1960s there were 2,009 irrigation systems of this type in the Chieng Mai valley alone [18, p. 84].

Gravitational irrigation is also possible in the fan-terrace complexes (at the periphery of the Central Plain) but is restricted by insufficient and irregular water supply. Thus most paddy fields in these areas are rain-fed [12, p. 213]. Elsewhere in the Central Plain, although the natural flooding of the Chao Phraya has always provided abundant water for irrigation in the wet season, the enormous volume of water has made control by individuals and local communities impossible. Hence peasants here have been dependent on large-scale, state schemes for additional and more efficient irrigation. In this century, state schemes were first designed to improve wet-season rice cultivation by expanding the irrigated area, regularizing of the water supply, and controlling floods [12, p. 219]. More recently, the Phumipon and Sirikit dams were constructed with the additional purpose of facilitating dry-season cropping.

By contrast, northern Thailand has a combination of state and communal irrigation systems unique to the country. State irrigation schemes have played an important role in expanding main-season and follow-crop production. Since the early 1930s there have been fifteen integrated-headwork systems involving the construction of large dams on the Ping, Wang, Yom, and Nan rivers [13, pp. 52-63]. However, these have been superimposed on the traditional communal systems and have not replaced them. That is, new trunk waterways feed some existing communal canals and thereby improve the intake and distribution of water into the traditional systems [12, p. 211]. Furthermore, more efficient water control has been achieved in the traditional systems not serviced by state schemes by the installation of numerous concrete and iron head regulators [18, p. 89].

Demographically, too, northern Thailand has some salient features. The region has shared in the country's rapid increase in the rate of population growth. In the first half of this century the increase averaged about 2 per cent annually. In the postwar period the average was about 3 per cent [4, p. 35]. In 1970 the rate was 3.3 per cent—higher than any other Southeast Asian country except the Philippines [22, p. 3]. The primary cause of this growth has been the decline in the mortality rate due to improved health services.

The population density of northern Thailand was actually only 33 persons per square kilometer in 1960, according to the census of that year. This is much lower than the 50 persons per square kilometer for Thailand as a whole. However, as noted above, about two-thirds of the North is comprised of highlands. Here the dominance of swidden agriculture does not allow a high density of population. Consequently, the population of the region of about 4 million

is concentrated in the lowlands where well-developed irrigation systems encourage intensive cultivation. Chapman suggests that a more meaningful index of population density in rural areas is "physiologic density"; that is, the number of persons in relation to the area of cultivated land [6, p. 3]. On this basis, fifty-eight out of the sixty-four districts of the seven northern provinces had, in 1963, densities exceeding 500 persons per square kilometer of cropland. This compares with areas in the Philippines and Central Java with the highest physiologic densities in Southeast Asia [6, p. 3]. In Sanpatong, only 13 per cent of the district was cropland in 1960, giving it a very high physiologic density of 668 persons per square kilometer [27, p. 125].

Northern Thailand is also noted for the high rice yields obtained. The agricultural census of 1963 indicates an average yield per rai (6.25 rai=1 hectare) in the North of 380 kilograms compared to 213 kilograms for the country as a whole. Of the seven northern provinces Chiang Mai had the highest average yield of 428 kilograms per rai [2, p. 169]. An agriculture survey that I carried out in 1968 of 116 rice-growing households in Baan Talaad and Sankham revealed an average yield of 553 kilograms per rai for Baan Talaad and 700 kilograms per rai for Sankham. One reason for the high yields in the North is that the small holdings¹ encourage labor-intensive cultivation. In 1962, 99.6 per cent of irrigated fields in this region were transplanted as against 25 per cent for Thailand as a whole [27, p. 59]. Better water control in the delta region of the Central Plain has led to a substantial increase in the transplanted area, but this was still only 55 per cent in 1970 [12, p. 226]. Other factors that contribute to the high rice yields in the North are: the well-developed irrigation systems, ideal gradients, fertile soil [12, p. 250] [27, p. 19], and the cultivation of follow crops (through the residual benefit of the chemical fertilizer used for these crops and the decomposition of soybean and groundnut stalks).

The rapid expansion of crops other than rice that follow the wet-season rice crop is another notable development in the North. By contrast, in the Central Plain the recent development of non-staple crops in the dry season has been "wretched," according to Kaida [12, p. 233]. In the seven northern provinces, between 1950 and 1964, tobacco-growing area increased 548 per cent, that for groundnuts by 166 per cent, and soybeans by 174 per cent. Garlic cultivation increased by 44 per cent between 1960 and 1964 [6, p. 6]. In Baan Talaad subdistrict, between 1960 and 1967, the area cultivated in soybeans increased 112 per cent, garlic 134 per cent, groundnuts 190 per cent, and Virginia tobacco 20 per cent. Onion is the most recent crop to be introduced. In 1960, villagers grew no onions, but in 1967 they planted some 400 rai.

More recently, triple cropping has become common practice in some areas of the North. In Baan Talaad this has been made possible by the introduction of a second rice crop, planted in April after the harvest of a non-staple crop such as soybean, garlic, onion, or tobacco. The cultivation of dry-season rice was limited in the 1960s. In 1964, it used only 2 per cent of the irrigated

¹ In the early 1970s the average holding in the North was 8.8 rai [25, p. 111].

riceland [27, p. 18]. In 1968, only seven households from Baan Talaad and one from Sankham experimented with small areas, and yields were disappointingly low. But in the late 1970s a new nonglutinous variety called RD7 was introduced by the Rice Department in Thailand. The very high yields and improved irrigation stimulated cultivation² and, in 1978, thirty-three (or 69 per cent) out of forty-eight households surveyed in Baan Talaad grew this crop.

The expansion of multiple cropping has been most pronounced in Chiang Mai Province because marketing, transport, extension, and irrigation facilities here are better. It is noteworthy that extensive triple cropping in this province is restricted to areas serviced by traditional, communal irrigation systems because the large-scale, state systems are less predictable during the dry season [17, p. 21] [18, p. 86].

II. RELATIONS BETWEEN LANDLORDS AND TENANTS

Information on rental changes over time in the North is sparse. In Baan Ping (Chiang Rai Province) Moerman notes a change, in the late 1950s, from a "traditional rule" that required payment of half the rice crop as rent only if the landlord provided the water buffalo to a system in which many paid a half-share even if they supplied their own buffalo [14, p. 111-12].

The economic history of Baan Talaad and Sankham points to a gradual increase in rents this century for irrigated riceland in favor of the landlord. Before the Second World War, a system of fixed rents (*khaa hua*) prevailed for the wet-season rice crop in this area. The extensive holdings of aristocrats and Shan traders were divided into tenements of 5 to 8 rai with fixed payments averaging from 7 to 10 taang³ per rai per year (about 30-40 per cent of the normal yield). Just before the war rents began to rise. For many years an aristocrat who owned about 400 rai north of Sankham charged a fixed rent of 60 taang per tenement of 7 and 8 rai (7.5 to 8.5 taang per rai). He died in 1939 and his son immediately raised the rent to 12 taang per rai, an increase of 41 per cent to 60 per cent. In the early 1950s, one Shan trader who owned 100 rai of riceland near Baan Talaad charged a fixed rent of 150 taang for 10 rai tenements or 15 taang per rai. This was about 50 per cent of the normal yield for this area. Between 1952 and 1955, in Baan Talaad and Sankham, the fixed rent system gave way to one based on a fifty-fifty division of the crop (*baeng khrueng*) between landlord and tenant. At the time of my initial research in 1967 and 1968 this was still the dominant system for wet-season rice. Yet there were already a few instances of tenants paying as much as 60 per cent of the crop. In 1978 there was one case in Sankham of a

² The average yield per rai in 1968 was 32 thang. In 1978, it was 48 thang. One thang of unhusked rice weighs approximately 11 kilograms. The cultivation of a second rice crop by downstream villages (such as Sankham) has been restricted by insufficient water.

³ One taang of unhusked rice weighs about 15 kilograms.

landlord who took 64 per cent of the crop as rent and another case of one who charged 70 per cent.⁴

High rents for the wet-season rice crop have been reported for other areas of the North. In November 1974, villagers from Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces protested that they were paying fixed rents of 25 thang per rai which was equivalent to 55 per cent of the average yield [1, Nov. 7, 1974]. Turton claims that in the North "rents of up to two-thirds of the gross product are not unknown" [25, p. 113].

It appears that rents in northern Thailand are generally higher than in the Central Plain. Tomosugi claims that in the delta region, in 1968, rents for wet-season rice varied from 25 per cent to 50 per cent of the yield [23, pp. 305-6]. A later report puts average rents in 1973 and 1974 as 164 baht per rai for the North,⁵ 111 baht for the Center, and 80.9 baht for the Northeast [25, p. 138] [19, p. 321].

In the 1967/68 season only a small percentage of tenants in Baan Talaad and Sankham paid rent for follow crops. In Sankham only eight villagers paid rent for soybeans, garlic, onions, and tobacco. Two paid 50 per cent of the gross soybean crops as rent. The others paid cash rents averaging 37 per cent of gross income from soybeans and 22 per cent from onions. In Baan Talaad no tenants paid rent for follow crops except those who grew early tobacco and onion crops on land normally used for wet-season rice. In 1978, forty-six out of forty-eight non-filial tenants surveyed grew at least one non-staple follow crop but only seven paid any rent at all and this averaged only 68 baht per rai.⁶ It would appear that most landlords were content to benefit from the residual effect these crops had for rice yields. In 1978, in Baan Talaad, rents for dry-season rice were more common and higher than for other follow crops. Thus, twenty-four out of thirty-two tenants who grew a second rice crop paid rent on it and the average was equivalent to 175 baht per rai or 18 per cent of the gross income from the crop.

In addition to paying rent, the customary obligations of tenants in Baan Talaad and Sankham for all crops are to: (1) meet all expenses arising from land preparation, planting, and harvesting (e.g., cost of hired labor and chemical fertilizer); (2) provide draft animals (water buffalo and oxen) for ploughing or the cash or rice to hire them; and (3) contribute labor and materials for work on irrigation canals and dams. The landlords' only obligations are to pay the cost of hauling his share of the harvested rice to his granary and to pay the land tax. In 1968, haulage from the fields near Baan Talaad and Sankham cost some 3 per cent of the rice transported. The land tax was only 5.5 baht

⁴ However, in both these areas the landlord paid for the chemical fertilizer. Also, in the latter case the tenant, who rented 14 rai, was entitled to 50 per cent of any yield above 1,000 thang.

⁵ The provinces are not named. For some purposes as many as sixteen provinces are included in the northern region. In 1982, 1 U.S. dollar equalled approximately 22 baht.

⁶ I do not have the information to calculate the percentage of gross income. Also, I did not have the time to survey Sankham households during this brief visit.

per rai with an exemption for the first 5 rai owned. Landlords sometimes returned a small part of their share of the rice crop to the tenant as a bonus.⁷ However, I know of several landlords who have in recent years (1975–82) chosen to ignore some of these customary obligations; that is, they have required the tenant to pay haulage costs or to pay all or part of the land tax. This is no doubt a reflection of the gradual strengthening of the landlord's bargaining position.

A notable innovation in the late 1960s was the payment of premiums or "key money" (*waang ngoen*) to acquire tenancy rights. For example, in 1967, Som of Sankham accepted an offer of 1,000 baht from Yii for the right to rent 2 rai of his land. In the same year Som's brother, Yuang, received a payment of 2,000 baht from another villager to rent 7.75 rai.

The payment of key money has been reported for other Southeast Asian countries. In Java it is called *sromo* [26, p. 52]. In Central Luzon in the Philippines it is called *pamata* [20, p. 79]. A slightly different form of key money, called *puesto*, is found in Bulacan Province in Central Luzon. Here the premium is paid to the former tenant, not to the landlord [20, p. 80].

Akin to the introduction of key money is the pre-payment of cash rent in part or in full in order to acquire tenancy rights. The cash rent covers all crops grown during the year and may be paid in full at the beginning of the year or half at the beginning and half at the end of the year. In 1967, there were only two cases in Baan Talaad and Sankham. In 1978, only three out of the forty-eight non-filial tenants of Baan Talaad paid rent in this way. However, in 1981 the number had increased to ten (out of thirty-eight non-filial tenants).⁸

High rents, key money, and prepayment are due to overall gains in the income-earning potential of irrigated riceland. Higher cash income is, in turn, a product of the raising of crop yields (through irrigation improvements and the use of chemical fertilizer) and multiple cropping. Clark and Haswell have demonstrated (with examples from the Philippines, England, and Italy) that another factor that contributes decisively to increased rents and other payments by tenants is a high population density in rural areas in a situation of limited alternative employment opportunities outside agriculture [9, Chap. 6]. Certainly such conditions exist in Baan Talaad and Sankham. I have noted above that Sanpatong District has a very high density of population in relation to the area of cultivable land. At the same time, opportunities for nonagricultural employment are minimal. Thus Chakrit and Hagensick note that there has been little industrialization in Chiang Mai Province. "Although there have been numerous small concerns—bottling plants, rice mills, ice factories, auto service centers—medium- or large-size industries have not been seriously considered in the area. Most businessmen believe that while the area possesses some valuable

⁷ In Baan Talaad, in 1978, bonuses averaged only 3.6 taang.

⁸ In 1967, the average cash rent per rai was 425 baht. In 1978, it was 536 baht and in 1981 it was 1,329 baht.

raw materials, its location militates against its development as a nation-wide or even region-wide locale for heavy or medium sized industries" [5, p. 62].

Increased income from cash crops, population pressure on land resources and limited alternative employment opportunities have combined to engender fierce competition between peasants to rent land and therefore a market situation that favors the landlord. This situation prevails in Baan Talaad and Sankham and in many other areas in Southeast Asia. Thus the payment of key money in Java, though forbidden by law, is still common in villages "because the need for land keeps on increasing" [26, p. 52]. In the Philippines, according to Takahashi, key money derives from "the strong demand by a large reserve of tenant farmers for land" [20, p. 80]. A local dam chief from Baan Talaad remarked with undisguised dismay that the problem of the payment of high rents and key money originated with the poor peasants themselves. Poor peasants, he said, were in conflict because "they were scrambling over each other to rent land."

Competition to rent land may contribute to the insecurity of tenure as peasants vie to outbid each other with higher and higher offers. Take the case, mentioned above, of the payment of key money to Yuang. For several years Yuang rented out 7.75 rai to Maa of Sankham. In 1966, Yuang dismissed Maa as tenant after accepting a cash premium of 1,000 baht from a fellow villager, Muu. But Muu's tenancy was terminated after only one year. Yuang refunded Muu's money and took on a new tenant from a neighboring village who was willing to pay a higher premium of 2,000 baht.

Perhaps a more radical change in Baan Talaad and Sankham than the frequent replacement of tenants has been the gradual reduction, in recent years, in the actual number of tenants as landlords undertake cultivation themselves with the use of hired labor and machines. This confirms Griffin's claim that in non-socialist countries in the Third World replacement of tenants by owner-operators and agribusinesses is an inexorable trend that accompanies the commercialization of agriculture [11, p. 77]. He cites reports from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and the Philippines of landowners evicting tenants and taking over cultivation of the land themselves. He describes this as a tendency "to concentrate the function of entrepreneurship into a few hands" [11, p. 74]. Several factors are responsible for this trend in Baan Talaad and Sankham. First, there is the increase in rice yields resulting from the introduction of chemical fertilizer and new rice strains, and the development of multiple cropping which I have already discussed. The increased productivity and profitability of land encourages the noncultivator landlord to become a capitalist farmer and the cultivator landlord to cultivate more land himself. Another influence has been the Land Rent Act of 1974 which nominally reduces the landlord's share of the crop to one-third. Although this legislation has not been widely upheld, many landlords still feel anxious that it might one day be enforced, especially if political conditions change. This provides an added incentive to evict tenants. A third factor has been the recent introduction of tractors.

Tractors have only been in use in Baan Talaad and Sankham since the early

1970s. In 1978, there were five small, two-wheel tractors in use in Baan Talaad and twelve in Sankham. These were powered either by five- or ten-horsepower engines. In early 1982, there were twenty-five two-wheel tractors (mostly ten-horsepower) in Baan Talaad alone—certainly a rapid increase in numbers. Small tractors have commonly been acquired through the sale of water buffaloes and/or oxen.⁹ One advantage of tractors is that they eliminate the time needed to feed water buffalo and oxen, a time which has been significantly increased by the expansion of follow crops and the reduction of dry-season grazing.¹⁰ A crucial benefit of tractors in a multiple cropping system is their speed. Water buffalo and oxen take about 1.5 days to plough 1 rai of land, whereas a two-wheel tractor can plough the same amount of land in three to four hours. In addition, no rest periods are required (as with draught animals) and the tractor can be worked at night, so that it is possible to plough up to 5 rai in a single day. This enables a cultivator to reduce the time lost between the harvest of one crop and the planting of the next, and has been of critical importance in allowing cultivators to grow three crops a year (including the new high-yielding strain of dry-season rice). Finally, the greater speed of the tractor permits the cultivation of more extensive areas of land, enabling the owners of large holdings to work more or all of their land themselves.

In the last couple of years, two trader landlords from Baan Talaad withdrew land from two tenants to work it themselves by hiring labor and tractor services. Two cultivator landlords from Baan Talaad and five from Sankham have recently evicted ten tenants to work the land themselves or to give to their married children to work. In the latter cases the children are prosperous villagers who already own large farms and who have only been able to work the additional land with hired labor and self-operated tractors.

III. LANDLORD-TENANT RELATIONS AND KINSHIP

This dismal picture of high rents, pre-payment of rents, key money, and insecure tenure is partly offset by the high percentage of tenants who rent from kinsmen, particularly from parents. Thus in 1968, 79 (or 59.39 per cent) of the 133 plots rented in Baan Talaad and Sankham were owned by kinsmen. Furthermore, 56 (or 42.1 per cent) of the plots belonged to parents. The percentage of filial tenants in the subdistrict as a whole is even higher. In 1978, my survey of the ten communities (*mubaan*) of Baan Talaad subdistrict revealed that 160 (or 47 per cent) of the 340 full-tenant households rented the land of their parents. Comparative information for other areas in the North is limited. Several anthropologists discuss kinship ties between landlords and tenants but only Moerman gives any figures. In the village of Ban Ping, 10 (or 28.6 per cent)

⁹ In early 1982, the cost of a five-horsepower tractor was 10,500 baht while a ten-horsepower tractor was 25,000 baht. The sale of two three-year old water buffaloes could pay for a five-horsepower tractor and the sale of two five-year old oxen could pay for a ten-horsepower tractor.

¹⁰ It takes about two hours per beast per day to cut grass for fodder.

of the 35 plots of "home irrigated land" were rented by kinsmen [14, pp. 101-2]. This suggests a significant variation within the northern region.

But I suspect that the percentage of tenants who rent from kinsmen in the North as a whole would still be significantly higher than in the Central Plain, or at least than in the delta region. This is because of the differences in the extent of absentee landlordism in the two regions. Udomsak Yudhanaraweesak states: "One important pattern of the North is that most of the landlords have small holdings. Only a few own more than 100 rai and most land owners also farm themselves" [1, Aug. 17, 1975]. Suehiro [19, p. 320] also cites a survey conducted in 1973 and 1974 by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives that shows that large absentee landlords are not common in the North.¹¹ It is true that Caw Kaew Nawarat, the last ruler of Chiang Mai, owned a lot of land in Chiang Mai Province. Indeed, he had more than 1,000 rai of riceland in Baan Talaad subdistrict alone. But certainly by the time I began research in 1967 all of his land there had been sold by his wife and children, mostly to local villagers. By contrast with northern Thailand, says Suehiro, "the existence of absentee landlords is a remarkable characteristic of the provinces of the Chao Phraya Delta region" [19, p. 320]. In four provinces close to Bangkok 119 absentee landlords own estates of over 1,000 rai and up to 10,000 rai or more, totalling 377,827 rai [25, p. 111]. Needless to say, large absentee landlords are unlikely to be related by kinship to their tenants.

Rental arrangements between parents and children are related to the developmental cycle of the family. The cycle begins with marriage, followed usually by a period of residence in the parental household of either spouse (but more frequently in the wife's mother's house, owing to the preference for postnuptial, uxorious residence). Extended family households are therefore quite common.

Villagers define a household as comprising "those who eat rice together." Commensalism has other implications. Those who eat together draw on a common store of rice. Members of an extended-family household also cultivate rice as a single, undifferentiated unit. Hence, in an extended-family household the junior couple and their children do not grow rice separately from the senior couple. Moreover, the junior couple has no authority in the management of rice cultivation on parental land. The position of an adult son or son-in-law is often likened to that of a water buffalo who must toil for his master. The parents usually give the young couple a share of the cash from the sale of rice but the share is not fixed and the amount depends on parental discretion. However, the junior couple does have autonomy in the cultivation of follow and swidden crops. These may be grown at their expense with profits accruing to them alone.

The decision of the junior couple to establish their own household is influenced by several factors: the amount of capital they have acquired, the marriage of a co-resident sibling, or dissension within the household. Whatever

¹¹ This survey was of eleven northern provinces and included Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Phrae, and Mae Hong Son.

reason prompts this move, the young couple normally set up their household in the parental compound. If the parents have sufficient riceland they will rent some out to the couple to work independently. The couple now make their own farming decisions and establish their own labor-exchange relationships. They also store, cook, and eat rice separately. For a number of years, however, this independence may only be partial. For some time the new, fledgling, satellite household may rely on various forms of economic assistance from the parents such as interest-free loans and the free use of the parents' water buffalo, farming tools, and granary.

Another vital form of assistance at this stage is the payment of very low fixed rents (*khaa hua*). For example, in 1960, Sombun married the daughter of Kham and Up of Sankham and for several years resided in their house. Then he set up a separate household in the parental compound. At the same time he began to work 3 rai of riceland belonging to his parents-in-law. Sombun paid a fixed rent of only 68 thang—a little less than a third of the crop. Kham told me that he charged his son-in-law a very low rent to help him get on his feet; otherwise, he said, "he would not have a very bright future."

As the satellite household becomes economically more viable and if the parents are still active cultivators who aspire to acquire more land, then the children will normally assume the same obligations mentioned above as incumbent on non-filial tenants: half the wet-season rice crop as rent, the payment of cultivation costs, and so on.

There may be a return to the payment of very low fixed rents when the children get older and when one parent dies. In Sankham, in 1968, there were nine cases of an elderly surviving parent receiving payments of rice from children of 20–25 per cent of the wet-season rice crop. In these cases, all children cultivated parental riceland and the plots they worked were those designated as their inheritance. The partition of parental land *inter vivos* no doubt serves to prevent dissension between siblings after the death of the surviving parent. This partition and the small payment may also function to reduce the tension that longevity creates between an aged parent and his or her children who are eager to receive their inheritance and are coming under increasing pressure to assist their own adult children. Tension is lessened by an equitable compromise. The parent receives enough rice for support in his or her old age and the children acquire control over parental land at minimal cost.

The tenancy situation for non-filial kin does not differ greatly from that of non-kin tenants. I know of no cases in which kin tenants have had to pay more than 50 per cent of the wet-season rice crop or pay key money for tenancy rights. But recently there has been a disturbing development in Sankham that presages more widespread insecurity of tenure for non-filial kin. Of the recent withdrawals of land from tenants which I have discussed above, four of the tenants evicted are kinsmen of the two landlords involved (two brothers, one nephew, and one cousin).

IV. THE LAND RENT ACT OF 1974

Following the student uprising of October 1973 and student support for peasant causes, there was a spate of peasant protests. Many of these in the North were concerned with high rents. In July 1974, a bitter dispute developed over rents at a meeting between 10 landlords and 100 tenants at the Mae Taeng District office [1, July 30, 1974]. In early November, more than 100 peasant representatives from Chiang Mai and Lamphun demonstrated at Chiang Mai against excessive rents which "were making it difficult for them to make ends meet" [1, Nov. 7, 1974].

Lack of response to these demands by the interim government of Sanya Thammasak prompted dissidents from the North to join peasants from other regions to demonstrate at Bangkok. On the twenty-third of November 1974, a meeting of peasants and students was held at Thammasat University and concluded with a decision to set up the Peasant Federation of Thailand (PFT; *sahaphan chawna chawrai haeng prathet thai*) in order to pressure the government for reform. On the twenty-ninth of November, following a mass rally, PFT and student leaders met with the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. After a long discussion the government agreed to a number of demands, including the enactment of rent control legislation [1, Nov. 30, 1974].

The Land Rent Control Act (*prarachabanyat khuapkhum chawna*) was passed by the National Assembly in December 1974. The act gives tenants security of tenure by contract for six years from the time of the act. Tenants are entitled to renew contracts for further six-year periods, except in a few cases such as that in which the landlord desires to work the land himself. The owner is permitted to claim rent on only one crop per year. The main-season rice crop is to be divided into three parts with one-third going to the landlord, one-third to the tenant, and one-third to the party that pays the cultivation costs. The rent must be reduced if harvests are poor and no rent can be charged if the yield is less than one-third of a normal crop. The legislation also provides for the setting up of supervisory committees at the district level to implement the act and to settle disputes between landlords and tenants. These committees are to include the district officer as well as five tenant and three landlord representatives from each subdistrict.

The promulgation of the Land Rent Act was seen as a great victory for peasant and student agitation. Yet the euphoria that followed this legislation was quickly dispelled. The conservative composition of the coalition that emerged from the general election of January 1975 and opposition from landlords and provincial officials combined to prevent significant progress in rent control.

Leaders of the PFT and student activists responded in early 1975 by holding meetings throughout the country to inform tenants of their legal rights under the Land Rent Act. Landlords and right-wing groups retaliated with a campaign of violence. Between April and August 1975, twenty-one PFT leaders were assassinated. Of these, eleven came from the North, including Som Chan-

daeng from Sanklaang subdistrict in Sanpatong. The violence undoubtedly had an intimidating effect on tenants throughout the North. Bowie and Phelan, who visited many of the areas where the murdered PFT leaders had been active, reported in 1975 that "no one interviewed was abiding by the law, nor was anyone they knew" [3].

Political intimidation has declined over the last few years and yet all non-filial tenants in Baan Talaad and Sankham, except one, have continued to pay 50 per cent of the main-season rice crop as rent and many still pay rent for follow crops. Why is this? A common response from tenants is: "we are kinsmen" or "we are people of the same village." No doubt in some cases this reflects a tenant's feeling that enforcement of the act could cause hardship to a landlord who is of similar economic status. But many landlords are, in fact, much wealthier than their tenants. In such cases the reluctance of tenants to seek enforcement of the act stems, in my view, from an awareness of two important factors: a loophole in the Land Rent Act and the realities of the market situation. Section 39 of the act states that a landlord is entitled to terminate a tenancy contract at the end of the six-year period if he "farms the land himself" (*tham kaan kasaet duai ton eng*). I have already pointed out that the growing profitability of commercial agriculture and the introduction of tractors have encouraged a number of landlords to do just this. Yet, there are also cases of landlords who, while declaring that they are working their land themselves, continue to use tenants on the pretense that they are "hired laborers." For example, one of the biggest landowners in Baan Talaad got six of his tenants to sign documents stating they intended to end their contracts in 1980 and that the owner himself would work the land thenceforth. In reality, the signers have remained as tenants on the land on the same basis as before. In Sankham, two landlords recently evicted two tenants for the declared purpose of working the land themselves, but the "hired laborers" used are in fact only new tenants—who make most of the farming decisions, meet most of the cultivation costs, and pay higher rents than their predecessors. So, tenants are faced with the reality that if they do attempt to enforce the lower-rent provisions of the Land Rent Act they may only encourage landlords to evict them, whether to genuinely work the land themselves or to find more compliant tenants who, because of the intense competition to rent land, are willing to acquiesce in the subterfuge of being "hired laborers."

Thus the appeal by tenants to norms of kinship and common residence might be seen as a strategy to personalize the landlord-tenant relationship so as to lighten rent demands and to increase security of tenure in a situation that still favors landlords. However, the several cases mentioned above of landlords who dismissed tenants who are close kinsmen clearly indicates that such personal bonds are not an infallible hedge against the free play of market forces.

V. LANDLESSNESS

One cause of landlessness in Thailand is the concentration of landownership.

TABLE I
LANDOWNING AND LANDLESS HOUSEHOLDS IN BAAN TALAAD SUBDISTRICT, 1978

Administrative Community	Households No.	Owners No.	Full Tenants No.	Landless Laborers No.	Landless Other Occupation No.
No. 1	118	40 (33.90)	13 (11.02)	65 (55.08)	0 (0.0)
No. 2	148	58 (39.19)	16 (10.81)	74 (50.0)	0 (0.0)
No. 3 (Sankham)	157	106 (67.52)	27 (17.20)	24 (15.28)	0 (0.0)
No. 4	202	106 (52.48)	36 (17.82)	60 (29.7)	0 (0.0)
No. 5 (Baan Talaad)	364	99 (27.20)	58 (15.93)	67 (18.41)	140 (38.46)
No. 6	130	60 (46.15)	61 (46.92)	9 (6.92)	0 (0.0)
No. 7	90	48 (53.33)	17 (18.89)	25 (27.78)	0 (0.0)
No. 8	377	65 (17.24)	84 (22.28)	228 (60.48)	0 (0.0)
No. 9	147	33 (22.45)	23 (15.65)	91 (61.9)	0 (0.0)
No. 10	150	41 (27.33)	5 (3.33)	104 (69.33)	0 (0.0)
Total	1,883	656 (34.84)	340 (18.06)	747 (39.67)	140 (7.43)

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Yet, as I have already pointed out, the degree of concentration in the North is not as great as in the delta region of the Central Plain where vast estates are owned by absentee landlords. Moreover, evidence suggests that the concentration of landownership in the latter region has progressed rapidly during the 1960s and 1970s as a consequence of widespread indebtedness. In 1974, the government received 50,000 complaints from villagers in Central Plain provinces who had lost their land to "loan sharks" [1, Nov. 1, 1974]. In the North, indebtedness was not a major issue in the peasant protests that followed the student uprising of October 1973.

The basic cause of landlessness in the North has been the pressure of population on cultivable land. This problem was mitigated before the Second World War by the existence of extensive frontier regions in Chiang Rai Province and at Fang in northern Chiang Mai Province where riceland could be easily acquired either by clearing or by cheap purchase. Since the war the problem has been exacerbated by a significant increase in the natural rate of population growth, the migration of hill people into some areas of the lowlands, and the closing of the frontier regions of Chiang Rai and Fang. In Baan Talaad, the ranks of the landless were swollen by an influx of poor migrants, mostly from Lamphun Province.

The full extent of landlessness is a question that was sorely neglected for many years. Government officials, as well as most Thai and foreign scholars, upheld the myth of Thailand as a nation of abundant resources and small landowners. However, the results of recent research make it difficult to sustain such optimism. In a 1977 survey of agricultural households in twenty out of the twenty-six provinces of central Thailand (commissioned by the Agricultural Land Reform Office), the median incidence of full tenantry was 14 per cent [8, p. 3]. In the ten communities (1883 households) of Baan Talaad subdistrict, 18 per cent of all households were full tenants in 1978 (see Table I). This is

much lower than for the Chieng Mai valley as a whole (comprising Chieng Mai and Lamphun provinces). A 1973 survey by Chieng Mai University of 440 households in twenty-two villages of this region indicated that 30 per cent were full tenants [2, p. 87].

In the Chieng Mai valley the incidence of landless laborers is even more perturbing. Turton refers to a 1974 survey of 1,488 households in one unnamed district in Chieng Mai Province which found that 36 per cent of all agricultural households were landless laborers [25, p. 112]. In Baan Talaad subdistrict in 1978 a striking 40 per cent of the 1883 households were landless laborers and in five out of ten communities 50 per cent or more of all households were landless laborers (see Table I). This compares with 15 per cent for central Thailand [8, p. 3] and a World Bank figure of 30 per cent for the whole of Thailand [10, Dec. 1, 1978]. Such data were not previously available for the reason that district officials compile statistics only on those who own land and cultivate crops (for land tax and irrigation purposes). Consequently, the long-awaited agricultural census of 1963 had details on landownership and tenancy but none on landless laborers. Regrettably, there are still no figures for northern Thailand as a whole.

In the Baan Talaad area at least, the emergence of a rural proletariat is a more serious problem than tenancy. Not only are there significantly fewer full tenants here than landless laborers but also, as noted above, about half these tenants work the land of parents and rental arrangements are adjusted equitably to the changing needs of owner and tenant.

The life of landless laborers is one of extreme poverty and insecurity. They describe their hand-to-mouth existence with phrases such as "searching for food in the morning so as to eat in the evening" (*haa chaw kin kham*) or "searching for food from day to day" (*haa kin pen wan wan*). Wages barely cover the cost of buying rice and they are usually forced to forage for other food: vegetables, tubers, fish, frogs, and crabs (which, as a result of population pressure, are becoming increasingly scarce). In times of serious illness they frequently cannot afford the cost of medical treatment because they lack savings or the security (in the form of land or crops) necessary to obtain loans.

It is true that the expansion of cash crops has provided new wage-labor opportunities. But this varies considerably from area to area and village to village. Thus in Baan Talaad many landless are able to get work at the local tobacco station or as follow-crop tenants in the dry season. By contrast, neither of these avenues of employment are open to the landless laborers of Sankham. The owner of the tobacco station employs only laborers from Baan Talaad and Kiwlae, the two closest communities.

One consequence of the disappearance of the major frontier regions in the North and in other regions in Thailand is that expansion of the area of wet-rice cultivation has been slight. On the other hand, there has been a rapid growth in the cultivation of unirrigated, "upland" crops such as dry rice, maize, soybeans, chillies, sugar-cane, cotton, mungbeans, cassava, etc. [8, p. 5]. In the North, this has occurred mostly in the transitional zone between the valley

bottoms and the hills [7, pp. 222–25] [24, p. 275]. Chapman describes the overall situation in northern Thailand as follows: “the overwhelming majority of ‘Khon Muang’ who practice shifting cultivation are undoubtedly reluctant swiddeners, forced by population pressure to move in increasing numbers away from their traditional base in wet-rice cultivation” [7, p. 222]. In central Thailand “upland” crops have been cultivated extensively since the Second World War by tens of thousands of squatters along the eastern side of the Central Plain [8, p. 7].

In Sanpatong, the unirrigated land to the west of Baan Talaad has for many years been used for swiddening. Recently, the cultivation here of soybeans and peppers and the gathering of bamboo shoots has become a vital source of supplementary income for the burgeoning landless population in the district. Also, I know of at least twenty-three landless laborer households from the villages near Baan Talaad that have in recent years tried their hand for the first time at cultivating dry rice. Furthermore, a whole squatter village called Baan Myang Bon has grown up since the early 1970s about 4 kilometers northwest of Baan Talaad in an area called Huai Manaaw. It is composed almost entirely of landless laborers who are partly dependent for their livelihood on swidden crops, including dry rice.

A. *Illegal Use of Forest Reserve*

In both northern Thailand and the Central Plain some squatter cultivation has taken place legally on land allocated by government officials but much has involved the illegal use of state forest reserves. Official estimates of the extent of such cultivation varies from 5 million rai to 21 million rai [19, p. 322]. Illegal squatting has caused considerable tension and conflict between the squatters and forestry officials.

In early 1973, two Hmong¹² men from Mae Waak village in Chom Thong District and one from Khun Waang village in Sanpatong went in search of employment in the lowlands. They found work at a plantation at Huai Manaaw clearing land on a contract basis. In the same year they began to cultivate rice swiddens on the slopes of foothills near Huai Manaaw, but district police and forestry officials charged them with trespassing on and destroying national reserve forest and the three were held in prison for one month. One of the men involved later told me that he explained to the magistrate that he didn't want to grow opium any more and if the government refused to allow him to grow dry rice he would have no alternative but to turn to the communists for help.

National reserve forest has been just as much a source of tension and conflict between government officials and Thai peasants from the lowlands. David Morell notes that the 1969–71 period of parliamentary democracy gave scope

¹² The Hmong (or Miao) people comprise one of the largest minority groups in China. They began to migrate southwards into mainland Southeast Asia in the eighteenth century and into northern Thailand at the end of the nineteenth century. They are now the major opium growers of this region.

for the expression of peasant grievances against forestry officials [15, p. 405]. Most complaints were against local forestry officials for attempting to extort money from peasants for the use of reserve forest.

Peasant protests over national reserve forest were also common following the student uprising of 1973. For example, in the district of Mae Thaa in Lamphun Province, villagers asked a student team to help them regain land in a reserve teak forest. The villagers had occupied the land for ten years before the Forest Industry Organization (FIO) expelled them. When the FIO would not move out the villagers became angry and burnt down part of the forest. Later, nine students and PFT activists were arrested over this incident and their attempts to shut down a mine that was blocking village water supply [1, Aug. 6, 1974].

In 1970, three northern Thai villagers from Baan Myang Bon planted tobacco on reserve forest land. They were charged after residents of a nearby village informed district officials. At first they were fined 1,500 baht each, but this was reduced to 700 baht after the owner of the local tobacco station, who had provided the tobacco seedlings, attended court to speak on their behalf. He also paid the fine for the men. Commenting on this incident a few years later, a local dam chief said that if poor peasants cleared reserve forest they were quickly prosecuted, yet a former Minister of Agriculture (who owned a large orchard near Baan Myang Bon) had cleared 300 rai of reserve forest with local officials taking no action at all. "That's the way it is in Thailand," he said, "the rich can do anything without fear of prosecution."

In early 1975, this dam chief met the Prime Minister, Kukrit Pramoj, at a meeting in Sanpatong. Also present at the meeting were the district officer, police chief, and forestry officer. The dam chief pointed to the three officials and, in a loud voice, told the Prime Minister that in Phetchabun Province district officials had allowed peasants to use reserve forest. And it was good land too, he added. Why then, he asked, did Sanpatong officials prosecute northern Thai and Hmong villagers for using reserve forest which was poor in quality and had very few tall trees? Kukrit replied that he would make sure that in future no one troubled the villagers again.

B. *Extension of Plantations*

One recent development that has restricted the availability of land to landless villagers has been the purchase of large tracts of unirrigated land by agribusinesses. One example is that of the Ahaan Saakorn Company which bought 1,000 rai at Huai Manaaw to grow longan, litchi, and asparagus.¹³ In 1971, the company employed between 300 and 400 laborers, mostly on a day-to-day basis, for clearing, hoeing and planting work. This company also owns a 1,000 rai pineapple plantation in Lampang Province, a small 50 rai mushroom plantation in Lamphun Province, and a 200 rai plantation in Sansai District, Chiang Mai, which grows asparagus, flowers, and baby corn. Another sizeable

¹³ About 700 rai belonged to Ladda Pantapa, a well-known Chiang Mai business woman. She became a shareholder in the company by investing her land at its monetary value. The rest of the land was purchased from local villagers.

agribusiness is the Thai Farming Company. This company is a joint Thai-Israeli venture with a 60 per cent Thai share and is a subsidiary of the Lanna Food Company which recently built a factory at Lamphun to produce dehydrated vegetables for export. The Thai Farming Company acquired 10,000 rai of "neglected" land in Baan Songkhwae, a subdistrict of Chom Thong and 1,000 rai in Baan Phai subdistrict of Sansai [1, Apr. 17, 1974].

In some cases these large holdings were acquired through dishonesty and trickery. Indeed, fraudulent methods of land acquisition became the focus of a major scandal in Thailand in 1974 involving Thai Farming Company. In about 1966, according to villagers, thousands of peasants moved into the subdistrict and began to clear and cultivate a large area of unirrigated land, but without ever possessing title to it [1, Apr. 23, 1974]. The government eventually approved the allocation of 3,500 rai of this land to the cultivators. Some villagers complained that they had later agreed to sell the land to influential persons and to the Thai Farming Company but had not received payment. Others said that they had been lured by wealthy persons (including the subdistrict headman) into selling their land under false pretences; that is, they had been asked to sign documents which they believed granted them title to the land [1, Apr. 23, 1974]. The land acquired by this ruse was later sold to the Thai Farming Company. In early May, about 500 villagers seized control of the disputed land and raised a red flag atop a tree. They proclaimed they would not allow anyone to take away their land and threatened to shoot intruders [1, May 8, 1974]. In June the company offered jobs to more than 1,000 villagers in an effort to settle the dispute, but the villagers refused, preferring no doubt to get their land back rather than become plantation workers.

VI. THE LAND REFORM ACT OF 1975

A solution to the problem of landlessness was one of the major demands of the peasant protests in Thailand during 1974-75. In numerous demonstrations peasants from Central Plain provinces urged the government to return them land confiscated by unscrupulous loan sharks or allocate them vacant land, in particular land from the national reserve forests. The provision of new land was one the demands made to the cabinet by a large peasant demonstration in Bangkok on May 1, 1975 [1, May 7, 1975]. In the northern province of Lamphun more than 300 landless peasants demanded that the governor arrange the allocation of 4,000 rai of unoccupied land [1, Sept. 15, 1974] [1, Nov. 3, 1974]. Earlier, in June that year landless peasants from Sanpatong District requested local officials to allocate them unirrigated land at Huai Manaaw.

There were also demands for an effective government policy of land redistribution. In late November 1974, representatives of the PFT and student leaders reached an agreement with the government that a land reform act would be instituted as soon as possible after investigations of land reform by the Farmers' Aid Committee. There was also some support from government experts who

calculated that about 60 million rai of additional agricultural land would be needed by 1985 to satisfy the land requirements of the rural poor in Thailand. But there were only about 40 million rai of state land potentially available for allocation. Hence, they argued, land redistribution was essential to make up the difference of some 20 million rai [19, p. 317].

The Land Reform Act was passed by the National Assembly in January 1975—the first legislation of its kind in Thailand. The act provided for the expropriation (with compensation) of landholdings above 50 rai and the redistribution of excess land to landless and near-landless peasants. But there were several notable exceptions that undermined any radical pretensions. Families specializing in animal husbandry were entitled to hold up to 100 rai. A person could own up to 1,000 rai provided “he worked the land himself” (presumably with machines and hired labor) and was doing so one year before the promulgation of the act. Properties of more than 1,000 rai could also be retained if the owner had been engaged in agriculture for more than one year and if the properties were run by modern farming methods and had projects to assist peasants to increase production, and also providing that, after fifteen years, the owner offered 60 per cent of the land to landless peasants [1, Jan. 8, 1975].

The land redistribution program proved a failure. The government selected twenty-six districts in eight Central Plain provinces as land reform areas, but in the four years between 1975 and 1979 was only able to purchase 88,868 rai—a mere 4 per cent of the private land it had designated for redistribution [19, p. 338]. There are two major reasons for the failure of the land redistribution scheme. Both should be viewed in the context of the resurgence of political conservatism after the passing of the Land Reform Act. First, government financial support was grossly inadequate. Thus, in 1977, the government budgeted for only about a third of the money needed to purchase all the private land scheduled for redistribution. And subsequent budget allocations were even more drastically curtailed [19, p. 338]. Second, opposition from the landlords was considerable and the government did not grant the Agricultural Land Reform Office enough authority to counter landlord intransigence. Nor did it make sufficiently attractive offers to landlords for the purchase of their land [19, p. 339].

The Land Reform Act was attacked right from the beginning by the PFT for being “neither sufficiently urgent nor fundamental” [25, p. 121]. In the North, PFT dissatisfaction with the act is certainly understandable because only a very small percentage of landlords owned more than 50 rai. For example, in 1978, only nine households in the ten communities of Baan Talaad sub-district owned more than 50 rai of irrigated riceland and even in these cases parents were easily able to evade the law by registering their land in the names of their children.

Opposition to the Land Reform Act may also have been influenced by the radicalization of the leadership of the PFT under student tutelage. In 1973 and 1974 the aims of student organizations were confined mainly to moderate demands to democratize Thai society along liberal-democratic lines. But by early 1975 many student activists had come under the influence of the Com-

munist Party of Thailand [16, p. 317]. The PFT newspaper, *Thai Peasant*, certainly reflects the influence of more militant, Marxist-oriented students. The July issue of 1975 made pronouncements such as "blood must be washed with blood" and "if the enemy uses guns, we will use guns" [1, Aug. 17, 1975]. Notably, the same issue carried the headline: "land must belong to the tiller." There is, I think, good reason to believe that the landlord and right-wing violence against PFT leaders in 1975 was due as much to fear of PFT agitation for a radical policy of land redistribution as to fear of the Land Rent Act. Thus Bowie and Phelan note that five of the eleven leaders assassinated in the North neither owned nor rented land and suggest that these men were urging "a more total land reform program" rather than just the enforcement of the Land Rent Act [3].

The Land Reform Act also made provision for the allocation of state land to the poor and after 1975, as a reflection of the strengthening of conservative forces in the country, the emphasis of government land reform policy shifted from land redistribution to the distribution of state land.

The squatter settlement of Baan Myang Bon near Baan Talaad became the foundation for one such scheme. In early 1970 a local dam chief encouraged poor families to settle unirrigated land at Huai Manaaw. Settlers came from villages in Baan Talaad subdistrict, from Sanpatong villages further east near the Ping River, and even from as far away as Chiang Rai Province. Within the next few years sixty families settled at Baan Myang Bon but thirty families had left by the time I visited the village in 1972. Yet between 1973 and 1975 the number of migrants increased rapidly. The influx of northern Thai peasants from the east and north was augmented by Hmong, mainly from the highlands to the west. In December 1975, there were altogether ninety-three Northern Thai¹⁴ and twenty-nine Hmong households. The Hmong were attracted to settle here by the shortage of land in the highlands suitable for dry rice and opium and by the expectation that the building of a large reservoir near Baan Myang Bon would enable them to acquire irrigated riceland. The reasons given by the Northern Thai for migrating to Baan Myang Bon were poverty, landlessness, and, for those who had moved from areas near the Ping River, the hardship of frequent flooding as well. In response to a survey that I carried out in December 1975, sixty-eight (or 73 per cent) of the ninety-three Northern Thai households claimed to have been landless laborers before moving to Baan Myang Bon and seventeen (or 18.27 per cent) were landless sharecroppers. Only five (or 5.37 per cent) reported owning irrigated riceland. The Northern Thai were also attracted by the prospect of eventually acquiring irrigated riceland near Baan Myang Bon.

In June 1974, those who had settled at Baan Myang Bon (thirty-two households at the time) together with other poor villagers in Sanpatong petitioned

¹⁴ The Northern Thai people are the dominant ethnic group of northern Thailand. They call themselves *khon muand* ("people of the principalities"). This ethnic label has a political origin. "Principalities" refers to the petty states of Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Lampang, Nan, and Phrae that once combined to form the kingdom or federation of Lannathai.

district officials to give them title to state land they were cultivating near Baan Myang Bon. Later, officials of the District Land Office surveyed the area and drew up a plan for a land allocation scheme (*khraungkaan catsan thiidin*). Some 990 rai were retained as state reserve forest and 148 rai as public property (e.g., for a market place). An area of 244 rai was allocated for residential sites and 2,100 rai for agricultural use.

The government decided that the land was to be allocated by draw. Eligibility for the draw was restricted to those "of good character" who were landless or did not have enough land to subsist. The thirty-two households that had already settled at Baan Myang Bon were assured of plots. Applications had to be submitted between mid-April and mid-June 1975. Altogether 3,209 applications were received from residents of Sanpatong, Chom Thong, and Hot districts for not more than 318 plots—a clear indication of the pressure on land resources. Some 554 of the applicants were hill people (Hmong, Lua', and Karen). Successful applicants were required to build a house and develop land within six months. They were also forbidden to leave the house-site uninhabited for a continuous period of longer than six months or to sell the land within the first ten years. Those who received land also had to follow the regulations of the Department of Cooperatives Promotion (*krom songsoem sahakaun*) in developing the land. Later, the King of Thailand agreed to personally finance, at a cost of 27 million baht, the building of a large reservoir near Baan Myang Bon to irrigate a large part of the land allocated for agricultural use. Construction had begun when I visited the area in late 1978 but was still incomplete in early 1982. The Northern Thai of Baan Myang Bon therefore remain dependent for their livelihood primarily on the cultivation of soybeans and on work as agricultural laborers in nearby villages. The Hmong rely on dry-rice cultivation and the sale of embroidery.

In 1977, the government planned to allocate 880,000 rai of state land in twelve provinces (including Chiang Mai) and another 6,060,000 rai in the four years between 1977 and 1980 [19, p. 334 and p. 339]. Yet, by 1979, only 34,425 rai in four provinces had been allocated to 1,778 households [19, p. 340]. Thus, the distribution of state land by the government has been no more successful than the more radical and politically divisive program of land redistribution. One reason is inadequate budget allocations [19, p. 340]. Another is that many government departments or agencies are responsible for the planning and implementation of land allocation projects on state land.¹⁵ According to Suehiro, "this resulted in a quite noticeable lack of uniformity in the enforcement of reform on state land, and differences in approach and conflicts of interest between government offices impeded the progress of land reform planning as a whole" [19, p. 340].

Corruption is another factor. I mentioned above that a draw was to be

¹⁵ For example, the Department of Cooperatives Promotion, the Department of Public Welfare, the Department of Land Development, the Land Department, and the Royal Irrigation Department were all at some stage involved in the land allocation scheme at Baan Myang Bon.

held in 1975 for the purpose of allocating land at Baan Myang Bon. Yet, this draw was scrapped by the district officer for another to be held about a year later. About 10,000 families registered for this second draw but it too was later cancelled. Just after I returned to Baan Talaad in September 1978, officials were in the process of organizing yet a third draw. I do not know how the district officer justified the cancellation of these draws, but his motives were patent to everyone. Several informants remarked that the only reason for new draws was that district officials saw them as a lucrative source of graft: each applicant was required to pay a 2 baht application fee. In the early 1970s local officials had not been interested in the development of land near Baan Myang Bon for poor villagers. Indeed they had caused much discontent by determinedly obstructing settlement here. But once forced by political changes and instructions from Bangkok to assist such a scheme they clearly intended to exploit it financially for all it was worth. This corruption and the delay it caused became an increasing source of tension between local officials and villagers. Accusations of corruption concerning land settlement schemes have been made against officials elsewhere—such as the one at Thung San in Phitsanulok Province in the Central Plain, where a university investigation revealed in 1974 that settlement administrators allocated land only to provincial officials and those who could afford to pay [1, June 29, 1974].

VII. CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that certain land problems in northern Thailand are particularly severe because of ecological factors peculiar to this region and recent technological innovations.

High crop yields are due to efficient irrigation systems and the use of chemical fertilizer. Improved irrigation has also encouraged the cultivation of second and third crops on wet-rice land. High crop yields and multiple cropping have raised substantially the income-earning potential of the land and increased income from cash crops has combined with a high physiologic density and limited employment opportunities outside agriculture to generate intense competition to rent land. This competition is the root cause of high rents, key money, prepaid rents, and insecure tenure. This situation has not been significantly modified by the 1974 Land Rent Act because of a loophole that enables landlords to evade the legislation with ease. Yet, tenancy problems are mitigated by the fact that many tenants work the land of their parents and in these cases rental arrangements are insulated to a great extent from normal market pressures.

The emergence of a large rural proletariat in the North is a more widespread and serious problem. The high percentage of landless laborers in rural areas is, in part, a product of the pressure of population on irrigated land—a problem aggravated by the disappearance of frontier regions. Another factor is the large number of landlords who have been encouraged in recent years to dismiss tenants in response to the growing profitability of commercial agriculture and the introduction of tractors.

I have also argued that the Thai government has made little progress toward solving the problem of the burgeoning landless population. The program of land redistribution (which the Land Reform Act of 1975 initiated) foundered as a result of opposition by big landlords and other conservative groups in the country and the focus of government policy subsequently shifted to the distribution of state land to the landless. However, even this politically innocuous program has failed because of inadequate funding, bureaucratic inefficiency, and corruption.

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