



From Peasant Farmers to Construction Workers:
The Breaking Down of the Boundaries Between Agrarian
and Urban Life in Northern Thailand, 1974-1992

by

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Abstract

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In the rapidly industrializing countries of the Pacific Rim and Southeast Asia it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate peasant studies from wider processes of change, as context has emerged as a critical factor shaping various patterns of peasant differentiation. This study is an extended case study of one village in Northern Thailand in the Chiang Mai Valley, examining how the breaking down of the boundaries between peasant and non-peasant worlds has transformed the social structure of the village.

Supplemented by extensive qualitative data, a longitudinal panel study used data from 1974-75 and 1991-92 to examine changes to agriculture, the emergence and transformation of non-farm occupations, and their interaction and development. The longitudinal comparison shows that over time the proportion of households engaged in farming as their primary occupation has declined significantly within the context of the commodification of land and labor. In addition, almost all households which continue farming are diversified, with some household

members in non-farm occupations. While land owners were able to continue farming more often than renters, the key factor influencing a household's ability to remain in agriculture is having members in both agricultural and non-farm sectors. Non-farm work has enabled persistence in agriculture.

Wage labor—mostly non-agricultural—is now the dominant occupation in the village. This shift into diversified farming households and wage labor has occurred in the context of rising costs for agriculture and expanded opportunities outside of agriculture. Significant generational stratification has also emerged, as those entering the labor market since the early 1970s have almost exclusively entered into non-farm occupations, while many older villagers remain involved in agriculture.

While the process of diversification associated with rural-urban interpenetration—diversification in proximity to a rapidly growing urban area—is hardly egalitarian, it is less likely to exacerbate existing inequalities to the same extent as would diversification in the context of a less vibrantly expanding urban economy.

D. D. Evans

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Date