Studying Opportunities and Risks in Rural Societies of Southeast Asian Countries

edited by FUJIKURA Tetsuro

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> FUJIKURA Tetsuro Bangkok, March 2025

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INTRODUCTION

Background: Diversification of Indicators to Study Rural Societies

In Southeast Asia, rapid economic growth over the past few decades has led to economic development in the core metropolises, regional cities, and surrounding rural areas. People's living standards have improved significantly. The commercialization of agriculture is progressing rapidly both nationally and internationally, transforming subsistence-based farming to more profitable, capital-intensive agriculture. Non-agricultural employment has also expanded with the development of commerce and industry, contributing to local markets. Furthermore, it has developed with the emergence of factories connected to global markets and improved access to overseas labor markets.

This development of the local economy significantly impacts the livelihood of the rural people, who primarily relied on agriculture. Forms of livelihood in rural areas are diversifying. Many regions have overcome chronic poverty, and basic affluence has been achieved. Amid this change, the social and policy issues are how people can connect diverse opportunities to enrich their lives and how to reduce risks that could lower their standard of living.

Research on rural villages in Southeast Asia has long focused on how class differentiation and diversification have progressed along with economic development in rural societies (there are helpful reviews in Rigg 1994). Previous research on class differentiation and diversification in rural societies has relied mainly on indicators such as land tenure and the role of village communities. Still, today, many indicators and issues exist to consider in understanding rural societies. Those indicators are becoming more diversified, and their interaction is becoming more complex. Income sources for rural households are diversifying, and even the boundaries and roles of the "household," which used to be self-evident as it overlaps with the management unit of farming, are becoming fluid.

In response to these circumstances, research on rural societies has begun reorganizing increasingly diverse indicators and issues and reconsidering self-evident concepts and frameworks. In in-depth field research, the main interest is to more carefully identify the individual characteristics that depend on each rural society's historical paths and circumstances and to clarify the diversity of social change trajectories. Rigg and his colleagues' achievements exemplify academic struggles in rural studies over decades (Rigg and Vandergeest eds. 2012).

Understanding Diversities in Rural Southeast Asia

Through the research project titled "Preliminary Approach for Research Framework Building for Studying Opportunities and Risks of Residents in Rural Societies of Southeast Asian Countries (from FY2023 to 2024)," the authors have explored and clarified people's responses to opportunities and risks. Furthermore, we have investigated their economic and social backgrounds from the perspective of transitions in the agricultural structure in rural societies, local industrialization and commercialization, young people's schooling and employment, and the ideal and actual situation of family formation. In compiling the project results in this working paper, the authors consider present rural societies in Southeast Asian countries with the keywords opportunities and risks, mainly discussing opportunities. In line with these undertakings, each chapter shares common viewpoints as follows.

The first viewpoint is to put the situation that rural people face in a historical context. The historical backgrounds, however, are diverse, ranging from villages in northern Thailand, which are said to have a history dating back at most 200 years, to villages in the Red River Delta, which can be traced back to the delta development in the 13th century. In this paper, to discuss more direct historical circumstances, we start from the late 1970s or the 1980s.

Second, we focus on how rural people utilize opportunities or hedge risks. Opportunity is not the same as benefit; risk is not the same as damage. The important thing is to investigate the processes by which people exploit chances or cope with uncertainties. We can observe rural people's active response to circumstances by paying attention to such processes. Some processes can be performed by each household, and others can be performed by collective entities. In this paper, the cases of northern Thailand and the Mekong Delta are examples of the former, and the Red River's case is of the latter. This process analysis will also be done from a time perspective, such as life history. The notion of capital accumulation in northern Thailand's case can explain the internal factors within each household that affect the deployment of opportunities they face.

The third thing we consider is the agricultural environment and institutional factors. The former is not the same as a natural environment. It is a product of the interaction between nature and people, and is closely related to institutions. On the other hand, institutions in this paper refer to broad economic and political entities that influence people's behavior, such as administrative institutions at each level and markets at various scales. These external factors are discussed such as enhancing or restricting people's manipulation of opportunities.

Using these viewpoints—historical backgrounds, processes of exploiting opportunities, and influential external factors—this paper attempts an experimental and exploratory comparison through three case studies. The studies intend not to set strict criteria for comparison but to contribute to rural studies, which have been grappling with diversities in rural societies, by open discussion crossing differences in political regime, natural environment, and historical and cultural backgrounds. However, the way each case study is compiled and the emphasis on them vary depending on the amount of time spent or that which is available to be spent in each research village, the various restrictions surrounding the field research in each site, and the researcher's perspectives and expertise. Nevertheless, we hope our attempt to explore the diverse rural societies of Southeast Asian countries provides a valuable contribution to further studies.

Three Case Studies

The first two case studies written by Fujikura are about rural villages in northern Thailand and the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Road access is a common issue in these areas. It provides opportunities on one side and risks on the other. The social impact of roads has been discussed in Colombijn and his colleagues' articles (Colombjin 2002). By focusing on market integration brought by roads, Rigg (2002) argues, "Road became a quiescent force in the process, proving an avenue out of poverty, but not the means." On the other hand, Windle conducts comparative studies among villages in different areas of Sarawak, using spatial and other indicators to investigate the diverse consequences of road impacts (Windle 2002). These studies are helpful to discuss the two cases in this paper.

Northern Thailand's case indicates that improved market accessibility benefits the interviewed household. Paved roads improved accessibility for the first generation in their 50s. As laterite roads were replaced by paved roads, electricity, motorization, and a great wave of commercialization came. Moreover, information technology also provides accessibility for the second generation, the family's primary income earners. The author discusses how the household has accumulated capital and deployed investment throughout its life history. The study describes villagers' active response to opportunities.

The second example is a village in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The development bottleneck grounded by the restricted agricultural environments was resolved by favorable accessibility to the newly emerged industrial sector, not by intensifying agriculture. However, the same top-down industrialization and resulting commercialization now have devastating impacts on villagers. Development projects are bringing the surveyed village to the verge of disappearance. The author refers to the case as an authoritarian solution in rural transformation.

Yanagisawa wrote about a village in the Red River Delta, Vietnam. Though this area has a centurieslong state-oriented irrigation history, the author focuses on the role of a cooperative after the marketoriented policy shift in the 1980s. By depicting the cooperative's practices prior to national policies, it argues the collective action of people through a cooperative to create opportunities. In this case, a cooperative is referred to as a mediator between the nation-state and local villagers. Compared to other studies in other areas in the Red River Delta (see, for example, Kerkvliet. 2005), which argue the people's struggles against the nation's pressure on collective farming as "everyday politics," this chapter suggests an example of cooperatives' long-standing role as a community mediated between nation-state and individual villagers in the commercialization process.

In addition to the main chapters above, this paper has two short reports. Niimi has written one on overseas workers from one of the provinces on the north-central coast of Vietnam, and Takahashi has written another about the gap between the provincial election campaign pledges and the reality of rice cultivation in a lower northern province of Thailand. These reports conduct quick reviews of other rural areas in the two countries.

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CHAPTER 1 Northern Thai Village in Chiang Mai

FUJIKURA Tetsuro

Following my first contact with villagers in northern Thailand in December 2023, I conducted a preliminary survey intermittently from August to December 2024.

General Information about Surveyed Village

The village in this chapter is a quintessential northern Thai village, as Forsyth and Walker illustrate (2008: 27-32). It is located at the bottom of a valley, receiving rainwater via forests on the upper mountain slopes. The area is one of the small intermontane valleys among the mountain ranges centered on Doi Pui Summit (1,665m). Administratively, the village belongs to the Mae Rim district of Chiang Mai province. The village center is about 750 meters above sea level and about 30 kilometers from the Chiang Mai city area. The main road connects to a neighboring Christian Hmong village at an elevation of about 950 meters.

According to a joint inter-department research project of Chiang Mai University, the village has a 200-year history (Chiang Mai University 2018). The villagers are Thai Buddhists. As of 2018, the total population was 1,147, with 392 households. The village head, in 2024, stated that the total population (only Thai nationals) was 1,147, the same as in 2018, with 221 households. While the project mentioned above didn't detail the number of non-local residents, mainly Tai-yai or Shan ethnics, the village head informed us that there are 400 non-local residents in 155 households.

The village's total area is 6.36 square kilometers, and its population density is 180 people per square kilometer, compared with 187 people per square kilometer in Mae Rim district. Non-local residents are not included in this calculated population density in the village because the population information published for each administrative district likely does not include them. As I will mention in the later section of this chapter, such a high proportion of non-local residents in relatively sparsely populated places implies a pull effect of the village economy.



FIG. 1.1 Landscape of the village from one of the upper slopes Source: Photo taken by the author in October 2024

Agricultural Landscape

Dense forests in the mountainous terrain, covering nearly 45% of the total area, store rainwater and supply abundant water for agriculture and daily life in the village. There are gravity-fed irrigation systems with five springs. The springs overlap five sacred areas of spiritual worship. The villagers have established a community-based water management system for each resource. These informal organizations are called "weir groups" (*Klum Mueang Faay* in Thai) (Chiang Mai University 2018: 36-39).

There is a stream along the bottom of the valley that joins the Mae Sa River downstream. As a villager in her late 50s reminisces, there used to be a strip of rice fields on both sides of the stream. Since the early 1980s, however, many farmers in the village have moved away from subsistence rice cultivation. Now, you can see rows of greenhouses and hydroponic facilities. Vegetables such as paprikas, tomatoes, and cucumbers are grown in the greenhouses, while leaf lettuce is grown in the hydroponic facilities. The woman's family stopped planting rice 15 to 16 years ago (i.e., 2008 to 2009). Two areas of rice fields remain in the village, but they serve as tourist attractions.

The forests, both community and state-conserved, are found from 950 to 1,300 meters above sea level along the mountains' ridge lines surrounding the village. Steep slopes between those forest areas and relatively flat areas, which used to be rice fields, on the bottom of the valley are used for horticulture and growing perennials such as macadamia. There are also some greenhouses. The slopes were used for taros and sweet potato cultivation before the wave of commercialization hit the village in the mid-1980s.

Besides macadamia and other perennials, such as fruit trees cultivated at relatively high elevations near the forests, villagers look for flat plots on the bottom of the valley and on slopes to build agricultural facilities like greenhouses. As a result of such actions, capital and facility-intensive agricultural landscapes can be seen everywhere. Our respondent farmer's tomato greenhouse is nearly 950 meters above sea level, reached by pickup truck along a steep slope.

Life History of Farming Household

In this survey, I contacted a three-generation farming household. In this section, I reconfigure their 40-year life history.

First Generation: Launching Agrarian Capital Accumulation

The first generation of this household is in their late 50s – they were born in the late 1960s. The wife has retired as the principal farming laborer in the family. She now primarily supports her son and daughter-in-law with their farming and raising their children. Her husband has contracted with a seed dealer company to grow paprika seeds in a neighboring district. Four years ago, he started this now lucrative business to compensate for rising agricultural investments and costs. He has handed over the family's farming in the village to his son and daughter-in-law. Now, the primary producers



FIG. 1.2 Greenhouses on the slopes Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2023

of this family are the second generation, who are in their early 30s - they were born in the late 1990s.

The first-generation wife's grandparents, except her maternal grandfather, were born in the village. Ten of the eleven siblings of the first-generation couple have lived in the village and are farmers. They are deep-rooted in the village. As the wife says, among her family and relatives, nobody has experienced going far from their families to work. Unlike other rural areas such as northeastern Thailand, this trend seems to be a characteristic of this village.

The role of the first generation in the history of their family is evident: agrarian capital accumulation. The generation's education was limited. The wife only graduated from non-regular high school courses primarily due to the accessibility of a school – it was 2.5 kilometers away and elementary school classrooms were turned into non-regular junior high and high school classrooms on weekends. It was unrealistic for her to go to the nearest regular high school about 17 kilometers from her home. Her husband was fortunate to have a sponsor – the owner of an elephant camp near a high school– who provided accommodation for him. The owner worried about the husband and allowed him to go to school from the camp. When the first-generation couple was around 20 years old, they got married and started their own farm.

The wife's parents had about ten rai¹⁾ of farming land with three or four plots. Due to her many siblings, she took over only two rai. Her husband and three of his five siblings were given land by their parents. He took over one rai of house ground and three rai of farming land. The couple's starting point was five rai of farming land and one rai of housing ground.

Their parents had planted wet rice in the fields alongside the stream and tubers like taro on the slopes. The former was for subsistence, and the latter was for the market. The socio-economic situation began to change when a paved road reached the center of the subdistrict 2.5 kilometers from the village, and electricity came to the village in 1984. This was a few years before the woman in question married. She said villagers began considering converting subsistence crops into commercial ones in those years. A few years after she married, a strawberry boom occurred in the village. It was

¹⁾ One rai is equivalent to 1,600 square meters.

the first of a great wave of commercialization that continues today. However, the price collapsed after six to seven years due to overproduction.

Once commercialization triggered villagers' motivation, crop conversion continued repeatedly. To be precise, commercialization may have created obsessions among villagers to switch crops. When villagers went out of the village and witnessed land use in other villages, or when dealers of agricultural products came to the village, the villagers came up with ideas for new crops. In 2004, the respondent couple began to plant flowers and paprikas. Four or five years later, they started growing tomatoes. Around the same time, starting to cultivate hydroponic leaf lettuce signaled the end of their rice field.

Growing paprika seems to have been lucrative and helped the household accumulate capital. It is estimated that paprika was sold for 100THB/kg in the first few years. It is now 50THB/kg. Ten years ago, the couple bought 20 rai of land for 2.5 million baht to expand their paprika and tomato cultivation. She took out a loan using her siblings' land as collateral. Last year, she paid off the debt after her husband's paprika seed growing became profitable.

This paprika story also indicates the transformation of the labor market in the village. As Chiang Mai University's project points out, in the past, agricultural labor was shared in the community through the exchange of labor (2018:16). In the first commercialization phase, labor exchanges were changed to the hiring of other villagers through payment. However, since other villagers also undertook commercial farming and more educated young generations started to work in the non-agricultural sector or were not happy doing the most arduous agricultural tasks, the labor shortage became evident, and villagers began to employ outside labor. This is why non-local agricultural workers now account for approximately one-third of the village population. The respondent household has employed Tai-yai workers for more than ten years.

Second Generation: Investing for Next-generation

As mentioned above, the primary agricultural work was taken over by the second generation in the family about ten years ago, except for contracted seed production, which took place in a neighborhood district. Both the son and daughter-in-law attained a university education. The son majored in engineering, the daughter-in-law majored in English (hereafter, the son will be referred to as the husband and the daughter-in-law will be referred to as the wife). As of December 2024, while this survey was still in progress, it was not clear why the husband decided to take over his parents' farming in the village having attained a university degree in teaching engineering in high school. However, he seems to have successfully taken over his parents' business, using his engineering expertise, particularly in establishing agricultural facilities such as greenhouses and hydroponic systems. The villagers highly regard his skills and he frequently receives requests from other villagers and newcomers to the village to build agricultural equipment.

His wife was born in a province neighboring Chiang Mai. This implies the expansion of the marriage area of villagers compared to the first generation. She met her current husband when they were university students in Chiang Mai. After getting married, she came back with her husband to the village to help with his farm. She is familiar with rural living because her grandparents were relatively wealthy farmers, having some lands and a rice mill. However, her farming roles as a member of her husband's family are in supervision and marketing, not actual work in the fields.

As they depend on non-local workers for the daily care of produce in the fields, their work on the farm does not involve so much manual labor, but it doesn't mean their farming is free from hard work and intense stress. The husband manages nearly 40 rai of fields equipped with advanced facilities, while the wife manages the marketing and shipping schedules for the agricultural products. The only relief is that her retired mother-in-law looks after their children. She says their strong motivation to improve their household income is generated by the strong desire to give their children the best education. I would like to point out here that their motivation is not simply to get rich or practice their ideal agricultural methods but to realize any ordinary parents' aspirations.



FIG. 1.3 Hydroponic leaf lettuces Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2023

Findings and Discussion

Opportunities and Social Base to Exploit Them

In this section, I will briefly review around 40 years of the respondent household's life history to explain what opportunities came to the village and how the recipient villagers exploited them to improve their lives.

The most decisive change in the village probably occurred in the mid-1980s when paved roads and electricity became widely available. According to a map in Vanpen (1986: 19 Fig.2), the national road, which was about 2 kilometers from the village, was still a laterite road as of May 1984. The road was paved shortly after this. The village head says that the village's main road connecting this national road was paved in 1986, and this improvement in accessibility brought a transportation shift from oxcarts and motorbikes to cars. Moreover, he said that agricultural mechanization began after electricity came to the village around 1984. As for the respondent family, they bought a pickup truck around 1990. It was the first vehicle to transport their agricultural products directly to the market. Before that, they sold their products to dealers coming to the village. It also opened villagers to information about the outside world. As the first-generation wife says, along the road, which they came to use more frequently, villagers could witness what products sold well in the market.

Not only physical accessibility, such as roads and transportation, but information technology, such as the internet, mobile devices, and social media, also improved their accessibility to know-how and the market in the 2000s. Devices like smartphones are indispensable for the young generation to help them get a wide range of agricultural know-how, from technology to skills and tips. Although some community-based farming groups are in the village, this couple does not belong to any of those groups. Clarifying the reason is a further research topic. However, for farmers not joining any agricultural organizations, agricultural know-how, including studying modular farming technologies through the internet, will significantly help improve their farming.

Moreover, mobile phones help them access and negotiate more directly with trading partners close to the retail market. They say, "We now rarely deal with buyers who come directly to our villages. They do so when there is a shortage in the market and their prices are not as good. Instead, we value continuing to do business with our regular customers in Bangkok, who buy our products at prices that are not that different from before, even when market prices are falling."

Another factor helping Thai villagers take advantage of opportunities is non-local labor. The socioeconomic situation, such as demographic aging and the younger generation not wanting to work in agriculture, could ruin farming opportunities, thus non-local workers are filling labor shortages. The relationship between Thai villagers and non-local Tai-yai workers seems cordial on the surface. The Thai villagers even admire their diligence and hard work. However, the relationship is certainly paternalistic and patron-client-like. Moreover, the capital accumulation of these non-local workers in the village is carefully restricted by limited citizenship. For example, the sudden influx of non-local workers due to external and internal labor market fluctuations is blocked by village administration through the residence registration system for non-locals, backed by villagers worried about "diligent competitors." In addition, non-locals are not allowed to own land.

Such a hidden labor force and its hierarchical structure have been reported throughout Thailand. The case of the village surveyed may show less rapacity than the overt capitalism seen in the manufacturing sector. Villagers manage to take advantage of their opportunities based on their surroundings. To the young couple interviewed, their capital accumulation is not an end but a means to give their children a good education.

Finally, I will discuss the trend in the development of services and tourism in the village and its future. According to the village head, some newcomers without any previous connection with the village have been coming for about five or six years to purchase land and open service facilities such as cafés, restaurants, and homestays. As the head says, there are wealthy people in Bangkok, and disasters, such as flooding in the city and the COVID-19 pandemic, have intensified the abovementioned trend. One of the reasons villagers are selling their land is the aging population of the village. Households without anybody to take over family farming are potential targets of buyers. To the villagers, the model case of rural tourism development is the Royal Project-related Doi Moncham Resort, several kilometers from the village. The resort's brilliant white accommodations on a hill ridge can be seen from the village. Some villagers also have invested in this sector in the village, such as campsites and homestays. As for the interviewed family, they opened a mini supermarket a few years ago with a rich assortment of products and refrigeration facilities alongside the village's main road. Unlike semi-open grocery stores typical in rural areas, their shop is clean, tiled, and bright like an urban convenience store, making it comfortable for tourists from cities.

The village head says the village considers it a priority development plan to meet the current demands for the services industry and tourism. However, it is also a worry that the village's geographical characteristics would prevent the plan from being fulfilled as the villagers expected. One characteristic is that there are state-conserved forests that the villagers alone cannot decide to develop. Another is that the village's main road cannot effectively connect to other centers. These characteristics will likely limit the development of services along the line.

Future Risks

Let us now turn our attention to future risks facing the villagers. The first concerns are related to the present capital-intensive, equipment-intensive model of agriculture in the village. This highly intensive form of production is lucrative but brings the high risk of sudden or gradual damage. An example of such sudden damage comes from natural disasters. In the 2024 rainy season, the village suffered from heavy rains and whirlwinds. Winds badly damaged greenhouses, and landslides occurred on slopes. According to the wife of the first generation of the interviewed household, natural disasters seem more concentrated in time and location and are more hazardous these days.

Another example of sudden damage comes from the decline in urban demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the early 2020s, the lockdown in big cities like Bangkok dramatically reduced vegetable demand. As for the interviewed household, there was no demand for paprikas for two consecutive years. One way to address these sudden risks is by establishing stable income resources. For the household interviewed, the grocery store is such a choice. The interviewed wife realizes the role of the shop in their family's budget. The budget for farming operations seems to be separated from the daily life budget, which is usually covered by income from the store.

On the other hand, gradual risk is related to crop science and water resources. The cultivation methods used in greenhouses and hydroponics are examples of modular farming. They are isolated from the natural environment outside as much as possible. For paprika cultivation, for example, farmers plant them in pots with disposable palm shells and carefully prevent pests from entering the greenhouses. Despite these efforts, the interviewed wife explained that there has been a decline in production over the years. Water supply is also a concern of the villagers. The wife pointed out there have been water shortages in the dry season compared to previous years. As a response, her household built a piped well to ensure water for their paprika cultivation. The village head is also concerned about the water shortage due to increased demand from the service sector and tourism development.

The second risk is the land issue. As in other areas of Thailand, state-conserved forests generate conflicts over issuing land titles for rural residents (Forsyth and Walker 2008: 37-50). Moreover, in the



FIG. 1.4 Greenhouse tomatoes Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2023

surveyed village, the emergence of newcomers who purchase land has caused a surge in land prices. The village head mentions that land prices nowadays are beyond the reach of ordinary villagers. The interviewed wife says she felt relieved as her family had bought land in the village to expand their farming before the prices surged. She says that the current land prices make farming investment difficult. Although foreigners, such as Tai-yai non-locals, can't purchase land because of Thai law, there is no way to prevent villagers from selling their land to Thai newcomers. Such newcomers, who are more affluent than villagers in many cases, are seen by villagers as both opportunities and risks.

Regarding land issues in other areas, a Singhanetra-Renard's study (1999) shows the more devastating impact of rural development. Her research site is also in Mae Rim district but much nearer to the Chiang Mai city area. Massive land buying began there due to land development and touristrelated enterprises in the mid-1980s. Due to demographic pressure over the years, most villagers owned only small plots that were inefficiently farmed, and many sold their rice fields when the land prices rose rapidly. In this village, rural development excluded villagers from using agricultural resources in their village, resulting in villagers seeking non-agrarian jobs in the newly established service sector or outside the village. In contrast, the surveyed village in this chapter benefited from the economic boom from the mid-1980s. However, current land purchases in the village can prevent villagers from investing in or using farming land in the future.

The third and last risk mentioned here is related to the status of non-local workers. As mentioned above, agricultural accumulation partly depends on migrant workers. The present national legal system allows the village to control the influx of migrants and prioritize Thai villagers' benefits. Owing to international concern about human rights, however, in seeking resolutions to address longstanding citizenship and residency issues of migrants and ethnic minorities, the Thai government approved a policy to grant Thai citizenship to over 483,000 people (*Bangkok Post* 2024). This policy includes the same right to land and property ownership as Thais. This policy may change the socio-political relationship between Thai villagers and non-local migrants. To Thai villagers, the situation may create potential competitors, who are said by villagers to be more hardworking than Thai people.

Epilogue

This chapter roughly depicted more than 40 years of rural transition in the village surveyed through the life history of the interviewed household. Focusing on opportunities that have emerged in rural development, we can observe villagers' active response to rural changes. Although rudimentary commercialization had come earlier, the interviewed family benefited from road access and a great wave of commercialization from the mid-1980s and succeeded in accumulating capital.

Compared with the research record of villages in other areas near Chiang Mai city, the surveyed village's advantageous point seems to be its distance from the city center. Although paved roads and motorization usually cause drastic changes in rural society, it won't make geographical factors meaningless. In the case of the village surveyed, significant change was seen, while keeping resources within the villagers' reach and helping them exploit opportunities. This point resonates with Windle's discussion mentioned in the introduction part of this paper. She concludes, "[W]here households retained control over their natural resources, new roads opened up new economic development opportunities that did not impinge on the sustainability of their livelihood system (Windle 2002: 833)."

On the other hand, land purchasing by wealthy urban residents after COVID-19 laid the grounds for the introduction of new technologies and the resulting social changes, such as digesting information from the internet and remote working through web conference systems, which help to overcome the physical constraints that kept rural society in its safety zone. While information technology also benefits the villagers, it may lead to future conflict between the villagers and newcomers over village resources.

Many rural areas in Southeast Asian countries have experienced de-agrarianization and what I have termed the second generation have received higher levels of education. As for the interviewed family in this chapter, the de-agrarianization process may continue in the next third generation if they receive more educational investment from their parents. It depends on whether rural changes can preserve rural resources that are favorable for them to be able to utilize for household capital accumulation.

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SHORT REPORT 1 Election Campaigns and Food Security in Phitsanulok Province, Thailand

TAKAHASHI Katsuyuki

The Thai population, along with government and other services, are all heavily concentrated in Bangkok and its surroundings. The author lives in Phitsanulok province, which is located in the lower north of Thailand, where the primary industry is agriculture. In January 2023, the progressive Move Forward Party, which won the 2023 general election as the dominant party, appealed to young people about the issue of inequality in a speech in Phitsanulok province ahead of the election. The author observed the campaign as a member of the audience. The former party leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit stated that the national average monthly income per capita is 7,500 baht (approximately 34,000 yen, calculated at 1 baht = 4.54 yen as of February 2025), and if Thai people earn 45,000 baht a month, they feel wealthy. The monthly income distribution peaks between 1,700 baht and 66,000 baht. A small number of dominant people have an income exceeding the 66,000baht income stratum. The average monthly income per capita in Phitsanulok is 9,000 baht. When Thanathorn asked the audience if there were jobs in Phitsanulok, high school students answered, "No." Thanathorn stressed that there are not many private companies in Phitsanulok that pay a monthly salary of 25,000 baht or more, and it is difficult to get a job at such a company. The Move Forward Party only pointed out the problem and did not offer any concrete measures as a way to tackle it. The disparity in monthly income was a concrete example of an important social problem and a reason to appeal for the need of democracy and decentralization.



FIG. Rpt 1.1 The fertile rice field near the Nan River in Phitsanulok Source: Photo taken by the author in September 2024

As a result of the general election in May 2023, the second largest party, Pheu Thai, formed a coalition government. During the election campaign the author observed, the current Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra visited Phitsanulok province and emphasized that she would triple farmers'

incomes within four years to make farmers rich if the Pheu Thai Party were to form a single-party government. To this end, her political party, the Pheu Thai, touted that it would increase productivity by measures against drought and flooding with irrigation channels and reservoirs, promote exports of agricultural products to Laos, Vietnam, China, and Europe to expand markets, and raise crop prices. The Pheu Thai Party stated in the election campaign that 40% of the population is employed in agriculture, but this accounts for only 8% of the GDP. Farmers earn only 1,000 baht per rai (0.16 hectares) of rice field. This is not enough for farmers to be able to live. Half of farmers' debts are due to falling crop prices, the Pheu Thai Pary said in the rally. The Pheu Thai Party campaigned on breaking the vicious cycle of low production prices and debt. Paetongtarn also stressed that she would create employment opportunities and encourage farmers to move away from agriculture. A by-election for a lower house seat was held in the 1st district of Phitsanulok province on 15 September 2024. The elected Pheu Thai Party lawmaker, who defeated the progressive People's Party (the succeeding party of the dissolved Move Forward Party), pledged to raise agricultural product prices and defer farmers' debt repayments during the election campaign. There was no mention of tripling farmers' incomes (The author observed the election campaign). The reason could perhaps be that the Pheu Thai Party could not form a single-party government and did not secure the position of Minister for Agriculture and Cooperatives in the coalition government.



FIG. Rpt 1.2 The Nan River sent abundant water to the rice fields Source: Photo taken by the author in September 2024

In the election of August 2024 for the Phitsanulok Provincial Administrative Organization president, voters re-elected Monchai Wiwatthanat who pledged to help farmers by holding product fairs and supporting reskilling (*Prachamati* 16 August 2024). Monchai defeated the candidate from the progressive political party who called for investment in agricultural processing plants and the expansion of agricultural water use in her election campaign which the author observed. Providing agricultural support is not easy at the provincial level because decentralization is not yet advanced.

According to the Phitsanulok Provincial Statistical Office, the number of farmer households that own land, including stock farmers, was 51,990, which accounted for 16.7% of total households in Phitsanulok province in 2022. Their average monthly income per household was 22,386 baht, but their average net profit from farming was only 14,482 baht. It was lower than the total average monthly income per household, 26,225 baht. The number of farmer households including stock farmers, who do not own their land, was 11,868, which accounted for 3.8% of total households, and their average monthly income per household was 31,725 baht, and their average net profit from farming was 24,549 baht. It was higher than the total average. This suggests that many farmers with tractors and other equipment tend to cultivate rice on other people's land as a commercial business. Agriculture is the top industry in this province, and accounted for 23.7% of Phitsanulok's Gross Provincial Product (GPP) in 2022. The agricultural employment population and GPP ratio are balanced in the Phitsanulok province.

According to the local newspaper *Phao Thai* (16 July 2022), farmers in the Bang Rakam district, Phitsanulok province, handed a petition to a member of the House of Representatives asking for relief because the price of crops fell, and the costs of fuel, fertilizer, pesticides, etc. rose, making it unprofitable for farmers and driving them into debt. Fertilizer had been 600 baht for 50 kg, but the price had increased to 1,700 baht for 50 kg. Therefore, they demanded that the cost support be increased from 1,000 baht per rai to 1,500 baht and that harvesting cost support be 1,500 baht per rai. There was a maximum limit of 20 rai for each. When the author checked with the person in charge at the provincial office, he learned that as of February 2025, the cost support of 1,340 baht per rai for flood-affected rice fields. However, there is a cap on the amount of support as government support is limited.

Government support is critical for the very survival of family farms because agriculture offers low incomes and is unstable. Agricultural products are essential for life, so raising prices will affect people by making food expensive. The market price of agricultural products is unstable due to varying rainfall, production volume, and international prices. The initial costs are high because seed, fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, tractors, and other machinery are required. It is sometimes necessary to hire labor. Falling rice prices cause investment losses that are greater than income. Therefore, farmers often incur large debts. Agriculture is vulnerable to climate change, with the number of rainy days decreasing. However, the rainfall is heavier when it rains. Rising temperatures and heat waves have made working in the fields even harder. Agriculture is hard physical labor and young people have an aversion to hard physical work and sweating. There is an increasing population movement from the rural areas to the cities, i.e. increasing urbanization. Young people move from rural areas to cities or even Bangkok to receive, what they believe to be a better standard of higher education. After graduation, many do not return to their hometowns but find employment in the cities, as there are few job opportunities in their hometowns. Agriculture is vital, but people do not want poverty, which is a problem in the rural areas.

Amid modernization and economic development, the image of agriculture in the eyes of many young people is that of an outdated industry that is declining and shrinking. The aging of farmers and the lack of successors are inevitable, especially as so many are intent on leaving farming for the brighter lights and opportunities to be found in the cities. When interviewing farmers in Phitsanulok, the author found that agricultural successors have had the experience of helping their parents with farm work as children. Another condition for remaining in the agricultural industry, is that they inherit farmland that will allow them to work.



FIG. Rpt 1.3 Rice field after harvesting and before the second farming, near a Japanese car parts factory in Phitsanulok Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2023

The Thai government and agricultural organizations have promoted smart agriculture, provided subsidies and incentives for young people to return to farming, and supported the branding and export of agricultural products (*Matichon* 22 December 2024). Some farmers have diversified into cash crops, organic farming, and smart agriculture, i.e. using advanced technology such as the internet, AI, and drones to enable them to continue traditional farming. In the current situation, the crop price guarantees and income compensation could stop farmers from leaving farming.

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CHAPTER 2 Mekong Delta Village in Can Tho, Vietnam

FUJIKURA Tetsuro

Restricted Agricultural Environment and Easy Access to Industry

Although Can Tho is the most urbanized and industrialized municipality in the Mekong Delta region, agriculture still has a considerable presence there. The outstanding presence of agriculture in Can Tho is a gift from the fertile soil of the Hau River, a distributary of the Mekong River. However, as Can Tho is located in the tide-flooded zone of the Mekong Basin(Briesen and Vo 2021: 28), the flooding process of the river not only benefits rural livelihoods but also brings challenges and disasters to the locals. For example, the city annually suffers from flooding due to the mixed effect of seasonal rising waters and tides from July to November.

The surveyed village is about 15 kilometers northwest of Can Tho's city center. It belongs to the O Mon district. To be accurate, the village has been classified as an urban area with other neighboring villages since 2004. Nevertheless, when I conducted the first survey in 2012, due to the predominant agricultural landscape and the fact that nine out of ten households were classified by the local administration as farming households, I considered this surveyed site a rural entity.

The village is located on the floodplain of the Hau River, approximately 8 kilometers from the riverbank. In general, the inundation depth in this area is even shallower than that in the upper area of the city. However, as FIG.1.2 illustrates, the village is in a hollow with flooding from 0.75 to 1.00 meter. This hydrological environment restricts the village's agricultural potential. In fact, as of 2012, some farmers suffered from the withering of perennial plants, such as fruit trees, due to flooding. Moreover, the wet conditions of the rice fields made it challenging to use harvesters.

On the other hand, the village has an advantage regarding road access. The main road connects with the national road 2.5 kilometres from the village center. The national road allows villagers, especially the younger generation, to access non-agricultural employment in the city's largest industrial zone, Tra Noc Industrial Park, established in 2005.

Socio-economic Situation as of 2012

The survey in 2012 interviewed about 105 household heads in a subdivision of the village. The following is abstracted from the analysis published in Fujikura (2013). Among households surveyed, the average land holding was 0.56 hectares, and nearly half had less than 0.5 hectares for cultivation. Taking the household size, 4.5 people per household on average, into account, its scale had reached its limits in terms of self-sufficiency. The small farming scale was related to the local custom of inheritance of land. Since land was distributed equally to household members of the next generation, demographic expansion would directly impact the land scale in the future. As for household heads born in the village, while their parents had held 1.17 hectares of land on average, they inherited no



FIG. 2.1 Inundation map in Can Tho city

Source: Pham 2011: 67 (The location of the surveyed village is pointed out on the map by the author)

more than 0.35 hectares on average. Adding the spouse's land and, in some cases, purchased land to that, the size of farming land finally had reached its size at the time of the survey.

Almost eight out of ten households surveyed engaged in farming. Wet rice cultivation was the main activity. The estimated annual income from rice cultivation was about 10% less (29.4 million VND) than that of wage labor. As mentioned above, the hydrological environment restricted agricultural development. Flooding harms perennial plants, and soggy fields prevent the villagers from using heavy machinery, such as combine harvesters, owing to the fear of sinking due to the weight. In fact, except for tillage, almost all cultivation processes were conducted manually. These manual processes aggravate agricultural productivity in the conditions of labor shortage. The costliest harvesting was subcontracted to ethnic Khmer seasonal migrants to offset the shortage caused by the younger generation's non-agrarian employment. The estimated wage standard for these manual workers exceeded the subcontract fee for machinery harvesting.

In addition, the non-agrarian activities of villagers, except wage labor, only supplemented agricultural income. Only 25 out of 105 households surveyed were involved in non-agrarian activities, such as groceries, small eateries, barbers and motorbike repairs. Among those, 21 households conducted them only as a supplement to their main economic activities. Of the other four households, only one specialized in the local duck transport business, which exceeded other farming households' average income.

Given the village's limited potential, wage labor played the most significant role in the household economy. In many cases, household heads engaged in agriculture. Therefore, the local administration, which classified households by their heads' occupation, acknowledged that most households in the village were farming. However, 145 out of a total of 250 members of households surveyed who had jobs were involved in wage labor, particularly factory work in a nearby industrial park (TABLE 2.1). Almost nine out of ten young people aged 15 to 34 were wage workers, and they commuted from their homes to factories. Their average wage was about 10% more than the average household income of rice cultivation. In more than half of the households, income from non-agricultural activities exceeded that from agricultural ones. Those households' average income was much more than those of the other types of households and twice that of farming households with only agricultural income (TABLA 2.2).

	Number of people	Average age	Average school years	Average monthly income (VND)
Factory Worker	96	27.2	9.2	3,150,284
Plasterer	12	35.2	5.9	2,342,083
Agricultural Labourer	10	40.6	5.1	682,492
Rural Cadre	6	48.8	10.5	1,170,000
Car Driver	3	24.0	10.3	3,666,667
Transportation Subcontractor	3	36.3	4.7	2,000,000
Accountant	2	24.0	15.5	3,400,000
School Teacher	2	34.5	14.5	3,650,000
Security Guard	2	54.5	7.5	1,950,000
Vehicle Mechanic	1	29.0	7.0	1,500,000
Other Mechanic	1	29.0	0.0	2,650,000
Military	1	21.0	16.0	2,000,000
Bank Subcontractor*	1	55.0	11.0	300,000
Other Informal Worker	5	42.2	5.4	1,808,000
Total	145	31.0	8.6	2,722,300

TABLE 2.1 Wage employment of household members

Source: Compiled by the author

Note: *Collecting interest on bank loans in rural areas

	Number of households	Average annual income (VND)
Total	105	79,890,027
Non-Farming household	17	45,983,647
Farming household	88	86,440,123
- only with agricultural income	(10)	42,242,658
- with non-agricultural income: A*	(15)	65,333,061
- with non-agricultural income: B*	(61)	100,529,644
- n.a.	(2)	

TABLE	2.2	Number	of	househ	old	s b	oy f	arm	type	and
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Source: Compiled by the author

Note: *Type A: Income from farming exceeds that from non-farming

*Type B: Income from non-farming exceeds that from farming

Considering the de-agrarianization process in employment, land tenure has become a less critical factor in determining household income. Farming landholding with less potential is expected to generate only limited extra income. In contrast, the demographic structure of households can be a more critical factor than land tenure. The more people in a household get to a factory, the more income they can get. However, the income analysis at the time of the survey indicates that the landholding of households from which wage workers came was reflected in their wage levels through education levels

(TABLE 2.3). Though the agricultural environment in the village was restricted, land-holding disparities of the former generation indirectly influenced the latter generation's employment and income.

and average monthly income of wage workers													
Class of land tenure (ha)	Number of wage workers	Average school years	Average monthly income (VND)										
0.00	24	6.3	2,147,727										
0.01~0.50	45	7.8	2,519,815										
0.51~1.00	44	9.5	2,741,977										
1.01~1.50	30	10.0	3,300,664										
1.51~	2	12.0	4,500,000										
Total	145	91	3 042 037										

TABLE 2.3 Household land tenure, average school years,

Source: Compiled by the author

To summarize this section, as of 2012, none of the actors involved in rural development succeeded in creating agricultural opportunities for the villagers surveyed. On the other hand, top-down industrialization, such as industrial park construction, offered non-agricultural opportunities for them. The massive levels of factory employment in the early 2000s provided an escape route from the agricultural development limit under demographic pressure within the village. Generally speaking, agriculture in the Mekong Delta region experienced the initial wave of re-commercialization in the 1990s after $D \delta i$ $M \delta i$ (renovation) in the late 1980s and has been further progressing since the 2000s. However, the village surveyed entered the de-agrarianization process without experiencing agricultural intensification in the time of commercialization Regarding present income standards, these non-agrarian opportunities favored more affluent households in terms of land tenure.

Drastic Change Post COVID-19

Revisiting research has been conducted since 2023 to analyze the ten-year transformation of the surveyed village. Its landscape has changed dramatically. In 2012, the author reached the surveyed village along a bypass with rice fields on both sides. Now there are rows of buildings, such as car repair shops, restaurants, and wholesalers. It is difficult to see any rice fields from the window of a car on the road. Also, alongside the local road in the village, the number of small shops has increased. Around the village, lots of former rice fields have been turned over to the production of perennial plants, particularly durian trees. Vietnam has been experiencing a durian boom for a few years. According to the head of the village, illicit conversion from rice to fruit trees is rampant. Relatively affluent households build concrete-enclosed embankments to plant durians.

Regarding the agricultural environment, several years ago, the village leader took the initiative to gather money and build sluice gates to control the waters during the flood season. This encouraged mechanization and eliminated the need for manual rice harvest labor. This happened not just in the village but throughout the surrounding area. As an agricultural expert of local administration says, agricultural migrant workers during rice harvest season no longer exist. However, despite the gates, some farming fields remain unsuitable for fruit cultivation because of floods, and the situation is said to be worse due to the current local urbanization and durian boom. One villager attributes the undrained water in his land to concrete-enclosing in residential areas and fruit fields. Without any incentives to invest, he is abandoning his farmland. Also, in other areas of the Mekong Delta, the development of commercialization in agriculture benefits those who can afford additional investment while excluding others who are not so affluent from agriculture or forcing highrisk modes of agriculture on them. In another survey in Tien Giang province, we saw that dragon fruit planting, which prefers roadside sites, makes rice cultivation surrounded by the fruit fields impossible.

On the other hand, the villagers surveyed are facing massive concerns. One is the city's large-scale Can Tho Western Belt Road Project, which the City People's Committee approved in 2021. The road is planned to connect Can Tho with another regional city, Long Xuyen, as an alternative to the current road, which is plagued by traffic congestion. The high-standard four-lane road is being built across the middle of farmland in rural areas of the city, and it's already reached the surveyed village (FIG. 2.2). It's said that the road project will affect 130 out of about 4,500 households.



FIG. 2.2 Road Construction Site in the Surveyed Village Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2024

Another significant concern is a new commercial center project, which will require 500 hectares of land and influence at least 2,853 households (64% of the total). As a villager says, the project was previously for an industrial park, but the plan was changed a few times, and such uncertainty has made the villagers more concerned.

An economic division officer of O Mon district, which the surveyed village belongs to, explains that one of the goals of the 500-hectare project is to accelerate the de-agrarian process in the district's lowest commercialized and industrialized areas. This administrator also says it is part of a plan to get 27,000 local people, including the surveyed village residents, out of farming. The land acquisition is planned to involve the construction of a new resettlement area with urbanized infrastructure. In contrast, one of the village leaders explains that the villagers worry about whether they can adapt to a new lifestyle there. There would be neither gardens nor fields to cultivate.

According to the village leaders, since the road project began, affluent residents in the city's urban center have purchased land in the village. It is believed that half of their intention is speculation, and the other is to invest in opening shops or such like in the village. On the villagers' side, one of their intentions in selling their land is to cope with farming-related inconveniences caused by the road construction. As a result, the land price has been skyrocketing for four or five years. A village leader points out that the price of land alongside roads is four or five times higher than ten years ago.

Moreover, the village's demographics suggest increased social mobilization, although more concise research is needed. In 2012, the village had 18,800 people and 3,812 households. As of 2023, the population has decreased to 16,997 people, while the number of households has increased to 4,480. The head of the village considers the background of these opposite-directed changes as follows: even amid the overall population outflow, there has been an increase in young people who moved out of the village and then returned to the surveyed village after marriage, and in people who purchase land in the village for commercial purposes and settle there. Although these inflows do not balance the population because their household sizes are small, they contribute to the increase in the number of households. The district's officer also points out the inflow of migrants pulled by commercial and labor opportunities in the area, which has the industrial park and the expanding commercial area surrounding it. This officer expresses the difficulty of administrative observation of residents, which has become increasingly complicated.

Authoritarian Solution to Rural Transformation

As discussed in the section summarizing the 2012 survey, the village's agricultural development bottleneck was resolved with nearby top-down industrialization without agricultural intensification. Although the capital accumulation background for high-cost farming after the COVID-19 pandemic, such as durian planting, has not yet been researched, as for households interviewed in 2012, their agricultural capital accumulation was insignificant. In 2012, most household economies already depended on non-agrarian income, particularly from factory work.

The fact that the road project is being constructed through the village surveyed is a coincidence. Nevertheless, road construction has caused a surge in commercial demand for land and skyrocketed land prices. As in other areas in Southeast Asian countries, such as in this paper's northern Thailand case, non-agrarian land use demand can prevent local people from exploiting rural resources. Moreover, in the case of the village in this chapter, the planned commercial center threatens the very existence of the village. Local government officials have decided to remove people from their farming lands through a resettlement scheme.

From the mid-2000s to the 2010s, industrialization provided rural people with employment opportunities. However, at least in the surveyed village, it merely offered an escape route from rural areas where population pressures had narrowed livelihood opportunities rather than diversifying them for villagers. Nevertheless, villagers could continue to hold their land to hedge some kind of risk.

On the other hand, what the people of the surveyed village are currently facing is leading to completely removing them from agricultural land use. Even though policymakers can explain that the planned resettlement project will provide people with abundant commercial or employment opportunities, opportunities do not always accompany certainty. To consider issues of knowledge, skills, age, family composition, life stage, etc., it is unclear whether the opportunities that are supposed to be offered to resettled people of all ages would be flexible enough to be taken advantage of, or whether they would lead to improved living standards. These uncertainties and equivocality provoke people's concerns. The impoverishment of former rural people after they could not effectively use compensation for land acquisition is reported across the country. These reports indicate that exploiting opportunities requires appropriate experience, knowledge, skill, and social network. Therefore, the development policy accompanying the removal of people must face even more challenges. It offers people no opportunities and only delivers risks caused by losing farmland.

I refer to this case in the Mekong Delta as the authoritarian solution to rural transformation. It results from a mixture of strong state initiatives over rural development with restricted agricultural potential and easy access to commercial and industrial areas. The road project is in the land acquisition process, and the commercial center project will be in the coming years. However, with land prices soaring, acquiring land from farmers will be arduous. Conflict between the state and the villagers is likely to erupt, and rebuilding the villagers' lives will remain challenging for both sides. If rural people are removed from their agricultural environments, policy challenges would become increasingly similar to urban policies.

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CHAPTER 3 Rural Village in Red River Delta, Vietnam

YANAGISAWA Masayuki

Introduction: Exploiting Opportunities as Rural Villagers' Response to Socio-economic Changes

The response of rural villagers to natural environmental and socio-economic changes has been the subject of research in various fields. What is the difference between these perspectives and the one of "exploiting opportunities"? This study examines how the perspective of exploiting opportunities differs from previous research by focusing more on the historic and specific responses of people living in rural areas to the changes. This would, for example, allow us to broadly understand their long-term responses to external agents of transformation and the actions they take to prepare for such responses and to rationally understand the variety of responses that reflect different and individual conditions that have been discarded as exceptions in previous studies.

In this chapter, the author clarifies how people living in rural areas (hereafter referred to as villagers) have built their livelihood in the natural environment and socio-economic changes from the perspective of exploiting opportunities, focusing on a cooperative in one village in the Red River Delta, Vietnam (hereafter referred to as the "A Cooperative").

A cooperative ($h\phi p t ac x \tilde{a}$ in Vietnamese) is a unit of collective farming formed as part of a socialization policy in northern Vietnam in the 1950s. In the surveyed village, the cooperative played an important role in improving village life not only during the period of increased food production in the 1980s, but also with the introduction of cash crops in the 1990s and the increase in non-agricultural job opportunities in the 2000s and beyond. The cooperative in the study village is still maintained and continues with activities closely related to villagers' livelihoods. The author examines the changes in the villagers' livelihood along with the activities of the cooperative, because the changes in the villagers' livelihood have been affected by the cooperative to a large extent.

The targeted period of this study is approximately 50 years since the late 1970s. After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, there was a rapid shift to collective farming throughout Vietnam, but it almost collapsed after only about five years. This was followed by a turbulent period of socio-economic changes in rural areas, such as the reform of the contracting system in 1981, the introduction of market economic mechanisms ($D\vec{o}i \ M\vec{o}i$) in 1986, the dismantling of cooperatives (collective farming) in 1988, and issuing of the Land Law in 1993. This study examines how villagers, together with the cooperative, responded to these changes from the perspective of exploiting opportunities.

General Information on Study Village

The A Cooperative is located in a rural village in the Red River Delta of Vietnam, which is in the T administrative village (commune, $x\tilde{a}$ in Vietnamese), Nam Dinh province. According to 2009 statistics, there were 1,105 households belonging to the cooperative, with a population of 3,607 and an area of 349 hectares. The Red River Delta is a delta formed at the mouth of the Red River, which originates in China, and forms a low-lying delta with Viet Tri at its apex. The study village is located approximately 100 kilometers south of Hanoi, the capital city of Vietnam.

There are four major deltas in mainland Southeast Asia. From east to west, they are the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam, the Mekong Delta in the south, the Chao Phraya Delta in Thailand, and the Ayeyarwady Delta in Myanmar. Because of their extreme hydrological environment, where the water level rises during the rainy season and decreases during the dry season, the deltas had hardly been explored by humans until the 18th century. However, from the 19th century onward, the global demand for rice brought colonial governments, royal families, and merchants together to utilize the delta, transforming it into a major rice granary for their respective countries. The deltas of Southeast Asia, which form some of the world's largest granaries, are a relatively new landscape, having been formed over the past 150 years.

With the completion of this water management system, agricultural production changed dramatically. In the past, most of the low-level paddy fields were flooded during the rainy season and only one crop of paddy rice could be planted in a year. Since the 1970s, however, double cropping of rice has been implemented, leading to the stability of rice productivity.

Life History of Study Village

From 1975 to the 2020s, Vietnam has implemented various institutional reforms directly related to agriculture and people's livelihood in rural areas. This section reviews the socio-economic policy changes over the past 50 years and examines how the villagers of the A Cooperative have responded to the changes and built their livelihood following the socio-economic changes.

'A Cooperative' and Villagers' Livelihood in 1980s

In 1975, after the Vietnam War ended, new nation-building efforts were re-started throughout Vietnam. Particular emphasis was placed on the policy of collective farming, which had already been in place since the 1950s. However, during the war, the boundary of the cooperatives repeatedly expanded and contracted, and the system was unstable. The end of the war in 1975 and the subsequent return of military personnel to their villages added to the confusion. People suffered from severe food shortages in the 1970s. This was the case in many rural villages in Vietnam.

In 1981, therefore, the government implemented a major reform of the collective farming system. Under a new contracting system known as Khoan 100, collective farming could be undertaken on a smaller unit. Whereas collective farming had been undertaken by the entire cooperative, collective farming could be done by subordinate units such as production brigades ($d\hat{\rho}i s an xu \hat{a}t$).

When the contract system was reformed at the national level in 1981, the A Cooperative implemented a modified system in which farming was actually undertaken on a household basis, although the production units were nominally responsible for collective farming. Therefore, it was necessary for the cooperative to allocate agricultural land to each household for their farming, while the land legally remained under the collective use of the cooperative. Before 1981, there were no restrictions on which land within the cooperative would be worked. The location of the field where each villager had to work varied depending on the work assigned on a daily basis. Under the new contracting system, however, the location and area of agricultural land to be cultivated was allocated to each household. The area was almost automatically determined according to the number of workers in a household, which was not a major problem. Determining the location, however, was a more important issue. The land that was advantageous for farming varied, depending on the topography and soil, as well as the distance from waterways and residential areas. In addition, the villagers wanted to have both paddy and upland fields so that they could grow rice as a staple food and vegetables for sale.

The A Cooperative took the initiative in allocating land to each household. The cooperative prepared a five-level land classification map in the village according to the productivity of rice¹⁾ (FIG. 3.1). The main criteria were soil and water conditions. The highest level of paddy fields was land with a moderate mixture of clay and sand, good water holding and drainage capacity, and easy access to major irrigation and drainage channels. Conversely, heavy clay paddy fields located near low land were classified as the lowest level. These classifications also reflected the villagers' empirical perception of rice productivity.

Land was allocated to each household based on the land classification map prepared by the A Cooperative. The allocation of land to each household was ultimately done by lottery. In other words, to equalize the productivity of the land allocated to households, it was necessary to allocate the land equitably in terms of land classification and location. However, full implementation of the equality principle could have resulted in the land being dispersed with small pieces of land. In fact, in the village next to the A Cooperative, a household was allocated 40 plots of land.

To stick to the principle of equality, the A Cooperative conducted a lottery. To optimize agricultural practice, however, the cooperative also suggested mutually exchanging the fragmented small pieces of land with other households through discussions. In the end, each household was allocated an average of six to seven pieces of land.

Since 1981, the villagers of the A Cooperative have been engaged in agricultural production on their allocated land, and throughout the 1980s, rice production in the A Cooperative increased steadily.

¹⁾ Some villages in the Red River Delta made seven-level land classification map.



FIG. 3.1 Classification of farmland shown at the A Cooperative's office Source: Photo taken by the author

There was no dramatic improvement in production, although many reports pointed out that the 1981 institutional reforms stimulated individual farmers' incentive to increase their productivity. Villagers' incentives alone did not lead to a dramatic increase in actual production. Agricultural inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides were scarce. Although the institutional reforms of 1981 certainly increased agricultural productivity, it was more significant for the villagers' rural life that the reforms made possible stable food production, albeit at a lower level.

In addition to the implementation of the contracting system, the government issued some major polices at the national level, including the introduction of market economy mechanisms in 1986 ($D\delta i$ $M\delta i$) and the dismantling of cooperatives (collective farming) in 1988. In the A Cooperative, however, there were no notable changes due to these policies.

Prior to the declaration of the introduction of market economy mechanisms at the national level in 1986, the A Cooperative started growing commercial crops such as potato and rice for seed. Especially potato production in the A Cooperative was unique. Through a national agricultural research institute, the A Cooperative imported Dutch potato seed and also invited Dutch experts to provide technical guidance. Moreover, the A Cooperative began to build a cold storage facility to store the seed potatoes. All these activities by the cooperative allowed villagers to initiate cash crop cultivation even before $D\vec{oi} M\vec{oi}$ (Yanagisawa 2000).

There were also no major changes in the A Cooperative when new cooperative law to dismantle cooperatives was issued in 1988. Most villagers remained members of the new cooperative, now defined as an agricultural service organization. As mentioned earlier, the A Cooperative had already functioned as an agricultural service organization. The cooperative announced suitable crops, varieties, fertilizers, agricultural chemicals, cropping calendars, and informed villagers as soon as crops were damaged by diseases and insects. Most villagers followed the cooperative's instructions. The only change resulting from the 1988 reform was that the cooperative was no longer required to submit documents to the higher level of government as a unit of collective farming.

Cooperative and Villagers' Livelihood in the 1990s

Villagers practiced agriculture on the allocated land and the cooperative provided agricultural services throughout the 1990s. Unlike the 1980s, the amount of chemical fertilizers and pesticides increased and high-yield varieties were introduced, so that agricultural production increased. In terms of labor and capital inputs per unit area, the 1990s were the most intensive period in at least the past 50 years. Various cash crops were also grown. Livestock raising, such as pigs and poultry, also became an important source of cash income.

Not only labor and capital intensification, but also land intensification progressed. FIG. 3.2 and 3.3 show the cropping systems in the 1980s and 1990s in the A Cooperative (Yanagisawa et. al. 1999). In paddy fields, double cropping of rice was combined with field crops such as corn and potatoes in winter, resulting in three or more multiple cropping. In the 1990s, crops were cultivated so intensively that there was almost no unoccupied land throughout the year.

Cropping			С	ro	ppi	ing	Ca	le	nda	ar			Planted	Percent	
pattern	J	F	м	A	м	J	J	A	s	0	N	D	area (ha)	(%)	
VEG													2.7	1.3	
GN-RR		\angle		L	7	Z					_/	Ì	25.6	12.5	
NB		7			Ľ	7					Z		17.8	8.7	
WSR-RR		4			ſ	72					_/		158.2	77.5	

FIG. 3.2 Cropping system in 1985

Source: Yanagisawa et.al. 1999

Note: VEG: vegetables, GN: groundnuts, RR: rainy season rice, WSR: winter spring season rice, NB: nursery beds

Cropping	g pattern			Cr	opp	pping calendar								Planted area	Percent
in 1985	in 1996	J	F	M	A	M	J,	J		s	0	N	D	(ha)	(%)
VEG, GN-RR	VEG	Ē			+	+	+	+	+	+	_		_	11.9	6.0
GN-RR	VEG-RR				/	7	Ł		1	1	2			14.7	7.5
SR-RR	VEG-RR					7	Ļ		T		Ż			0.7	0.4
GN-RR, SR-RR	COOP	F	7		 	Т	$\frac{1}{2}$		T	-[*	Ż	/	Z	8.3	4.2
SR-RR	SR-RR-VEG	Þ	К		7	7	4	T	Т	T	1			9.6	4.9
NB	NB-SR-NB-RR	Þ	7		7	ч Т	7¢	T	Т	Т	7	2		10.9	5.5
SR-RR	SR-RR		2			_	Ľ		_	_				141.0	71.5

FIG. 3.3 Cropping system in 1996

Source: Yanagisawa et.al. 1999

Notes: VEG: vegetables, GN: groundnuts, RR: rainy season rice, COOP: fields managed by the cooperative, in which Irish potato is planted from December until February, rice in late spring, rice in the rainy season, and vegetables in the winter season, WSR: winter-spring season rice, NB: nursery beds. With regard to the agricultural intensification of paddy fields, the cooperative offered various opportunities to villagers. However, the upland crops especially vegetable cultivation and the livestock raising, which were also rapidly intensified in the 1990s, were developed by the villagers themselves, because each household had different conditions.

The available land for vegetable cultivation was small, so vegetables, mainly leafy vegetables, such as Welsh onions (*Allium fistulosum*) and water spinach (*Ipomoea aquatica*) in summer, and lettuce (*Lectuca sativa*), and Chinese cabbage (*Brassica campestris*) in winter, and other vegetables were continuously cultivated (Yanagisawa et. al. 2001). Vegetables were always planted without gaps, and someone was always working on the farm, which was the landscape of the A Cooperative's vegetable fields in the 1990s (FIG. 3.4).



FIG. 3.4 Vegetable fields in the A Cooperative (January 1996) Source: Photo taken by the author

Vegetable cultivation varied between households. For example, how to grow, how to sell the products, and who manages the cultivation depended on the household. Some households cultivated vegetables as the main source of cash income, while others cultivated vegetables only with elderly parents. There were also cases in which vegetables were cultivated by those who had time to spare.

Agricultural production was intensified both on paddy and upland fields in the 1900s. The effects of the cooperative to provide opportunities was different. Opportunities for intensification of rice cultivation were mainly brought by the cooperative, whereas vegetable cultivation was developed by villagers themselves.

Cooperatives and Villagers' Livelihood since the 2000s

Since the 2000s, the livelihood structure of the village has changed significantly, shifting from a land-based system to a non-agricultural-based one.

The direct impetus was the construction of an industrial zone in 2003, located 7 kilometers from the A Cooperative. Many of the A Cooperative's young people began working in the industrial zone after graduating from high school, rather than engaging in agriculture in the village. The construction of the industrial zone, which is within commuting distance from the village, has enabled a villagebased commuting work pattern (sáng đi tối về, literally, it means "go in the morning and return in the evening"). For the young people living in the A Cooperative, it became possible to earn a salary while maintaining the same livelihood as their parents' households, without having to make new arrangements for housing, food, and other necessities. For young couples, especially those who had just married, the advantage of village-based commuting was significant, as they could leave their children in the care of their parents. It was also an advantage for the parents to secure workers to maintain and manage their fields on weekends and holidays, even though they could not expect to work during the week.

The structural changes in livelihood in the village were basically driven by the overall changes in the economic structure of Vietnam. Since 1986 when the market economy mechanism was introduced $(D \delta i \ M \delta i)$, rather than working in agriculture, career paths in industrial and service sectors for wage labor have become more important, especially for young people. During the same period, the level of education has also improved, and the number of young people with high school and college degrees has increased. Many of the villagers born in the 1980s went on to graduate from high school. In other words, when the demand for labor increased due to the construction of the industrial zone in 2003, many of the young people in the A Cooperative had just graduated from high school.

As the livelihood structure changed, the emphasis of agricultural production shifted from intensification to just maintaining production. Paddy yields, for example, have not increased since the 2000s (TABLE 3.1). Abandoned lands were not unusual in both paddy and upland.

	2000	2005	2010
Rainy season	5.2	4.7	4.3
Spring season	5.6	5.4	4.8
Average	5.3	5.0	4.5

TABLE 3.1 Rice Productivity in the A Cooperative (t/ha)

Source: Field survey by the author

The share of agricultural income to households decreased. According to the authors' 2016 survey, wage labor accounted for the majority share of cash income to households (53%), followed by self-employment and services (34%), and agricultural production (5%). Rice in paddy fields was grown for the villagers' consumption. To cope with the labor shortage, agricultural mechanization progressed. Harvesters were introduced in the 2000s, and in the 2010s, rice transplanting machines started to be used. In vegetable crops, electric lines were run to the fields and electric pumps and lights for night work were installed to save labor in agricultural work.

As the share of agricultural production in the household economy declined, the role of the A Cooperative as an agricultural service provider also changed.

Since the 2000s, the A Cooperative has been organized to build the water supply system, to construct the inter-village roads, to renovate the levees in the agricultural areas to promote mechanization, and to improve common cemeteries and parking lots. In other words, the cooperative came to exert a significant influence on the improvement of the living standard in the village. In summary, the cooperative has transformed from an agricultural service organization for increasing food production and growing cash crops in the 1980s and 1990s to a livelihood service one in the 2000s.

Findings and Discussion: Exploiting Opportunities in Socio-economic Change

This chapter examined villagers' responses to socio-economic changes, particularly since the late 1970s, in the A Cooperative in a Red River Delta village of Vietnam. In keeping with the purpose of this chapter, which is to look at it from the perspective of exploiting opportunities, how does this understanding differ from the previous view?

The conventional view of the Vietnamese village studies was that Vietnamese villages were at the mercy of various institutional changes, and that the livelihoods and villagers' lives were forced to change. Alternatively, Vietnamese villagers showed various forms of daily resistance, especially in the analysis of the period of collective farming (for example, see Kerkvliet 2005). In contrast to such views, how can the perspective of exploiting opportunities interpret socio-economic changes in the village?

The policy of the contracting system implemented in 1981 was not intended to be a complete dismantling of collective farming at the national level. It merely made possible a smaller unit to be cultivated, instead of the entire cooperative, which had previously been based on the collective as a unit. However, in the A Cooperative, agricultural land was substantially allocated to each household equally. Agricultural production was initiated on a household-by-household basis, which was a system that would have had to wait until the dismantling of the cooperatives in 1988 and the issuing of the Land Law in 1993.

Regarding market economy mechanisms, $D \delta i M \delta i$ was implemented at the national level in 1986. In the A Cooperative, however, the cultivation of cash crops had already begun before 1986. In the 1990s, villagers also began to grow vegetables as cash crops on their own. The 1990s was the period in which agricultural intensification progressed the most in the village in the past 50 years. The cooperative played a major role in this process of intensification. In particular, in the cultivation of rice and cash crops, the cooperative provided villagers with various opportunities for intensification. Directly, packages of the types of chemical fertilizers and pesticides suitable for cultivation were bought by the village. High-yielding varieties and other highly tolerant varieties against disease and flooding were also introduced. Indirectly, it was important that the land had already been allocated to households in 1981 to stimulate intensification at the household level.

The role of the cooperative in the process of intensification, however, differed between rice and vegetable cultivation. While the cooperative provided many opportunities for intensification in rice cultivation, vegetable cultivation was intensified according to the different conditions for each household. Vegetable cultivation was, as mentioned above, carried out according to the differences between households in technical ability and socio-economic conditions. The cooperative did not provide villagers with as many opportunities to promote vegetable cultivation as it did for rice.

The difference in the role of the cooperative in the process of intensification related to the equalization in crop cultivation. In the case of rice cultivation, the cooperative's involvement raised the technical level of villagers and minimized the socio-economic difference between households. By exploiting opportunities provided by the cooperative, even households with low cultivation skills or insufficient labor, and households that could not spend enough time collecting agricultural materials and information for sales were able to receive agricultural guidance from the cooperative to secure their staple food.

On the other hand, vegetable cultivation was carried out in accordance with the differences in technical skills and socio-economic conditions between households. Forcing a standardized method of vegetable cultivation would have benefited only specific people who met the conditions.

The role of the cooperative in land allocation was also crucial. Land use rights were formally distributed to each household according to the Land Law in 1993. And then, it was amended every 10 years, in 2003 and 2013. The purpose of the institutional amendments was to modify the terms of land use rights, the purpose of use, and the provisions regarding inheritance, sale and so on. The objective behind the law was to promote the exchange and consolidation of subdivided agricultural land.

In response to the changes in land policy over more than 30 years since 1981, the practical land use in the A Cooperative was always ahead of the national policy. In the 1980s and 1990s, when land-based agriculture was essential for food production, land was substantially allocated to each household to secure food stability for the villagers. Rather than responding to each policy as it was implemented, the cooperative exploited opportunities for the villagers within permissive limits, and the villagers actively exploited the opportunity.

From the 2000s onwards, the proportion of agricultural production in household income decreased, because the younger generation shifted to wage labor such as factory work. There was a shortage of labor in the village, and agricultural production became increasingly mechanized. The implication for agricultural land for villagers since the 2000s was completely different from that of the 1980s and 1990s. The agroecological conditions of farmland, such as soil, elevation, and water holding capacity, were no longer recognized by the villagers as an important factor. To optimize non-agricultural employment, the villagers preferred agricultural land close to or easily accessible from their houses.

In 1981, the A Cooperative had already begun not only allocating land to each household, but also exchanging land as much as possible. By 2003, the agricultural land had already been consolidated, and the number of agricultural plots per household, including both paddy and upland fields, was around two. From the perspective of the villagers for exploiting opportunities, it could be seen that both the cooperative and the villagers have been responding from a longer-term perspective rather than responding to each policy. This has been one of the backgrounds to supporting non-agricultural employment since 2003. By considering exploiting opportunities, it became clear that the villagers maintained their livelihood within a longer-term strategy.

One more understanding gained from the perspective of exploiting opportunities would be the diversity of villagers' responses. Not all households responded to socio-economic changes in the same way. For example, the main income source in the A Cooperative has shifted to the non-agricultural sector since the 2000s. In parallel, the number of abandoned rice paddies and upland fields increased, which reached approximately 10% of total agricultural land in 2023. Unlike paddies, however, upland fields were almost completely covered by vegetables throughout the year. This was because land was leased and rented between households within the A Cooperative. Although a lot of young villagers were engaging in non-agricultural sectors, some were still not. For example, there were cases of young

couples who had just married and did not have the financial means or labor forces to engage in the non-agricultural sector. They rented abandoned land for vegetable cultivation in the village and earned a small source of cash income. Not all people in the village were responding to the socio-economic changes in the same way. Choices were made that were consistent with individual lifestyles and the conditions of the moment in their respective life plans.

In this chapter, the 50-year change in one cooperative in the Red River Delta was examined from the perspective of exploiting opportunities, which would be useful to comprehensively understand household strategies from a broader and longer-term perspective.

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SHORT REPORT 2 Other Rural Areas in Vietnam

NIIMI Tatsuya

In the contemporary context, the existence of Japanese companies is contingent upon the presence of foreign workers. According to estimates, the foreign workforce in Japan totals approximately 2.3 million individuals (NIKKEI ASIA 2025). Of these, nearly 30% are TOKUTEI GINO workers (Specified Skilled Worker: SSW) and Foreign Technical Intern Trainees. A substantial proportion of these foreign workers, amounting to approximately 50%, are Vietnamese.

It is noteworthy that Nghe An Province is a significant source of these "DEKASEGI" workers, defined as those engaged in labor outside their place of residence. Nghe An Province, situated on the north-central coast, is a prominent source region for expatriate labor, with an estimated population of 3.4 million, of which 1.6 million are considered to be within the labor force. This substantial labor force is comparable to those found in major cities such as Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City, and Binh Duong and Dong Nai provinces, which are characterized by significant industrial activity, as well as in the north-central and central coastal regions of Thanh Hoa. Furthermore, an average of approximately 30,000 new entrants are introduced into the labor market annually (from the interviewed with bureau of LDTBXH in Nghe An in 2010).

However, statistical analysis reveals that the unemployment rate in the province is not necessarily high, especially in rural areas, where it stands at 2.08% below the national average (2.28%). Conversely, the province experiences a population outflow of 30 per 1,000 people (32.5 per mille for women), which is similar to the Mekong Delta region or in neighboring provinces such as Thanh Hoa and Nam Dinh, where a significant number of individuals are employed abroad (General Statistics Office 2020).

With regard to the analysis of GDP, CPI, and minimum wages in Vietnam and Nghe An Province over a period exceeding two decades, it is evident that the annual GDP growth rate varied from 6.42% in 2010 to 5% in 2023, with average growth of 5.96%. The annual GRDP (Gross Regional Domestic Product) growth rate of Nghe An Province increased from 6.87% in 2019 to 6.9% in 2023, with an average of 6.77% over the five-year period. The period from 2010 to 2023 saw a rapid rise in CPI, which increased by 83.1% (in 2023, the figure was 3.25%). The minimum wage was set at 980,000 VND per month for AREA II(Vinh city) in 2010 and increased to 4,960,000 VND per month in 2023, which is approximately equivalent to five times the original amount over a 25-year period. Other areas of Nghe An Province are categorized under AREA IV, with the minimum wage ranging from 730,000 VND to 3,450,000 VND per month in AREA IV, indicating a 4.7-fold increase in minimum wages over the observed period.

This phenomenon is regarded as the presence of surplus labor in rural areas, often referred to as disguised unemployment. A decline in the labor force participation rate from 68.8% in 2015 to 62.6% in 2023 has been observed in rural areas, despite the ongoing population outflow from these areas. The predominant industries in terms of employment in Nghe An Province are agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, accounting for 35.4% of the employed population. The industrial and construction sectors

account for 31.5%, while the service sector, which is comparatively larger in economic terms, is only 20%. This finding suggests a paucity of development in the industries that absorb the labor force newly entering the labor market. This has resulted in labor migration, with workers seeking employment in foreign countries, or migrating long distances to Ho Chi Minh City and the surrounding southern economies, or to Ha Noi and the surrounding northern economies, where there is a greater focus on domestic industrialization. The ILO has expressed concerns regarding the human rights implications of this phenomenon, particularly the significant number of individuals who have sought employment opportunities in Japan as technical intern trainees.

The present study was conducted in the ND district of Nghe An Province in 2010. The results of the study indicated that the majority of the outflow was to Malaysia (80%), with a smaller proportion going to Taiwan and Korea. Japan was a comparatively infrequent destination. The following factors may have contributed to this phenomenon: (1) The local government's support for young and middleaged laborers to seek employment in Malaysia and Taiwan, (2) The absence of stringent educational requirements in these countries and regions, and (3) The relatively low cost of relocation. The duration of employment in these countries was approximately five to six years, with a post-employment savings figure of only 400 USD.



FIG. Rpt 2.1 Classroom, full-time 5 days/week for at least 4 months before coming to Japan Source: Photo taken by the author

In 2024, Nghe An Province remains the primary source of "DEKASEGI" labor. Following the completion of our previous research a decade and a half ago, a new highway has been constructed, facilitating enhanced accessibility to Vinh City in Nghe An Province. The journey by car from Ha Noi to this destination has been reduced to a mere four hours. It is also noteworthy that a significant number of individuals, amounting to over 90,000, have emigrated from Nghe An to pursue employment opportunities in foreign countries. This phenomenon has resulted in the repatriation of remittances amounting to an impressive 691 million USD annually, thereby contributing to the economic well-being of their respective communities (According to our research with the bureau of LDTBXH). Furthermore, it is estimated that approximately 7,000 workers have relocated from Nghe An Province to Japan over the past five years.

The team conducted interviews with a number of families, some of whom have family members who have previously worked in Japan. Their aspirations include accumulating sufficient funds to pay outstanding debts, securing financing to go to Japan, undertaking home renovations, and acquiring new vehicles.



FIG. Rpt 2.2 With a family that sent several of its members to work in Japan and who were financially successful

Source: Photo taken by the author

FIG. Rpt 2.3 A house rebuilt and a new American car bought with money from DEKASEGI in Japan Source: Photo taken by the author

The head of one household reported that, in general, the commune is characterized by the presence of individual paddy fields, with an estimated area of 5 to 6 sao ranging from 2,500 to 3,000 square meters. These fields are sufficient to produce rice for family consumption and an occasional surplus for commercial use. The household possesses approximately 2 hectares of forest. In addition to agriculture, the farmstead engages in the husbandry of poultry, swine, and vegetables for its own consumption. The parents must have secured loans from banking institutions and could subsequently send their children to work in Japan. It is estimated that the interest rate for these loans is 0.65% per month, and that the loan amount ranges from 100 to 300 million VND (equivalent to between 4,000 and 10,000 USD). The subjects of this study have expressed a desire to invest relatively large sums of money and send their children to Japan where they will be able to earn foreign currency in a short period of time that they cannot get locally. It seems that this desire is now feasible.

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