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**Interaction between Material Resources and
Cultural Resources in Contributing to Well-being in
Rural Thailand**

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Interaction between Material Resources and Cultural Resources in Contributing to Well-being in Rural Thailand

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Abstract

Thailand's rapid changes towards modernization have brought about various impacts on rural livelihoods. The increasing demand of land as well as other natural resources with conflicting interests has induced the change in patterns of natural resource utilization and allocation in favor of powerful groups of the country's population. This forces rural households to live under limited natural resource conditions. Better connections to the market economy have led rural people to change their mode of production and patterns of consumption driven by the market forces. Consequently their demand for cash has increased to serve their modern mode of production that usually involves high investments and their changing styles of living. High costs of production together with high costs of living have caused many rural people to face hardship. Although many rural households own considerable amount of material resources to facilitate their changing living styles, their overall well-being seems to be uncertain. This is mainly due to their declining access to lands and other natural resources that support their production and other aspects of livelihoods. However, it is argued that rural countryside has not faced with a completed transformation. Hence, remaining cultural values are still strongly influential on rural settlers. In the situation of economic crisis, remaining cultural resources play a significant role in securing rural livelihoods. This suggests that By combining both natural resources and cultural resources in an integrated manner, the improvement of well-being in rural Thailand should be more promising.

Introduction

Thailand is rich with natural resources and fertile lands except in the north eastern region that fertile lands are limited. At the same time it is also widely known with its unique culture that influences strongly on peoples' ways of life. The country's economy has long been agricultural-based. Until recently, the country's rapid changes towards industrialization have brought about a dramatic change in its economic structure that makes the agricultural sector shares a small proportion of the country's gross incomes. The rapid growth of industrial sector together with rapid expansion of urban areas has effected gradually on patterns of land and other natural resources utilization. Like other developing countries with a dual economic system, the rapid growth is often skewed in favor of powerful

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groups of the population, especially urban elite. As a consequence, a large proportion of lands and natural resources tend to be increasingly in hands of the minority rich population, while the majority poor controls over a smaller proportion. Since the majority population still lives in rural areas and depends largely on agriculture for their livelihoods, the change in patterns of land and natural resources utilization undoubtedly put a significant pressure on rural livelihoods. This pressure has become more serious as the country began to face with the economic crisis in 1996 and has not yet been fully recovered. Some expelled industrial workers who returned to their rural home towns have struggled hard to survive under limited land resources conditions and alternative occupation. To cope with this pressure, rural people have been attempting to revise their modes of production and ways of life by putting more attention to cultural-based livelihoods and a self-sufficient approach of agricultural production. This attempt has been supported by several parties including academics, NGOs and some government departments. The outcomes of this attempt has been apparent in many rural communities throughout the country and become a main point of interest for NGOs, development students and scholars to focus their work and extend their research on related matters. At the same time, related government agencies have also shifted their foci from promoting the modern mode of production to cultural-based production together with strengthening community organizations. Under this situation, rural people tend to adapt themselves in order meet with their needs by applying their indigenous knowledge in natural resources utilization and productive activities in a more integrated way. It is particularly interesting for this paper to discuss on how people in rural Thailand make use of natural resources available in their localities which are increasing depleted to be more efficient by putting cultural capital into the production process and ways of life in order to improve or at least maintain their reasonable well-being.

Living under Limited Natural Resources Conditions

As an agricultural-based country, the majority Thai population lives in rural areas and their livelihoods depend greatly on agriculture and natural resources. Despite the country's fast economic growth and industrialization in the last two decades, the proportion of people living in rural areas has not decreased dramatically. Therefore, the dependency of rural population on lands and other natural resources is still high. Since industrial development and urban expansion need some lands for development, a considerable amount of rural lands has been sold industrial developers and urban elite. At the same time, rural people's life styles have changed significantly that are subject to the driving forces of the market economy and consumerism. This makes the need for cash increases to meet the changing patterns of their consumption. As a consequence, many rural households have to sell their lands for cash to be used in satisfying their changing needs. At the same time the changing patterns of resources utilization as correspond to the growth of industrialization and urbanization also bring about changes in natural resources allocation in favor of powerful people and urban

elite. These circumstances create unequal land resources distribution between the rich and the poor as well as limit access of the poor to other natural resources traditionally needed by local people to support their livelihoods. This forces the rural poor to live under limited natural resources conditions.

Ownership of land is crucial to livelihoods of the rural population in Thailand as the majority of them still depend strongly on agricultural production. It is estimated that around 90 per cent of farmers in the country are small holders and considered as subsistence farmers (Laird, 2000). According to a village level study in 1999 in 10 villages located in different regions throughout the country, the average agricultural landholding per household was 18.68 *rai*² or about 2.99 hectares. However, the average landholding per household differed between villages ranging from 2.28 *rai* to 85.65 *rai*, and 8 out of 10 villages have the average landholding per household below 25 *rai* (Khaosa-ad *et al.*, 2000). This shows unequal distribution of agricultural land among farm households in different areas. The average size of landholding illustrated above is rather low for farm households with an average size of 5 members per household. Moreover, some households are landless as unequal land distribution also a common phenomenon at the village level. Landholding with no proper legal ownership status is also an important issue emerging in many rural areas in Thailand.

National Economic Social Development Board (NESDB) (1998) reported that a considerable proportion of landless households were found in rural areas in each region of the country. The overall figure showed that in 1995 there were 514,717 landless households in rural areas throughout the country. The proportion was not significantly different among regions with the southern region showed the lowest proportion. Additionally, there were 14,116 villages or about 24 per cent of total villages in which the majority of their population owned the lands with no proper legal titles. Both landless households and households which do not have proper legal status of landholding face certain levels of difficulties to pursue their agricultural activities. Members of landless households are likely to move to cities nearby or even to the capital city to earn for their living. Alternatively they may undertake farm work in their home villages under share cropping arrangements or renting systems. Some of them may work as low paid labor in rural areas. Both types of work are generally insecure. Farm work based on share cropping and renting systems often involves high risk of low return or even lost. Low paid work is not always available, most types of the work are either available seasonally or based on a very short term arrangement. In these situations, landless households as well as households with very small landholding often face a high degree of hardship.

Other natural resources that rural people utilize have been decreasing or degraded in their qualities. Water pollution and lack of clean water for consumption are common problems in many places, especially in northeastern

² *Rai* is the Thai unit of land measurement equivalent to 1600 square meters or 0.16 hectare.

region and areas nearby the sea (see NESDB, 1998 and Prince of Songkla University *et al.*, 2004). Forest areas including mangrove forest have also been decreasing despite the ban of logging in 1989. Fishery resources are observed to have been decreasing dramatically in last 2 decades, especially in inland water bodies and coastal water bodies which are main fishing grounds for most small-scales fishers (see Nissapa *et al.*, 1998 and Masae *et al.*, 1998). All these changes effect undoubtedly on rural livelihoods, especially among the poor who utilize these resources for various purposes and depend highly on these resources. Traditionally the poor use these resources not only for generating their cash income, but also for other forms of consumption to reduce household expenditure, such as collecting wild vegetable, wild fruit, mushroom, bamboo shoot, young insects, some wild animals and catching fish for daily meals, cutting wood for basic house construction and repair, etc (Keawyai, 2003 and Choocherd, 2003). Agricultural practices under mono-cropping system that do not allow for crop diversification also effect the poor who are traditionally accessible to collect wild products mentioned above in lands owned by others. The effects are even more serious on those who have limited access to lands for agricultural production and other job opportunities than those who have better alternatives. In many areas, this force has driven marginalized people to encroach into forest areas and further destroy the forest in order to survive. This illegal practice has become a widespread conflicting issue confronting the marginalized rural poor living in forest areas throughout the country.

Limited natural resources available to the majority rural people in Thailand form a main conditioning factor to pursue well-being among rural settlers. Agricultural activities that are main sources of their livelihoods depend largely on the availability of land resources and other supporting factors. The continuing population growth together with rapid expansion of urbanization, which requires some lands for non-agricultural purposes, leads to the decline of farm lands and force farm households to live under limited land resources conditions. At the same time, changing patterns of other natural resources utilization in favor of powerful people and urban elite also limit the access to the resources among the rural poor who generally have accessed widely to some resources under a complex right arrangement. This forces local people who are traditionally utilize different kinds of natural resources for various purposes to face some conflicts and hardship. Some of them have to change their ways of life towards modernization and market economy more rapidly.

Connection to the Market Economy and Changing Patterns of Consumption

Although Thailand's connection to the capitalist world marked clearly in the reign of King Rama V of Bangkok period over 100 years ago, influences of capitalism and the market economy on rural ways of life have been very limited until about 30-40 years ago (Nartsupha and Lertwicha, 1998). Accesses to road, main electricity and other modern forms of transportation and communication

tend to play a major role in enhancing capitalism and the market economy to enter rural areas and forcing local people to change their values (see Nartsupha and Lertwicha, 1998; Masae, 1996; Masae *et al.*, 1998). The change in rural people's values appears clearly in the transformation of mode of production from subsistence to semi-subsistence or even commercial production in some cases, and in the change in patterns of consumptions from local-based traditional patterns to more modern styles and market-based. In this section, the discussion will focus only on the change in patterns of consumption.

Data from several socio-economic studies show that almost all rural households nowadays own modern and durables assets that are considered as necessary for present day living (see for example Promphakping, 2003; Srijantr, 2003; and Phromjui *et al.*, 2003). Most common items owned include electric cookers, electric fans, television, refrigerator and gas stove. These items are no longer considered as luxurious items as people can purchase in rather low prices for some brands that are not widely known and made within the country, although more well-known Japanese or western brands are likely to be owned by better-off households. Ownership of motorcycle is also common among rural households although it is less popular than basic household assets mentioned above. Most people in rural areas throughout the country use motorcycle as their main means of transportation within the village and to nearby villages or towns, as public transportation is not widely available to them. Households with different degree of wealth may be distinguished from selection of different brands or types of basic durable assets used as well as number of each type of durable assets owned. Less necessary durables assets are likely to own by better-off and wealthy family. These include high value items such as golden jewelry, high value furniture, car, small truck known as pick-up truck, and telephone, especially mobile phone. Although washing machine can be purchased in a considerably lower price, but the item is rarely owned by common villagers as it is not seen as necessary. Productive durable assets such as two-wheel hand tractor, spray tank and water pump are owned mainly by better-off and wealthy farming households. Poor households are likely to hire these items more than purchasing as they do not use the items as frequently as general household items mentioned above. Purchasing of high-value durable assets such as motorcycle and cars may cause many rural households to have a large amount of debt, as many of them purchase under installment plans (Thongsonsang, 2004). The changing life styles that appear in forms of preference on high-value durable assets in one hand facilitate their daily living. On the other hand they drive the poor households to live with a high debt incurred.

Apart from the consumption of durable assets mentioned above, more general household consumptions, such as food and cloth have also changed apparently among rural households. As a result of better connections to the market economy, a variety of food and clothing items can be easily purchased with comparatively lower prices than before. Although most rural households prepare their own food based on local dishes familiar to them, preparation of non-

local dishes that are widely known through media or experience of outside contacts is done more frequently than before. Easily accessible to food items from outside the community appears to enhance the change in food consumption. Nowadays, food items suitable for preparation of non-local dishes can be easily bought from nearby markets and mobile traders who drive modified pick-up trucks or tricycles to sell food items from village to village. Clothing items with wide-range designs are available in nearby towns. Better access to media that often promote fashionable dress seems to enhance rural people, especially younger generation, to adopt modern style dressing quickly. The older generation appears more conservative in their dressing styles, nevertheless, number of clothing items owned also increases.

Changing patterns of consumption among rural households in Thailand seem to associate with their better connections to the market economy. The change should contribute significantly to the improvement of certain aspects of quality of life of rural people as they should have better household facilities that ease their household shore, wider range of food to be consumed and better cloth to be dressed in different occasions. However, these changing patterns of consumption tend to change values of rural people towards more luxurious ways of life. In this sense, new patterns of consumption should bring about heavier burden on rural households, especially the poor, to compete with others following the new values. The fact that many rural households have high debts provides strong evidence to this argument. This can be interpreted that ownership of material resources seems to be driven strongly by the market economy using market mechanism and adversity. Many rural households may decide to purchase certain durable assets to make they look more modern, even though their decision cause them to owe a high debt. In this matter, ownership of material resources does not necessarily reflect the actual well-being of rural households as it may occur with a certain level of anxiety.

Modern Agricultural Practices vs. Social and Environmental Costs

Adoption of modern agricultural practices among farmers in rural Thailand began to be apparent and widely spread after the introduction of the First National Development Plan in the early 1960s. Before that most rural areas were minimally influenced by modern agricultural technologies and rather live a vacuum state, except those in the central region which were proximity to the country's capital and had good access to government services and technology markets (see Nartsupha, 1998). Modern agricultural practices existing in the present stem from a series of efforts to modernize agricultural sector under the green revolution that have spread throughout the country as a part of the government extension scheme.

Common among modern agricultural practices is the adoption of the mono-cropping system together with a package of technologies designed to suit each type of crop cultivated. Types of crops introduced are mostly cash crops using high

yielding varieties (HYVs). In order to cultivate HYVs efficiently, proper inputs and management practices are needed. Proper land preparation through mechanization together with application of certain amounts of recommended chemical fertilizers and reasonable caring of the crops using chemical weedicides and pesticides are common features of modern practices following the Green Revolution (Pretty, 1995).

Although modern agricultural practices have contributed to improve yields per acreage of cash crops significantly, they have proved to be involved high costs of operation and create crucial environmental problems in the long term (see Shiva, 1997 and Pretty, 1995). The use of chemical fertilizers, weedicides and pesticides leaves toxic residue in the cultivated areas and polluted surrounding environments. These situations are harmful to nature and human health. Depletion of some types of natural resources including low water quality, decreasing biodiversity, decreasing fish population in inland water bodies, emergence of some fish diseases in natural water bodies are often viewed as caused by environmental pollution resulted from agricultural toxic residue. Moreover, long-term use of chemical fertilizers is argued to degrade land quality that effect long-term production (Panyakul, 2001)

The domination of mono-cropping system of cash crops has led many rural households to focus their production for cash and ignore their traditional systems of mixed or integrated farming which aim more at self-sufficient. This put rural farm households at even more risky state as they have to depend greatly on market in which prices of cash crops are often lower than their expectation. It has been informed in various places that some farmers have failed to continually develop their agricultural occupations using modern practices after some years of adoption due to high costs involvement in their production and thus low net incomes. An increasing argument is often made on impacts of malpractices on natural resources and the environment that leads to increase social costs of development. Some of these social costs include the costs on health problems caused by excessive use of chemical inputs in agricultural production (see Chuangchote, 2003).

Community Culture: A Main Essence of Resistance and Survival

In the midst of several forces that drive rural people, especially the poor, to face a certain degree of hardship, not all rural people decide to leave their communities or migrate permanently to seek a better life in urban areas or even overseas. The majority rural people appear to remain in their home communities and strive in various ways to secure their livelihoods. Only some of them migrate temporarily to other capital the capital city and other areas where alternative occupations are available. Nevertheless, these people often leave their family at home and come back to do farm work in production season. Many successful efforts to secure rural livelihoods and to resist outside forces have been found in rural areas in different regions of the country. Factors behind these successful

efforts are mainly associated with local culture. Various components of rural Thai culture are of high values that contribute much to secure rural livelihoods by reducing hardship of deprived members and enable them to maintain their ways of life in the midst of outside forces (Nartsupha and Lertwicha, 1998; Pudthaisong, 2002; and Baker, 2003). Strong family tie, kinship relations, cooperative values, religious and spiritual beliefs of merit and supernatural power, and working skills based on local wisdoms are often cited as having a crucial contribution.

The family tie is generally strong in rural areas. Temporary extended families can be easily found, although the trend of having a nuclear family is increasing (see Samakkarn, 1996, and Sermsri, 1999). Many ageing members in rural areas are likely to live with one of their children in their old age. These ageing members often rely on their children for their living including food, cloth and other cares. At the same time, ageing members with a good health condition often help their children to care young members of the households and look after the houses in the absence of their children. For children, caring their parents is considered as a good deed that they must perform to repay indebtedness that their parents did to them since their earlier age. Ageing members also feel secure to live with their children than living alone. Without this arrangement it is rather difficult for ageing members to have a secure life in the situation which the state social welfare provision is very limited. It is also not uncommon that children who work far away transfer their money regularly or occasionally to their parents living with their brother or sister. This practice helps ageing parents to be also financially secure and do not fully depend on the child with which they generally live.

Nartsupha and Lertwicha (1998) observed that rural communities in different regions of Thailand still manage to maintain strong kinship relations within each community and beyond. Although various types of kinship relations can be found in different ethnic groups and localities, their values in maintaining relations are similar. The most common type is extended kinship relation that covers both blood relatives and affinal relatives. Fictive kinship relation is also important especially among members of newly settled communities in which pioneers settlers are generally counted as fictive relatives that their offspring should respect highly (see also Samakkarn, 1996). Fictive relation can also be developed from being close friends who have a long reciprocal and trustful interaction. This type of fictive relation is normally found in southern region called "*kloe*" and in northeastern region called "*siao*." The terms "*pook kloe*" and "*pook siao*" are used to mark the tie between two persons as having fictive kin commitments. In Northeastern region, *pook siao* often involves a ritual act to strengthen the bond between two persons (see Nartsupha and Lertwicha, 1998). In the time of hardship, some degree of help to reduce hardship can be sought from both extended kin and fictive kin. Borrowing small amount of money or other necessary items, such as food, from relatives is often found to secure household conditions in the time of hardship. Borrowing money from relatives under this circumstance usually done with no interest and some time called

“*yeum*” rather than “*koo*”, as the latter term is often referred to borrowing as a loan involving interest from any sources.

Cooperation has been pointed out by many researchers who undertake community studies in Thailand as a cultural component that stems strongly in rural Thai societies (see for example Shigetomi, 1998; Nartsupha and Lertwicha, 1998; Pongphit, 1986). Many local movements and development activities that are based on local participation taking place fundamentally on existing cooperative values. These values are observed to be influential on rural people in working together as a group for collective action and self-reliance. Many contemporary organizational arrangements in rural Thai communities that need cooperation are based on cooperative values existing in each community combined with other social and economic benefits. Savings groups and labor sharing arrangements are two most common types of informal organizations found in rural communities throughout the country.

A study on labor sharing by Raekphinij (1998) reveals that labor sharing arrangements practiced in three rural communities in Southern Thailand stem on cultural foundation of reciprocal relations in various aspects that farmers and peasant societies in the past used to encourage exchange of resources among them. At present, labor sharing is still practiced to ease their burden of work on certain agricultural tasks in the peak production season under the condition of limited or expensive hired labor. This type of arrangements does not only help each household to ease their burden, but also encourage wider social interactions and strengthen ties among members of the community.

An exploratory study of capital accumulation among peasants in Southern Thailand by Masae (2001) reveals that various savings groups in the southern region are community-based and developed based on traditional needs and cultural values stem from religious thoughts. Although some of these saving groups were introduced by the Community Development Department through a nation-wide scheme in order to promote saving, many of them struggled to follow preset formal rules, so that they adapted themselves to fit local social and cultural contexts. In Baan Naam Khao of Songkhla province, Chop Yodkeaw, the founder of the community savings group applies the Buddhist ideology of “*Bua See Lao*” or “Four Levels of Water Lily” to select members of the cooperatives step-by-step in order to recruit good members and encourage them improve their unpleasant behaviors according to Buddhist principles. In many communities, a combination of savings activities with other social and economic activities to correspond with needs in various aspects of members and communities. Many savings groups provide social welfare in various forms such as health care, scholarship and educational loan, funeral support and urgent cash, through specific fund allocation to help members reduce their hardship of lacking their own capital to support their needs. Some communities such as Baan Nong Klaang Dong of Prachuapkirikhan province, the community savings group functions as the central body for the integration of several activities to meet the needs of community

members and support future development of the community through the community master plan initiation. This plan provides guidelines for the integration of several development activities based on resources available in the community with the main aim at promoting the community self-reliance (Sutham, 2003 and Yongkiattrakool, 2001).

Religious and spiritual beliefs of merit and supernatural power often form a core part to rural life. Studies done by Nartsupha and Lertwicha (1998) and Baker (2003) reveal that rural people in every region have a strong tie with their beliefs associated with religions and other spiritual power. Based on their beliefs, rural people should act accordingly in order to have a good life. Ritual acts in various forms are often combined with personal and social activities to bring supporting power as well as protecting power into their activities. Paying respects to gods (*chao*), spirits (*winyaan*) or ghosts (*phoe*) of things and places are commonly found in various places together with the act of making merit (*tam bun*). At the same time, the belief in the power of *phoe* also serves to warn believers to make good deeds following a set of rules to please each spirit. In some Northern and Northeastern rural communities including tribal communities, failure to act accordingly is considered as "*phid phoe*" (disobedient) which can be destructive or harmful to life. On the other hand, paying respects to *phoe* in forms of ritual making and observe strictly to set rules is believed to bring goodness (see also Redmond, 2002). Contemporary applications of these beliefs through a combination of spiritual acts with development activities are generally helpful in strengthening local power as well as preventing bad deeds of members. In a psychological point of view, local people should feel more secure and happier under the protection of supernatural power provided by gods and spirits when proper acts are undertaken.

Several movements at the community level in the rural countryside are based on local wisdom related to arts and other productive skills. Art work, such as cloth weaving, basketry and handicraft, forms part of rural life. In the past, most rural households were involved in some forms of art work producing basic items and utensils for household use and tools for agricultural production using local materials. Although producing art work become less important nowadays, as most of necessary items and utensils can be easily bought from the market, artisanal skills still remain with some elders. More recently, these skills have been revived again and further developed to respond to the increasing needs of genuine artisanal products. In the time of economic downfall and agricultural production can no longer provide adequate incomes to meet the increasing household expenses, many rural households have restarted their art work again with the aim to earn a supplementary income. In the areas where land is rather unproductive and other alternative sources of income are limited, people tend to concentrate more on artisanal work based on existing skills with further modification. A study of weaving groups among Thai Lue villages in the northern region reveals that women made use of their weaving skills inherited from their ancestors and developed into a community business. Through this community

business, they have been able to draw on “local capital”, including social capital, knowledge capital and financial capital, to generate significant incomes and other benefits both to their households and to their community as a whole (Baker, 2003). A study by Phromjui *et al.* (2003) in the lower northeastern part exposes that community leaders, both formal and informal leaders, play a leading role in promoting artisanal work including traditional cloth weaving and casting bronze items as well as organizing handicraft groups to further develop into a community business (*turakit chumchon*). This effort does not only help local people to better secure their incomes, but also ensure that the skills are passed on to a new generation. In the southern region, villagers in communities within and surrounding the Phru Kuan Kreng peat swamp have improved their traditional weaving skills from sedges called “*krajoot*” that is abundant in this peat swamp to produce other modern-style products for outside markets. They also form handicraft groups to help develop their product design, seek new markets, secure their income through loan and advance payment from the group funds. Nowadays most households in these communities generate regular cash income from *krajoot* weaving. Although daily income from this type of work is rather low, but it is important for their survival as other occupations are limited (Charernjiratrakul *et al.*, 2002).

The discussion in this section explores only some efforts of rural people in different regions of Thailand to resist outside forces and to secure their livelihoods based on local culture. In reality, there are many other efforts that are not brought into discussion. Nartsupha and Lertwicha (1998) and Baker (2003) papers also touch upon some other activities found in certain rural areas such as food processing activities, herbal medicine preparation and making of local liquor. However, information related to the development of these activities is limited as they emerged more recently than those already discussed. What is interesting about these efforts are not merely their economic contribution that is crucial to survival of rural people in the era of globalization, their interconnections with local culture in various aspects including cooperative values, artisanal heritage as well as beliefs and kinship connections are worth for further exploration. These interconnections appear to influence organizational settings and arrangements that seem to be locally specific and very useful for allocation various local resources to fit the ways of life in each locality. In this sense, well-being of local people should be served significantly by these community organizational arrangements that encounter various aspects of their needs.

Reviving Local Culture and Promoting Sustainable Development: Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Although it is apparent that development efforts following the notion of modernization contribute greatly to the country’s economic growth, it is often argued that they create several negative impacts on people living in the countryside. This model of development has led local people to change their ways of life induced by the market mechanism and consumerism, and changed modes

of production from the traditional mode to a more modern mode based on mono-cropping and high cost technologies. Although the changes have improved the overall income of the country's population including rural inhabitants, costs of living and production costs have increased in a higher speed than incomes among rural households. High population growth in the early period of modernization together with the changing patterns of natural resources utilization and allocation to serve the continual increase of industrialization and urbanization has forced rural households to live under limited resources conditions, especially land which is the main input of agricultural production. In the midst of several forces brought into rural communities as a consequence of modernization, it is also argued that many rural communities have been striving to survive based on their own culture which is known as local culture (see Pongphit, 1986; and Nartsupha and Lertwicha, 1998).

There are many evidences which prove that the present day rural people still have a strong tie with their culture, despite their openness to adopt modern styles of living in a material sense. According to Chatthip Nartsupha, a prominent political economist who has conducted several studies on political economy and culture in the Thai countryside, the economy and ways of life in the Thai rural countryside have not experienced completed transformation. Their strong tradition of struggle and survival without much help from the state, together with their remaining strong cultural ties in forms of belief, family and kin structures, provide a strong foundation for their resistance to change and their adaptation to secure their livelihoods. He argued that Thailand rural society and economy have survived relatively intact much longer than usually imagined. Although capitalist forces began in the country over one hundred years ago, its influences on the Thai countryside had been rather slow in the early period. Even in 1950s, only the central region had been drawn the capitalist trading economy, the other regions were still largely untouched (Baker, 2003; see also Nartsupha, 1999). The more recent influx of the market economy into the countryside so far has not transformed completely the rural ways of life in Thailand.

Even though the transformation taking place in the rural areas of Thailand is not completed, great impacts of modernization are apparent. Changes in consumption patterns and mode of production, especially agricultural production that is dominant in rural areas, are great. These changes have led rural people to bear with high costs of living and production through investment in modern materials and techniques brought into village communities to facilitate their changing living styles and modes of production.

However, agricultural production is predominantly small-scale due to limited access to land and unequal distribution of land among farmers and between farmers and powerful groups of population. Small-scale agricultural production is generally inappropriate with the mono-cropping system introduced by the state to modernize agricultural sector. This leads most farmers to face inefficient production and gain low or even lose their profits, as small farm sizes

are generally not to scale in an economic sense. Moreover, the adoption of modern agricultural practices makes farmers to focus greatly on the market-oriented activities and ignore other activities and practices that are traditionally serve other aspects of their livelihoods (see Panyakul, 2001). Since rural household incomes generated mainly from agricultural production have not increased significantly following modernization of agricultural practices as compared to the increase of their expenditure, it is rather difficult for rural households to secure their living without owing a high debt. In this situation, the state of well-being of rural people is doubtful without the contribution of non-material or cultural resources.

Despite several forces, results from many studies discussed above show that most rural households in Thailand are not crucially deprived. Their remaining strong ties with the community culture contribute significantly to their well-being. Various cultural values have been conserved and later revived and applied in more integrated manners to fit with changes occurring in each community. Strong kinship relations and cooperative values help greatly to relieve deprived households and members in the time of hardship. Beliefs and ritual acts function to support their psychological needs and organizational arrangements to fit local contexts. Various aspects of indigenous knowledge and local wisdom have been applied to support economic and social activities. Several traditional skills, especially those related to arts, have been brought back into practice and further developed to meet market needs. Considerable applications of belief, cooperative values and traditional skills contribute greatly to various forms of organizational arrangements that function in securing rural livelihoods in the face of strong outside forces. The success of savings groups and community business groups could not be achieved in the absent of local cultural resources.

The increasing interest to revive local culture and integrate into productive activities and ways of life among rural population instigates NGOs and Government to pay more attention on promoting alternative development approaches. Actually, NGOs working in rural communities have been trying hard to call for public attention on the integration of local culture to development work. Their attempts include re-exposing values and functions of local culture in maintaining rural livelihoods that lead to secure well-being of rural people in the long term, and calling concerned government agencies and policy makers to support alternative development based on the community culture. Their calls have been supported by leading academics such as Professor Prawet Wasi, Professor Apichart Punthasen and Professor Saneh Jamarik who have closely observed negative impacts of “misleading development” on rural livelihoods. These calls together with support from leading academics have instigated several local movements to enhance this new development approach. At the beginning, NGOs calls and action to promote cultural-based alternative development have not received a warm welcome from the government. However, after problems related to misleading development attempts have become more apparent, the central government and planning bodies have changed the development concepts and adjusted directions by stressing more on alternative development approaches and

local participation with the aim to promote more sustainable outcomes (see Kamolwatananisa, 2003). This policy change provides more spaces for integrating local culture into development movements that are hopefully more promising in improving the overall well-being of rural people.

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