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Introduction

Reciprocal help in production and consumer life have formed an integral part of social relationships in Asian rural communities. In particular, labor exchange in rice production had been widely practiced, and it had a great significance in both economic and social terms. The inquiry into various customs of labor arrangement may help us understand some crucial characteristics of 'moral economy,' or the norms which govern economic activity, in peasant communities. At the same time, the way of labor mobilization and its social significance have changed over time, especially in places where commercialization of agriculture advanced. To examine the changing process of labor arrangement may, therefore, also be useful to assess the impact of penetration of capitalism on villagers' moral economy.

In Thai peasant society, cooperative labor exchange had formerly been important means to mobilize extrahousehold labor, as in other rice-growing communities in Asia. Joint labor in general appeared not only in rice cultivation, but also in other different contexts such as ritual occasions (both public and private) and construction of individual farmhouses or Buddhist temples. We take labor arrangements in rice cultivation as an apt example to represent villagers' moral economy, though the properties of cooperative work would be different according to local conditions. For instance, in Northern Thailand, where community level irrigation system flourished, the work related to construction and maintenance of irrigation facilities often had cohesive and collective nature as the most important cooperative activity in village. By contrast, in the villages of Central Thailand, where there had seldom been communal irrigation work, the labor mobilization in rice production was marked by bilateral labor exchange between individual households.

Central Thailand is also marked by longtime penetration of capitalism, and its rural producers have been enmeshed in the market economy more deeply than those in other regions. In the Central region, export-oriented rice production started as early as late 19th or early 20th century. Especially during the past four decades, its rural population has achieved remarkable success in transforming traditional agriculture into modern and commercial-oriented farming systems. The resulted economic development changed considerably social relations among villagers. Reciprocal labor exchange custom that formerly practiced gradually gave way to hired labor from the 1960s. It seems to have been generally agreed that the tendency towards disappearance of labor exchange to be replaced by wage labor was irreversible (Tomosugi 1977; Sharp and Hanks 1978; Kitahara 1987; Tasaka 1991). Contrary to this widely-held view, however, labor exchange has never vanished and sometimes could even revive. In a village where I closely studied in the early 1990s, labor exchange practice, once at a low ebb, was reintroduced in planting stage. The simple and prevailing thesis such as "social bonds are replaced by wage nexus as the economy grows," therefore, cannot be always applied as it stands. If we admit that such an economic explanation sometimes fails, we then need to look more carefully into other sociological aspects of labor mobilization.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the changing process of labor organizations in Thai peasant communities, thereby examining how social and economic values of labor have changed in step with penetration of capitalism. At the same time, I shall argue that cooperative labor arrangement was motivated not only by self-interest or moral considerations, but also by more fundamental sentiments of human beings. The focal area is a village in Suphanburi province, one of the most agriculturally progressive provinces in the Central region. Data was collected during fieldwork carried out in K village (*Baan K*) in 1991 and 1993-1994, with further short visits in 2000. I also draw upon other monographs mainly of Central Thai villages.

1 . Labor Exchange Customs in Central Thai Villages

(1) 'Traditional' Labor Exchange (*Ao Raeng*)

It is not clear how the labor exchange was practiced in Central Thailand before the 1930s, because most of the observations by social scientists were made between the late 1940s and 1980s. Chatthip (1999: 27-8) suggests that, in the early 20th century, there were many occasions for joint labor based on mutual assistance in village communities across Thailand. Mutual cooperation in rice farming was seen in various stages including transplanting, harvest, threshing, winnowing, and pounding. In Central Thai villages, such a labor exchange is generally called *ao raeng* or *long khaek*. *Ao raeng* or *ao raeng kan* literally means "to take one's strength (each other)." Another term *long khaek*, or 'bringing a guest,' may imply that the workers were treated as guests rather than mere laborers.

The *ao raeng* practices observed in Central Thailand from the 1940s to 1970s seem to have shared the following characteristics. Firstly, *ao raeng* was based on bilateral relationships between individual households. It would be informally organized neighborhood group (often overlapping with kinship), which was neither collectively organized nor exclusive, with a great flexibility in choosing partners. Secondly, it was based on equal relationship between partners. Principally, one reciprocates whatever amount of labor received from others (Kamol 1955: 256; Tomosugi 1968: 235-7; Kemp 1992: 132-7). In this sense, *ao raeng* is different from other labor arrangements observed by anthropologists such as *kho raeng*, in which labor assistance is asked one-sidedly by one's social superiors, and *chuai kan*, or small help exchanged unsystematically among close kin.¹ Let us see some actual examples below.

A case of Bang Chan village offers us a detailed account of labor arrangement in an advanced rice-growing village located in outskirts of Bangkok. In 1950s Bang Chan, *ao raeng* was practiced in various stages of rice production such as uprooting of seedlings, transplanting, and harvesting, the last being most important. Kamol (1955: 244, 253-5) gives figures that 1.1 and 2.1 times of family labor (man-hours) were provided by cooperative labor in uprooting and transplanting respectively, while as much as five times of family labor was supplied by exchanged labor in harvesting.² The concentration of labor requirement in harvesting stage was huge (916 man-hours in one or two days by each farm), but farmers managed to avoid labor peak and made labor exchange possible, by planting several different local varieties such as early, medium, and late varieties, each having different maturing dates (*ibid.*: 253). There were some strictly observed rules such as immediate reply of work and that the guest workers came only when they were asked to do so. The calculation of the amount of labor was based on a unit called *ngaan*, which means either 100 bundles of seedlings for uprooting or a quarter of *rai* for transplanting and harvesting (*ibid.*: 256).³

It seems that *ao raeng* was generally employed at peak labor time such as during the uprooting of seedlings, transplanting and harvesting, and it was rarely practiced in broadcasting, a technique far more labor and time saving than transplanting. Until 1930s when transplanting method began to prevail, traditional direct seeding method had been the standard way of planting rice in Bang Chan. At the time of Kamol's research period, the direct seeding was still practiced but the villagers rarely organized *ao raeng*. The adoption of far more labor-intensive transplanting method created a new labor peak, which probably prompted increasing number of farmers to employ *ao raeng*. According to Tanabe (1994: 206), who made research in flooding area in Ayuthaya in the mid-1970s, family labor is normally invested in the stage of direct seeding. The same observation was made by Tomosugi (1980: 17-8), who states that *ao raeng* is mainly practiced in harvesting in a village on the upper-reaches of the Chao Phraya delta. Thus, it may be plausible to say that, at least by the 1970s, *ao raeng* was done mainly in labor peak periods when farmers had to collect a great deal of work hands, and not in far less arduous direct seeding, for which family labor was sufficient.

(2) *Ao Raeng* as a Joyful Social Occasion

Ao raeng was not only a mere measure of labor mobilization, but also an important social occasion, in

¹ According to Kaufman (1960: 30-1), *kho raeng* ("to ask for one's strength") was based on patron-client relationships. Kemp (1992: 132-7) added *chuai kan* ("to help each other") as another category of rural work groups. *Chuai* here refers to a small help extended as part of a wider set of transactions between two households which are very close.

² Labor requirement in harvesting was ten times as much as those for other stages such as uprooting and transplanting.

³ One *rai* and one *ngaan* is equivalent to 0.16 ha and 0.04 ha, respectively.

which the fellowship among relatives and neighbors was to be fostered. In former K village, where the predominant way of seeding was direct broadcasting, the most important occasion for cooperative labor was harvesting. Elderly farmers in K village fondly recall that dozens to one hundred people would gather to help one family, and they all passed a very enjoyable time, exchanging pleasantries, dancing and singing during breaks.⁴ A genre of folk song called *phleeng tenkam* was performed with a sickle and rice straws in hands, when one was waiting for others at bunds. *Ao raeng* also provided important opportunities for love affairs, as well as to refresh camaraderie among villagers. Young men often offered labor without requiring repayment, while women ironed their clothing and dressed up before they went to the field, expecting a chance to meet a pair.⁵

Upon finishing the work, the guests (*khaek*) would be treated to a feast with meals and alcohol prepared by the host family. An old villager in K village remember that, in the 1950s, as many as five hundred people gathered at a time to help one family to reap, in which two pigs were slaughtered and served to the guests, along with local beer called *saathoo*. Kamol describes how the villagers in Bang Chan invested labor for the preparation of the dishes. According to his estimate, a family in Bang Chan spent six times more time entertaining the guest workers than supervising cooperative work on the field during the 1953-54 rice year (Kamol 1955: 239-40). In a sense, *ao raeng* had been practiced not for efficiency of work only, but also for the communication between villagers. To borrow Kamol's expression (*ibid.* : 255), such a group work make a laborious task less tedious and more enjoyable.

2. Labor Mobilization in Transition

(1) From *Ao Raeng* to Hired Labor

Ao raeng was gradually replaced by wage labor in the 1960s and 1970s, as commercialization and modernization of rice production advanced. Technological changes in rice farming in this period, which is collectively known as "green revolution," includes development of irrigation, the prevalent use of high yielding varieties (HYVs) of rice, chemical fertilizers, various agrochemicals, and farm machines. In some part of the upper-reaches of the Chao Phraya delta, where K village is located, the process of green revolution was accompanied by another technological change in planting stage; a shift from traditional broadcast-sowing to transplanting.

In Tomosugi's study area, for example, wage labor was already employed in harvesting in 1967, mainly because the villagers could not afford the time to cooperate with others, and they also found it troublesome to prepare a feast for the guests (Tomosugi 1980: 17-8, 44).⁶ Eventually wage labor had become dominant and labor exchange disappeared in the mid-1970s, as transplanting and double season sequential cropping had become predominant. Since harvesting of dry season crop came to coincide with the preparation (transplanting) for wet season crop, vast amount of labor was required in this peak time from June to July. The prevalent use of standardized HYVs added another dimension. As HYVs ripen almost simultaneously, it became difficult to stagger harvesting time of each household according to different varieties of rice, as was formerly practiced. As a result, wage came to account for more than 70% of the total production cost of owner-farmers (Tomosugi 1977: 84-90).

As has already been mentioned, in K village, where broadcasting had been dominant before, *ao raeng* was mainly practiced in harvesting season, the most labor-intensive time of the year.⁷ As double season cropping of rice was introduced and transplanting replaced traditional seeding in the mid-1970s, hired labor is considered to have prevailed as an efficient and convenient way of labor mobilization instead of *ao raeng*. By the early 1990s, it became common to hire a considerable number of piece workers not only within the village but also from outside (neighboring villages and districts) for harvesting. In a neighboring village, as much as 70 to 80 casual workers stayed at headman's house for an entire harvest

⁴ Anuman (1967) describes such a lively atmosphere brought about by communication among villagers at the times of harvesting.

⁵ Kaufman (1960: 150) also points out the importance of communal work in rice fields as a best opportunity for courtship.

⁶ The same point is made by Kitahara (1985: 123), who observed that some of his informants attributed the decline of *ao raeng* to tiresomeness of feeding guest workers.

⁷ It is not clear that how often *ao raeng* was practiced in traditional direct seeding and plowing in K village.

season to meet the demand for labor force. At the same time, evidence from other Central Thai villages shows that the nature of *ao raeng* itself was gradually changing at the time, as we shall see below.

(2) *Ao Raeng* in Transition

It will be misleading not to recognize the fact that influence of market economy had already begun penetrating into the Central Thai villages since the early 20th century. Since there is no well-documented account on the rural labor organization before the 1920s, we can only make speculations about how it actually worked in pre-modern village society. But some evidence suggests that the rule of labor exchange had been less rigid and more elastic than that of Bang Chan village, which we have already examined above. According to Tomosugi (1977: 89), formerly, even landless peasants could also join the labor exchange system, in that they received rice in place of labor as reward. This practice, locally called *kho khaw* (“to ask for rice”), was considered as a kind of mutual help. Another important point is that, in former days, less attention was paid to the equivalence between what one gives and receives, than was in the later years. In principle, as we have seen, one had to be recompensed for the same type of labor he offered, and reward had to be balanced. However, the balance between two transactions was not necessarily pursued and often failed to be attained. First, the amount of labor seems to have been only roughly calculated on a working-day basis. Secondly, a labor debt might have been returned in a different work, say, that of harvesting for transplanting (Tasaka 1991: 181; Tomosugi 1980: 156).

In the overall shift from *ao raeng* to hired labor, however, the nature of *ao raeng* itself transformed. Villagers were becoming more selfish, more calculating and economic, demanding the return of labor more strictly. For instance, the amount of labor began to be carefully calculated on an acreage basis rather than a working-day basis, and a third party (even professional part-time workers) came to be hired to offset labor debt without delay (Kamol 1955: 257; Kaufman 1960: 65; Tasaka 1991: 216-7). Farmers also began to keep much more accurate records of the labor they gave and received from around 1959 (Kitahara ed. 1987: 351, 494-7). The former loose reciprocity thus had turned to stricter creditor-debtor relationship by the 1950s or 1960s. To borrow Moerman’s phrase (1968: 136-7), “exchange replaced fellowship; household organization replaced village organization; inexpensive food replaced elaborate hospitality; efficiency replaced fun; calculated reciprocity – and ultimately wages – came to dominate the work groups.” In this process, *ao raeng* transformed itself from joyful cooperation to troublesome obligation. After passing through the phase of the “calculated reciprocity,” *ao raeng* in rice farming had become practically obsolete by the 1980s in Central Thai villages.

3. Labor Exchange in Revival

(1) *Ao raeng* Revival in K village

As we have seen, the 1960s to 1970s witnessed a steady decline in labor exchange practice in rice-growing communities of Central Thailand. However, as a new technology called pre-germinated direct seeding (PDS) method became increasingly dominant in place of laborious transplanting in the 1980s, *ao raeng* came to be revived. PDS method is different from traditional direct seeding, in that the germinated seeds are broadcast on a carefully prepared irrigated field. In K village, where PDS method became overwhelmingly dominant, *ao raeng* came to be reintroduced in particular at the planting stage by 1990. Table 1 shows the main measure of labor arrangement chosen by each household in three stages of rice production in the early 1990s. This indicates that more than half of farming households practiced *ao raeng* in broadcasting seeds and fertilizers, while wage labor was still dominant in harvesting.

As was the case with traditional one, this revived *ao raeng* was based on loose dyadic relation between households. Most of the 70 households which carried out *ao raeng* in the seeding stage exchanged labor with relatives or close friends including those who lived outside the village. Four or five group-like relations appeared to exist, but they were by no means discrete units that exchange labor exclusively among members. For example, a number of farmers teamed up with different partners in separate occasions of seeding and spreading fertilizers. When one could not help his usual partner for one reason or another, he would pair up with other person. Ten households grouped together with their children’s family. It is also worth noting that most of the participants of *ao raeng* were male villagers, with a few exceptions. As was in the past, the feast for the guest workers was the *sine qua non* in *ao raeng*.

Table 1: Labor Arrangement in Each Farming Stage
(Among 123 rice-growing households)

Labor arrangement*	(No. of households)		
	Seeding	1st Fertilizing	Harvesting
Ao raeng**	70 (56.9%)	66 (53.7%)	4 (3.3%)
Family labor	30 (24.4%)	36 (29.3%)	6 (4.9%)
Wage labor	23 (18.7%)	21 (17.1%)	113 (91.9%)

Source: Field survey, 1991.

Note * Figures for seeding and fertilizing represent data as of 1991 rainy season, while those for harvesting show what kind of arrangement they normally choose.

** This includes families which partially employed hired labor, and the cases which may fall within the category of 'chuai' or mere help rather than *ao raeng*. The same is applied to Table 2.

The increase of labor exchange in step with the spread of PDS method may be attributed to its great labor-saving character. For transplanting, villagers were forced to use wage labor as the most effective and reliable method to complete a vast amount of work within a limited time. Meanwhile, the adoption of direct seeding (broadcasting) method led to a considerable decline in labor requirement, allowing villagers to adopt alternative ways of labor arrangements. A simple estimate shows us that the PDS method requires far less labor than transplanting, thereby considerable amount of time and money are saved. According to my rough estimate, the PDS method dramatically shortened the working hours for planting from two man-days per *rai* (in case of transplanting) to 1/12 man-day per *rai*.⁸ Assuming that 40 *rai* is to be planted by six persons, transplanting takes around two weeks, while PDS does only four hours or half a day. Furthermore, wage per *rai* also fell significantly from 230 baht (uprooting and transplanting combined) to 15 baht (direct seeding) as of 1991.⁹ There is a considerable gap between cost input of two methods, even after considering the cost for weed-preventing chemical (50 baht per *rai*) which had not been used in transplanting. Thus PDS method contributed greatly to reduce both labor and cost input at the planting stage. More careful inquiry is needed, however, to see whether this inference can be applied to the entire process of the rice cultivation from land preparation to harvesting.

In 1985, Somporn (1990) conducted research on economic impact of the PDS method on farm management in Suphanburi province, when around 55 % of farming households of his study area adopted this method which was introduced five years before. According to him, the overall labor input in case of the PDS method was about 20 % lower than that of transplanting, for both dry and wet seasons. The PDS method reduced considerable amount of man-hour in planting, while it needs a little more labor input in repairing rice plant, pest-control, and harvesting. By adopting PDS, the wage decreased, but cost for herbicide and fertilizer increased. So the overall production cost in PDS was only two to five percent lower than that in transplanting (*ibid.*: 301, Table 6). Somporn also pointed out that the PDS method tended to be adopted by families whose members were rather few, because of its labor-saving character. Besides, few households which adopted the PDS method relied on hired labor or exchanged labor at the seeding stage, and, as a result, more than 90% of the total labor input for seeding was covered by family labor (*ibid.*: 299, Table 4). This implies that at the earlier phase of diffusion of the PDS method, it was hailed because of its labor-saving character, and farmers deployed family labor at direct seeding as the most economical way. A question now arises; is the revival of *ao raeng* in K village is based on such an economic consideration?

In contrast to Somporn's study area, there is no clear correlation between farm size and the way of labor

⁸ This figure is based on the supposition that transplanting requires one man-day for 0.5 *rai* and broadcasting (both for seeds and fertilizers) needs one man-hour for 1.5 *rai* or one man-day for 12 *rai* (if one works eight hours a day). If we add the labor invested for uprooting of seedlings, the labor requirement for the whole process of transplanting will increase considerably. According to another estimate, the labor input for planting stage in PDS method is one-tenth of that in transplanting (Somporn 1990: 298).

⁹ 1 baht was equivalent to 0.04 US dollar in 1993.

arrangement in the case of K village. Indeed, as shown in Table 2, the large scale farmers (which operate more than 51 *rai*) tended to be dependent on hired labor, while a relatively large number of small scale farmers (with less than ten *rai*) relied on family labor. However, it is difficult to find explicit inclination to either side among the mid-sized farmers, which made up the bulk of the village population. The farm size seems not to be the primary factor to decide which measure they take in broadcasting, and this is also supported by observation of *ao raeng* practices. Adoption of *ao raeng* or other methods in K village appears to have been associated with each farmer's way of keeping company with neighbors, rather than with his socio-economic status.

Table 2: Modes of Labor Arrangement by Farm Size
(Seeding in 1991 rainy season)

Rice growing area (rai)	(No. of households)		
	Ao reang	Family labor	Wage labor
-10	19 (52.8)	14 (38.9)	3 (8.3)
-20	21 (61.8)	8 (23.5)	5 (14.7)
-30	12 (60.0)	4 (20.0)	4 (20.0)
-40	6 (50.0)	1 (8.3)	5 (41.7)
-50	9 (69.2)	2 (15.4)	2 (15.4)
51-	3 (37.5)	1 (12.5)	4 (50.0)
Total	70 (56.9)	30 (24.4)	23 (18.7)

Source: Field survey, 1991.

(2) *Ao Raeng* as a Tool of Communication

I will try to argue below that *ao raeng* in K village nowadays is motivated by social consideration rather than mere cost calculation. We have first to examine whether the *ao raeng* reintroduced in broadcasting is economical in terms of time and money as compared to family and wage labor.

First, *ao raeng* is not always economical with time and money as compared to family labor. *Ao raeng* is apparently time-saving, because it can mobilize a lot of people at once. However, *ao raeng* necessarily entails the obligation of "repayment" and feeding guest workers. The host has to prepare foods for the guests and help them another day. In fact, even large-scale farmers can rely entirely on family labor in broadcasting, so that they can choose not to exchange (or hire) labor if they see it troublesome. There is no practical need to employ *ao raeng* even for broadcasting (either seeds or fertilizer) as much as 60 *rai*, for example, because a couple may complete the work by themselves within only three days.

Secondly, *ao raeng* in broadcasting is not necessarily economical way as compared to hired labor, either, even in terms of cash expense. This is partly because wage for broadcasting is negligible in the overall expenditure for rice production. Table 3 shows the breakdown of production cost (in cash) per *rai* of a mid-sized farmer. In this case, this household relied chiefly on *ao raeng* in direct seeding (some part was done by hired hands) and fertilizing, so the bulk of the wages was paid for harvesting and post-harvest process (binding and carrying plants, machine threshing). As seen from the table, the cost for wages accounts for more than 40% of total cash expense. If we suppose that they used hired labor for seeding and fertilizing, the wage per *rai* for broadcasting of seeds (15 baht) and fertilizers (10 baht) would account for just 1.7% and 1.2% of total cash expenditure (around 840 baht), respectively.¹⁰

¹⁰ If they employed transplanting method in place of direct seeding, it is estimated that wages only accounted for more than half of total cash expenditure, as uprooting and transplanting was farmed out at 230 baht per *rai*.

Table 3: Estimated Production Cost* of Rice by a Mid-sized Farmer

Breakdown	Cost per rai (baht)	%
Fertilizer	242	29.3
Chemicals (insecticides, herbicides, etc.)	93	11.3
Maintenance of farm machines	70	8.4
Fuel	70	8.4
Wages**	350	42.4
Total	825	100

Source: Field survey, 1991.

Notes: * All the figures were given as rough estimates. I included only cash expenses including those bought on credit.

** The expense for wages consists of those for harvesting and post-harvest process including threshing.

Furthermore, since *ao raeng* necessarily entails serving feast for guest workers, we have to take consideration of an additional cost for it. In K village, the *ao raeng* work was always followed by a drinking party, in which alcohol and meal had to be prepared by the host family. Sometimes a chicken might be butchered and served. Let us assume that a household needs to fertilize 10 *rai*, for which 100 baht would be required as wages if he uses hired hands. If he decides to carry out *ao raeng*, he needs to spend at least 80 baht for two bottles of local popular liquor (few provides more than two). In this case, it might be said that *ao raeng* is a little bit more economical than hired labor in terms of money, but the difference is very minor. Even for the large-scale farmers, the cash expense on *ao raeng* (i.e. for food and alcohol) may readily exceed wages, because they often work for a number of days to broadcast little by little rather than at once.

Ao raeng is not economical as compared to hired and family labor, due to considerable labor-saving nature of the broadcasting and the obligation of treating guest workers. The apparent economic advantages of *ao raeng* are canceled out by the obligation of repayment of labor and the cost for food and alcohol. All these inefficiencies notwithstanding, *ao raeng* was employed in direct seeding by more than half of small scale farmers who operated less than ten *rai*, as we saw in Table 2. As indicated earlier, *ao raeng* was formerly employed mainly in back-breaking and time-consuming activities such as transplanting and harvesting, and it is likely that *ao raeng* was rarely practiced in undemanding task of broadcasting. In other words, *ao raeng* was normally practiced in peak labor periods, but not in slack times. In contrast, revived *ao raeng* in K village was practiced in broadcasting, which otherwise can easily be carried out by family labor without any expense on labor arrangement. The fact implies that the villagers practice *ao raeng* not to save time and money, but to enjoy sharing a work, a meal, and lively sentiments among close relatives, neighbors and friends.

For example, in a group I closely observed, there were some men who also went help a number of different groups of *ao raeng*, seemingly because they wanted to join the booze party after work. A man once helped five households a day, certainly not expecting subsequent return of labor. He was among 17 persons who gathered spontaneously to help an influential vice-headman put fertilizer in his rice field. Acreage of rice field operated by members of this vice-headman's circle ranged from ten *rai* to 53 *rai*, which indicates that exchange of equal amount of labor was no longer the matter of attention, given the condition that the labor requirement for ten *rai* and 40 *rai* made hardly any difference. It seemed to me that they got together above all to enjoy a drinking party after work, rather than to finish the given task effectively. It was also frequently observed that a villager casually joined his neighbor's work party. These facts may suggest that the principle of equal exchange of labor is not always followed today by villagers, who are, in this situation, primarily driven by a thirst for congenial companionship, rather than moral imperative.

4. Implications for the Analysis of Labor

Labor exchange is normally analyzed in the context of either labor mobilization or mutual help. In other words, it has generally been seen from the viewpoint of either orthodox political economy (both Marxist and neo-classical) or moral economy, or sometimes the combination of the two. The former

approach may regard the villagers as self-seeking *homo economicus*, while the latter approach treat them as the beings entangled in moral relations in the given community. Neither approach, however, seems to fully explain the revival of *ao raeng* in K village. As has been described above, the work related to rice production in Thai villages have had various social aspects including feasting, dancing, and courtship. Such social aspects of agricultural work are usually disregarded by economists, but, at the same time, the term ‘moral’ is also too narrow to encompass all these features.

Moerman (1968) gives us an interesting and revealing account of labor organization in a Northern Thai village in the 1960s. In this community of Thai Lue ethnicity, villagers utilize neighbors’ labor for their own rice field in a very delicate way. Moerman classifies labor mobilization practices of villagers into three categories according to what kind of reward they get from labor; fellowship, exchange, and goods (*ibid.*: 116-8). By the category of ‘fellowship,’ he wishes to point to free assistance (*coj* or ‘merely come to help’) offered by close family members or relatives, which does not require specific return. The term ‘exchange’ includes other kinds of reciprocal farm labor. It will be further divided into three sub-categories; *lo*, *termkan*, and *aw haeng*. *Lo* is a cooperative farming arrangement, in which households agree to work together for certain stages of rice cultivation. *Aw haeng* (same as *ao raeng* in Central Thai) may be the strictest reciprocal duty among the three, in which, for example, a day of male reaping labor has to be returned for a day of male reaping labor. *Termkan* (‘to add to one another’) is different from *aw haeng*, in that the return does not need to be the same service one was given, nor be immediate. The return to those who offered labor could be made in ‘goods (*pan*),’ either rice or cash. The ‘goods’ as gift are distinguished from ‘wage,’ in that the amount of the former is determined solely by the generosity of its donor, while the latter must entail haggling process.

Such a subtle and intricate categorization of labor arrangement was based on some specific socioeconomic conditions marking the village and its environs; that there was no landless class which characterizes Central Thailand, hence the villagers had to rely on the help of outside wage labor; that the land utilization was varied, in that rice fields were divided into several categories according to irrigation method, distance from the village, and whether it was cultivated for subsistence or commercial purposes. At the same time, Moerman’s case study certainly has wider implications, as an illuminating example to show what was taking place on moral economy of utilizing labor in once self-sufficient community, which was getting gradually into the commercial world. He further explains elaborately on this transitional moral economy on labor. There were two valuables by which the villagers determine the use of labor; intimacy and task difficulty. For instance, the labor for easy task in the ‘subsistence’ home field tended to be furnished through ‘fellowship’ by close relatives, while arduous work in the distant ‘commercial’ field would be carried out by hired strangers. By the time of his fieldwork, utility of cash had become another important issue to determine the labor arrangement. Thus villagers would choose one way of labor arrangement from a sequence of options ranging from the ‘kin’ end to the ‘commercial’ end, carefully weighing these determinants (Figure 1).

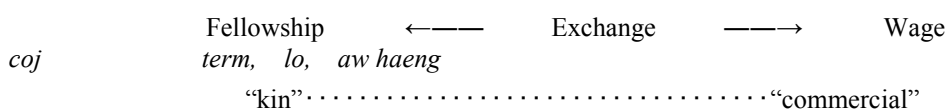


Figure 1: Moerman’s Typology of Labor Mobilization

Source: Adopted from Moerman (1968: 127).

In Moerman’s scheme, *ao raeng* (indicated as *aw haeng* in Figure 1) is just one type among a series of labor mobilization practices, but a type which comes closest to wage labor. If we assume that *ao raeng* that was practiced in the 1950s in Central Thailand should also be placed next to the market exchange among a variety of cooperative labor arrangement, it is not surprising that *ao raeng* transformed itself easily to wage labor. In a community whose members are already habituated to market economy, *ao raeng* and wage labor are almost interchangeable.¹¹ On the other hand, *ao raeng* that revived in the 1990s

¹¹ In Bang Chan village, once languished custom of labor exchange was revived in the years after the Great Depression, mainly because the villagers had no cash to hire others (Sharp and Hanks 1978: 224). This fact shows that, as early as the 1920s, rural population in the area had already been involved in

in K village appears to come closer to the other end or ‘fellowship’ category, in which little attention is given to exact exchange of labor, partly due to far less arduous characteristics of task of broadcasting.

In my view, however, Moerman’s argument on ‘fellowship’ put too much emphasis on the normative values of the villagers. According to him, the villagers helped each other because this was the norm and they had to ‘maintain a close relationship’ (*ibid.*: 116-7). He tried to explain such social transactions from the viewpoint of moral imperatives, which necessarily entail rewards and punishments. Certainly such a functionalist explanation neatly discloses certain truths, but, at the same time, it overlooks another important aspect of communal relations; a simple joy and pleasure to do something with others. Though it is not central to his argument, Moerman (*ibid.*: 124, 136) himself points to the fact that to work together in fields, especially in time of harvest, bring a great pleasure to the villagers, with raillery, singing, courtship, the chance for an assignation, and an abundance of foods as well. In a sense, it comes closer to ‘play’ rather than work. Though moral economy approach is useful in revealing aspects of human exchange to which orthodox economics cannot attend, there still remains a wide socio-cultural sphere that it cannot properly deal with.

The pursuit of pleasure, however, is often transient and easily abandoned. In the mid to late 1990s, another transformation of farming system occurred in K village. Harvesting by hands was totally replaced by combine-harvesters, and the majority of farmers began to plant rice almost three times a year instead of two. By 2000, *ao raeng* in K village had declined again, probably because rice production cycle of each household became so differentiated that the villagers could not exchange the same type of labor simultaneously. *Ao raeng*, which came closest to play rather than work, could readily disappear due to certain economic or technical conditions, but this case study suggests that it can resurface anytime as long as the village community continues.

5. Conclusion

n Thai peasant society, cooperative labor exchange or *ao raeng* was formerly important means to mobilize extra-household labor. It also contributed to enhance kinship or other bonds of fellowship. In villages in Central Thailand, *ao raeng* was commonly practiced in rice cultivation until the 1950s. From the 1960s, such village cohesion weakened and the *ao raeng* was gradually replaced by wage labor in a general tendency toward the modernization and commercialization of farming systems. At the same time, the nature of *ao raeng* itself transformed, with villagers becoming more economic and calculating, demanding the return of labor more strictly. A scholar called this self-seeking inclination as “calculated reciprocity,” which remind us more of a commodity exchange rather than mutual help.

However, as the labor-saving new technology of seeding spread into the area, *ao raeng* has come to be practiced for broadcasting the seeds in a way somewhat different from the earlier days. In fact, broadcasting by *ao raeng* is economical neither in terms of time nor money, compared with wage labor or family labor, because of the obligations of “repaying” and feeding the guest workers. This suggests that the recently revived *ao raeng* is mainly carried out for sociable rather than economic purposes, seemingly displaying the resilience of the village community. Thus oscillating between social and economic values, cooperative labor organizations still exist in Thai rural areas where a highly commercialized agriculture is dominant today.

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