

Lao Peasants after Socialism

Boike Rehbein¹

Abstract

Grant Evans argued that socialist collectivization in Laos had failed because peasants did not change their patterns of thinking and acting overnight. This paper tries to show that the argument is valid even today. At the same time as peasant habitus persists, however, modernization takes place. Peasants are transformed into labourers and commercial farmers and the role of agriculture generally decreases. But in Laos, just like in Europe, the story of modernization has come to an end. Members of the most “modernized” social groups become agricultural professionals catering for niche-markets. They do not return to the past but invent a new version of peasantry. All three tendencies exist side-by-side in contemporary Laos. The paper gives an overview of the tendencies and tries to explain them sociologically.

Introduction

Lao peasants have experienced a roller-coaster ride. They saw the first attempts to commercialize Lao agriculture under French colonial rule, then suffered destruction and resettlement during the Indochinese Wars, they became heroes during the revolution and were forced into collectives after the revolution, before witnessing a return to commercialization. Ever since, they have been considered underdeveloped and backward. They seem to be doomed as a social group, while Lao agriculture is bound to become commercialized, before it will be reduced to large-scale agro-industry. Modernization presumably transforms the peasantry into blue-collar workers, service sector employees and a few agro-capitalists.

The fate of Lao peasantry may be more complex and more enduring than this account suggests. Grant Evans (1990) has argued that collectivization in Laos had failed because older patterns of behaviour were too persistent to be changed within a couple of years. He demonstrated that older peasant cultures were transformed by social and political changes but not erased. Does this argument still apply after 30 years of “New Economic Mechanism” or marketization? I wish to show that it does. And I will add that peasantry will even experience something of a resurrection, albeit in an entirely new shape.

This argument has to be set against the background of the global transformation of agriculture under capitalism. In a first shift, peasants are transformed into commercial farmers producing for the market. This shift has occurred in several historical periods and in various places, even in Southeast Asia before colonial rule (Lieberman 2003). However, systems of commercial farming always disintegrated when larger systems of exchange were struck by crisis. This is – not yet – true for the Western capitalist world-system, which caused a second

¹ Professor, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Humboldt-University Berlin; rehbeinb@hu-berlin.de