

# Rural Restructuring and Democratization in the Northeast of Thailand<sup>1</sup>

Monchai Phongsiri<sup>a\*</sup>, Mana Nakham<sup>b</sup> and Nattapon Meekaew<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region*

<sup>ab</sup>*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University  
Khon Kaen 40002, Thailand*

<sup>c</sup>*Faculty of Education, Khon Kaen University, Khon Kaen 40002, Thailand*

<sup>\*</sup>*Corresponding Author. Email: monchai7@hotmail.com*

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## Abstract

Economic change and rural transformation have affected the political viewpoints, perceptions, and ideologies of people in rural areas. Thai society for the last nine decades has become increasingly democratized, yet questions have been raised over whether democratization really emerges and develops in rural areas. The present article is based on research on the relationship between restructuring and democratization in rural areas in the northeastern region of Thailand. The study employed the historical qualitative research approach. Chorakhe subdistrict in Nong Ruea district of Khon Kaen province was selected as a case study. In-depth interviews, group discussions, and observation were used to collect data. The research examined the situation in three eras and found that rural restructuring has affected power relations and political viewpoints and perceptions of rural people. At present, rural people have become energetic about direct political participation, and not just participation via their elected representatives. The research also indicates that the more democratized a rural society becomes, the more individualistic its members are. Individualism and the resulting decreased tolerance have led to more conflicts within rural society, even in long-established and once-cohesive communities.

**Keywords:** rural restructuring, rural democratization, collective action, Don Mong market

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## **Introduction**

Previous studies about democracy in Thailand have placed too much emphasis on the politics of the central government and the urban middle class. At the same time, studies of democracy in rural areas have been conducted primarily in terms of behavioral science. Such studies potentially contribute to misunderstanding about changes in social relationships that lead to democratization because a number of them focus on only a limited range of behaviors of rural people that may not be relevant to democratic ideology (Sattayanurak, 2014: 96-97). In addition, people in rural areas have become more engaged in political activities and they are willing to show their support for democracy, on both the local and the national level. They are not afraid to express their political standpoint or criticize social inequality, as can be seen in the social movements of the Red (and Yellow) Shirts and the Assembly of the Poor.

In discussing democracy in rural and local areas theoretically, one can ask what aspects should be considered. If a different concept is applied, consideration of the roles or strategies of political leaders would be different, because democracy is the idea of promoting the common good of the people. The leaders, therefore, have to decide what is good for the members of the community (Haus and Sweeting, 2006: 267-268). There are two key points regarding the democratic imagination: equality and liberty. Traditionally, the term “equality” was based on bestowing autonomy, an important aspect of liberty (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 164-165). However, some scholars have pointed out that democracy in rural areas might not be only about idealized ideas of liberty or participation in local administration, but that it includes the role of coordination and public services relating to knowledge of the environment in local areas. This could be called “coordinative democracy” with the aim of promoting the common good of the local community (Haus and Sweeting, 2006: 267-268). Several scholars have proposed different views of democracy in terms of “devolution” and “decentralization” (Devas and Delay, 2006: 677-679). The concept of

rural democracy is mentioned in the theory of village democracy of China, a communist state, proposed by He (2007: 7-9). The theory consists of the following seven dimensions: 1) the citizenship of that village, 2) village elections, 3) the procedures used in making decisions together, 4) political competition between candidates in the election, 5) participation in politics on the village level, 6) the village's representative assemblies, and 7) gender equality.

Democracy in local or rural areas, according to these scholars, appears to focus on collective action as it appears in such words as coordination, participation, collaboration, devolution, decentralization, etc. On the other hand, Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 164-165) argue that if the influence of equality continues to rise until it becomes more important than liberty, political movements for democracy will not be for the sake of the public, but for individuals. The stronger democracy is, the more problematic it will be because of people's demands for equality.

This conundrum has led the researcher to ask the question of how changes in rural communities relate to democratization. A number of scholars have proposed quite interesting study approaches, including Nartsupha (1995: 16-19), who presented the political economy approach that focuses on structures and relationships of the systems in a society. This approach aims to understand the structures of a society's important institutions in a systematic manner. To conduct social analysis, one must not overlook changes that lead to new things and advancements, including new groups of people who later become voices for that society. Hoggart and Paniagua (2001: 41-45, 56-57) have suggested the term "rural restructuring" as an approach to investigate "modes of regulation" and "socialization." The approach allows us to see what binds our social structure together. In rural communities, "hegemonic blocs" play an important role in determining social characteristics as they have unique patterns of dominating people. Yet, as society is changing continually, perhaps the "radical break" suggested by Hoggart and Paniagua (2001: 56) should be used to allow us to see changes in the foundations of the society. The break must be long enough, so that we can see the differences accumulated in rural areas in the past and how

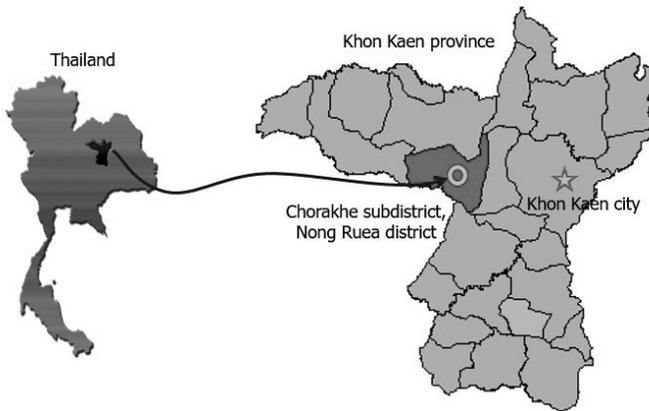
such changes are related to restructuring. The study of restructuring supports the study of movements toward democracy by Marxist scholars Laclau and Mouffe (2001: 60-61, 101). The study suggests we should focus on a specific point in time that is considered “a moment of political articulation” by employing the political periodization method. With this method, we will be able to see economic views because the positions in the structure of capitalism are defined by the relationship between an individual and modes of production, as well as ownership of the means of production. Moreover, changes in the relationship between “the center,” an advanced and intensely-developed area, and “the periphery,” which is less developed, are considered parts of rural restructuring (Centre-periphery model, 2019).

Therefore, this study aims to examine how restructuring in rural areas relates to rural democratization by looking at changes in power relations between rural people and local administration (local government), local politicians (who potentially are connected with national politicians), and different groups of people in the rural community that show tendencies or directions in local elections.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative research employed the historical approach to help understand changes in rural areas in terms of economics, politics, society and culture, from past to present. Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews using interview guidelines and observation of both participants and non-participants. In addition, small group discussions and case studies were used. Twenty-four key informants (KIs) were selected using the approach proposed by Robert K. Yin, according to which a case study or a key informant must be purposively selected according to research objectives (Yin, 2003: 9-10). The KIs included villagers of a targeted community who participated in political activities on both the local and the national level; community leaders in a village and a subdistrict; local politicians; former and current chief executives of Subdistrict Administrative Organizations (SAOs); merchants; and

government officers. Data was collected from February 2013 to July 2015. Follow-up research was carried out from March to May 2019 and in January 2020 (after the by-election for the House of Representatives, Constituency 7, Khon Kaen province, Nong Ruea and Mancha Khiri districts). The targeted area for this study was Chorakhe subdistrict in Nong Ruea district, which is approximately 38.5 kilometers away from Khon Kaen city (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Map showing the targeted area: Chorakhe subdistrict in Nong Ruea district of Khon Kaen province

## Findings

This study applied the concepts of rural restructuring and democratization in rural areas to conduct empirical research, as described in the previous sections. The research findings are divided into three eras to illuminate the “radical break” as suggested by Hoggart and Paniagua (2001: 41-45, 56-57): 1) the era of substantive economy, 2) the era of market economy, and 3) the era of industrial capitalism.

### The Era of Substantive Economy (1807-1917)

This period is considered one of settlement of the people. Interviews with the seniors in the community revealed that the history of Chorakhe

subdistrict has long been involved with the establishment of Khon Kaen city. Laos was conquered by Chaophraya Maha Kasatsuk (of Siam who later became Rama I) in 1778-1779. As a consequence, Lao people, both un-forced migrants and captives, migrated from Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak to Siam. Around 1807, two groups of immigrants settled in Chorakhe subdistrict. The first group lived in the Kut Khae area or Khum Kut Khae. They came from Mueang Phra Lup (the previous location of Khon Kaen city). The first group originally migrated from Vientiane and settled near the bank of a creek in the east of the village. The second group came from Ban Pao in Ubon Ratchathani province and resided in the Ban Pao area or Khum Ban Pao. They lived around the swamp that is located in the center of the village. They were from Champasak. This evidence indicates that Chorakhe subdistrict was founded over two centuries ago.

The first two groups arrived and claimed land for their houses and agricultural areas, and consequently, their way of life depended on natural resources. They did rice farming and gathered wild products, such as shellac and animal skins, in the forest. They produced food and products for household consumption. Tasks were assigned according to gender. Domestic jobs belonged to women and included growing mulberries, raising silkworms, and weaving textiles. Men were responsible for working on the farm or outside the village. They might cut trees in the forest, gather wild products, and go hunting in the forest for several days. Men's responsibilities also included selling products, such as wild goods, or exchanging goods with traders in other cities. The financial positions of people during this era were not significantly different from each other. Everyone used their abilities to claim land and depended on fertile natural resources. They produced food to feed themselves so they were completely independent of the market economic system. The economic system in this era was the substantive economy.<sup>2</sup> In this era, land, labor, and agricultural products were the

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<sup>2</sup> Substantive economy is the concept proposed by Karl Polanyi. He defined "economy" in two different ways, which are formal meaning and substantive meaning. Formal meaning places importance on reasonable choices that are officially determined in society, culture, and politics of capitalists. Substantive meaning defines a real economy which serves people's basic needs and in which they are truly dependent on other people and nature (Polanyi, 1977: 19-21).

only means of production on the household level. They did not serve as capital<sup>3</sup> or commodities<sup>4</sup> because the main objective of production was for household consumption. Leaders were chosen because of their honesty and charisma. Connection with political groups outside had not yet been identified.

Because this was an era of settlement, there was not much transformation to be witnessed. Villagers still depended heavily on natural resources. Some forests became used as living areas and places for production. External relations were limited. People were assembled to do particular jobs like woodcutting, or they joined a buffalo-selling caravan led by a person known as a *naihoi*. They traveled to different places to trade their buffaloes and other products. The new social groups that emerged in this era were based on places they migrated from or type of work they did, sometimes related to gender. Furthermore, transportation was inconvenient, preventing people from experiencing the expansion of state power and the market economy. Interaction with the outside world would be the duty of leaders (such as *naihoi*) or a group of men following him to trade their local products.

### The Era of Market Economy (1917-1977)

These decades marked the beginning of local markets and the market economy. In democratic ideology, importance is placed on decentralization via the market economy. The expansion of the market economy allows the middle class to thrive and become more influential,

<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx defines “capital” in two meanings. First, capital means personal assets earned by the labor of others. Thus, capital is the governing power over labor and its products. The power belongs to the capitalists. Therefore, capital is accumulated in the form of labor. Second, capital refers to “funds or stock,” which are the major sources of capital. Such accumulations will not become capital unless they create profits for capital owners (Marx, 1988: 35-39). Land and labor occupied by the king or noblemen were only production factors because they were not exchangeable in the market, and were used for the subsistence living of the people who produced them (Boldizzoni, 2008: 1).

<sup>4</sup> Commodities are the beginning of capital (Boldizzoni, 2008: 1), that is, they are basic goods that can be traded or exchanged within the same category, regardless of different product qualities or whoever produces them. Therefore, “commodities” is the technical term used to distinguish commodities from goods. In terms of marketability, the majority of commodities are likely to be sold in places that customers regularly visit, such as markets, shops, and organizations for product exchange. Thus, commodities are economic products regardless of type, in the hands of traders or producers, with the clear objective of being sold (McEachern, 2006: 166; Menger, 2007: 238-239).

which leads to the demand for democracy (The spread of democracy in the 20th Century, 2020).

Ban Kong market was established in 1917, and it led to the area's growth as an intense economic zone. The expansion of the community drew many people of different origins, such as Vietnamese, Chinese, and central Thai, to settle down and open agricultural shops in the area. Large barns were built to store paddy bought from villagers. Before the market was established, villagers had to carry their paddy in carts to sell it in Khon Kaen. A round-trip journey took almost four days. Later, an opium den, a cannabis den, and a famous dancing group were added to the area. Such entertainments attracted a large number of visitors to the market, and as a result, Ban Kong market became an economic and entertainment center. In 1950, Maliwan road was constructed as the main road from Khon Kaen passing through Chumphae to Loei. The road also cut across Chorakhe subdistrict at Ban Don Mong village. The construction of Maliwan road prompted villagers and traders from Ban Kong to relocate to Ban Don Mong. Traders from Ban Kong market and other cities came to purchase and occupy massive plots of land in the area that is now Don Mong market. Later, they developed the market to become the center or the advanced area of Chorakhe subdistrict. With more convenient transportation, state power was able to reach people in the community. Leaders in this era were government officials who had authority bestowed upon their role/position within the Thai bureaucracy system.

The rise of Don Mong market is related to the arrival of economic plants as Chinese traders came to the village and opened shops to buy agricultural and wild products from the villagers. First, the Chinese would visit the community to seek customers (those who wanted to sell their products). Some villagers decided to sell their products directly to the traders. Not long afterwards, a new group of people – middlemen – emerged. They facilitated connections between production and distribution, from community to market. Moreover, there was a gathering of villagers to produce non-agricultural products to sell at the market or in other communities, such as reed (for clothes and mats), silk, and cotton. A former rice middleman recounted:

I used to be a middleman, buying rice and delivering it to the Chek (Chinese) at Don Mong market, using my own cart. Once I had a connection with the Chek, I set up a branch in the village and became a trader buying rice and delivering it to them. Some villagers decided to sell it directly to buyers by loading rice on their cart. I did this for years, buying and delivering rice, and they would give me a share in the profit. (Sangwian [Pseudonym], 2014)

The connection between villagers, middlemen, and Chinese traders was considered a business relationship; they merely sold and bought products. There was no obvious involvement with politicians or local officers. Furthermore, the Chinese traders who immigrated to this area did not position themselves above anyone else. Instead, they introduced themselves and their shops to the villagers in a humble way so that the villagers would feel like selling products to them. From an interview with one senior, it was found that Chinese and Vietnamese traders running businesses in Don Mong market came from Laos and Vietnam. They crossed the Mekong river and came to the northeast of Thailand around the time that Ban Kong market was established in 1917.<sup>5</sup>

The most remarkable change in this era lies in the modes of production. In the past, villagers produced only enough to feed their family. In other words, products were mainly consumed in the household. However, during the market economy era, the purpose of production was more similar to that of production for business. As products were distributed to the market, villagers had more opportunities to interact with people outside the community, both at Don Mong market and at the market in Khon Kaen. When modes of production changed, there existed new groups of people, for example, Chinese traders (in the market) and middlemen (in the community).

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<sup>5</sup> This finding is different from that in the study by Suwit Thirasasawat, which suggested that the arrival of Chinese traders was related to the construction of the railway from Bangkok to the northeast region, which reached Nakhon Ratchasima in 1900, and Nong Khai in 1956, resulting in the setting up of a number of shops run by the Chinese near the railway stations to buy agriproducts, paddy, and wild products from villagers (Thirasasawat, 2003: 127-129).

Economic plants and agricultural production enabled land to become an important factor of production. Villagers' products became commodities as defined by the clear objective of production for sale. The most important economic plant was rice, which had been produced since the settlement period. Most of the villagers already grew rice for consumption at home. When the market economy was introduced, rice changed from a product consumed at home or exchanged in the community to one purchased and sold in the market. Moreover, more varieties of economic plants were grown for sale, such as jute, watermelons, cucumbers, long cucumbers, tomatoes (seeds collected for sale), sour tamarind, and sugarcane.

In addition, the advent of convenient transportation through the building of roads contributed to the rise of new groups of people who would later become an important part of the society, such as landlords at the Don Mong market, Chinese traders, middlemen, those managing the sugarcane factory quota, and outsiders having contacts with the villagers.

### **The Era of Industrial Capitalism (1977-Present)**

During the years 1977-1987, working abroad became quite popular among villagers in Chorakhe subdistrict. Most of those who went abroad worked as construction laborers in Saudi Arabia because these jobs paid well. However, those wishing to work abroad had to pay a costly fee that could only be processed through agents in Bangkok and Udonthani. Some villagers took out loans from merchants or traders in Don Mong market while others borrowed money from neighbors and relatives to pay the commission. When they came back home, their financial status had improved and they used the money earned by working abroad primarily to build houses and purchase land. Some people invested in businesses which enabled them to transform themselves from farmers into entrepreneurs. The majority of entrepreneurs opened shops selling construction supplies because of their work experience abroad. Some started bottled water businesses or became land brokers. As their financial status improved, they began to take part in the political world.

Some villagers decided to work in other places in Thailand for more opportunities rather than going abroad. For example, some worked as sugarcane harvesters in Suphanburi or Kanchanaburi province so that they would not have to stay away from home for more than a few months. It was just a temporary relocation to earn more money for their family after the harvest season. The first group of sugarcane harvesters came back and became brokers who recruited more workers in the village. Most sugarcane harvesters were indebted workers, meaning that they worked to pay for the money they took out from their employer in advance, mostly with no interest added, similar to advance payment. The main reason employers made these loans was to control their workers so they would continue to work for them as there was stiff competition for laborers. (It can be said that the modern patronage system is similar to that of the feudal lord known as *nai*, who controlled his servants or laborers, *phrai*, to work under his name. The *phrai* had to be tattooed with the name of their *nai* to show that they were subordinate to him. Like modern workers today, most of the *phrai* took out loans from their *nai*.) Interviews with the villagers who had worked as sugarcane harvesters in other places revealed that the brokers did not influence them regarding local and national elections. They were only interested in finding more laborers to work for them.

In previous years, the relationship between the Don Mong market and the areas growing economic plants was like that of the “center and periphery,” with the market as the center drawing resources, products, and laborers from the periphery – the surrounding areas that grew economic plants. This relationship pattern caused a reduction in the amount of undeveloped area as there was high mobility and fierce competition for resources. The emergence of newer centers has resulted in the decline of the old ones. An example can be seen in the case of Don Mong market, which is no longer flourishing as it was before. In 2000, there were flea markets, such as Khlong Thom, and night markets in the community. These markets rotated, opening on different days of the week to offer their products in the community, and eventually causing Don Mong market to become less popular in selling food, especially after the arrival of the transnational retailer Tesco

Lotus in Nong Ruea district. Don Mong market clearly faced its lowest point. Modern trade and markets that could relocate to sell products in different communities allowed people to have easy access to consumer goods. Moreover, some villagers also brought their products, such as vegetables, freshwater animals such as fish, eel, tiny shrimp, snails, etc., and wild products, to sell at the market or the night market more conveniently. The heir of Don Mong market's landlord explained the situation in the following way:

Many shops here have begun to close. The atmosphere is quite stagnant because of Khlong Thom market. They sell food and clothes like we do, so our sales are not as good as before. Some shops remaining here sell construction supplies and Buddhist offerings because they are impossible to sell at the Khlong Thom markets. We have outdoor markets almost every day around here...some vendors buy goods from Khon Kaen city to sell here. They used to make good money, but now the demand is relatively low as the products can be found at the flea markets. Moreover, people know that the products at the flea markets are fresher than the ones from Don Mong. (Adul [Pseudonym], 2014)

The expansion of factories in Nong Ruea district and neighboring areas has resulted in the transfer of the majority of agricultural laborers to the industrial sector, causing a dramatic decrease in the number of agricultural laborers. Currently, a large number of young people in Chorakhe subdistrict work in factories because of the guaranteed minimum wage policy and convenient transportation. They are able to go to work and come back home the same day. The factories also provide shuttle service from and to their homes. Some villagers have seen career opportunities in transportation. The community leader said:

Because of the guaranteed 300-baht minimum wage policy, more people turned to work in factories that opened near their homes. The arrival of factories has created more jobs, such as drivers who shuttle employees to factories and back to their homes. More villagers bought trucks to do this job. Villagers

who still remain in the agricultural sector are those who retired from factories or failed to secure a contract with them. (Suwat [Pseudonym], 2012)

In this era, new groups of people are involved in the community. In the past, agriproducts were produced for sale in the market place, but now a large amount are produced through contract farming. Sugarcane was an important economic plant. An example is the case of Grandpa Term (pseudonym), who in 1993 was the first villager who brought the sugarcane series known as 3-2-023L (a hybrid variety developed by the Department of Agriculture) from his brother in Phimai district of Nakhon Ratchasima province to grow in Chorakhe subdistrict. A few years later, other villagers saw that sugarcane could grow very well in this area, so they also tried it. Grandpa Term recounted:

At first, when we grew sugarcane on our own, nobody supported us...and we sent it to the factory in Namphong district...When a factory in Nong Ruea district was set up, we sent the sugarcane there...that time the factory in Nong Ruea was not owned by Mitr Phuvieng, and the former owner didn't support us. When they built the Mitr Phuvieng sugar factory (which took over the old one), they supported us. Since 1995, we started growing sugarcane according to a contract. The factory kept supporting us by introducing us to new varieties of sugarcane. (Term [Pseudonym], 2014)

Those who grew sugarcane after 1995 were encouraged by the Mitr Phuvieng factory. Consequently, all products grown would be used to supply the factory. However, since a quota system was implemented, villagers preferred to sell their products to the quota owners, previously known as middlemen. The emergence of the quota system completely changed the relationship between villagers and sugar factories. Because of the system, it was necessary for factories to contact villagers directly in order to secure sufficient products for their factory. Recently, there was an attempt from the Khon Kaen factory (in Namphong district) to provide a place to buy sugarcane near the

village. Therefore, the Mitr Phuvieng factory had to take action by providing a place for sugarcane trade in the community as well. Grandpa Term explained,

Recently, the Namphong factory came to buy sugarcane. The factory also provided a sugarcane yard, so Mitr Phuvieng had to do this, too. (Term [Pseudonym], 2014)

Originally, the factory owners (entrepreneurs) expected that the villagers would sell sugarcane to them, so no proactive action was taken to obtain supplies for the factory. Nowadays, factories have had to adapt and change their way of thinking. The main reason is that sugarcane production decreased for various reasons. Some villagers planted new crops, such as eucalyptus, rubber, and in some years, there was a drought. These circumstances caused an increase in the purchase price of sugarcane. Therefore, the middlemen would sell it to the factories that paid the highest price. That caused the factories to purchase sugarcane from villagers directly. Thus, growing sugarcane now is through contract farming. The contracts define the relationship between the farmers and the factory. This type of relationship has replaced the relationship between villagers and the Chinese traders (“or Chek”) who bought agricultural and wild products from villagers in the past in the Don Mong market. The newly-established relationship has caused the Don Mong market to lose its importance as a place for agriproduct trade as well as the relationship between villagers and Chinese traders. However, relations between villagers and middlemen still exist, which can be seen in the case of quota owners. Moreover, sugarcane harvesters, who gained experience outside their village, have become the village brokers who help their employers/farm owners recruit more laborers.

One of the most significant changes in this era is in the modes of production of villagers. During the first era they mainly produced to sustain themselves, so the economic system was quite independent. It did not depend on or involve the market. In the second era, land and laborers have become the most important factors in the economic system. There was an attempt to grow economic plants for sale, using laborers in the family to produce and deliver products to markets. The current

era is considered one of capitalism. Villagers rely primarily on the labor of their family members. They can be either migrant workers or workers in nearby factories. It can be said that villagers have become laborers themselves to work for others (factory owners or sugarcane farm owners outside the area). Thus, the status of villagers has changed from that of laborers to human capital producing for others. This change has gradually led to the alteration of power relations in the society.

In terms of local politics, during 1997-2003, there was a major restructuring of local administration in Thailand. The Subdistrict Council was replaced by the Subdistrict Administrative Organization (SAO), according to the Subdistrict Council and Subdistrict Administrative Organization Act, BE 2537 (1994). In 2003, the first election for a SAO chief was held in Chorakhe subdistrict. The study revealed that all the candidates used assets they had earned from working abroad to fund their campaigns. In other words, none of the financial support of any elected chief was from agricultural work. They all had experience working abroad and returned to become entrepreneurs in the community. Their votes came mainly from relatives. Recently, the economic base has played an important role in supporting elections. Some candidates had different groups of supporters, for example, a group of village health volunteers, religious groups, funds, insurance representatives, and a group of subdistrict headmen and village chiefs. Previously in this subdistrict, no SAO chief had been able to secure the position for two consecutive terms, demonstrating that villagers are not affected by the patronage system, nor are they preoccupied with certain ideas as they were in the past.

Political groups, both local and national, have become more prominent in the community. The relationships between local and national political groups can be seen in a number of development projects in this subdistrict. The political groups search for election campaigners to promote development projects to help support their strongholds. Moreover, occupational groups who were once overlooked in the search for election campaigners, such as insurance representatives, have become a mainstay for politicians at all levels. From the interview with an important election campaigner in Chorakhe and neighboring

subdistricts, it was found that these representatives are informal groups who became major supporters of elections at all levels. One representative explained that in a former job he/she had to travel (*doensai*, in Thai) to look for clients by him/herself. This work requirement enabled him/her to establish connections with many people in different areas, making it easier for him/her to convince clients to vote for the politician he/she supports. One villager who is an insurance representative explained:

Previously insurance representatives had to ‘doensai’ to reach clients themselves, whether in their villages, other villages, or other subdistricts, and they had to go even further to other districts. This travel enabled them to get to know a lot of people. Like my husband, he has been doing this for so long until he was promoted to be a regional insurance representative. When there was an election for village chief, chief executive of SAO, and the member of the House of Representatives, those candidates would approach him and ask if he could help them get more votes. (Sunee [Pseudonym], 2014)

Besides the increasing political roles of local politicians and campaign leaders, villagers in this era actively took part in political activities, not just through the representatives. An example is the conflict of ideas between liberals and the conservatives, symbolized by the Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts. Nowadays, in spite of various communication channels, television and radio are still the media that influence the villagers, especially, the channels that broadcast via satellite. They continually report news to specific groups, as a leader in Chorakhe subdistrict explained,

There are both Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts in Chorakhe subdistrict. Yellow Shirts are mostly retired state officers, while the majority of villagers are Red Shirts. However, the Red Shirts are polarized into two groups – the unsophisticated one and the modernized one. For the unsophisticated group, they like to spend most of their time listening to the radio or watching TV programs operated by Red Shirt allies or leaders. They are willing to pay over 2,300-2,800 baht for satellite installation so

they can watch their favorite Red Shirt programs. They are easily brainwashed. They never question what they are asked to do. If they are told to join a protest, they will do it immediately. Different thoughts are not welcome. They will not socialize with people of different political standpoints even if they are their relatives. Sometimes, these ultra-Red Shirts will not even attend their neighbor's funeral just because they don't share the same political ideas. But modern Red Shirts are quite reasonable. Before taking part in a protest when informed by politicians, they ask first what kind of event they are going to. They are able to distinguish things. They are open to news from different sources and channels. They have friends whose political views are different because they understand that it is a difference in ideas. (Somsak [Pseudonym], 2013)

The case study of the village chief election in Chorakhe subdistrict involved competition between the former chief and new candidates. One candidate came to the village and bought land. He was once a community worker of a non-governmental organization. Later he and his family moved to live in this village. Despite having no entitled position, he actively took part in development activities and became a consultant, assisting in coordination with external organizations for almost 10 years. Because of his many contributions, he gained enormous trust from the villagers. He was eventually elected as the village chief, even though he did not receive support from relatives as the other candidates did. During the time he was chief, his work was very remarkable. He was often praised by state officers whom he worked with, and even vendors in Don Mong market talked about him. Word of mouth made him known throughout the subdistrict. After he retired, a member of his working group ran for the next election and won with an overwhelming vote, 176 to 60 (from a total of 242 voters). "Trust" was the main reason given by the villagers, suggesting that work and trust are the most important components of democratization. The former village headman in the case study village explained:

Village leaders are often persuaded to take sides with one group or one color. If they do not show clearly what side they take, they will not receive the trust of all parties or all colors. Consequently, they will find it difficult to work for all of parties of the village and will lack support from all colors. It takes many years for a leader who focuses on working for all groups of villagers to be trusted by various parties and various colors. It can be done, but it requires patience and determination to work for the village as a whole, and not take sides. (Pattana [Pseudonym], 2013)

From the economic restructuring mentioned above, households can accumulate their capital by selling products directly in new markets (flea markets and night markets) and working in factories. A variety of groups from both outside and inside the community have economic and social roles that relate to politics, such as migrant workers, especially those who had experience working abroad and became entrepreneurs, NGO-community workers, insurance representatives, etc. As a result, politicians need to seek and establish connections with several groups. They can no longer have complete control over their voters or brokers. They have to (re)establish their networks across their previous networks and social groups. In addition, as social upward mobility has become more possible in rural areas because of occupational diversification, new patterns of social relationships, networks, cooperation, and competition have developed. Rural restructuring in each of the three eras has affected the power relations and political viewpoints of rural people. At present, rural people have become an active part of political engagement, not just participants via their elected representatives. However, this research found that the more democratized rural society becomes, the more individualistic its members are. Individualism and the resulting decreased tolerance have led to more conflicts within rural society, such as the cases of Red and Yellow Shirts even in long-established rural communities. Therefore, the two pillars – *equality* and *liberty*, may be not sufficient for the democratic imagination.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, the research adopted the political periodization approach to examine how the restructuring of rural areas contributed to democratization in a rural community in northeastern Thailand over three eras.

**The first era (1807-1917)** was that of the substantive economy, according to the definition proposed by Polanyi (1977: 19-21) by which villagers rely on natural resources and neighbors for a living. Chorakae was a community which had been settled for several generations and was involved with the establishment of Khon Kaen province. Its founders chose to settle there because of the abundance of natural resources. Land, labor, and agricultural products were the only production factors, not capital or commodities, because the main objective of production was for household consumption. Because transportation was not convenient, the expansion of state power and the market economy to the community was quite limited. Interaction with the outside and local government would be the duty of leaders.

**The second era (1917-1977)** was when the community's economy clearly relied on the market system. Villagers changed their way of life from producing for consumption to producing for sale. The transformation from a substantive economy to a market economy is regarded as ideal and as an institutional change that supports democracy. Furthermore, as seen in Chorakhe subdistrict, the development of infrastructure according to the government's policy contributed to changes in rural areas. Villagers had more social contacts with outsiders, while new people had more roles in the community. State power became more and more dominant in the area, enabling leaders to have authority as representatives of the central government to govern people. This development follows Max Weber's concept of bureaucracy (Weber, 1947: 73; Gerth and Mills, 1946: 51-55), according to which a society needs a hierarchical administrative mechanism to maintain order.

**The third era (1977-present)** is considered the time of several important changes relating to democratization in rural areas. People rely heavily on the labor of family members to produce for

others. Therefore, laborers have been transformed into human capital, as Carkhuff (2000: 165) proposed. They produce not just to serve themselves, but others as well. In this period, people have obvious relationships with political groups, both locally and nationally. They are political enthusiasts who are eager to take part in political events, such as protests demanding democracy organized by groups of Yellow or Red Shirts. They always catch up with news updates, which is in line with the study of Pattharathananun (2012: 122-142) that people are more individualistic. Rural people are now in touch with the outside world and receive news from a variety of sources. Thus, they have been demanding their rights to participate in national events more than they did before. The stronger the democratic idea is, the more people will demand equality. As a result, a political movement will not be for all, but will be more for individuals. This can be seen in the Red vs. Yellow Shirt conflicts of the villagers that have occurred, despite the fact that the two sides have lived in the same community for over two centuries.

The rural restructuring in the case study of Chorakhe subdistrict conforms to the concepts of center and periphery. In the past the center was the Don Mong market, which was regarded as an intense economic zone surrounded by the periphery, consisting of agricultural areas with less intense economic systems. Products from the periphery were fed to the center – Don Mong market. Subsequently, however, the influence of the center began to fade because of the establishment of newer centers, such as sugar factories, industrial factories, and large retail companies, all of which attracted a number of laborers from the agricultural sector. Moreover, an increase in mobile and community markets has also greatly affected the Don Mong market or old center. As Urry (2000: 26) explained, globalization has made mobility part of our social life. There is uncertainty and complexity. Freudendal-Pedersen (2009: 5-6) argued that mobility has become part of modern life when new lifestyles are created. The more mobile we are, the more freedom we will have. Therefore, mobility plays a crucial role in shaping a society, contributing to democratization in rural areas. This notion is supported by the study of Janmuean and Pattharathananun (2017: 138-139), which reveals that the political culture of people living in

rural areas has completely changed. They have become independent of the patronage system. They have become more investigative when it comes to state power. If their leader is proved fraudulent, they make sure he will never be in power again. Therefore, the society of northeastern farmers has moved beyond elections to political ideology, equality, and justice.

However, the interactions between the city and the village and the expansion of communications technology have led to the destruction of the community's tradition and culture. The Isan lifestyle was based on values of intimacy and sharing, but rural people have adopted new values and the consumption culture of urban people through television programs. These changes have led to class stratification and a collapse of peasant society.

The awareness and enthusiasm of rural people about participating in political activities, their demand for democracy, and their call for investigating state power are considered to have paved the way to democratization. This has caused the main political concept of the center to disappear from modern politics. Marxism, liberalism, and conservatism are no longer relevant. Rationales of trust lie in the structure of society and politics. Trust is the heart of social sustainability. It expands people's limits to work with others (Dunn, 1984: 279-281). If trust is included in the democratic imagination, rural areas will become more peaceful. This can be seen in the case study of the most recent village chief election in Chorakhe subdistrict, where an in-migrant candidate, with a background as non-profit community worker who was committed to sacrificing for the community, was overwhelmingly elected. Trust was the main reason given by villagers for voting for him. This example confirms that commitment and trust are the most important components of elections.

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