Thai Agriculture: Golden Cradle of Millennia

by Professor Lindsay Falvey

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‘Indispensable definitive reference on Thai agriculture and the environment...’

Abstract: Thai agriculture is traced through prehistory, agro-cities, and religious empires with immigrant Tai, to a sustainable wet glutinous rice culture that shaped institutions for an exporting society. Agriculture provided rising security and wealth with population increase and Chinese and European agribusiness expansion, until accessible land was expended. Employment, crisis resilience, self-sufficiency, rural social support, and culture were maintained through agriculture, although hampered by institutional orientations to taxation more than research and education. By the 1960s, agribusiness conflicted with smallholders. Thailand is one of the world’s few major agricultural exporters, leading in rice, rubber, canned pineapple, black tiger prawn, and regional chicken meat production and export, and feeding four times its population from less intensive agriculture than its neighbours. Issues remain in poverty, education, research, governance, national debt, and sensitive alternatives for smallholders. Past specialties in irrigation, administration, export, multinational agribusiness, negotiation, retained potential, and acceptance of new ideas, suggest that Thailand should remain a major agricultural country as environmental and religious concerns contribute to its unique agriculture. [view one review at <http://www.asc.ku.ac.th/NewsletterLatest-story2.htm>]

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**Chapter 1 - Uniquely Agricultural**

Golden Cradle; The Land of the Thai; Soils; Water Resources; Climate; Other Natural Resources; Regional Origins; Intensification; Industrialisation; National and Global Responsibilities; Current Situation; Ingredients of Thai Agriculture; Summary

**Chapter 2 - Agricultural Origins**

From Gathering to Growing; Neolithic to Iron Age; Domination of Rice; Early Thai Agriculturists; Khmer Agriculture; Pagan Agriculture; Southern Thailand; Summary

**Chapter 3 - Arrival of Tai Agriculture**

Chinese Tai; Muang Fai; Integrating Technologies; Tai Agriculturists; Migrating Farmers; Tai in Thailand; Tai Traits; Environmental Traditions; Tai and Buddhist Environments; Summary

**Chapter 4 - Expansion of Thai Agriculture from 1200 C**

Agricultural Organisation; Agricultural Administration; Integrating Irrigation Systems; Agricultural Domination; Tai to Thai Agriculture; Agricultural Life; Summary

**Chapter 5 - Emerging Agribusiness: Ayutthaya to the Early Twentieth Century**

Agriculture, Environment and Morality; Export Rice; Cash Crops; Foreign Influence; Administering the Peasants; State Irrigation Development; Traders and Early Agribusiness; Summary

**Chapter 6 - Agriculture and Politics: From the 1930s**

Agricultural Policies from 1932; Policies Post-World War II; Agro-Social Change; Highland Agriculture; Agribusiness and The State; The Culture of Irrigation; Environmental Change; Summary

**Chapter 7 - Thai Agriculture to the 1990s**

Agricultural Planning Context; Planning History; Foreign Fillips to Planning; Plans One to Eight; Agricultural Growth; Cropland Expansion; Fertiliser

Irrigation, Mechanisation and Credit; Social Effects; Post-1997 Agriculture; A New Agricultural Paradigm; Summary

**Chapter 8: Crops**

Rice; Rice Policy; Rice Production Systems; Glutinous Rice; Rice Breeding; Rice Husbandry;
Maize; Mung Bean; Cassava; Sugar; Coconut; Rubber; Fibre, Extraction and Other Crops; Fibre Crops; Oil and Extraction Crops; Other Crops; Fruits and Vegetables; Crop Seeds; Summary

Chapter 9 - Livestock and Fisheries

Animal Production Systems; Buffalo and Cattle; Dairy Cattle; Pig; Poultry; Aquatic Animals; Freshwater; Marine; Brackish Waters and Shrimp Culture; Fish Production; Goats, Sheep and Elephants; The Future for Livestock; Summary

Chapter 10 - Forestry

Frontier Forests; Forest Types; Forest Destruction; Logging

Forest Policy; Prohibition of Logging; Conservation and Social Forestry; Agriculture – Forestry Interactions; Private Forestry; Forest Production and Industries; Summary

Chapter 11 - Agricultural Institutions’ Development

Government and Agriculture; Institutional Instruction; Origins of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives; Agricultural Research; Livestock, Fisheries, and Forestry; Research Impact; Agricultural Education; Agricultural Cooperatives; Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives; Marketing Organisation of Farmers; Agribusiness and the Small Farmer; Summary

Chapter 12 - Agribusiness

Agricultural Inputs; The Agribusiness Story; Charoen Pokaphan; Shrimp Agribusiness; Forest Agribusiness; Rubber Agribusiness; Horticulture, Textiles, and Technology; Government Agribusiness; Future Agribusiness; Summary

Chapter 13 - Small-holders and Development

Economic Context; Agriculture and Growth; Small-holders as Family Farmers; Integrated Crops and Livestock; Research and Development; Alternatives and Self-Sufficiency; De-marginalising Small-holder Agriculture; Summary

Chapter 14 - Agriculture, Environment, and Values

Global Agriculture and Environment; State of the Thai Environment; Tracing Thai Attitudinal Shifts; Global Development Forces; Missing the Middle Path; Seeking Environmental Traditions; Popular Buddhist Thought; Conservative Canons; Rising Eco-Buddhism; Practical Approaches; Buddhist Economics; Alternative Agriculture; Self Sufficiency; Summary

Chapter 15 - Whither Thai Agriculture?

From Past to Present; Current Position; Policy Outcomes; The Asian Financial Crisis; The Challenge.

References – some 900 references
The author, Professor Lindsay Falvey, comments in his Foreword...

"The story of Thai agriculture is too voluminous to contain in one book such as this. It includes all elements of the Thai culture, economy and environment, and has been the subject of specialist research in the various branches of these fields over centuries. Because Thai traditions of writing have not emphasised the same technical and economic approaches common to Western documentation until recent times, much of the origins of Thai agriculture is derived from professional extrapolations. Nevertheless, there are voluminous writings surrounding the subject, beginning in the thirteenth century, from Thai, Chinese, Japanese, and various European authors. It is their experience and knowledge which comprise the bulk this book much more than the eclectic experiences on which I reminisce with increasing frequency in this twenty-fifth year of working in Thailand. Having a year to collate information has been most beneficial. As Zimmerman noted in his 1930s treatment of the subject, one year to write on Thai agriculture is grossly inadequate, twenty years’ research being a minimum.

The story of Thai agriculture is one of importance to all. It contains lessons about the importance of culture and history in development. It highlights the shortcoming of the economic development models. It illustrates the durability of an export industry which also employs most of the population, leads the world in some business fields, and rescues the non-agricultural classes from catastrophe in times of crisis. Yet it also contains lessons about the civilising of development, and is bold enough to relate spiritual aspirations to those of industry."