

Program for Advancing Strategic International Networks to Accelerate the Circulation of Talented Researchers  
Japan-ASEAN Collaboration Research Program on Innovative Humanosphere in Southeast Asia:  
In search of Wisdom toward Compatibility Growth and Community in the World

Dispatch Report

Livelihood changes and social life in transforming Southeast Asian rural communities:  
Collaborative research in Cambodia and its neighboring countries

Year: December 2015 to February 2016

Place of fieldwork: Cambodia

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1. Research background

As a part of the research group analyzing the essential qualifications for achieving a “peaceful society” in Southeast Asia and the world, this study will examine actual changes in Southeast Asian rural communities in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries with a special interest in two areas of people’s lives: livelihoods and social life. Both are crucial for exploring historical changes in rural communities in the region and for estimating the future of human society. The study focuses on Cambodia and its neighboring countries and will conduct collaborative research with young students and scholars in these countries.

2. Research purpose and aim

The main purpose of my research in Cambodia in this project is to study the possibility of creating a “peaceful society” with special attention to local culture, tradition, and government policies in the country, which would probably be a model applicable to other countries in Southeast Asia. This is the third dispatch of mine in this program and I have spent two months in the country from 20<sup>th</sup> December 2015 to 19<sup>th</sup> February 2016 to pursue this. As in the first and second dispatches, I lived in Phnom Penh and visited the counterpart institutions in the capital city, the Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Royal University of Agriculture, almost every day to exchange opinions with Cambodian researchers and students on various issues regarding Cambodian rural society. In addition, I organized a short collaborative fieldwork in rural villages in Cambodia with the lecturers and students of the two counterpart institutions; the Royal University of Phnom Penh and the Royal University of Agriculture.

Except for exchanging understandings on the characteristics of the dynamic transformation of rural Cambodia, we spent much time discussing the features of the development process/path of other countries in East Asia and Southeast Asia. Cambodian colleagues and students have a tendency to subjectively notice the uniqueness of Cambodian society, culture and state without referring comparatively to cases of other countries. This comes from a shortage of information on world society and history. Through the discussions,

I learned the significance of foreign researchers, including myself, taking a role to help to expand their scopes. In other words, I came to recognize that one of my crucial contributions to my Cambodian colleagues and students is to help to cultivate their capacity to bridge the Cambodian experience with those of other countries. By doing this, I would like to promote their understanding of a definite feature of their own society in a comparative perspective.

### 3. Results of the fieldwork

During the first and second dispatches, I visited one rural commune located in the Cambodia-Thai borderland to conduct short periods of fieldwork. After I arrived in Cambodia this time, I reviewed the data of the commune collected by the previous fieldwork periods for the purpose of making a presentation at an international conference. Finally, I presented the analysis under the title of “Environmental Rehabilitation, Connectivity and Globalization: A Study of Rural Development in a Community on the Cambodia-Thai Borderland” at the 7th International Conference on Environmental and Rural Development, which was held at the Royal University of Agriculture, Phnom Penh, on 16th January 2016. The conference was organized by the International Society of Environment and Rural Development, and thus there were a number of researchers from Thailand, Philippines and other countries present. My presentation firstly introduced the local situation in the 1980-90s as a battlefield, which caused serious environmental contamination due to landmines and unexplored ordnance. While this legacy of war negatively influenced the development process/path of the community there, the agricultural production of cash crops in the commune has been boosted since the beginning of the 2000s, relying on the border economy of Thailand. Moreover, there was an interesting shift in the livelihood activities of local people in the villages there recently when four Japanese companies built small factories producing paper crafts for export to Japan. In the presentation, after I had explained the timeline and general situation of the local development process of the community, I emphasized the significant role of one Japanese NGO manager who connected the local community with Thailand and Japan. In the end, I received a comment from a Philippine professor in the Q&A session that the function of connectivity could be one of the crucial factors for the rural development of rural societies in Southeast Asia.

I also conducted preliminary fieldwork on livelihood changes and social life in three villages in Bakan District, Pursat Province during the period 6-11 February, 2016. I invited two lecturers and two undergraduate students from the Royal University of Phnom Penh and four master’s course students from the Royal University of Agriculture to participate in this fieldwork as a part of our collaboration. In this activity, I selected twenty families from the three villages by random sampling and organized interviews by groups on family structure, livelihoods and household economy according to a questionnaire. At the same time, I conducted two-hour-long interviews with each village chief of the three villages to collect information on the local community in general. The analysis of the data is ongoing and I cannot show a definite result here, but I consider the research was successful in crystallizing some hints for studying actual changes in livelihoods and social life in rural Cambodia and for raising interesting topics for future research, such as the situation of the increase in transactions by rural families with microfinance banks/NGOs, and the long-term impact of increments of population migration on family lives in villages.

The “sangaha” is one of the hints for which I renewed the consideration of importance through this fieldwork.

The “sangaha” is a kind of communal donation practice to families that are suffering economic difficulties caused by taking care of sick family members. According to the interviews, the first step in this activity is usually marked by an announcement of a proposal of “sangaha” toward a certain family by a village chief and religious leaders. Then, a person, who is probably a village chief in most cases, visits each home in the village to collect donations from persons who agree with the proposal. The amount of the donation is not fixed, so one should visualize “a sense of community” among villagers through involvement in the actual practice of mutual help. This was the first time for me to collect information about “sangaha” in rural Cambodia, although I have read some papers analyzing the activity from the perspective of agricultural economics, which evaluates the effectiveness of “sangaha” as a case of a risk-sharing system in a local culture. However, because the practice is deeply based on Buddhist notions and ideology, the cultural background of “sangaha” must be analyzed more deeply. At the same time, it is interesting that during this time I was told by the village chiefs that “sangaha” in the area had begun just recently, about ten years ago. This shows the necessity of studying it not as a traditional cultural practice but as a new social phenomenon in association with various changes in the religious-political spheres of rural lives. The data collection on “sangaha” in this preliminary research is not of sufficient volume to draw any conclusions, but surely shows an interesting angle for studying the potential for a “peaceful society” in Cambodian rural society.

#### 4. Implications and impact on future research

One of the outcomes of the preliminary fieldwork in rural Cambodia in February 2016 was to have Cambodian colleagues and students visit rural villages with me. This shows a shift into high gear in the collaboration with our Cambodian counterparts. During this preliminary fieldwork, I not only posed questions to rural villagers but also asked for comments and opinions from the Cambodian colleagues and students on the situation of the rural communities in the area. This was aimed to help them to crystallize their research topics about rural Cambodia. As a result, one of the lecturers of the Royal University of Phnom Penh declared that he would conduct village-level livelihoods activities from the perspective of agricultural economics in FY2016. Another of the lecturers from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, who has a background in psychology, said he has now come to be interested in research on the social relationships between family members in rural villages. Beside these two lecturers, two master’s course students from the Royal University of Agriculture showed interests and plans for future research in the area as well.

In FY2016, I will visit Cambodia once again for three months. I will use this final dispatch to conduct research in rural areas with our Cambodian counterparts.