

White-collar farmers: oil palm cultivation and the living World in a Southern thai village

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Abstrak

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This article examines the role played by oil palm cultivation in transforming the living world of farmers in a village in Southern Thailand, based on the interaction between villagers actions and reactions by the environment. The mode of living in the research site had been self sufficient in terms of paddy cultivation and utilization of surrounding natural resources. However, the introduction of a modern style of rubber cultivation in the 1970s, followed by oil palm cultivation in the 1980s, completely changed the villages socio ecological order. These two crops cover the entire village besides residences. The villagers purchase all food materials and even drinking water, and they enjoy a modern way of living fully equipped with electrical appliances and cars. The elders in the village still remembe and somehow miss the past life, while the youth, mostly college graduates, have lost their ties with the natural environment in daily life.

Oil palm, in spite of its smaller cultivation area, has played a more vital role than rubber in transforming the living world of the village, because harvesting and selling the fruit are outsourced to middlemens labor. Some villagers employ labor for rubber tapping and harvesting. This system enables the villagers to be white collar farmers. Although there are attempts by some villagers to reduce their living costs and secure food safety by cultivating upland rice and vegetables for self consumption, it is difficult for them to drastically change their livelihoods and become completely self sufficient. What appears at first glance to be a rich village is in fact vulnerable to both natural and market conditions.