

‘CHINIZATION’ OF SOUTHEAST ASIA: CHANGES OF RURAL LIVELIHOODS IN NORTHERN LAOS

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Abstract

A new wave of massive influences of China from the northern border is increasingly felt by the mainland Southeast Asia. It is the result of the economic opening policy pursued in the former socialist countries locating in both sides of the border since the 1990s, and this new movement is accelerated by the international mega-project of infrastructure development such as Asian Highway. The economic impact of such an infrastructure project at an aggregate level is no doubt tremendous by promoting trade, investment, etc. However, its impact on local economies (especially in the small countries such as Laos) is rather neglected. Needless to say, impacts on each locality depend on the respective local conditions historically formed. This research focuses on northern Laos where rural people still live in a subsistence economy with swidden agriculture and livestock rearing; but due to population pressure, intrusion of cash economy, and other policy factors the people's livelihood is recently experiencing a rapid change (and actually deterioration). Maize production for export to China just started in the late 1990s in some part of northern Laos. This research examines the impacts of maize expansion on various aspects of the local farming and livelihood system. Issues such as the impact on labor demand (especially female labor) and the responses of local people to it, trends of increasing economic disparity among rural people, and the question of sustainability of the new farming practices are especially focused, based on data and information collected through fieldwork during 2003 and 2004. Finally, the meaning of globalization for the local people in Southeast Asia is reconsidered from a wider perspective.