

*Research  
Summaries*

## **The Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia**

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In 2004, under the title of *The Challenges of the Agrarian Transition in Southeast Asia* (ChATSEA), a group of researchers submitted a project to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. It has recently been approved for funding under SSHRC's Major Collaborative Research Initiative (MCRI) program and will be implemented over a period of five years (2005-2010).

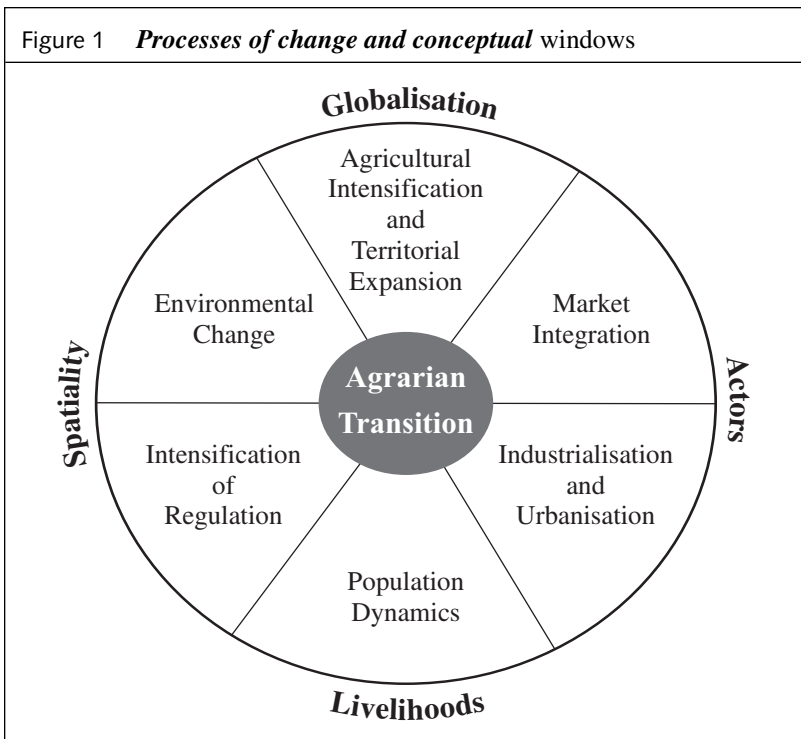
The agrarian transition represents perhaps the most profound process of social change of the last three centuries. In the wealthier countries of the global North it is a transformation that is largely complete, but in the developing societies of the global South it is still very much underway.

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<sup>1</sup>The following summary is largely identical to the one that accompanied the formal submission of the project. While all team members were directly or indirectly involved in its drafting, the final version was the work of Phil Kelly from York University, Toronto and the undersigned, who is the project director. The other team members are, in Canada: Michael leaf (UBC), Peter Vandergeest (York), Tania Li (Toronto), Derek Hall (Trent), Steffanie Scott (Waterloo), Sarah Turner (McGill), Pierre André, Bernard Bernier, Dominique Caouette and Jean Michaud (Montréal) Yann Roche (UQAM) and Frédéric Lasserre (Laval); outside of Canada: Jonathan Rigg (Durham), Michel Bruneau (CNRS, Bordeaux), Doryane Kermel-Torrés (IRD, Bordeaux), Doracie Zoleta Nantes (U. P. Diliman), Chusak Wittayapak (Chiang Mai) Maznah Mohamad (USM, Penang)), Pham Van Cu (Hanoi), Philip Hirsch (Sydney). Thanks are due to Nicklaus Davey for the conception of Figure 1.

We define this transition as the transformation of societies from primarily non-urban populations dependent upon agricultural production and organized through rural social structures, to predominantly urbanized, industrialized and market-based societies. We identify six processes of change as central to this transition. These provide the organizing framework upon which the project will be based: 1) agricultural intensification and territorial expansion; 2) increasing integration of production into market-based systems of exchange; 3) accelerating processes of urbanisation and industrialisation; 4) heightened mobility of populations both within and across national borders; 5) intensification of regulation, as new forms of private, state and supra-state power are developed and formalized to govern agricultural production and exchange relationships; 6) processes of environmental change that modify the relationship between society and nature to reflect new human impacts and new valuations of resources (Fig. 1) .

Figure 1 *Processes of change and conceptual windows*



Classic understandings of the agrarian transition largely draw examples and approaches from a European context, leaving many questions unanswered when applied to the contemporary transition in the developing world. This project seeks innovative understandings of this agrarian transition by developing a framework that reflects both current circumstances in societies experiencing the transition, and new approaches to social theory. Four perspectives in particular guide us in updating our understanding of the agrarian transition. We term these conceptual 'windows' and they provide the integrative theoretical approach that underpins this research project. They relate to: an intensifying process of globalisation through which social processes are integrated across global space; a more complex allocation of resources in the form of livelihoods as issues of sustainability and equity are acknowledged; a reworking of spatiality, as processes of change are understood to be geographically uneven, and accepted spatial categories are reformulated; and, a recognition of the diverse array of institutions and actors that drive social change, as well as the importance of how such actors are subjects with complex and changing identities (Fig. 1).

These conceptual innovations draw upon contemporary social theory to provide a new understanding of the agrarian transition as it is currently unfolding in the developing world. The project will focus on Southeast Asia as the world region that has undergone the most dramatic shifts in its agrarian sector over the last three decades. As such, it represents both a role model and a warning to the rest of the developing world. More broadly, with nearly 550 million people, Southeast Asia represents a key arena for global processes of economic growth, poverty reduction, political security, environmental change, and ethno-religious conflict. It is also a region to which Canada is deeply connected through migration flows, trade, development assistance programs, and private investments.

The research team assembled to undertake this task comprises 22 researchers, drawn primarily from economic, cultural, and environmental geography, as well as other disciplines including history, sociology, anthropology, economics, women's studies, urban studies and planning. The team members, belonging to three generations of scholars, are attached to 17 different universities or

research institutions: nine in Canada (Montréal, McGill, York, Toronto, UBC, UQAM, Laval, Trent and Waterloo), four in Southeast Asia, three in Europe, and one in Australia. The output of the project will include at least 45 graduate theses, most prepared at Canadian universities but in a highly international context, and a broad range of peer-reviewed articles and books. In addition, to ensure that policy-oriented results reach key stakeholders, workshops and seminars will be held on a regular basis and a knowledge base developed that will make our findings available to the wider public on the world wide web.