

THE CHALLENGES OF THE AGRARIAN TRANSITION  
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

# ChATSEA

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**Ethnic Politics, Migrant Labour and Agrarian  
Transformation: A Case Study of the Hmong  
and Shan in a Royal Project  
in Northern Thailand**

by

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# ETHNIC POLITICS, MIGRANT LABOUR AND AGRARIAN TRANSFORMATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE HMONG AND SHAN IN A ROYAL PROJECT IN NORTHERN THAILAND

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between ethnic politics and agrarian transformation. Experiences of Hmong and Shan minority/migrant groups in a Royal Project in Northern Thailand are considered. Interviews and surveys with 40 Hmong employers and 25 Shan workers were conducted in summer 2007. The study reveals that ethnic politics, in particular the construction of the Hmong and Shan identities, have shaped agrarian transformation in the Doi Soong Royal Project. In other words, the construction of the Hmong as 'governable subjects' enables the Royal Project to continuously introduce new agricultural practices such as 'environmentally friendly' agriculture. Although this agriculture is financially distressing for the Hmong, the Royal Project could insist on it because the financial costs are off-loaded onto the Shan labourers, who are constructed and treated in Thailand as 'illegal' and 'economic immigrants', which eventually facilitates the agrarian transformation. This study also suggests that the understanding of agrarian transformation needs to go beyond the questions of land, income diversification and rural-urban migration towards paying attention to ethnic politics, migrant labour relations, and cultivation practices.

## Keywords

Ethnic Politics, Governable Subjects, Migrant Labour, Agrarian Transformation, Hmong, Shan, Royal Project, Thailand.

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## Introduction

Upland agricultural regions in Northern Thailand have undergone a rapid transformation since the early 1980s due to various factors including emerging markets, population increase, interest in a cash economy, and development projects. In particular, the Royal Project has had a significant impact on the transformation of Northern Thailand (see Appendix 1). Since the late 1960s, the Project has encouraged commercial cash cropping in the name of opium substitution and swidden eradication. As a result, former swidden farmers from the Hmong minority group in the Doi Soong Royal Project<sup>1</sup> areas in Chiang Mai province have intensified commercial cash cropping. This intensification process is being facilitated by an influx of cheap labour provided by Shan ‘refugees/migrants’ (hereafter referred to as the Shan or cross-border Shan)<sup>2</sup> from Burma/Myanmar.<sup>3</sup> This restructuring of agricultural labour, in relation to ethnic politics and agrarian transformation, is the topic of this paper. I argue that the ethnic politics of the region, in particular the creation of specific Hmong and Shan identities, have helped transform the landscape of agrarian labour relations and cultivation practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to security considerations for the Hmong villagers and Shan workers, I do not reveal the exact location of my research site. Instead, I only illustrate the nature of the site in general. My research site is located in a Royal Development Center, which is referred to by the pseudonym Doi Soong or Doi Soong Royal Project throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, ‘the Shan or ‘the cross-border Shan’ are used to refer to those who have crossed the border into Thailand in the past ten to fifteen years. Unless otherwise noted, these terms do not refer those who have been living in Thailand for centuries and have citizenship or ‘hill tribe’ status.

<sup>3</sup> Although my study focuses on the labour relations between two minority groups, the Hmong and Shan, I do not take these ethnic categories as fixed. Instead I keep in mind that they are internally heterogeneous, and that inter-group boundaries are blurred as people assimilate and adapt to new practices. See further discussion Latt 2008, Chapter 5.

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## Ethnic Politics, the Hmong and the Shan

There are about 100,000 to 150,000 Hmong people in Northern Thailand. Although many of them were born in Thailand and have Thai citizenship status, they are treated as ‘illegal encroachers’ and ‘hill tribes’ as well as ‘environmental destroyers’, commercial agriculturalists, and drug traffickers. As a result, their access to agricultural land and resources has been under attack by different state agencies, pro-conservation groups and the ethnic Thai (Roth 2004; Anan 1998).

The Shan are a Tai-speaking people who share common ethnic features with the ethnic Tai/Thai. Since pre-colonial times, there have been political and cultural exchanges between the Shan and Northern Thai communities. While people often move back and forth between the Shan State (in Eastern Burma) and Northern Thailand, there has been a large Shan population residing in Northern Thailand for centuries. Since the mid 1990s, about 200,000 Shan people have crossed the border into Northern Thailand. Although a majority of them escaped from the oppressive practices of the Burmese state (and insurgency groups to some extent), the Thai state has refused to recognize them as ‘displaced persons’,<sup>4</sup> unlike other groups such as the Karen. Thai officials argue that the Shan are not displaced persons because they have not been forced into Thailand by ‘conflicts’ (i.e. group fights). Thus, they are officially referred to as ‘economic migrants’. The Shan are not provided with government assistance nor do they have access to refugee camps. Instead, they have been glossed by officials as “illegal migrants” and many are forced to accept any type of livelihood they can find.

This paper refers to ethnic politics not in terms of inter-group conflicts, but in terms of the

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<sup>4</sup> Not being a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, Thailand does not *officially* use the term ‘refugees’ but instead uses ‘displaced persons’ to refer to those who seek refuge in Thailand (although the term ‘refugees’ is often used by officials, NGOs and the media).

construction of identities and differences in the 'process of hierarchically organizing various groups of people through differential state categories of belonging' (Sharma, 2006:4). This study contextualizes Hmong-Shan labour relations and the associated agrarian transformation within the broader ethnic politics of Thailand. It is in part the Royal Project's relationship to the Hmong that generates the conditions in which Doi Soong agriculture operates, and the state's differential treatment of the Shan (from the Hmong and other refugee groups) that transforms the Shan from refugees to migrant workers.

I understand ethnicity and other axes of identity as relational, performative and socially constructed. Using this theoretical approach, I assume that identities do not pre-exist, but are constructed and imposed in relation to (or in opposition to) other groups. As this paper will illustrate later, the Hmong are seen as 'environmental destroyers' in opposition to lowland ethnic Thai, whereas the Shan are treated as 'good labourers' by Hmong villagers in opposition to Karen and Lisu labourer. Moreover, identities are not static, but contested and selectively performed for certain political, ideological and material ends (Butler, 1993; Nelson 1999). As such, identities are not complete but always in the making (Hall 1990; Sandburg 2004). Ethnic politics and the construction of minority peoples' identities as 'hill tribes', 'illegal immigrants', and/or a 'problem' can be thought of as the creation of 'governable subjects' (cf. Foucault 1978): i.e. the creation of subjects through certain ways of knowledge production so that they become subjected to those in a more powerful position. Such creation allows the latter to discipline the former and control their bodies, actions and thoughts.

Central to ethnic politics is the geographical imagination associated with minority groups and their placement within the nation-state. For instance, regardless of the Hmong and Shan being part of Northern Thailand history as the inhabitants of frontier regions since pre-modern periods, decades of state territorialization and nation-state building have led to

imagining them as 'outsiders' who have 'illegally' entered Thailand (cf. Thongchai 1994; Pinkaew 2001). Consequently, they came to be categorized as 'hill tribes', non-Thai immigrants, and so on.

Yet, the act of identity construction is not limited to the state; a minority group may construct identities of different groups in order to claim rights, resources and belonging (cf. Li 2000; Pinkaew 2001; McKinnon 2005). This paper shows how the Hmong's construction of Shan identities help the Hmong's access to Shan labour, facilitating agrarian change in Doi Soong.

### **Questions, arguments, contributions and outline**

The overarching question of my research is: how does ethnic politics shape agrarian transformation in Doi Soong Royal Project site? This question is answered by inquiring (i) what changes have taken place in Doi Soong? (ii) what is the relationship between identity construction and the control of labour (both the Hmong and Shan)? and (iii) how does the availability of cross-border labour impact agriculture in Doi Soong?

Based on the fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2007 with 40 Hmong farmers and 25 Shan labourers, this paper argues that ethnic politics, specifically the production of Shan as illegal outsiders and the production of the Hmong as 'environmentally destructive hill tribes', allows the Royal Project to foster new agricultural practices. In other words, the Royal Project has been able to introduce 'environmentally friendly' agriculture because the Hmong have been stereotyped as 'environment destroyers'. Although the environmentally friendly agriculture is financially distressing for the Hmong, the Royal Project continues to promote it because the financial costs are off-loaded onto the Shan labourers, who are constructed and treated in Thailand as 'illegal' and 'economic immigrants'. This paper also shows that the agricultural system in Doi Soong has become wage labour dependent, organized with a clearer ethnic division of labour between the Hmong and

the Shan. At the same time, agriculture has been further intensified, while 'safe food' production has become entrenched within Thai agricultural policy, as promoted and implemented by the Royal Project.

This research project makes three major contributions to the agrarian transition debate. First, literature on agrarian transformation in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia pays significant attention to globalization, market integration, urbanization, rural-urban migration, demographic change, and increasingly to organic farming. Nonetheless, the role of ethnic politics on agrarian transformation has not been adequately studied, as ethnicity and ethnic politics are mostly discussed in the contexts of political transition, forest conservation, development, and resource management. This research investigates the relationship between ethnic politics and agrarian change.

Second, the labour contribution of cross-border labourers to economic production and transformation are often understudied in both academia and popular media, especially because of the labourers' precarious legal status. Moreover, studies on migration and agrarian transition have focused on rural to urban migration. This research re-connects the cross-border labourers (rural-rural), with ambiguous legal status, to upland agrarian processes and transition.

Third, debate on agrarian transformation focuses on the questions of income diversification, land, and rural-to-urban migration. This study shows, however, that agrarian transformation also needs to be understood in terms of the restructuring of labour relations and agricultural practices.

The following section explains the brief history of the Royal Project and its role in the creation of the Hmong as governable subjects. By investigating Hmong experiences in Doi Soong, Section 3 demonstrates the challenges faced by the farmers, which paves the way for Shan employment. Section 4 looks at the way the Shan in Thailand are constructed as 'illegal', 'economic migrants' and 'good labourers'

which limit the kinds of jobs made available to them. Section 5 argues that agrarian transformation involves restructuring of the social relations of production, and changes in the modes of agriculture in which the role of the cross-border labour is significant. The final section concludes by suggesting the ways in which agrarian transformation can be understood through ethnic politics.

## **The Royal Project and the governable Hmong subjects**

At the outset, it should be noted that while the Royal Project plays a crucial role in Doi Soong agriculture, different state institutions including the National Security Council, the Royal Forestry Department and the Police are more involved in the construction of the identities of ethnic minorities. These institutions' construction of minority identities helps justify the Royal Project's ethno-centric development and agricultural policies. As a national institution, the Royal Project has dealt with minority populations in the name of 'solving hill tribe problems'.<sup>5</sup> In practice, it has contributed to the creation of the Hmong as a troublesome 'hill tribes' whose actions need to be controlled: i.e. the construction of the Hmong as 'governable subjects' (Foucault 1978). By historicizing Hmong experiences, this section illustrates that the creation of 'governable subjects' underpins the Project's ability to foster different modes of agriculture (chemical-intensive cash cropping to replace opium cultivation, and now environmentally friendly agriculture to replace chemical-intensive cash cropping).

Founded in 1969, the Project's aims are to provide alternative livelihoods to the 'hill tribes' to eradicate communism, to suppress opium production, and to protect forest and watershed regions. With the support of the United States, international aid organizations, Taiwanese experts and Thai universities (mainly Chiang Mai

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<sup>5</sup> See Chanida 2008 for the Royal Project as a political project.

and Kasetsart),<sup>6</sup> the Project implemented opium substitution programs throughout the 1970s and 1980s by encouraging farmers to grow commercial cash crops (with chemical inputs). Currently, the Project has four research stations and 37 development centers in five provinces in Northern Thailand. The Project oversees the production of about 140 kinds of vegetable crops by about 80,000 people on 1.59 million Rai<sup>7</sup> of land. Crop production increased from 235 metric tons in 1997 to 7,655 metric tons in 2004 (Jayamangkala 2006).<sup>8</sup>

### Creating opium growers and environmental destroyers

Although it is true that the Hmong were (and are) involved in opium cultivation, shifting cultivation, and deforestation (although less so than by commercial logging and corporate farming), the Royal institution has historically exerted a strong influence upon Hmong agricultural practices. This involvement of the Royal institution, however, has been hidden from public discourse and the Royal institution in Thailand remains exceedingly sensitive to criticism made against it. For instance, after the signing of the Bowring Treaty in 1855 'as a result of aggressive negotiation of the British Diplomat John Bowring... with the militarily weaker Thai [Siam] government' (Renard 2002:12, footnote), opium cultivation was legal-

<sup>6</sup> The Project also works with associate agencies, which include UNDP, FAO, United States Department of Agriculture, European and Australian development programs. These associate agencies research, experiment and implement agricultural practices.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Rai = 1,600 m<sup>2</sup> = 0.16 ha = 0.395 acre

<sup>8</sup> The royally-initiated projects were started since 1959 in various parts of Thailand. They were 'development' projects ranging from irrigation projects to road projects, fishery projects, school projects and so on. In 1969, the Royal Hill Tribe Development Program was launched to 'help the hill tribes'. This program is known today as the Royal Project. If we consider all royally-initiated projects including the 'hill tribe' development projects, there are nearly 800 different projects, as identified by an unofficial, but resourceful website (<http://www.geocities.com/RainForest/Vines/1701/kingm12.htm>).

ized in Siam. The monarchy supported opium cultivation under the Royal Opium Monopoly to fund various government operations. The Hmong were one of the largest opium producers at the time. By the 1920s, the opium trade was the country's largest source of revenue. Like contemporary practices of the Royal Project (discussed below), the Monopoly had members who were legally allowed to grow and sell opium to the Monopoly at the official price (*ibid*). Nonetheless, when the United States began to exert pressure on the ruling elites from Bangkok, the Thai Prime Minister Field Marshal Sarit Tanara outlawed opium cultivation (trade and use) in 1959 (*ibid* 4). Since then, the state, including border patrol police and military forces, have been hostile to the Hmong. As a result, the Hmong have become 'problems' and subjects of control, mainly through the newly created Royal Project.

The Project has three main activities: Research, Development and Marketing. The Research section experiments with new crops that are grown in Development Centres. The Marketing section, with its retail chain called Doi Kham (Golden Mountain), buys crops from the farmers and resells them to urban and international consumers. The buyers of Doi Kham include big food chains such as Tesco Lotus, Makro, Big C, Carrefour, Golden Place, Tops, Home Fresh Mart, McDonald's, Jusco and Villa Market, as well as catering services such as Thai Airways International Kitchen and the Oriental Hotel. Moreover, the products are exported to Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan (various interviews with RDP officers; Kinnaree, 2007:108).

There is an intriguing parallel between the state's treatment of the Hmong's cash cropping under the Royal Project and that of opium cultivation under the Royal Opium Monopoly. Just as the state encouraged opium cultivation until being pressured by the US government, the Thai state encouraged commercial farming through chemical use until pressured by the global environmental concern mainly raised by western Europe and North America. Currently, the Hmong are blamed for their use of chemicals in agriculture. Moreover, as discussed below, the

Royal Project refuses to buy crops from the villagers (just as the Royal Opium Monopoly did) by referencing the chemical use, although it had initially introduced chemical fertilizers and pesticides to replace opium with cash crops. For example, the FAO's 1972 recommendations on the highland irrigated peanut crop stated that

the tentative recommendation of 6-12 Kg per rai of both P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> and K<sub>2</sub>O...can be supported by the 1969-70 results in Lumpang area. If the 1969-70 results only are considered, a suitable fertilizer application would be 3-6 Kg P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> and 12 Kg K<sub>2</sub>O per rai (p. 2).

A survey conducted in 1978 and 1979 by the Social Research Institute of Chiang Mai University even requested the officials to provide pesticides to the villagers due to high costs (SRI 1981:56).<sup>9</sup> The point here is not to calculate how harmful these chemicals are; rather it is to shed light on the upland schemes' introduction of chemical inputs. Nevertheless, once the elites felt the wave of global environmentalism stemming mainly from Europe and North America, as well as when lowland Thai and urban residents became environmentally conscious, their own history of chemical introduction was forgotten. Instead, they reconfigured the policies and started blaming the Hmong (Hmong activist from IMPECT,<sup>10</sup> Interview August 13, 2007).

In Northern Thailand, such blame has gone far to the extent that environmental destruction has come to be understood among ethnic Thai and policy makers as putative characteristics of ethnic minorities. The Hmong are particularly vulnerable to such stereotypes because they are characterized as being 'greedy', and thus grow crops intensively with too many chemicals. As a result, the Hmong from Doi Soong are now

<sup>9</sup> The recommendation did not specify whether to provide it for free or with low cost.

<sup>10</sup> IMPECT stands for the Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand.

forced to grow vegetables with fewer chemical inputs and are increasingly forced to practice organic farming.

This shows that the Royal institution, as part of the state, has directly impacted Hmong agricultural activities, be they opium cultivation or chemical-ridden cash cropping. Once global and national political priorities change, the Royal Project responds by treating the Hmong as a 'problem' and new modes of agriculture are introduced to the farmers. The Royal Project's actions, therefore, can be thought of as the continuous fabrication of the Hmong as a problem. New solutions are then introduced as agricultural policy, to solve the perceived problems that have supposedly been instigated by the Hmong. Through this process, the Hmong are made and remade into governable subjects.

### The Doi Soong Royal Project

In the late 1960s, the Royal Project established a station in Baan Doi Soong, Chiang Mai Province, after a few Royal visits. The reasons given were that the farmers were poor, illiterate, and lacked adequate food and shelter, while satellite imagery showed intense cultivation of opium in the area. According to the village elders, the military destroyed opium plants without any consideration of the villagers' livelihood. Once the Royal Project station was established, the villagers were encouraged to grow commercial cash crops with the promise that the Project would help market the crops. As always, the US government sponsored both the military and the Project for opium eradication (Interview, Doi Soong director).

Located at about 1,300 meters above mean sea level, Doi Soong lies between a national park and a watershed. This politically precarious location is the reason the local residents, who do not have legal land tenure, have been under constant pressure from authorities and lowland ethnic Thai. The Doi Soong Royal Project covers more than five villages, but my study focuses only on two, Baan Doi Soong and Baan Pha Ngam (pseudonyms). There are two main rea-

sons why these villages were selected. First, they are the main agricultural villages, located about 3 kilometers apart. Second, the majority of the Shan workers alternate between these villages and they continuously rotate between employers from both villages every few days without permanent employment.

In terms of demography, there were only five households in Baan Doi Soong in the 1940s. Several years later, people from other districts and provinces migrated to the area. By the 1970s, two relatively big villages were established with about 70 or 80 households in each village (Heish 2001). Currently, there are about 2,200 people (about 270 households) in two villages combined. A significant number of the Shan labourers (estimated to be between 500 and 1,200) have entered the area in the last 10 years, replacing Karen and Lisu labourers who were previously labouring in Doi Soong.

Agriculture is the dominant form of livelihood, and the villagers grow various kinds of vegetables including cabbage, baby carrots, head lettuce, spinach and broccoli, as well as fruits and flowers. Being one of the major Development and Research Centers, the Doi Soong Royal Project has transformed the villages under its jurisdiction from opium producing villages to commercial cash cropping villages.

The Royal Project has worked primarily through its membership system. In the past, membership was wide open; thus a vast majority of the villagers belonged to the Project. The members acquired seeds, fertilizers and other agricultural inputs from the Royal Project on credit. After harvesting, the villagers were required to sell the crops to the Project. The amount of money, after subtracting the cost of inputs that the members owed to the Project, was given to the villagers as profit. As such, the Hmong were sub-contractors and a major source of labour.

Initially, the Project bought as many vegetables as the villagers grew since the total volume was not high. However, with agricultural intensification, the Project now can buy only a limited percentage of the crops being pro-

duced. Moreover, the villagers are required to follow an environmental safety standard called Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)<sup>11</sup> to be qualified for membership. Because of these two factors, many villagers left the Project, leaving the Project with only about 150 members in the entire project area.<sup>12</sup>

The benefits to the members are that they can acquire inputs from the Project (some inputs from the Project are cheaper compared to market prices). Moreover, vegetables can be sold to the Project at a guaranteed price (although not every type of vegetable is guaranteed, as will be discussed in the following sections). The obligation is that each member is required to grow what the Project's buyers demand. Officially, each member is required to sell 20% of their vegetables to the Project, and the rest to middlepersons or in the open market. Still, there seems to be no clear-cut rule over the Project's buying policy, but its decisions depend on buyers' demands. As I will discuss in the next section, arbitrary buying decisions of the Royal Project is one factor challenging the farmers' livelihood.

## Royal subjects in distress

*Thailand has had great success in abolishing opium cultivation... while respecting the culture of traditional opium-growers and offering them appropriate alternative sources of income...The Royal Project is worthy of study by everyone interested in sustainable development...*

Paul Michael Taylor, in Bangkok Post, 15 July 2007

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<sup>11</sup> GAP is an environmental safety standard that limits the use of chemicals in the name of minimizing pollution and protecting natural resources. Basically, GAP reduces chemical residues in the crops by limiting certain chemical inputs and the amount being used. See more on FAO website: <http://www.fao.org/docrep/006/Y5224E/y5224e04.htm>

<sup>12</sup> These members continue to stay with the Project believing that they could still sell to their vegetables to the Project even with lower price, whereas they might not find buyers in the markets. Some farmers stay with the Project because it is easier to transport their vegetable crops to the Project.

Public discourse in Thailand presents the upland peoples' lives as 'improving', giving credit to the Royal Project as a 'success'. The 'success' of the Royal Project, however, is discursive because the Hmong farmers in the Doi Soong Royal Project are experiencing financial and agriculture-related challenges. The inherent problems of the Project are kept invisible from the public eye because of the sensitive regime administering the schemes. Media coverage tends to romanticize the Project by portraying it as a successful attempt to improve the livelihood of highland populations. Under the sub-heading of 'Achievement of Extension Work', Hsieh (2001) reports that the farmers' income increased almost 10-fold from vegetable sales and 16-fold from flower sales between 1985 and 1993.

While my research findings do not challenge such reports on increased income, they do, however, reveal that the villagers are struggling with constant indebtedness because of falling net profits. Unlike the dominant representation of the Project as cited above, many farmers are critical of the Project and its policies. Phang, 29 year old, is one villager who expressed strong opinions about the Project. He works with about 12 Rai of land. He once grew lettuce, but has switched to vegetables. He joined the Project a while ago, hoping to sell his crops to the Project for a better price. His expectations, however, were not met by the Project's operation system. He said,

The RDP [Royal Development Project] tells other people that 'we come here to solve the problem of the people'. In fact, it's not. Villagers don't like the RDP. It has no policy to help the people.... They [RDP officials] just care about vegetables, not the people.... they are just selling vegetables to other countries (Interview, 19 June 2007).

Such discontent is the direct result of the discrepancy between the rising cost of cultivation and family expenses on the one hand, and

low crop prices on the other. All respondents said the prices of seeds and chemical materials as well as family expenses are always on the rise. Since the farmers' net profits are declining, they have to borrow money constantly to meet their expenses.<sup>13</sup> As a result, 75% of the Hmong respondents said they are currently indebted. Farmers' indebtedness was not evident in the past, as reported by Pongsak Angkasith (1982:58). Angkasith's work conducted between 1975 and 1980 suggests that most of the farmers in the Doi Soong area were not indebted. The farmers' income distress is caused in part by some shortcomings of the Royal Project. This paper identifies four main shortcomings: (i) inconsistent buying practices; (ii) land use restrictions without provision of alternative livelihoods; (iii) differential treatments between the two villages, and (iv) late payment.

### Inconsistent Buying Practices

First, the Project refuses to buy vegetables from the villagers in the name of the GAP. In the beginning, the Project, as promised, bought vegetables from as many farmers as it could to convince them to replace opium with cash crops. Within a short period of time, the villagers started growing similar crops. The Project, however, has changed the policy and now buys only from its members. Moreover, it buys only a limited amount of vegetables it can resell to the buyers. In contrast to the stated goal of 'helping the people', the Project ends up serving to secure its partners' demands by buying from the farmers what its partners want, instead of seeking (new) markets for what the farmers produce.

Phang said,  
the RDP has meetings with other people [retailers]...and comes to tell us what they want.... It is like we have to grow what they want us to grow.... But they

<sup>13</sup> Many farmers said they make more money by selling vegetables because they are planting more times a year than before, but their savings are low because of ever rising costs.

are not interested in what we grow<sup>14</sup> (Interview, 19 June 2007).

It is intriguing that the GAP turns out to be the Project's legitimizing instrument for justifying its decisions over accepting and rejecting the farmers' vegetables.<sup>15</sup> The Project refuses to buy crops from the villagers, referring to the level of chemical usage, especially when the market price is not favorable for the Project to generate a surplus income. Phang's friend, a Project member who was sitting together with Phang when I interviewed Phang, complained that

They buy all vegetables, big and small, beautiful and not beautiful if the price in the market is high [higher than the Project's guaranteed price]. They don't buy from us when the market price is low. But they said our vegetables have too much chemical (Interview, 19 June 2007).

The RDP's resorting to GAP, therefore, often responds to the 'market price' more than to 'safety'. The end result is that the vegetables produced beyond the Project's demand often pile up in the market, thus reducing market prices. Instead of addressing the problem of farming under the GAP, the Project has even moved towards organic farming, which will be discussed in Section 4.

### Land Use Restriction

The second shortcoming of the Project is the restriction of land use without providing the villagers with alternative income earning opportunities. The director of the Doi Soong

<sup>14</sup> This is confirmed by interviews with officials from the RDP Main Office and Doi Soong Office. The Main office has meetings with the buyers, and then distributes quotas to its branches. The branches then instruct the villagers what and how much to grow.

<sup>15</sup> In order to be purchased by the Project, the crops have to pass the chemical residue test under the GAP standard (various interviews with RDP officers and villagers). The test is conducted about two weeks prior to harvesting.

Project said that the higher-level offices have criticized the Doi Soong Project for not being able to control deforestation in the area. As a response, he was planning to limit each household to use only 7 Rai of land.<sup>16</sup> The problem, however, is that the farmers have already been restricted from forestlands. In Doi Soong, many families are working with plots larger than 7 Rai (some about 10 to 15 Rai, and some extended families work with more than 20 or 50 Rai). Most of them said their current plot areas were not enough since their costs and efforts were greater than their income. Reducing available land without providing alternatives would be detrimental to the villagers, which is already the case in Doi Soong.

### Differential Treatments

The third shortcoming is the spatial biases in providing irrigation facilities and the discriminatory buying quotas between Baan Doi Soong and Baan Pha Ngam.<sup>17</sup> My study found that the Project is buying disproportionately from Baan Doi Soong. While most of the members in Baan Pha Ngam are selling around 20% of what they produce to the Project, some farmers from Baan Doi Soong, who are already equipped with year-round irrigation facilities, are selling 80 to 90% of their crops. This explains the fact that 12 million Baht, of a total 18 million Baht, worth of Doi Soong Royal Project's sales in 2006 was accounted for by vegetables from Baan Doi Soong (Interview, Senior Officer, 19 June 2007). The effect is that sellers from Baan Pra Ngam have to rely on the buyers in the market. As many of them are growing similar vegetables and competing to sell their crops in the market on the

<sup>16</sup> Other RDP officials said the Hmong do not have legal ownership over the land, but the RDP allows the villagers to make use of it. It is doubtful if the villagers have certificates of land ownership. I tried asking a few villagers about the certificate, but I was only told that they had one, and I did not manage to see any. Some responded that they can sell and buy land if they have money.

<sup>17</sup> As mentioned in my methodology section, respondents for my research were drawn from two villages under the Doi Soong Project, as workers seek jobs from both villages.

days of the best price, prices fall as many more villagers bring their crops to market.

### Late Payment

The fourth problem is the Project's late payments to the farmers upon buying vegetables. Although the policy is to make payments available in the farmers' bank account within a week, most farmers said it takes two to three weeks, sometimes even more, leaving them with inadequate money for re-investment. It should be noted that, according to the Director of the Doi Soong Project, who drives alone from Main Office in Chiang Mai City to Doi Soong everyday, it is risky to bring money with him through the forest. Therefore, paying through the bank seems to be the best option. Nonetheless, since released funds go through banking procedures, receiving money in the farmers' bank account takes time.<sup>18</sup>

### Shortcomings' After: Distress and Dilemma

This paper has discussed several challenges which face Hmong farmers as they grapple with the policy demands of the Royal Project. These challenges have left the Hmong farmers increasingly disillusioned with agriculture. There are a large number of villagers that want to abandon agriculture, as shown in table 1.

The dilemma, though, is that they cannot rapidly diversify income because of the lack of financial resources and familiarity with non-agricultural jobs. In the above Table, there were only 18 farmers who demonstrated any desire to abandon agriculture. The second group of farmers (14 farmers) said they would not abandon agriculture. Still, their primary rea-

<sup>18</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be acknowledged that my interaction with the Project officials and staff members gave a sense that they are trying in every way possible to successfully implement 'highland development'. The detrimental shortcoming, though, is the very ideology of orthodox development (i.e. market-centric and top-down) that the Project endorses (see details, Chapter 4 in Latt 2008).

**Table 1.** *Farmers' desire for dis/engagement with agriculture*

Engagement/Disengagement	Respondent
Want to abandon agriculture/start non-farming	18
Will not abandon	14
Not sure	4
Already abandoned	4
Already abandoned	4

sons are the same as the first 18 farmers: their inability to capitalize on alternative livelihoods. This implies that if they had the means, they would abandon/start non-agricultural livelihoods. Moreover, the Hmong cannot pursue industrial jobs as rapidly as lowland ethnic Thai, largely because of the way minority groups are stereotyped as criminals and drug traffickers, or at worst as 'not quite human' (Sturgeon 2005:175).<sup>19</sup>

Because of this, many people continue to engage with agriculture. From my Hmong sample, 65% (26 persons) still engage in agriculture alone, while 25% (10 persons) engage in both farming and non-farming activities. Only 10% (4 persons) have abandoned agriculture completely. Even among those who engage in both farming and non-farming activities, income from the former constitutes about 64% of the household income.

Asked what non-farming activities farmers wanted to start, many said they were interested in selling food or groceries. They are aware, however, that many other villagers want to open shops as well, and thus that there will not be enough customers. At the same time, unlike lowland villages, Doi Soong is located on the top of a mountain, with no highway passing through it

<sup>19</sup> In 2005, for example, Chiang Mai had a cultural show of an African tribe called Masai in Chiang Mai Zoo. The placing of 'tribal' people next to animals in a zoo might indicate deep seated assumptions regarding Thailand's own 'tribal' people. Also, one Chiang Mai resident who translated my survey questionnaire into Thai secured the file with the password 'opium', showing the mindset the press and government officials always foster.

to help grocery stores and other transportation-related businesses to flourish. Moreover, the closest three-four other villages are located about 6 kilometers apart and populated only with about 1,000 people. Thus, compared to lowland villages, Doi Soong is geographically and demographically less viable for income diversification.

Despite the problems presented by the Project, the Hmong do not turn against it. I suggest that this may be because of the way the Hmong have been made into governable subjects of the state through the Project itself. This has served to create a sense amongst the Hmong that they, first, are indebted to the Royal Project, and second, cannot publically criticize the sensitive Royal institution (cf. Chinada 2008). This, however, does not underplay the agency of the farmers. Neither does it imply the power of the Project as absolute and uncontested. Rather, the farmers have not resorted to violent means against the Project, but exercise their agency through mixed modes of consent and, what James Scott (1985) calls, 'the weapon of the weak': i.e. passive mode of resistance such as non-cooperation. In Doi Soong, the farmers exercise their agency by withdrawing themselves from the Project membership, and selling their vegetables in the market instead of selling to the Project.

Foucault (1991) argues that power is articulated not only through force, by also through consent and self-discipline, the power of the Royal Project depends on the Hmong's consent. The Hmong farmers in Doi Soong are not against the presence of the Project. Rather, their disappointment is due to the Project's shortcomings. They merely want and expect that the Project buys more of their vegetables for better prices, which would help them. Moreover, overt resistance towards the structure of the Royal Project and its programs is not the strategy the farmers have resorted to. Instead, they have coped with these pressures by hiring Shan labourers.

## The Shan Transformed: From Refugees to 'Economic Migrants'

### Leaving Oppression

As mentioned in section 1, Thai officials do not recognize the Shan as 'refugees'/'displaced persons', but only as 'illegal' and 'economic migrants'. This argument is made on the assumption that the Shan did not flee group conflicts. I do not make the assumption here that all cross-border Shan are politically 'displaced persons/refugees'. My study shows, however, that most of my Shan respondents fled from the oppressive practices of the Burmese state, as reflected by the following narrative of Muey (age 30). She is an agricultural labourer living outside Baan Doi Soong. She said,

Burmese soldiers came to the [village] ... and drove people out... We came here leaving our farms and homes behind.... They did twice, and we were in the second round. Since we couldn't earn a living in our village, we just came to Thailand.... As women, we had to run often [referring to sexual abuses] (Interview, 5 September 2007).

The narratives of my respondents resemble what has been reported in the media during the past ten years, and their origins frequently appeared in the news as sites of abuses (Table 2). For example, in January 1997, the Bangkok Post reported that

Once thriving farming communities in eight townships became depopulated 'free-fire' zones; Larng Kher, Murng Nai, Nam Zarng, Lai Kha, Murng Kerng, Kun Hing, Ke See and Murng Su. The villagers were given five days to move. Soldiers threatened to shoot anyone who did not comply.... At some sites, troops forced villagers to stand guard along the roads and to clear trees and bushes.... Others had to work in military camps, on road-building projects. Over 100,000

people were affected and 20,000 of these have already moved to Thailand (Bangkok Post, 1997).<sup>20</sup>

**Table 2.** *Origin of Shan respondents*

Village	Number	Percentage
Lai Kha	11	42
Murug Kerng	7	31
Pang Long	2	8
Ke See	1	4
No Answer	4	15
Total	25	100

**Table 3.** *Reasons for leaving the villages (Multiple responses are recorded)*

Reasons for Leaving	Numbers
Forced Labor	5
Confiscation or shooting of animals	5
Forced Relocation	4
Physical Abuses	3
Not (Enough) Land	3
Confiscation of land and crops	2
Tax by govt and rebel armies	2
Unemployment	1
Low Wage	1
Flood	1
No Response	9

### The Shan are not refugees: According to Thailand

Against the life experiences of the Shan, the Thai government continues to represent them as 'economic migrants' who have entered Thailand 'illegally' to seek a better life, but not as a

<sup>20</sup> See a detailed report of state oppression in the Shan State at Shan Herald Agency for News at <http://www.shanland.org/resources/bookspub/humanrights/dispossessed/>

result of violent conflicts.<sup>21</sup> The denial of refugee status is not a matter of not knowing, but a matter of willful ignorance. For example, Major General Pichammeth Muangmanee, Deputy Commander of the northern region, said in an interview in May 2002 that about 150 Shan entered Thailand because of the clash between the Shan State Army and the United Wa State Army (UWSA),<sup>22</sup> while a Thai military statement reveals the forced removal of 500 Shan to Thailand as a result of the clash (The Nations 2002). Regardless of this knowledge, the National Security Council directed its staff to reject the claim that refugees exist (Bangkok Post 2002).

Indeed, Shan-Thai relations cannot be thought of in isolation to the Thai state's position vis-à-vis minority groups. Instead, the Shan have to be contextualized in broader Thai ethnic politics in which the state has always been in conflict with minority groups. It is in this context the Shan came to play the role of a specifically *migrant* ethnic group. Ethnicized subjects are positioned in the nation-state through 'differential modes of political incorporation' (Williams 1989:408, In Sharma 2006) and this explains why the Shan are treated differently from the Hmong and other refugee groups by the Thai state, depending on different political and historical contexts. Although the Hmong were (are) seen as immigrants, they were able to move into the forest and mobilize forest resources. Their success may be attributed to the fact that their initial migrations to forested areas pre-dated the state's ability to extend territorial control over these areas. At the same time, the global political contexts of anti-communism, anti-opium production and environmentalism paved ways for the Hmong to receive Royal initiatives and support through the Royal Project.

<sup>21</sup> I am not arguing here that the Shan are either refugees or economic migrants as the boundaries of these categories blur in practice.

<sup>22</sup> The UWSA is an armed ethnic group dominated by the Wa drug lords. Being the major group in conflict with the Shan armies, it is supported by the Burmese state, and is known for its involvement in opium trafficking.

By contrast, the Shan are migrating across the solidified territorial borders of the modern Thai state. The migration is occurring at precisely the same moment that global economic forces require Thailand to seek cheap labour in order to keep its economy competitive in the global market. These series of events have culminated in the form of government policies that serve to gloss the Shan as migrants with no permanent status, and offers them no choice but to be the providers of cheap labour. This has left them in a subordinate position in Thailand.

### **Making of Shan good labourers**

Having been denied standing as 'displaced persons' and simultaneous construction of the Shan as 'illegal outsiders', the Shan are not entitled to the resources available in refugee camps and material support. Thus, they have to pick up whatever jobs they can find to survive. In a sense, making the Shan 'illegal' and 'economic migrant' is a creation of 'governable subjects', like the Hmong, but they are more subject to arbitrary harassment by the police in the name of border control. This eventually transforms the Shan into 'unfree' or forced labourers – i.e. politically confined labourers with fewer options- as they now have to tolerate the exploitation of their employers, under whose roof, but still unsecured, they are shielded from police intimidation and deportation.

Yet, the experiences of the Shan in Doi Soong highlight the need to pay attention to the different scales at which identities are constructed. While the Shan are constructed as 'economic immigrants' and 'troublemakers' in national and regional levels (cf. Latt 2008, Chapter 5), the Shan are seen as good labourers at the village level in Doi Soong. As they are willing to accept whatever jobs are available to them due to limited options, they are seen by the Hmong in Doi Soong as being hard working, strong and good labourers. For example, Dang, a 41 year old farmer, and a member of the Project, who has hired the Shan for more

than seven years for a majority of work in Baan Doi Soong said, '[the Shan] are good labourers, very strong and they know how to farm' (June 19, 2007). Mai, the wife of a village leader, agreed with Dang. She said,

[the Shan] never complain, and they never said that this is too difficult or cannot be done... if we ask them to come for a few days, they just said yes, yes, yes and do the job... In general, they never complain.

This sort of assumption is so widespread in Doi Soong that a vast majority of the Hmong employers hire the Shan on this basis.

Construction of Shan identities as good labourers in Doi Soong involves positioning the Shan and Hmong/Lisu/Karen in binary opposition in the sense that the Shan are seen as strong, hard working and good labourers, whereas the latter are seen as 'bad labourers'. Many employers responded that the Shan work harder than other workers, including the Hmong, who do not like hard work, but want more money. For example, Dang noted,

the Shan work hard, and [they are] better than Hmong labourers... now, all villagers want to hire the Shan mostly because Hmong workers want to be hired longer period and need to set the time.... But for the Shan, we don't need to worry about how many days we want to hire. We can ask them anytime to come and work.

Nonetheless, having been attributed with positive attributes does not necessarily mean that the Shan are independent of negative identities imposed in different parts of Thailand. As such the Shan are 'trouble makers' and 'good labourers' at the same time. For instance, even though the Hmong employers think that the Shan are good labourers, they also express the belief that the Shan are a 'problem' who have flooded into Thailand and causing social problems as they arrive. In addition, the Hmong villagers maintain prejudices that the Shan are con-

flict-ridden (in Burma), dirty, stink from smoking and bring diseases (Various interviews and survey). This is one reason the Hmong look down the Shan, and hire Shan labourers for the jobs other labourers refuse.

## **Cross-border labour and agrarian change**

Debate on agrarian transformation focuses largely on the questions of income diversification, access to land, and rural-to-urban migration. My study found, however, that agrarian transformation can take place in terms of the restructuring of social relations of production and the modes of agriculture, in which the role of cross-border, rural-to-rural migrants is significant. This section demonstrates that the availability of Shan labour impacts Doi Soong agriculture in two ways. One is the transformation of social relations of production, which has become enormously dependent on flexible waged labour and the ethnic division of labour. The other is the transformation of cultivation systems promoted by the Royal Project (intensified agriculture and 'environmentally friendly' farming).

### **Transformation of Social Relations: Labour Composition and Social Relations**

Prior to the arrival of the Shan in the mid 1990s, the Hmong worked on farms by themselves and engaged in labour exchange with other villagers. They also hired Karen, Lisu and several other ethnic members as waged labourers. Since the influx of the Shan, the ethnic composition in the labour force and the ethnic division of labour in Doi Soong has been transformed to the extent that the Hmong farmers now depend on the Shan as their major source of labour.

The following interview with Chong, 60 years old, reflects the changes in labour composition in Doi Soong. Chong is a member of the community cultural organization, and a retired farmer. His five children, in their 30s,

are now farming on his land of about 15 Rai. Chong said,

We used to hire Karen, Lisu, and sometimes Mussa [Lahu] and Chahu, but we started hiring the Shan maybe 15 years ago when we stopped growing opium ... [In the past], most workers were Karens from other villages.

When I asked how many labourers he hired in general, he said,

If we had many things to do, we just asked our friends to help me, and then I helped them in return. We hired very few people. Now, villagers hire many Shan to do the jobs.

According to various interviews, the Shan, in the beginning, went from house to house and asked if there were any jobs for them. The villagers hired them for a few days, sometimes by paying them with food. Gradually over time, more Shan entered Doi Soong and the Hmong began to favor the Shan as cheaper labourers. During the past decade, seasonal employment of the earlier workers was significantly replaced with the flexible employment of the Shan.

As the labour composition changed in Doi Soong, labour relations have changed as well. Currently, the employers hire employees on extremely flexible bases such as sub-contract, hire-and-fire, and labour on-call. These labour relations are facilitated by the particular ways the employers conceive of employees as 'good labourers'.

The opinion that Shan 'never complain', and that 'they can do everything' lead the Hmong employers to keep hiring the Shan on extremely flexible basis, each term of employment ranging from 2-3 days to a week. Thus, most Shan workers do not have permanent employment, but keep rotating in every few days. For example, Nang Suk, a Shan labourer and a mother, said she has to look for jobs about 8 to 9 times in some months, sometimes taking about 3-4 days

in between jobs. Moreover, there is often no prior agreement as to how many days they will be hired for. Sometimes, the employers let the workers go after a few days without any notice, making the employees unemployed that same evening (cf. Chapter 6 in Latt 2008). Furthermore, the common wage for the Shan is 100 Baht a day, which is lower than the official minimum wage of 159 Baht a day in the province, and that of 150 Baht to Hmong, Lisu and Karen labourers. This is one reason the Hmong employers assert that the Shan are good labourers, because they accept low wages and a limited number of working days.

**The Hmong, Karen and Lisu in the changing labour composition**

The massive presence of Shan workers raises a question in regard to the role of the Hmong landowners/employers in Doi Soong agriculture. Unlike various studies on other parts of Thailand, my study found that a majority of the villagers in Doi Soong continue to work on farms.<sup>23</sup> Most of those not working on farms are a very few villagers who have abandoned agriculture and students/young children who once constituted part of the 'traditional' farm labour pool. Those who have left for the

**Table 4.** *Numbers of villagers engaging or disengaging with agriculture<sup>24</sup>*

	Numbers of people	Percentage
Working in Agriculture	54	45.4%
Working outside of Agriculture or left village	12	10.1%
Students/Kids (not working)	53	44.5%
Total	119	100%

<sup>23</sup> Hmong women work on farm conducting tasks such as seeding and cleaning, while men perform tasks such as buying seeds and fertilizers/pesticides, or marketing the crops. They hire Shan workers for a large portion of (hard) jobs. See section 3 why many Hmong continue to work in agriculture.

cities are students and some villagers who move back and forth between farm work in Doi Soong and manual jobs in Chiang Mai City. Thus, a majority of working persons are still involved with agriculture. As Table 4 shows, a majority of those not working in agriculture are students and children.

In regards to the Karen and Lisu, many of them have been pushed out of Doi Soong. During my study period, I was able to locate only three families (two Lisu, one Karen) and one Karen man. One Lisu family (a couple) had been hired as monthly labourers. Casual conversation with them revealed that their relatives and neighbors had been working in other villages, as there are not many jobs (for them) in Doi Soong. Their story illustrates one example of the way, the Shan have come to replace the Hmong, Karen and Lisu labourers in physically demanding jobs.

**Transformation of social relations: Reorganizing the ethnic division of labour**

In Doi Soong agriculture, Hmong identification of the Shan as strong and hard workers lead the Hmong to hire the Shan primarily for what are deemed to be hard jobs, eventually engendering ethnic divisions of labour, as shown in the following conversation with Chai, a 29 year old farmer, and a member of the Royal Project. His land is about 8 Rai, and was separated from his parents' land five years ago.

The Shan [can work with even] very heavy bags and hard work such as digging the hard land... But the Hmong are not strong and hard working like the Shan. So we hire the Hmong only for easy jobs [such as cleaning and seeding] and they don't like digging soil... [So, we hire the Shan for] digging soil, carrying things, sometimes spraying.

<sup>24</sup> The numbers in this table represent the household members of my research sample.

**Table 5.** *Jobs for which Hmong employers hire Shan (Multiple responses allowed)*

Type of Jobs	Number of responses
Digging Soil	23
Carrying	16
Planting: seeding, weeding, harvesting	9
Cleaning	3
Spraying	2

My study shows that the Hmong hire the Shan mostly for digging soil and carrying things. Table 5 reflects the responses of 23 employers.

According to Chong, the village elder, this type of ethnic division within the labour system was not evident in the past, as the labourers were not limited to any specific jobs. Instead, it depended on individual employers who might hire labourers on a sub-contract basis, or they might hire labourers to perform various tasks. The pay and the terms of employment also depended on individual employers. In contemporary labour relations, however, the Shan are specifically hired for what are deemed to be 'hard jobs'. Moreover, the wage seems to have been fixed at about 100 Baht a day.

### **Transformation of Cultivation Systems: Further Intensification of Agriculture**

Labour restructuring in Doi Soong impacts Hmong agriculture in that it allows the Hmong to appropriate Shan labour for the intensification of agriculture, while also enabling the farmers to minimize the costs associated with the greening of agriculture. As urban and international consumers now demand 'safe food', the Project's marketing and production strategies have come to focus on 'environmentally friendly' and 'safe' food production. Thus, since the mid 1990s, the Project has enforced Good Agricultural Practice (GAP). This is a

point of departure from the chemical-ridden agriculture of the 1970s and 1980s.

As discussed in section 3, the villagers are facing the problems of falling profits and persistent indebtedness. In order to catch up with falling profits, they have further intensified agriculture (instead of diversifying income). Whereas farmers once harvested crops one (or two) times a year, a majority of them are now harvesting two to three times a year on the same land. As shown in Figure 1, 20 respondents out of 25 are growing two and three times a year.

Many villagers said they could cultivate frequently because of the availability of Shan labour, as reflected by the conversation with Wan, a 37 year-old mother from Baan Pra Ngam, and a member of the Project. She said,

In the past, we grew one or two times... Sometime, only one time [because] this village didn't [still does not] have water in the summer. But we need to grow more because... we need money for everything... [So,] in the summer, we rent land in [Village X], and hire the Shan... Landowners from Village X don't want us to use chemicals. So, sometimes previous landowners didn't lend us the land, or they asked for more money. So, we need money for them [as well]... We hired the Shan because they are cheap.

Wan's narrative reveals that her family must harvest more times per year in order to generate enough income to cover rising expenses. Also, they hire the Shan not only for labour, but also for reduction of labour costs. By hiring Shan workers, the family is able to meet their increasing labour demand as cheaply as possible.

To recall, it was noted in the beginning that the Project has only about 150 members. However, labour restructuring and intensification of agriculture are widespread phenomenon in the entire Doi Soong area, as non-members are also affected by the Project's policies. For instance, the members' crops (as well as non-members'), refused by the Project, mostly end up in the

market which adds to an already large supply of similar crops in the market. As discussed, this large supply is a result of the Project's encouragement for decades. This excessive supply often forces lower prices. Combined with the low crop prices with high input prices, the farmers must increase the use of chemicals<sup>25</sup> and hire waged labourers to intensify production.

### Transformation of Cultivation Systems: Towards Organic Romanticism

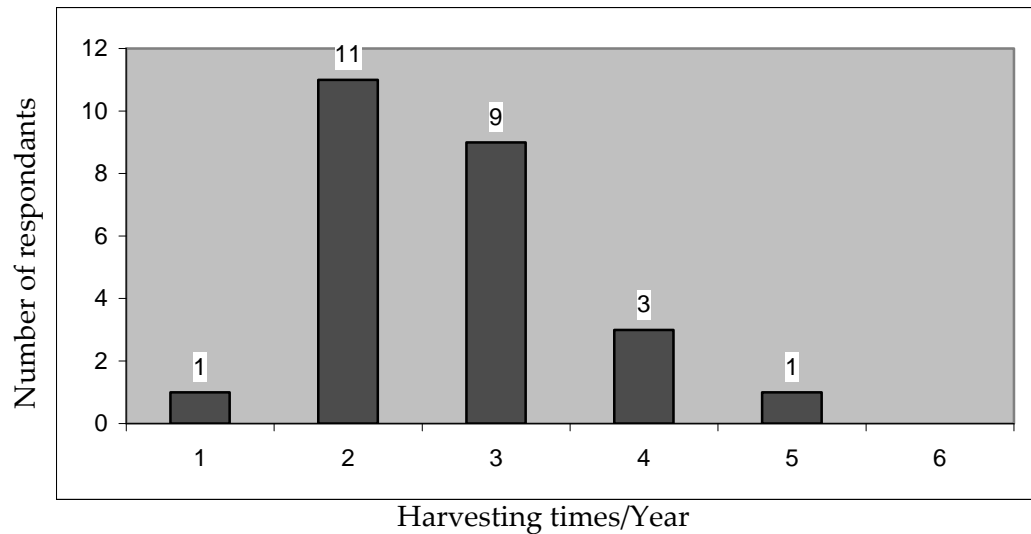
Instead of addressing the problem of farming under the GAP (section 3), the Royal Project has further restricted farming practices by introducing organic farming called 'The Organic Vegetables Project' since 2002.<sup>26</sup> According to a senior officer, the Doi Soong Project has been experimenting with organic farming. Currently, there are fewer than ten organic farmers in Doi Soong. The numbers of organic farmers is likely to increase, as the Royal Project has increasingly emphasized the high and safe quality of the products. The director of the Doi Soong Royal Project said,

the farmers are interested in organic farming... [because] organic substances decrease production costs and the vegetable prices are still high.... In addition, the policy of Doi Soong and the Royal

<sup>25</sup> Members are having a hard time balancing the Project's regulation (also, organic demand) and their chemical needs, unlike non-members whose chemical use cannot be directly controlled by the Project.

<sup>26</sup> There are six other branches of the Royal Project that are involved in this project'

**Figure 1.** *Agricultural Intensification (Total respondents = 26)*



Project indicate the desire of the consumers to have chemical free vegetables.... [Moreover] we are aware of the impact of chemical use to the environment, water sources, and the farmers themselves.

Obsessed with consumer safety, Somporn et al (2006:II) report that,

the quality throughout the supply chain is the significant strength of the Doi Kham's [Royal Project's marking chain] products which are capable of catching the upper market, high income class and quality concerns consumers.

This significant strength, however, certainly comes at the expense of the farmers who are struggling with the problems of high costs and low profits. These harsh realities contrast with the director's *Organic Romanticism*: idealistic portrayal of environmentally-friendly and financially-sound agriculture. In practice, the Project's organic farming is problematic since the beginning. It started with the majority of organic farmers being forced to grow organic on the basis that their farms were located near a water

source, and thus they should not use chemicals.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, organic farming has also been more costly. The farmers complain that the organic fertilizers and bio insecticides, which can only be purchased from the Royal Project,<sup>28</sup> do not effectively prevent insects. Thus, they either have to remove the affected plants or spray more pesticides. The farmers reveal that the staff members from the Project investigate the crops about three times a week, most of the time suggesting they spray pesticides. This is problematic for the farmers as the prices of the organic pesticides are high and rising.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, regardless of the high costs, organic farming has not generated higher income because of the Project's buying policy. Many farmers complain that although organic vegetables are given a higher price (8-10 Baht per kg in general and 1-2 Baht per kg in winter), it is still low because their efforts are greater than the price. In particular, the price of organic vegetables during the past 2-3 years has been low. Some farmers identified that the market price is sometimes one to two Baht per kg higher than the Project's guaranteed price.

Another issue is that although the Project has a guaranteed price system, it guarantees only specific crops at specific times. If the farmers are growing vegetables that are not in the list of guaranteed price items, the Project pays the same as, or even lower than, market prices. If the Project refuses to buy non-

<sup>27</sup> Forcing farmers to grow organic crops is not unique to highland farmers. But, lowland farmers are indirectly forced in the sense that they are offered loans and supports from government agencies and NGOs only on the conditions that they either grow organic crops or use less chemical inputs. Otherwise, they are likely to be excluded from the 'good farmer group' and have less access to the funds (Personal communication, Atchara, PhD candidate from Chiang Mai University, November 2008).

<sup>28</sup> If the Project runs out of organic pesticides, the villagers can buy what they need from the market. However, the use of chemicals bought from the market must be approved by Project personnel.

<sup>29</sup> One sack of fertilizer costs about 500 Baht, and the bio pesticide costs about 15 Baht a liter.

guaranteed price vegetables, the farmers have to sell them in the market where the buyers pay the same (low) price no matter whether it is organic or non-organic.

Furthermore, once the farmers sell the vegetables to the Project, a large portion of these vegetables are discarded. The Project does not buy vegetables that are not good-looking. If there are any bruises or holes on the surface, the Project buyers will remove these damaged goods from the more attractive produce that they want to purchase.<sup>30</sup> A farmer said, for example, that 'if I have my products for 500 kg, then I have only 200-220 kg left after their selection' (he is paid for 200-220 kg only). In addition, the farmers are taxed between 5 to 10 percent on sale. As a result, organic farmers have not increased their income, but continue to struggle in the cycle of indebtedness.

Similar to non-organic farmers, organic farmers depend on waged labourers because organic farming is even more labour-intensive, as reflected by the following interview with Yeng who said,

It is tiring as it consumes my energy and time a lot. I don't make as much money as before either. Too much insect makes vegetables not beautiful. So, I have to add fertilizers more often, which are expensive.... Sometimes, the insects ruin my vegetables, so I have to remove them from the plot. In rainy season, the vegetables get diseases. In winter, they get fungus and rotten, so the price is not good. So, I have to take them to sell in the market myself.

Many farmers, including Yeng, noted that they must hire cheap Shan labour to increase their production. Thus, by appropriating cross-border labour, the Hmong farmers can both intensify and "green" their agricultural practices as required by the Project. Yet, despite the Shan being part of the economic process in Doi Soong,

<sup>30</sup> Unsold vegetables are fermented to be fertilizers.

their labour and contribution to Doi Soong economy have been underplayed in the representation of the Royal Project's success. In particular, the Shan's chronic poverty, poor working and living conditions have been ignored (cf. Latt 2008, Chapter 6). Moreover, as the Shan are merely seen as 'foreigners' working as 'migrant workers', instead of being understood as integral members of society and the Thai economy (Sharma 2006), their poor living/working conditions are not the concerns of the Royal Project. As such, the Shan are erased from the economic relations between two official parties – the Hmong and the Royal Project.

## Conclusion

This paper argues that ethnic politics allows the Royal Project to foster new agricultural practices in Doi Soong because the creation of the Hmong and Shan as 'governable subjects' through identity construction enables the Royal Project to manage the Hmong and Shan accordingly. In other words, by constructing the Hmong as a 'hill tribe', a 'problem', and as 'environmental destroyers' the Royal Project is able to enforce 'environmentally friendly' agriculture in the name of solving the 'problem'. Similarly, by constructing the Shan as 'illegal' and 'economic migrants' by the state, and good labourers by the Hmong allow the Hmong farmers (and the Royal Project) to appropriate the Shan as unfree or forced labourers.

Agriculture continues to be the most significant livelihood activity in Doi Soong. Nonetheless, it has been transformed through processes of intensification,, while the notions of 'high quality' food production and 'environmentally friendly' agriculture have become the foundation of new agricultural policy in Thailand. The Hmong farmers' intensification of agriculture and the Royal Project's insistence on 'high quality' food have been facilitated by the availability of Shan labourers, whose cheap and flexible terms of employment have been shaped by the way they are constructed in Thailand as 'illegal' and 'economic immigrants'

and as good labourers in Doi Soong. The availability of Shan labour impacts Doi Soong agriculture in two ways. One is the fulfilling of labour shortages. The other is the continuity of agriculture despite the Royal Project's enforcement of costly 'green' agriculture.

The transformations that have taken place in Doi Soong can be understood by thinking through ethnic politics in which the positioning of different groups in dissimilar ways within the state enables the state to control and manage the labour of these groups accordingly. By creating the Hmong and Shan as 'governable subjects' – i.e. the construction of the Hmong and Shan as 'non-Thai' or 'other' – the state is able to manage and control them through mechanisms of insecurity. By naturalizing the nation-state and its borders, and by forgetting the history of nation-state building, the Hmong and Shan come to be treated as 'immigrants' and 'outsiders', regardless of their cross-border migratory history. It is this state ideology - 'the other threatening us' – that enables the state (and the Royal Project) to dominate the bodies, actions and labour of the Hmong and Shan in the name of 'protecting the citizens'.

As discussed in section 3 and 5, the Hmong farmers' income is being minimized by the Royal Project's insistence on 'environmentally friendly' agriculture. But the Hmong find hiring the Shan an opportunity to survive, without having to start non-farming activities. The Hmong effectively minimize their expenses by hiring the Shan, thus allowing them to intensify agriculture, and maintain a non-antagonistic relationship with the Royal Project.

Nonetheless, the costs of this 'success' – the Hmong's financial distress and the Shan labourers' chronic poverty - are hidden in the representation of the Royal Project from public discourse. Despite the fact that Doi Soong's agriculture now depends on Shan labour, the mobilization of the definition of the Royal Project's success has veiled the Shan's existence, labour contribution, and poor working/living conditions, as they are only seen as 'illegal' and as 'problems', but not as part of the society.

In sum, if we problematize ethnic politics, we can see that agrarian restructuring involves the transformation of agricultural practices and the restructuring of labour relations. Moreover, agrarian transformation involves the continuous creation of 'governable subjects', which allows the state to control the labour of different groups of people in fostering new modes of economic production. Once ethnic politics – in which people are labeled and positioned within the state in certain ways - is naturalized, naming someone a 'hill tribe' or 'migrant' is no longer seen as the product of social and historical processes, but as the embodiment of what the person actually is (Sharma 2006:54). This naturalization, then, obscures the connectivity among different groups of people to the extent that the contribution of these people, particularly the Shan in my research, is completely erased from the economic process. Thus, cross-border labourers with precarious legal status may facilitate agrarian transformation, but they may not be visible in public sphere.

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