Introduction: Seminar on Local and Regional Trade in Mainland Southeast Asia

Gehan Wijeyewardene

The Thai-Yunnan Project held a one-day seminar on 20 January on the above topic, mainly as a means of bringing together a number of students and other researchers working on topics relating to trade in the region. Major emphasis was given to trade across national boundaries. In November 1992 the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University held a seminar on the topic Karn kha chai daen (Border trade). It was an important occasion as not only the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prasong Soonsri, gave a paper, but many officials from a variety of government departments. Two important points made by Prasong, were the concern for economic security and the nature of border crossings which divide Thailand's relations into two categories - first with Burma and Laos and second with Cambodia and Malaysia. This arises out of a threefold division of border crossings. 1. Formal legal crossings where full international law applies and passports are required and accepted. 2 Temporary posts which limit quantity traded and time post is open. 3. Easing of restrictions for small trade. In fact it turns out that the only formal posts are with Malaysia and Laos. With Cambodia and Burma they are strictly 'easing of restrictions'. Prasong and the representative from the Interior Ministry make this point about formal posts. Border posts with Cambodia and Burma are strictly local 'easing of restrictions'. This applied until quite recently even at the Mae Sai-Khilek border. Prasong also makes a major distinction between systematic trade where tax is paid or officially waived, and unsystematic where trade is underground, unapproved channels too difficult to oversee.

In the light of these comments, the papers by Beasley and Walker are
particularly interesting. Walker discusses the 'official' crossing Chiang Khong-Huai Sai, and shows the many ways in which compromises are made for the benefit of all sides. It is particularly interesting that despite the formal state mechanisms that regulate trade, such informal things as traders groups and queues are an integral part of the working of the system. Beasley has looked very closely at the way in which the very formal trade post at the Friendship Bridge has become a vehicle carrying the entire ideological baggage of Thai-Lao relations and development in Laos. It appeared in discussion that the cost and red tape involved in using the bridge meant that many local people continued to use the ferries, which presumably worked on a queue system as much transport in Thailand does. One participant pointed out that very recently, probably as a result of some Australian intervention, the Lao government stopped the ferry transport, forcing everyone to use the bridge. There has been no confirmation of this story, but it does point to the wish of all governments, not just Southeast Asian ones, to turn everything into the systematic, and therefore controllable.

CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Triangles, quadrangles and circles 2

Northwestern Laos 7

The Friendship Bridge 12

The White Tai of LaiChau 15

NGOs in N. Thailand 17

Traders and Education 22

Correspondence

Jackie Yang 24

Chao-Tzang Yanghwe 25

Publications 26

Reviews

Corruption 26

Ecology 27

Editorial news 28

Beasley points out that the Lao polity has not had to wait for the bridge to play its part in the modern world. She also points out that the Mekhong only appears a barrier to a particular kind of Western
vision. In fact rivers bind people together rather than keep them apart. There is one aspect of the Thai-Lao relation which should be added to her discussion. This is the Thai desire to see their own past which has now vanished from most of Thailand, in Laos and in Luang Prabang in particular. She does touch on this when she cites an editorial from Thai Rath which suggests that the Lao should call themselves Thai Jai. This is a term traditionally applied to the people known as Shan and the Thai would like to assimilate Luang Prabang with Keng Tung as repositories of the old Thai past.

The border theme as it impinges on trade, in this case illegal opium trade, is discussed in the paper by Le Failler which examines the history of the DFeo family. He writes:

Explaining the particular history of this family is one way of understanding the geopolitical stakes which have made the four borders region one of the world's most complicated political areas.

The paper by E.C. Chapman has had to be held over for the next issue for reasons of space. It dealt however with the difficulties of planning the international links of communication in the new developing transnational quadrangle.

The papers by Niti and Rapin concentrate on internal, local trade and both, in their own way, show the importance of national issues as they impact on even the lowest level of trade.

There is a seamless web which links the lowest levels with the global view of trade as presented in Hinton's paper, which is essentially a discussion of the development of new ideologies that attempt to make sense of contemporary changes.

If I were to try to bring the themes of these papers together, I would argue that there is an unbroken connection between the attempts of local inhabitants trying to live their lives in the only environment they know up to the international global economy. Rapin shows how local, individual trade is caught up through government policy and the actions of NGOs - national and international, organizations into a global network. Many of the other papers, Walker, Beasley, Le Pettit, discuss the organization of local trade into an international network. The value of this exercise is, I believe, that it draws attention to close examination of what happens on the ground - at the level of village and individual.

I regret that we have not been able to reproduce the contributions of Phuangthong Ruangswasdisab, who looked at the historic operation of trade in western Cambodia during the period of Thai occupation, and Phillip Taylor who looked at the operation of local religious ideology in the development of modern economic activity.

* * *

Growth Triangles, Quadrangles and Circles: Interpreting Some
Macro-Models for Regional Trade

Peter Hinton

Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney

The explosive growth of Southeast Asian countries like Thailand and Malaysia and the liberalization of the Chinese economy has prompted a lot of thought about the future of the region. From 1948 until about 1980, military and strategic conceptions dominated discourse. Now, since the battlefields of Southeast Asia have become markets, idioms have changed, but people try to gaze into the future with an equal intensity.

The idioms these days are those of free-market trade and development economics. In this paper I take a critical look at some of the models for the advancement of regional trade which have been advanced.

Before I come to the contemporary situation, it is worth looking at some predictions that were made some fifty years ago by a distinguished China observer, American historian Owen Lattimore. Lattimore's predictions are of particular interest because he was writing at a time when the eventual Allied victory over Japan seemed assured, but before the portents for a new era of conflict, post-World War II had become evident. He thus wrote as if there would be a sustained era of peace after the Japanese war. A reading of Lattimore's work, moreover, highlights some of the hazards and rewards of crystal-ball gazing in a region where prediction is particularly difficult.

Lattimore and 'Yunnan: Pivot of Southeast Asia.'

Lattimore's paper appeared under this title in the journal Foreign Affairs (1943). Briefly, his thesis is as follows: By establishing treaty ports like Canton and Shanghai, the European powers caused a significant distortion of the Chinese economy. The ports were artificial creations, designed to facilitate the export of goods from China. They were located far from the resources and industries which were the heart of the Chinese economy, most of which were situated in the interior of China. In the de-colonized era which Lattimore believed would follow the war, he predicted a resurgence of Chinese enterprise, and a subsequent relocation of trade and industry to more natural locations. One of these would be Yunnan which was situated in an area well endowed with resources, particularly minerals. It was also ideally situated at a cross-roads for trade, being located between India and the bulk of China, and between China and Southeast Asia. The Chinese had recognised this, and had consequently built the Burma Road, running from Kunming to the frontier. The road was built (completed by the Chinese in 1937, ungraded by the Americans in 1941), he was at pains to emphasise, not as 'a desperate Chinese effort to create an emergency inlet into their country for foreign munitions' but as 'the first modern line of communications which the Chinese themselves pushed outward to a
foreign frontier' (Lattimore 1943:481. Original italics). They had also completed a railway from Kunming to the Burmese frontier which, they intended, would ultimately reach Lashio.

Until the invasion of China by Japan, Yunnan was almost untouched by industry. Its population was sparse (in an area about twice the size of France, it had a population little more than one quarter of France [around 11 million at the time cf about 35 million in 1990]). Another reason for industrial underdevelopment was that despite the existence of the Burma Road and the railway the French had built linking Haiphong and Kunming, transport infrastructure was very poor. The topography of the province was rugged and, unlike the rest of China, there were few navigable waterways. It remained an essentially self-contained province with an agricultural base.

This changed during World War II, when an influx of refugees boosted the population and the region became the locus for the forces mobilizing against the Japanese. Moreover, some of the industry, which had been driven from the war-affected parts of China, re-established in Kunming. There were 'textile mills, arsenals, smelters, a small plant for making high-test steel and a hydro-electric plant which, though small, is the largest in all China. Also _ most important _ there is a government-owned plant for the manufacture of high-precision-machine-making machinery.' (1943:488)

Lattimore regarded it as 'inconceivable that Yunnan will relapse into its old lethargy' after the war. He predicted that it would become 'one of the most profitable places in China.' (1943:491). Moreover, the Chinese would become more important in the undeveloped regions of Indochina to the south. He did not think that the people of that region would be fearful of the Chinese in these circumstances. On the contrary, they would be filled with dread at the post-war restoration of 'the order of colonial subjection and racial discrimination, world without end.....the Chinese will assume an altogether new and more admirable position'(491)

Lattimore could not have foreseen that Chinese politics would take the radical turn that it did, nor could he have predicted the tenacity with which colonial interests were defended after the war. Similarly, he could not have anticipated the rapid economic development of the mainland Southeast Asian countries, particularly Thailand, which has placed them in a position of countervailing economic force in the region. Nevertheless, the question he posed remains open: might it be that, with the current rapid growth of the Chinese economy, Yunnan will grow to the point that it will eclipse the Southeast Asian NICs to the south, and indeed become the 'pivot of Southeast Asia'? 

The Golden Triangle: an Anachronism?

The Golden Triangle is the region where Thailand, Burma and Laos conjoin on the Mekong River, at the northern extremity of Thailand. It has produced a substantial portion of the world's illicit opium since the 1950s. With an industry of this magnitude, located in
an area which has been the site of bitter regional and international conflict, it is unsurprising that powerful interests should take an interest in its conduct. These interventions have been well documented (eg McCoy 1972) so I will not elaborate here. Suffice to say that local power blocs, the international criminal underworld, elements of the defeated Chinese Nationalist forces (the Kuomintang) and the CIA have all been involved. The latter engagement was regarded as being particularly reprehensible by many in the US and elsewhere in the West, given the strong official US anti-narcotics stance. The 'Golden Triangle', has held a particular mystique for many because within it, the boundaries between the legal and the illegal, the acceptable and the unacceptable, and between rhetoric and reality, became as blurred as they were in an opium smoker's reveries.

The Golden Triangle may still exist as a point on the map where the territories of three countries meet, but it is no longer a figure which adequately captures the dramatically expanded scope of the narcotics trade in the region. This has become greatly extended over the past decade owing primarily to three factors. First, opium is now refined into heroin in small plants in Burma scattered along the Chinese and Thai frontiers. Heroin is both more concentrated and more difficult to detect than opium, making the task of smugglers much easier. Second, immense new markets have become accessible since the Chinese authorities relaxed controls on the cross border trade from Burma and Laos. Thirdly, with the end of the Indo-China war, new, poorly policed routes for smuggling the drug, for instance through Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, have become accessible. (See Lintner 1993 for a valuable account of the contemporary narcotics trade in the region.)

Despite all these developments, 'the Golden Triangle' usage is still very common. In fact it has taken on a new life. The flourishing tourist trade in far northern Thailand offers its clients tours of border areas, visits to a heroin museum, and for the intrepid trekker, a pipe of opium. New arrivals to the Thai border town of Mae Sai are greeted with the sign: 'Welcome to Mae Sai, Capital of the Golden Triangle.' The thrill of a brush with the exotic, the dangerous, the illicit has become a tradable commodity.

The Economic Quadrangle and the Chiang Rai Chamber of Commerce.

Enthusiasts for the 'Economic Quadrangle' decisively reject a related term which has gained some currency: 'The Golden Quadrangle.' The latter has too many resonances with its notorious predecessor, the Golden Triangle. Those who promote the concept of the Economic Quadrangle are at pains to distance themselves from the the past, and establish the trade of their region firmly in the mainstream.

The Economic Quadrangle encompasses northern Thailand, southern Yunnan, and adjoining sections of Laos and Burma. It is being promoted particularly by the Chiang Rai Chamber of Commerce in a conscious effort to enhance the prospects of Chiang Rai Province which, many local businessmen feel, has missed out on the boom which most of the rest of Thailand has enjoyed. Executives of the Chamber of
Commerce feel that the best policy for their area is to encourage trade to the north, particularly with China. Before this can happen, they argue, the abysmal transport infrastructure of the area will have to be improved. There is thus much talk of a possible ring road linking Thailand and China through Burma and Laos, although the country through which it will have to pass is very rough, and costs will be great. There is also talk of a free economic zone where commerce would flow unimpeded by the regulatory powers of national governments. The Chamber has spent a great deal of energy lobbying the Thai administration to have customs and immigration laws relaxed to allow Chinese produce, businesspeople and tourists easier access to Thailand.

Thanomsak Serivichyaswat, the President of the Chamber of Commerce, is a veterinarian turned lobbyist and publicist who spends most of his time promoting the cause of the Economic Quadrangle. He takes a high media profile. His organisation has run several well publicised tours by businesspeople of southern Yunnan. These were sponsored by several large corporations and by The Nation, one of Bangkok's two English language dailies. His organisation took up the term 'Economic Quadrangle' from the report of a European consultant which had drawn attention to the potential of trade between northern Thailand and Yunnan. He has been trying to persuade other northern provincial Chambers of Commerce to do likewise.

Thanomsak and other executives of the Chamber talk a lot about the apathy of the Bangkok Government. They have had little success in persuading the bureaucrats to build bridges and to streamline their administration of trade. They are also frank about their difficulties. The business tours, for example, have had mixed success. Initially they had difficulty in getting sufficient registrations to cover costs, and they found that the Chinese authorities were not always as cooperative as they felt they should have been. Then they had run into difficulties when they tried to encourage private contractors to improve the road through Burma to the Chinese border. Corrupt Burmese officials are a problem, and dissident ethnic groups, particularly the Wa, are disruptive, insisting on levying extortionate tolls on vehicles passing by. As a consequence the road from Mae Sai to the Chinese frontier via Kengtung remains poor, being negotiable only by four-wheel drive vehicles accompanied by an armed escort in the dry season. At the same time, the volume of river traffic remains low owing to difficulties of navigation and obstructive regulations. There are occasional tourist vessels the volume of the tourist trade has not been sufficient to warrant expansion of facilities.

Thanomsap and his colleagues spoke ruefully of their problems, but also insisted that the Quadrangle would come, even if it took a long haul on their part. They had been given some encouragement by the fact that the Asian Development Bank had taken up their cause. The ADB has put itself forward, less in its usual role as financier of projects, and more as a broker between the various national and provincial governments in the region. It has brought representatives of government, business and other interests together at conferences and workshops which were designed to talk through differences and to
devise policies and plans. The involvement of the ADB has given the idea of the Economic Quadrangle considerably greater prominence than before, but it remains to be seen whether this is sufficient to overcome the considerable obstacles that exist.

Asia's Growth Circles and the Sondhi Limthongkul Foundation

I had not heard of Growth Circles until I attended a conference in March 1994, held in Chiang Mai, entitled 'Asia's New Growth Circles'. It was organised by the Sondhi Limthongkul Foundation which, according to its publicity material, is a non-profit organization established in Thailand in August 1992. It is devoted to the promotion of exchanges of knowledge of and expertise in public policy, international issues, arts and culture. It has founded the Asia and Pacific Studies Centre at Mackay, on one of the campuses of the University of Southern Queensland, and the Center for Interdependence in Chiang Mai. It publishes Asia, Inc., a regional business magazine with a circulation of around 70,000, and Manager, an English language Thai business magazine. Both are distinguishable from the usual business magazine by the greater proportion of articles which highlight regional cultures. These attempt to present these cultures in their own right, rather than as exotic novelties.

I attended the conference with E.C. (Ted) Chapman with whom I have been working since early 1992 on the effects of current rapid economic changes in the upper Mekong basin. Our joint presentation (Chapman and Hinton 1994), was written for an audience which we expected to be mainly made up of businesspeople. Indeed most of the other presentations were from business, government, multi-lateral agencies or regional research institutions. The keynote address was by Deputy Prime Minister, Supachai Panitchpaka.

In fact the conference was something of a surprise. The invitees' presentations were effectively foils for an unconventional perspective the organisers sought to communicate. The nub of this position was contained in a speech by Sondhi Limthongkul himself, and in two papers by Prof Chai-anan Samudavanija. Sondhi Limthongkul is a highly successful businessman, philanthropist and intellectual. Prof Chai-anan is a prominent Thai academic who has published some radical analyses of Thai politics (Morell and Chai-anan, 1981), yet who has also been adviser to several recent Prime Ministers. He is now CEO of the Sondhi Limthongkul Foundation.

The Growth Circles idea was put forward as a distinctively Asian attempt to rethink conventional notions of trade, culture and history to present an alternative to the dominant ideas which its proponents claim are Eurocentric. Here is a quotation from a special supplement of Asia, Inc., which was published to coincide with the conference:

'Our world this month is on the brink of building the 21st Century's global economic structures. We are, in fact, at a magic moment of history......In December 1999 the Portuguese flag comes down in Macau. On the morning of January 1, 2000, the sun will rise on a
region finally administered by its own people. Asians have reached the moment when, as management guru Kenichi Ohmai puts it, 'We have ceased to be fooled by 19th Century concepts of the nation-state.' One result: the emergence in almost every Asian business community and foreign and trade ministry of different attitudes toward territorial border-lines often drawn to suit non-Asian political and mercantilist needs or ambitions....a trend toward a new, more affluent and - above all - more borderless Asia now seems inexorable. Many of these regional experiments are being called growth triangles, quadrangles, special economic zones and the like. We prefer to think of them as circles, a word implying both territory and businessman to businessman guanxi, the evocative Chinese term for 'connections' (1993:37).

Chai-anan, in his papers (1993a and 1993b), elaborated on these ideas. For him, the nation-state, after being imposed by colonial powers, crushed traditional civil society and, while loudly proclaiming the ideas of abstract democracy and human rights entrenched elites which came to conflate the notions of 'market' with those of 'civil society.' Arrangements between nations have, he argued, taken two forms. First of all there was 'inter-nationalization', in which blocs of nations were formed, between which the United Nations was called upon to arbitrate when disputes arose. Then, when this approach ran into difficulties, an alternative, 'supra-nationality', emerged: 'Supra-nationality is a state-centric notion and can be regarded as an instrument pursued by nation-states which share more or less similar economic, social, legal and cultural systems.' It has led nations into trading blocs like NAFTA in North America, AFTA in Southeast Asia, APEC in Asia and the Pacific.

The gap between elites and the people has been steadily widening throughout this process, Chai-anan argues. Movements have been established by groups wishing to reassert popular sentiment. There has been, for example, the green movement, which, he suggests, could be a model for those rethinking Asian regionism: 'the images of triangles or quadrangles of growth should be replaced by the image of 'Circles of Growth', because a circle symbolises interdependence, networking and cross-cultural interactions which at each point could be connected without any structural domination and centralisation.'(1993:5. Italics added.)

An elaborate map distributed to conference participants shows several growth circles (with the heading, 'Asia's New Growth Circles: An Alphabet of Opportunities as the Millenium Nears'). They are very large. One extends from Chengdu (Sichuan) in the north to the Kra Isthmus in the south, and from Hanoi in the east to Chittagong in the west. Another extends from Guiyang in the north to Cam Ranh in the south and from Hong Kong in the east to Vientiane in the west. They seem to an extent arbitrary and provisional, deliberately fuzzy edged so as to avoid the hard edged angular thinking implied by the geometrical figures. Sondhi and Chai-anan would argue that the concreteness of the latter is illusory. They are doomed to failure for as long as they give such strong priority to the economic and fail to take historical and cultural factors into account.
In sum, the Growth Circle idea moves beyond the purely economic, regarding cultural and equity matters as being of equal importance to trade success. It explicitly challenges more conventional models which are contingent upon the prioritization of the nation-state. It is of added interest because it is not being posited by a fringe group of academics or intellectuals, but by people who have been successful in business, who are well endowed, and who have the means to propagate their ideas to a wide audience. It is an Asian attempt to think beyond Western imposed ideas, which is poles apart from the strident authoritarianism of some - like Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew - exponents of 'the Asian way'

Conclusion

In a recent issue of Foreign Affairs, the same journal in which Lattimore published his article over fifty years ago, a paper by Paul Krugman (1994) challenges the conventional wisdom about the 'miracle' economies of East and Southeast Asia. Krugman argues that the spectacular growth rates which have been characteristic of countries like Japan and Singapore are unlikely to be sustained because they are a result of extraordinary, one-off growth of capital and labour inputs rather than gains in efficiency. They are a product of the same sort of rapid and novel mobilization of resources as occurred in the Soviet Union in the 1950s. To consolidate their gains, the governments concerned will have to make painful choices which will put their 'miracle' in a more realistic light.

Krugman, in predicting a marked slow-down of the boom economies of Asia is, like Lattimore, looking into the future. His paper is a reminder that nothing is certain in this region. Could it be that Lattimore will turn out to be right, and that the emergence of Yunnan in a pivotal role has merely been delayed by six or seven decades? Certainly with the awakening of China to the potential of market economies in the region, the regional centre of gravity could well shift away from the boom areas of Thailand, towards Kunming in the north. And it is worth remembering that to the north east of Yunnan lies Sichuan, with its huge population and abundant resources.

So, whither growth circles, squares, triangles and other figures? The idea of the Growth Quadrangle in particular started out as a means of focusing the minds of bureaucrats, businesspeople, diplomats and the general public on the benefits that would flow from inter-national cooperation in the region. However, the higher the profile of such international arrangements, the more national interests and pride crystallise and override issues of common interest. Ironically, measures to secure international cooperation can cause the opposite of their worthy intentions. So perhaps, while the involvement of the Asian Development Bank in negotiations for greater regional cooperation is to be welcomed at one level, at another it might function to impede the cross border trade which is enjoying rapid spontaneous growth (Chapman, Hinton and Tan, 1992. Also Chapman and Hinton 1993).
Does the Growth Circle model present a more viable set of possibilities? The idea of trade being associated with 'interdependence, networking and cross-cultural interactions...without structural domination and centralisation', to use Chai-anan's words, is an appealing one, but is it ever likely to happen? The nation state is not going to go away in the foreseeable future. The Lao, for instance, are wary of Thai, whose nation is inestimably larger, wealthier and more powerful than their own. They will cling just as tenaciously to their national identity as the Thai would if they were similarly threatened. While promoting the idea that Lao culture is distinctive (although it is essentially the same as that of north-eastern Thailand), they will do so in the idiom of national identity. Similarly, strong pragmatic interests will be defended in terms of the national interest. For instance, the restrictions on the flow of people and goods from China by the Thai authorities in the northern provinces, which the Chiang Rai Chamber of Commerce regards as an unnecessary restriction on their freedom to do business, are at base dictated by Thai concern about being swamped by cheap Chinese labour and manufactured goods.

None of the scenarios suggested by the geometrical models are likely to come to fruition in a literal sense. They are essentially wish lists in geometrical form, helping those who propound them to think through their aspirations and to convey their views to others. They are, above all, imaginative constructs. Like any act of the imagination they shape actions, but the outcomes are rarely, if ever, quite as expected.

References


Chai-anan Samudavanija 1994(a) Bypassing the State. Paper presented to the Conference on Asia's New Growth Circles, Chiang Mai 3-6 March 1994


TRADE AND TRANSPORT IN NORTH-WESTERN LAOS*

Andrew Walker

Anthropology, Research school of Pacific and Asian Studies. ANU

INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin this paper at the Golden Triangle - that famous point where the borders of Thailand, Laos and Burma meet midstream in the Mekhong. Personally, this place depresses me. The river views are spectacular but the rows of empty concrete apartments and shops, tourist stalls selling a mass of Triangle and poppy memorabilia, and the generic "hill tribe" girls posing for photographs hold little attraction. In fact whenever I visited the Triangle it was almost devoid of visitors except for those forcibly bussed in by tour companies.

However on the southern outskirts of the town things are moving. The Haa Chiang (or Five City) Plaza is nearing completion. The plaza is a northern Thai triumph in concrete and timber veneer. By local standards it's big - three stories high with two main wings around an open courtyard. On the river side there is a large outdoor pavement which overlooks extensive port facilities. This will be the place where the nouveau riche of southern China step ashore and inspect, under one roof, almost everything Thailand has to offer. It
will also farewell their Thai counterparts as they set out on their "dream journey" up the "mysterious jungle river" that is the Mekhong.

The plaza is being built by MP World Travel, part of the MP conglomerate owned by Chart Thai Party deputy leader Wattana Asvahame. The MP Group has purchased five German built "747 Jetcrafts" that will provide cruise services between Luang Phrabang in northern Laos and Jinghong in Sipsongpanna. Beside the Plaza, the rustic MP villas and travel agency will make way for a riverside resort hotel. Nearby, across the narrow Ruak river in Burma, a massive casino complex is under construction. Across the Mekhong River in Laos MP has built a large warehouse allegedly in preparation for the opening of a tax free trade zone at the Triangle.

The activities of the MP Group are central to the new ideology of the "economic quadrangle". According to the key proponents of this ideology - the Chiang Rai Chamber of Commerce, the Governor of Chiang Rai and the Asian Development Bank - investments in transport infrastructure and the continued deregulation of socialist economies will enable dramatic increases in cross-border trade, investment and tourism. The infrastructural linking of the dynamic economies of northern Thailand and southern China via the relatively untamed hinterlands of Burma and Laos is seen as an almost inevitable formula for success - a "Mekhong corridor" along which prosperity will flow. At the same time the corridor is seen as linking, and even strengthening, the common cultural traditions of the region. The businessmen of Sipsongpanna and northern Thailand can cruise in air-conditioned comfort hoping to catch a glimpse of the bare breasted Lu maidens featured in their tour booklets bathing by the river. In the new world of the quadrangle prosperity and tradition can exist side by side.

However, some traditions are more marketable than others. Last year it was revealed that MP's owner Wattana Asvahame had been denied an American visa on the basis of suspected involvement in the drug trade. Wattana protesteth so much that at one stage he even threatened to sue Bill Clinton. As the jewel in the quadrangle crown, Wattana and MP are looking a little tarnished.

THE CHIANG KHONG BOAT OPERATORS' ASSOCIATION

About 60 kilometres downstream from the Haa Chiang Plaza lies the busy Thai river port of Chiang Khong. Near the top of the bank overlooking the port is a ramshackle cluster of sheds where I undertook much of my research. These sheds have a superb view of the Mekhong and the Lao town of Huay Sai on the opposite bank and are a pleasant place to sit in the evening drinking whiskey and talking trade. This is the headquarters of the Chiang Khong cross-river boat operators association.

In all there are about 40 cross-river boats operating out of Chiang Khong. All of the boats are individually owned and operated, all operators are men and almost all of them live in the village forming the commercial heart of Chiang Khong - Wat Luang. Their wooden
boats are all about 13 metres long and 1 metre wide. Most have a capacity of about 1.5 tonnes and they are powered by four cylinder car engines that are imported second-hand from Japan.

The main function of the boat operators association is to coordinate a roster system known as the "queue". Under this system the 40 boats are divided into 4 queues of 10. On each working day (Monday to Friday) only one of the queues provides cross river services - one quarter of the boats being quite sufficient to meet demand on all but the busiest days. Given that the boat operators only work one day in four most are engaged in a number of other occupations: many of them work as small scale cross-border traders and many also have fruit orchards and rice fields in villages surrounding Chiang Khong.

The boat operators derive their revenue from two main sources: Thai traders and Lao traders. I will discuss these in turn.

The core of the Thai trading group is made up of approximately 20 female traders working between Chiang Khong and Huay Sai. Many of them are the wives or close relatives of boat operators. On any day the ranks of the traders are swelled by boat operators who are rostered off and by a small number of male traders who are not boat operators. Most traders travel over to Huay Sai every day, take orders, return to Chiang Khong, buy from the many shops in the main street and travel back to Huay Sai to sell. Almost all sales are made in response to orders and only a few traders take goods across to sell on a speculative basis. Whilst in Huay Sai the traders spend a lot of time standing around and wandering the main street waiting for customers to place orders. Some follow delivery circuits in the local tuk-tuks dropping off goods at small shops, collecting payments and taking orders as they go. Very little is bought in Huay Sai for sale in Chiang Khong apart from the occasional pieces of cloth and exotic vegetables and animals from the local market.

The Lao traders using the cross-river boat operators fall into a number of categories. Some are shopkeepers from Huay Sai who buy in sufficient bulk to justify the freight costs and immigration fees. A second group are traders from Luang Namtha who are travelling across to Huay Sai where they will load onto trucks for the arduous road trip north (only possible in the dry season). Finally, there are traders from Lao towns down river who cross to Huay Sai to load onto small Lao boats for the journey home.

The Thai traders are charged much lower rates than their Lao counterparts. For example a Thai trader pays 80 baht for a full boat-load whereas a Lao trader pays 170 baht. Thai traders who are also boat operators, and thus members of the association, are not charged anything at all. The fact that rates charged to Thai traders are substantially lower gives them an important competitive advantage and is a barrier to the entry of Lao traders into small scale cross-border trade. Whilst there is an ample supply of boats on the Lao side of the river the Thai boat operators association will not permit them to moor and load at Chiang Khong.
At the end of the day the members of the relevant boat operators queue adjourn to one of the sheds for the calculations and distribution of the money. Whilst the amount is basically equally distributed there are numerous deductions and loadings which make the process somewhat complex and often contentious. Very generally, individual daily takings of 400-500 baht are considered acceptable - disappointing on a Friday (which is usually busy) but good enough on other days. Amounts above 600-700 are considered good, with the 1000 baht barrier only being breached on a few days per year.

LONG DISTANCE TRADE IN LAOS

Chiang Khong is the source of most Thai manufactured goods sold throughout northern Laos and Lao traders travel there in considerable numbers to purchase stock. The largest number of these traders come up river from Luang Phrabang, followed by Huay Sai, Udom Xai, Paak Beng and Luang Namtha. A small number of traders travel from as far afield as Xiang Khoang, Phongsalie and Sam Neua. Almost all traders buy in Chiang Khong to sell in their town of origin, with the obvious exception of the long distance Huay Sai traders who tend to concentrate on selling in Paak Beng and Udom Xai.

I estimate that approximately 70 percent of the Lao traders are women, though this may be an overestimate given that their distinctive dress makes them much more visible than their male counterparts. Almost all traders conduct their trading activities in groups ranging in size from 2 to 10 people, with four or five people being the most common. From my observations the cooperation within the group is limited to sharing the cost of cargo boats and trucks. Group members purchase goods separately and are likely to have different customers. When I ask traders about the advantages and disadvantages of working in groups they almost always say that it is less convenient but more fun and safer than working alone.

I am currently working closely with three groups of traders all of whom trade along the Huay Sai, Paak Beng, Udom Xai trading route.

The first group is made up mainly of traders based in Huay Sai who sell in Udom Xai. This group is unusual in that it has a relatively large number of men. The core of the group is four husband and wife pairs who live in south Huay Sai. Two of the women are sisters. One of the couples used to work for Lao customs in Huay Sai, greatly assisting the group in its negotiations with customs over import duty payments. The other key member of the group is a male trader from Udom Xai. He and his wife own a retail stall in the market at Udom Xai (the largest market in north-western Laos) and are an important link with the group's customers. The group goes on trading journeys roughly once a month, typically spending some 2-3 million baht in the wholesale shops at Chiang Khong. Given that they are well known to the shop keepers they have access to credit - paying a 2-3% surcharge as interest. Debts have to be repaid within four weeks. The group usually takes the one day trip to Paak Beng in one or two 70
tonnes boats that are hired at the Huay Sai port. (All the long
distance cargo boats are Lao owned by individual owner operators.)
Loading onto the boats at Chiang Khong and off at Paak Beng is
undertaken by teams of labourers who work at the port and who are paid
according to tonnage. Trucks are hired for the eight hour trip to Udom
Xai at the Paak Beng port. There is usually a queue of trucks waiting
at Paak Beng who have bought Chinese goods down from Mengla (to be
sent by river to Luang Phrabang and Vientiane) or timber from the
mills in northern Laos (to be sent up river to Chiang Khong). Having
delivered the goods to the customers in the large market at Udom Xai
some of the traders travel to Mengla in China to purchase small loads
of textiles, toys and electronic goods to sell back in Huay Sai. Those
that don't travel to China usually wait in Udom Xai to collect
payments from their customers. The return trip to Huay Sai is made by
pick-up truck to Paak Beng and speed-boat for the 3 hour trip up the
river.

The core of the second trading group I am working with is a
couple from Huay Sai who operate a 25 tonne cargo boat alongside their
trading activities. They work with a number of different traders, but
while I was working with them last year they developed a close
relationship with a female trader from Udom Xai whose husband owns a
truck that operates between Paak Beng, Udom Xai and Mengla (in China).
Having guaranteed access to both a truck and boat gives this group a
strong trading advantage - removing uncertainty and reducing freight
costs. Whereas the couple based in Huay Sai sell mainly in Paak Beng
where they have a large number of relatives, their trading partner
take goods in her husband's truck to Udom Xai where they are sold to
traders from Phongsalie and Sam Neua. Prior to joining up with the
Huay Sai pair, the trader from Udom Xai had made at least one trading
trip to Chiang Khong but found it unprofitable due to her inability to
negotiate effectively with the Lao customs. The Huay Sai couple, on
the other hand are highly skilled at these negotiations and now
negotiate on behalf of their trading partner, consistently achieving
very low rates of duty through a careful combination of charm,
assertiveness and persistence. Typically the trading trips of this
group involve about 1 million baht worth of stock.

The third group is the most diffuse with the core being a
group of 3 small-scale female traders from Paak Beng who sell mainly
in their home town but who are also involved in occasional ventures to
Udom Xai. They travel to Chiang Khong regularly and buy in relatively
small quantities, often shopping at the large travelling market that
is staged in Chiang Khong each Friday. Despite being regular traders
they still pay cash for their purchases. The composition of the
trading group varies greatly and they often come to Chiang Khong
separately or with other traders from Paak Beng. They usually return
home after one or two days on small cargo boats, selling to the shops
clustered along the main street in Paak Beng. One of this group is
involved in a strategic relationship with a Lao customs officer in
Huay Sai.

THE TIMBER TRADE
Currently the largest export from north-western Laos consists of sawn timber bought up the Mekhong river in large (50 to 80 tonne) boats, off loaded at Chiang Khong and then distributed by truck throughout Thailand. Whereas the sale and distribution of manufactured goods discussed above is controlled by Lao traders, the timber industry is dominated by Thai capital.

I am currently aware of 6 sawmills operating in this region. Two mills are located in Bokeo province - one at Sin Udom, 5 kilometres downstream from Huay Sai; the other at Bandaan a further 10 kilometres down the river. Following the river downstream the next mill is located about half way to Paak Beng on the south bank at Paak Op. Just to the south of Paak Beng, in Udom Xai province, another mill is currently under construction. A second, newly constructed, mill in this province is located to the north of Paak Beng at Moung Houn about one third of the way along the road to Udom Xai. Currently there is only one mill in Luang Namtha province, located just outside the provincial capital on the road to Muang Sing. There is also a large mill in Phongsalie province, outside north-western Laos, but the output of the mill is trucked, via Mengla in China, to Paak Beng and then up the river to Chiang Khong.

The spate of Thai investment in sawmills in this region represents something of a return to the period of the 1960's when at least 7 mills dotted the Mekhong river bank in Bokeo province. Given the lack of transport infrastructure and security problems in other parts of the north-west the riverside strip of Bokeo province bordering Thailand was the most suitable location for timber ventures. Most of these mills were established with Thai capital, though Lao entrepreneurs and some members of the Lao military were also involved. The industry collapsed after 1975 as a result of the withdrawal of Thai investment, the closing of the border for trade and lack of fuel and spare parts for machinery.

By the late 1980's only 2 of these mills remained - Sin Udom and Bandaan. Sin Udom is currently leased to a Chiang Khong based business that has taken on the Sin Udom name. The owner lives in Chiang Khong where he has a large timber yard on the southern outskirts of town. He is also involved in major real estate developments around Chiang Khong and owns Chiang Khong's only trucking company and the cross-river vehicular ferry operating between Chiang Khong and Huay Sai. The second mill, Bandaan, is leased to a businesswoman now based in Chiang Khong who used to run a timber trading business in Nong Khai.

The mill at Paak Op is located in the Chiang Rom/Hong Sa "Special Region" - two districts carved out of Oudomxai province that have been placed under special (probably military) administration presumably by virtue of the region's extensive resources in timber and lignite. The mill is owned by an ex-police Chief and member of Parliament from a central Thai province. It is not yet fully operational. A road has been constructed from Paak Op through to Phayao province in Thailand and timber will be taken out through this quicker and less supervised route rather than shipped up the Mekhong
to Chiang Khong.

The mill at Paak Beng is currently under construction. This mill is being built by the Thai tobacco giant Thepawong owned by the famous Wongwan family. The Wongwan family has a number of other interests in Laos including a cigarette factory and hotel in Vientiane.

The mill at Moung Houn was completed late last year. The Lao partner in this venture is a private trading company that, amongst other things, markets fuel in northern Laos. I have been unable to find out the identity of the Thai investor.

Finally, the mill at Luang Namtha is currently operated by a Thai businessman who was previously involved with the sawmill at Sin Udom. Prior to this he was a timber trader working out of Nong Khai. I understand that the mill was originally constructed by the Luang Namtha provincial government, but has been substantially expanded and upgraded by the current operator.

As mentioned above, most timber from these mills is taken up the Mekhong to be unloaded at Chiang Khong. This is the business of large cargo boats, some of which specialise in the transport of timber, whilst others carry timber on the return journey after carrying long distance traders and their cargos down to Paak Beng. The boat operators are paid what they consider to be a very good rate for the carriage of timber - substantially more per tonne than they ask of the Lao traders. The timber is unloaded at Chiang Khong about one kilometre upstream from the main freight port, and stored in a series of yards belonging to the various importing companies. After customs assessment it is loaded onto trucks to be taken to buyers throughout Thailand.

CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with a brief overview of the trade and transportation networks in north-western Laos.

The main trading corridor is from Chiang Khong/Huai Sai down the Mekhong River to Luang Phrabang. An important branch of this corridor heads north by road from Paak Beng to Udom Xai. Udom Xai itself acts as a distribution point for goods to towns throughout northern Laos - Luang Namtha, Xiang Khuang, Phongsalie and Sam Neua. There is also a strong southward movement down the road passing through Udom Xai to the Mekhong at Paak Beng. This southward stream consists of Chinese manufactured goods from Mengla destined for Luang Phrabang and Vientiane and sawn timber from mills at Luang Namtha and Phongsalie destined for Chiang Khong. There is also a significant flow of forest products destined for export at Chiang Khong. Informants at Paak Beng have told me that in the past there was some movement of cattle down this road on the way to buyers in Thailand but that this trade has dried up in the last 2 years.

In future years there are likely to be two major changes in
the road system of north-western Laos. Firstly, the road from Huay Sai to Luang Namtha and onward to the Chinese border will be greatly upgraded. The impetus for the southern half of this upgrade is the imminent large-scale export of lignite from Vieng Phukha to Thailand. Aid funds are being provided for the northern half of the road opening up a direct land route between Thailand, northern Laos and southern China. The second major change will be the development of roads from Nan and Phayao provinces in Thailand through the special region in Laos to the Mekhong. Once again, in the case of the road from Nan province to Hong Sa, lignite is the rationale. Road developments from Hong Sa onward to Sayaboury and Luang Phrabang are also planned. Further to the west there is already a road south from Paak Op to Phayao province and a number of other roads cutting through the Special Region from the Mekhong are in various stages of development.

Looking north from Chiang Khong/Huay Sai, there is some movement of goods upstream along the Mekhong. During the wet season in 1994 a number of Chinese vessels came to Huay Sai to pick up cargos, including 2000 tonnes of dried lam yaay from Chiang Mai and 200 tonnes of rubber from south Thailand. Interestingly most of the Chinese boats arrived in Huay Sai empty, despite the much reported desire of Chinese enterprises to export via Thailand. I was told that some had unloaded cargoes in Burma.

Possibly the most interesting trade was that from Huay Sai upstream to Burma. Throughout the latter half of 1994 I noticed truck-loads of goods being taken from Chiang Khong across to Huay Sai on the vehicular ferry. Many of these loads were transit loads from Klong Toey Port in Bangkok having come from Singapore and Taiwan. These goods were then loaded into Lao cargo boats and sent upstream. After some time I found out that they were going up to Muang Mom, a small Lao village opposite Burma just north of the Golden Triangle. They were sent across the river to a Burmese village some 30 kilometres from Tachilek. The goods included cigarettes, textiles and electronic products. I was puzzled why the goods didn't go direct by truck to Tachilek from Thailand and repeated enquiries usually met with no response. I suspect that the goods are travelling into Burma by this backdoor route so as to avoid customs duties at the much more supervised entry point at Tachilek. I also read with interest recent reports that Khun Sai is shifting his operating base from eastern Shan state to the west on the Mekhong border with Laos. Apparently stricter Thai border control has lead him to seek new supply lines through Laos.

One final note. Muang Mom, the Lao village I just mentioned, has an interesting trading history. When the border between Thailand and Laos was closed Thai merchants from Mae Sai and Chiang Saen used to travel through Burma to a large market that then operated at Muang Mom where they would sell to Lao traders from throughout northern Laos. Today the large market place is abandoned and becoming overgrown, but Muang Mom still serves as a backdoor trading point. In addition to the transit trade to Burma noted above, Lao boat operators have told me that boats based at Muang Mom travel to China to buy cattle that are brought back down the river and smuggled into Burma.
and northern Thailand. Muang Mom is also a popular place for residents of Huay Sai to go and buy motor bikes that have been stolen in Thailand. Golden triangle or economic quadrangle, some things never change.

* * *

The Friendship Bridge: opening up Laos to Southeast Asia

Tamerlaine Beasley

SEAsia Studies Centre, Asian Studies, ANU

I went to Laos in September last year and interviewed a lot of different people in government and business, NGOs and attempted to contrast the sorts of things people were saying in the area with representations of the Friendship Bridge in the media. Try to draw some conclusions about the parallels and discrepancies between the two. I was actually looking at images and perceptions of the Friendship Bridge. The media representation of the bridge gives quite an insight into some of the misperceptions or perceptions, depending on your view of the region, and how they are changing currently. With the PR, the bridge received excessive media coverage for a bridge as you probably saw with the opening ceremony. The coverage received was extreme for such a minor piece of infrastructure, which demonstrates, obviously, that it was a political event rather than simply a basic construction. The Australian government had a lot to do with the extent of the publicity for the bridge. It made a concerted effort to ensure the opening was covered extensively and AIDAB, particularly, used the bridge as PR to promote itself in the region. And also demonstrated the changing nature of AIDAB and the way it attempts to link business and development in the region. The press releases were made very frequently by the Australian Embassy in Bangkok. The stamp release, all these things were a concerted media effort by AIDAB. The opening ceremony was obviously the pinnacle of that effort. and the heads of state there indicated the importance attached to the bridge. Some of the themes emerging in the representation of the bridge in the Thai and Australian media were that the bridge was a catalyst in opening up Laos. The following quotation is a classic of the sort of representation the bridge received. The Age newspaper, speaks of the bridge as it:

'emerges from the downpour and the heat six great fluted pillars of concrete struck deep into the river bed, opening landlocked, battered and browbeaten Laos to outside economies and ideas'. This sort of theme emerged consistently in all the representations of the bridge. The bridge is opening up Laos, not only physically opening up Laos to trade, but opening up Laos to outside economies and ideas. So it is a more perceptual thing, speaking of ideas more than physical trade moving across the bridge. The bridge as a catalyst. The metaphor used particularly was extreme in relation to the bridge, It assumed almost a religious significance in a lot of the media coverage. This was not only in the Thai media, the Australian media also picked up on this. The bridge as a symbol, the title of the bridge, the bridge of
friendship and the bridge, the concept of the bridge, bridging two previously separate entities. You can imagine the sort of titles that come out of that. Of articles. The bridge was basically considered, described as a bridge to everything. The amount of words tagged on the end of that phrase was phenomenal. Also the contrast was drawn to demonstrate this catalyst concept, like the dark isolation of Laos, before the bridge, coming into the light, the dawning of a new era. The contrast before and after the bridge was quite interesting. Another of the key themes that emerged was Laos as a closeed entity before the bridge came. Laos was landlocked, bounded, The Mekhong River as a barrier separating Laos and the outside world. These sort of quotes. The Mekhong described as a formidable barrier and moat protecting an isolated communist Laos from capitalist Thailand. And now it is to be bridged by Australians, was common in a lot of different articles. This self-promotion is quite evident in most articles. It was quite phenomenal some of the concepts which were projected onto the bridge. One article actually went as far as suggesting the Mekhong river was a barrier comparable to the Berlin Wall, which is quite extreme considering the nature of borders in Southeast Asia and the contrast between Western and Southeast asian notion of borders. It was obvious this concept of Laos being closed and blocked off, a bounded entity tended to draw on the Western concept of borders. the surprising thing was a lot of the Thai media used those concepts as well. That Laos was previously closed because of physical barriers the Mekhong, whereas, despite 1975, the Thais and Lao people have been travelling backwards and forwards across the Mekhong for centuries and that has not changed. The fact that 10% of the population managed to flee Laos after 1975, tends to demonstrate the fact that even different political regimes have not stopped that sort of situation. With these sort of contrasts between closed and open Laos, I think, when you look at them in a more political light they become a lot clearer. When you are looking at Laos as closed you tend to project 'closed' as in 'politically closed to the West and capitalism'. A lot of the metaphors, a lot of the descriptions of the bridge become a lot more accurate because the bridge is demonstrating the changing nature of relationships and in a way is opening up Laos because of bridging of relationships between the capitalist and socialist worlds in Southeast Asia at the moment.

The bridge has easily lent itself to metaphoric descriptions. Another interesting angle on the metaphoric representation of the bridge is that the bridge was described as a bridge to modernity and change, and as a pathway which physically allows change to enter Laos. This was one of the themes which the NGOs picked up on. That the bridge would bring AIDS, bring prostitution, Thai cultural imperialism to Laos. The concept is actually quite ridiculous. The resistance to change and the assumption that change would bring all these evil influences on these previously simple, pure, untainted societies. In some of my research I found similar parallels throughout Lao development. Mayoury Ngaosyvarthn has written about Lao women yesterday and today. In her description on prostitution on Laos she blames prostitution initially on the French and when the French left she blames the continuation of prostitution on the Americans and when the Americans left she blames it on the Thais. And now its quite similar
with the bridge, prostitution is going to arrive in Laos. This concept of Laos as a pure, untainted protected state open to corruption from the outside continuously emerged with the representation of the bridge. This sort of simplistic portrayal of Laos was extreme and extremely patronizing in many cases. Some of the images of Laos portrayed in the representation of the bridge of Lao people playing pan flutes and riding astride buffaloes in lush paddy fields. The cliched views of Asia often represented in the Western media. Just abounded in regard to the Friendship Bridge. The incredibly patronizing view of Laos, romanticizing the idyllic, protected life style and Laos as totally untouched. Which is interesting considering the incredibly volatile nature of Laos' political history. And debasing the war in the region and the constant contact with the outside. This notion of Laos as closed continues throughout all the representation of the bridge. For example in the Bulletin it was said the bridge would end centuries of isolation by providing a link with the outside world. Obviously some of these concepts are ridiculous and extreme. The rather frightening thing is that they are consistent in almost all the representations of the bridge.

I think in a lot of cases what was actually happening is that much change in Laos at the moment, and in the region, was projected on to the bridge. The bridge may not even have been relevant to a lot of this change, but because it was built by Australians and because it was a politically neutral topic and because there were other people involved, if you were criticizing change because of the bridge you weren't directly criticizing your own government. So a lot of political and economic criticism was directed onto the bridge. A lot of the changes which are happening in Laos, the Australian government took credit for, quite effectively, with the bridge. The bridge is bringing economic development to Laos, and encouraging economic reform. I think a lot of the change which the bridge highlighted was a result of the 1986 new economic management system of the Lao government which was introducing market pricing and decentralizing economic decision making, economic reform, the increasingly close relationship with Thailand, the well-known 1985 statement of Chatichai 'changing battlefields into marketplaces'. So in a lot of ways Laos was opening up, to use the term in another way, to Thailand before the bridge eventuated, before the idea of the bridge came.

I think with this blaming of the bridge - it depends on whether you see it as negative or positive, I suppose, it provided a forum for discussion of a lot of the changes which were going on in Laos society. Groups were set up in Laos and Thailand which provided a forum for Thai and Lao people to get together and look at the way in which Lao society and Thai society are changing and the changing actual relationships between the two. I don't think the representation of the bridge as changing everything and being such a catalyst is very realistic. I think the Lao government is extremely wary of opening up to Thailand and understandably so in many ways. Because of the publicity of the bridge there was a lot of publicity in the Thai media about Laos about the time of the opening of the bridge. One Thai article in Thai Rath was particularly interesting. It was an editorial style article and the author suggested that Thailand and Laos were
pursuing closer economic relations and was very positive about this. However, the author suggested that for greater integration and the benefit of the Lao people the Lao people should all learn to speak Thai, particularly the Lao minorities so that they could be better integrated into the Lao state. It was also suggested that a railway should run all the way through Laos into Thailand and that Laos should also consider changing the name they call themselves, from Lao, because the Northeastern Thai people call themselves 'Lao'. The Lao people in Laos should not call themselves Lao. They should call themselves Tai Jai. When you are looking at these sort of things and the Phi-nong relationship between Thai and Lao, it is understandable that the Lao government is somewhat wary. And having this bridge, despite the claims of the Australian government, won't automatically change the situation and the Lao government do have the potential to control this change. And the major way they can control this is through the Lao bureaucracy. That was one of the things which happened when the bridge initially opened. The bridge was not functioning for the general population. And even now it is still very difficult to get across the bridge. The fees are quite arbitrary crossing into Laos. A lot of Thais are very dissatisfied at the charges being made by the Lao government to get in across the bridge because it is not the same as into Thailand. So they say it is not fair and that the Lao people are trying to make money from the Thais. There are a whole lot of obstacles to the bridge being used freely. Another major obstacle to these images of change which have come in with the bridge, some of the represenations in the media of what the bridge will achieve are just phenomenal, like it will now open up so that you can drive from Singapore to Beijing. I mean these sort of concepts and they weren't only demonstrating what might be possible one day. In a lot of ways it was assumed, in a lot of articles, particularly economic articles, like in the Financial Review that economic change will happen overnight. I don't think there was much understanding of the extent of Lao under-development and the problems which hinder Lao development. The bureaucratic constraints, the lack of Lao infrastructure, government inefficiency, the lack of educated bureaucrats, the corruption and one of the major problems with development in Laos today is not the lack of funds, there is an incredible amount of aid funds in Laos. It is the problem of the government to utilize the funds efficiently. There simply isn't the bureaucracy to effectively coordinate the amount of money being pumped into the economy. So this sort of assumption that a bridge will change the whole situation is quite naive.

A couple of issues not directly related to the bridge: these are really major issues happening at the moment and I haven't found much coverage of them at all. Build-operate-transfer. the construction of infrastructure is raising a lot of issues of sovereignty and the relationship between private multinational infrastructure companies and the Lao government. The turning of Laos into the hydro powerhouse of Southeast Asia is raising a myriad issues that need some sort of independent research. When I was in Laos I was asked to write something just because nothing is getting out. This build-operate-transfer is particularly interesting because of the nature of the process. The way foreign companies are getting control
of certain areas and being able to charge local Lao people whatever price they want to, to use infrastructure within their own country. So basically there are a couple of things which are happening which are important and need some research. Also Australian companies like Transfelds; it was going to build the Franklin Dam in Tasmania, but was stopped because of Australian environmental action. They are now building hydropower schemes in Laos with no opposition. There does not seem to be too much publicity and Keating actually went to the signing of the agreement for that when he was over there. So basically Laos is pretty dynamic at the moment and I think there are lots of interesting things going on. With the bridge, I think it is important because it is drawing attention to the area and its symbolic value is significant. Representations of the bridge in both Thailand and Australia exemplify a lot of the broader changes happening in Laos today, although they may not be related to the bridge.

* * *

Creating the political borderlines of the French colonial empire in Indochina: an example of the using the ethnic minorities, the White Thai of Lai Chau (Vietnam)

Phillipe Le Failler

Pacific and Southeast Asian History, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

When in 1888, the French explorer Auguste Pavie, undertook to persuade the leader of the White Thais to ally himself with the new colonising power in Indochina, he proposed that the latter could in fact continue his secular leadership under French domination without abandoning any part of his power. Thus Deo Van Tri, former feudal lord, became an official representative of the Republic with the title of Quan Dao, or district chief. Pavie, an atypical colonizer, wanted to demonstrate that it was possible to join peoples to the French power without using canons and weapons. He did not realize that he was making the same kind of agreement that had been made three centuries previously by the Annam court, to give an earlier member of the Deo family the hereditary leadership of the Sip Song Chau Thai region. Explaining the particular history of this family is one way of understanding the geopolitical stakes which have made the four borders region one of the world's most complicated political areas.

The Deo family began its known story around 500 A.D. in China, remaining there until the fall of the Ming dynasty, when the clan leader, a former mandarin, decided to escape Manchu power by going to Vietnam. He settled in the Bac Ninh region, where the family name was changed from La to Deo to avoid Manchu reprisals. During the uprising in the Sip Song Chau Thai region against the power of the Vietnamese Le dynasty, a Deo clan member was sent to fight the rebels and, in recompense, received the conquered area's hereditary leadership.

Into the early twentieth century, Deo Van Tri was a powerful
man, ruling with his family, over the Black River region, its colourful Thai population in the valleys, and Meo tribes in the hills. He inherited from his father the role of warlord, from the age of sixteen, he fought the Burmese and, assisted by the Luu Vinh Phuoc Black Pavilions, fought off bands of Chinese irregular troops, submitting to the Annam court, to expel them from the north of the Empire. The Hu imperial government then gave him the title Quan Dao of Muong-La, his father Phu of Muong Theng. He resumed fighting against the Red Pavilions, small groups of Chinese troops issuing from the Yellow Pavilions, until the arrival of the French troops.

At the beginning of the war of conquest in 1884, he took part in the resistance against France. He led three Thai companies of the Luu Vinh Phuoc army in the battle of Tuyen Quang and, after the dispersal of the Black Pavilions, he retired to Muong Lai where, in 1885, he gave asylum to the fugitive regent, Tuyet and former emperor Ham-Nghi. Taking advantage of this troubled time, the Siamese invaded the Sip Song Chau Thai area. With a small number of troops, Deo Van Tri went to take revenge, his three brothers having been captured, chained, put in a cage and sent to Luang Prabang, waiting to be sent to Bangkok. His revenge was the destruction of the city.

When he heard about the imminent arrival of French troops from Lao Cai coming to his domains, he tried to organize their defense but was unable to prevent the French soldiers from taking Lai Chau which they found burnt under Tuyet's orders. Deo Van Tri decided that his interests lay in a rapprochement with France, and decided to push Tuyet out of the Lai Chau region, thereby ending his involvement with the Vietnamese insurrection.

His family submitted to Auguste Pavie and Commandant Pennequin in 1888, who obtained the submission of Deo Van Tri himself in 1890.

This short résumé of DVT's early life shows the pressures to which this frontier region was subjected. With Burmese and Siamese incursions, Chinese bands, the Vietnamese resistance and colonial troops, all jostling for influence in this area, to regard the frontiers as isolated is pure fiction. Paradoxically, the frontier was hypersensitive to the smallest change affecting the centre. As we shall see, that which was in evidence in times of war, was equally true in peace time.

Born in 1849, as Deo Van Tri came to the end of his military career in 1890, his new role as clan leader, administrator and opium smuggler was only just beginning.

In 1891, as the head of his clan, Deo Van Tri offered up proofs of his loyalty to the French. He accompanied Pavie on his voyage to Yunnan and even entrusted to him, four young kinsmen to be sent for a European education (they later went on to the cole Coloniale, the institution for training the highest colonial civil servants).

1894 was the year in which the power of the White Thai was consolidated: taking part in the operation to demarcate the border
with China, Deo Van Tri was put in charge of a section of the frontier stretching from the Red River basin to that of the Mekong, in control of three hundred militiamen. His power over this region became even greater than it had been under the Vietnamese Nguyen dynasty.

In order for France to create a colony in the Far East, it was important to have borders that were stable, guaranteed and recognized. Generally speaking, in mainland Southeast Asia, the political existence of borders only became a tangible reality when the occidental powers put into place material symbols of the border. Customs posts and frontier guards were the most common manifestation of this, and this will is only limited by the human and geographic constraints.

The French understanding of the particularity of what a frontier means in Indo-China came only gradually. At first, as in the case of Deo Van Tri, the imperative was to limit the areas of possible conflicts, so the military leaders chose to make temporary treaties, expecting normalisation (meaning complete control of the entire territory) to come later. Very quickly, it was realised that it was impossible to militarily control the thousands of kilometres of frontier. The highland areas did not lend themselves readily to military operations but were marvelously suited to all types of guerillas; an idea which was enough to make the generals shudder. Thus a semi-independent principality was constituted, co-existing with a colonial power noted elsewhere for its imposition of a very French centralist conception of the State.

In so doing, they demonstrated an understanding of the difference between a frontier situated in Europe and its corollary in Asia. The former was conceived of as a demarcation between nation-states, separating people and cultures using frontier posts and customs points in order to give greater substance to the features recorded on maps. As for the latter, it expressed more the limits of a zone of influence than of real government, involving a substantial delegation of powers of sovereignty. Rather than a formal alliance, it required that agreement in principle be reached with local chiefs, and this could only be done by leaving them the greatest autonomy.

Several hundreds of kilometres away, in the Shan States, the British had reached a similar agreement with the Sawbwas, princes, and obtained their allegiance and the right to trade in return for recognition of the rights and prerogatives of these 33 traditional chiefs. In fact, the autonomous federation of Shan states, detached from Burma, had but an ephemeral life, lasting for the final 25 years of the colonial regime, yet it illustrates that a pragmatic choice was made to renounce direct administration in favour of these difficult zones.

The originality of Deo Van Tri's alliance with the French lay not in the principles which permitted his clan to conserve secular power, but the fact that these principles were totally opposed to the wishes of the French themselves. The result was an ambiguity in policies towards this regions that has lasted until the present day.
The study of which this article is but a brief report, shows the equivocal nature of this situation, French documents showing in luxurious detail the governmental system developed by Deo Van Tri. On the one hand, active involvement in a colonial system and drawing maximum advantage from his role as spokesman and representative in the region, on the other, the creation, or rather, the perpetuation of economic links with the entire Tai community. The network covered a very great region in which the Shans states and Yunnan constituted the heart of an empire safe from all attacks. These economic networks were nourished by the existence of the frontier as well as the taxes which burdened the highly populated delta regions. Although these networks probably predated Western colonisation, the latter involuntarily favoured the growth of an underground economy whose extent remains difficult to measure.

In the final years of his life, he continued to enrage French customs agents who intercepted several huge shipments of opium per year involving him or his family. This was without doubt merely the tip of the iceberg and his clan's fortunes probably reached their apogee during this period. Yet the colonial power's support for the biggest smuggler undermining their own monopoly was never withdrawn. In this difficult balance between political calm and the desire for legality, it was always the first which won out. Due to his political indispenibility, Deo Van Tri was never once brought to trial even though his involvement in opium trafficking was well known to all. From time to time, the Quan Dao was approached and asked to be more prudent, to prevent the customs administration's loss of face, yet otherwise his anti-monopolistic trading activities were never curtailed: the price of political tranquility on the frontier.

Deo Van Tri died of heart failure on the night of the 29 of February 1908. He was 60 years old. His funeral took place on the 27th of April. He was buried beside his brothers on the rocky spur which extended between the three valleys of the Black River; the Man-La and the Nam-Na.

In this study of the power relations between an ethnic minority group and a colonial power, I hope to present a less unilateral version of history than has normally been written for this region. The National Archives in Hanoi are full of documents, mostly in French, about events on the frontier regions at the beginning of this century. The documents comprise a unique but seldom used collection of primary sources on the trans-frontier economy.

***

Community culture and movements: The Thai NGO responses to agricultural commercialisation in a Northern Thai village

Rapin Quinn**

In their response to increasing agricultural commercialisation in rural Thailand in the 1980s, Thai NGOs claimed that they used
"community culture" as a means to help the "commoners" (such as small-scale farmers, tenants and landless peasants) maintain and improve their status by improving access to resources for production. This article aims to examine the NGO use of community culture and socio-political movements to counteract the market-economy system which, the NGOs argue, allows entrepreneurial individuals and agencies to accumulate their wealth at the expense of the commoners, often using public natural resources.

The article begins with the definition and scope of NGOs as well as their perceptions toward agricultural commercialisation boosted by the market-oriented economy. Next the NGO use of "community culture" and socio-political movements is explained. Then, the use of community culture and movements pursued by the NGOs and villagers is assessed for their future performances in the development process.

A special kind of Thai NGOs

Thai NGOs are generally made up of like-minded educated middle class people and have emerged since after the "uprising" in 1973 as independent organisations (Prudhisan, 1989). They have sought to introduce "alternative development" approaches2 to counter what they see as the negative impact on the poor resulting from government development policies and practices. These Thai NGOs generally see themselves as undertaking "participatory development" whereby they encourage people to work together in identifying their problems and achieving their own development. They claim that their methods are flexible and their plans and activities can be adapted in response to the people's changing needs in different situations.

The NGOs range from grass-roots supporting organisations (GSOs) (Carroll, 1992) which are organised only at the local level to organisations which have regional or national networks. They are nearly all linked through networking activities which facilitate the flow of information and support between them. In the district where I conducted field research in 1992-3, the main NGO was the Foundation for Education and Development of Rural Areas (FEDRA), a medium sized NGO which was set up as an independent Buddhist-oriented organisation in 1974. It is run by a senior monk in Chiang Mai whose development objective is to maintain and improve economic and social status of the "farmers" (kasikhon). The monk's development idea and actions received support from the public both in cash and kind. Thirty per cent of its budget is from domestic donations while the rest from mainly German donor NGOs.3 In 1992 it had fifteen permanent staff members and three volunteers from the Thai Volunteer Service (TVS).4 Some FEDRA members were active in the Northern Development Workers' Association (NDWA) which provides a hub for NGO workers in the Chiang Mai where they can share experiences and discuss work difficulties. FEDRA itself is a member of the NGO-Co-ordinating Organisations of Rural Development (NGO-CORD) which acts as a co-ordinating body for over 200 Thai NGOs working in development throughout rural Thailand. Thus FEDRA is typical of many similar NGOs which work at the grass-roots level but find support through association with networks of NGOs at regional and national levels.
Thai NGOs owe their origin to middle class opposition to authoritarian governments of the 1970s. As a consequence, they generally adopt an "anti-state; anti-capitalist" attitude (Hirsch, 1990). They consider that the double digit economic growth in Thailand has been achieved at the expense of the traditional agricultural sector and of Thailand's natural resources. The NGOs have a strong history during the 1970s of efforts by urban middle class to come to experience and understand village society and development. By the 1980s, one of the key concepts in Thai NGO thinking was that of "community culture" as a means to help people strengthen themselves in the "politics of development" (Gohlert, 1991). By community culture, the Thai NGOs refer to every aspect of people's social life especially in relation to the production process through which the people learn the methods of production, social relations and values, methods of making decision and exercising their power (Interview-NGO1- 2 October 1992). The aim to understand the community culture lies in a belief that it can be "reproduced" in response to the increasing agricultural commercialisation produced by the "capitalist" economy and culture. As Fr. Niphot Thienwihan, the Director of Chiang Mai Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC) argues:

a community by nature is dynamic and its ideology has been reproduced continuously. This appears in not only a village which has yet to be influenced by capitalism but also in a village which has already been penetrated by the capitalist culture. In the so-called traditional, semi-traditional and urban-culture-oriented villages, there has been cultural and ideological reproduction in counterbalance with the capitalist culture (Bunthien, 2531: 91).

In the following section, I will trace the involvement of FEDRA in a village and the projects it has introduced in response to changing demands of the people as they become increasingly involved in agricultural commercialisation. In looking at the NGO involvement, I will also assess the NGO use of community culture in the development process.

NGO use of community culture and movements

Tending the grassroots

From the 1970s, as small-scale farmers have increased their involvement in agricultural commercialisation (e.g. growing tobacco and soya bean and expecting profitable sale), landless peasants who rented both land and buffaloes from the small-scale farmers began to suffer from high rental rates (e.g. 50 per cent of production for land rent and 40-50 tang5 of paddy for buffalo rent per season). A village headman felt "sympathy for the poor" and went to seek help from Phra Dhammadilok (Chan Gusalo), the FEDRA Chairperson who, along with some staff members, subsequently attended a village meeting organised by the headman (Interview-V1-27 January 1993). The monk explained the foundation's development principles, approaches and "projects" designed to alleviate the people's poverty (see Vanpen, 1988; and Darlington, 1990).
The Chairperson gave 11 buffaloes and 2 oxen from the FEDRA "buffalo bank" project to 13 villagers who were identified as being in more urgent need than others. Different from many charitable organisations, FEDRA required that each caretaker contributed 3 tang of paddy per buffalo as rent per year. The contribution to be kept as a village "rice bank" project for the participants to borrow when encountering a shortage of rice for consumption. Compared to the commercial system generally practised in Northern villages where a peasant had to pay 30 to 40 tang to hire a buffalo and repay 18 to 20 tang on a loan of 10 tang of paddy (i.e. up to 60 tang of paddy to meet an annual debt), under the FEDRA operation, he would need only 3 tang for hiring a buffalo and 12 tang to meet a 10 tang loan. If a peasant could produce 60 tang per rai he would barely meet the family's basic needs for food, clothes, medicine and shelter let alone children's primary education, whereas under the FEDRA system he was likely to meet all the needs because of the low payment of interest rates.

These cattle in the FEDRA buffalo bank had been donated to the temple by well-to-do people who wanted to gain "merit so as to relieve their sickness" (tham bun to a yu or sado khro). Using the element of community culture, the FEDRA Chairperson considered that the rich, the poor and the animals encountered "suffering" (Dukkha) in different dimensions. For instance in this case, the rich suffered from the illness, the poor from the poverty, and the cattle from being tortured and killed. He, therefore, organised an alms-giving ceremony in which he invited both buffalo donors and caretakers to participate and used the Thai Buddhist culture of merit making to educate the people to both give and take and to be kind (metta) to not only human beings but animals also. In a concrete term, he helped the rich to feel relieved from their sickness by liberating an animal which was about to be slaughtered. At the same time, he was able to provide economic support to the landless to survive the threat of ever accumulating debt. While similar buffalo bank projects are implemented widely in rural Thailand, FEDRA initiated its own approach in accordance with the village culture based on Buddhism. What emerged in the village, however, was that FEDRA economic projects became attractive to small-scale farmers who saw that they could benefit from similar assistance as that given to the poor and consequently sought to be involved in other FEDRA development activities.

Mobilising productive resources

The small-scale farmers saw that a rice bank could become a source for their agricultural investment. They organised a rice storage to be built with FEDRA financial support and set up a village development committee to take care of projects which FEDRA agreed to assist. The local development committee members were made up of representatives from the group of small-scale farmers rather than landless peasants. FEDRA "development" activities which initially targeted the landless had consequently shifted to small-scale farmers.

After building the rice storage, the committee with its
broader appeal to all the village adapted the traditional ceremony of "thambun khao mai" or celebrating the new rice in the fourth lunar Northern month (January) to mobilise village resources for further investment. For the first year in 1984, the committee collected 200 tang of paddy from rice bank members and kept them in the rice barn. They all agreed that if any paddy remained in storage at the end of the year in excess of members' loans, the paddy could be sold by the committee for cash which could be available for additional borrowing for investment. This would be in addition to the FEDRA revolving fund project.7

The "thambun khao mai" or new rice celebrating ceremony conducted in this village originally aimed to gather surplus village resources, mainly paddy, after a harvesting season, for sale in order to obtain cash was used to build or renovate the village temple. Because the cost of production was increasingly high in the 1980s, the farmers decided to use the ceremony as a means to collect the paddy not only for renovating the temple but also as another source for their future investment. For instance, each year for five years, villagers agreed to donate unhusked rice to the temple according to their levels of income, assets and ability to earn income. After selling the donated rice, the money was divided into two parts. One went to the temple. The other went to the village saving account run by the village development committee. In 1989, the committee lent the money from the saving account (without any collateral requirement) to the villagers at the low interest rate of about 2 per cent per month (comparing 5 to 10 per cent from money lenders) (Interview-V2- 23 January 1993). FEDRA viewed these activities as community culture which people applied and participated in development and, therefore, helped them improve their agricultural production and reduce the productive cost.

FEDRA also became involved in more technical activities as shown when villagers had trouble with disease in soya bean crops. FEDRA workers contacted government agricultural experts and extension officers to help solve the problem of soya bean disease being faced by the villagers around the mid-1980s. As a result, the cause of the disease was investigated and an experiment was begun in the village to develop a more suitable strain of soya bean for sale. To help the growers reduce the productive cost, FEDRA negotiated with some agricultural business companies to supply chemical fertiliser and insecticide at a discount price to the farmers within the FEDRA operating areas. This was the direct intervention by FEDRA with village support but without a dimension of community culture.

With regard to a FEDRA philanthropic principle of supporting the "farmers" and their occupation, FEDRA performed an important task in encouraging people's initiative and participation in their development. However, one might ask how the landless peasants benefited from the projects introduced by the small-scale farmers with community culture while the cost of production was increasingly high and the village resource seemed to be controlled by the later group of villagers? From my field research, I found not only a minimal participation from the landless but also their claim that FEDRA "helped the rich to get richer" (Interview-V3- 26 January 1993).
Forming a people's organisation

As the small-scale farmers in this village maintain their cultural practices of "wai phi pu ya" for yearly family reunion and of "klum muang fai" for irrigation construction and maintenance, the practices show their unity of social formation. Some FEDRA workers began to use these models to encourage villagers to set up a people's organisation or interest group. They encouraged the soya bean growers to use their community culture as shown in collective actions to enhance their profit with middlemen. Instead of selling soya bean individually, the NGO workers suggested that the villagers should have an agreed selling price which would prevent the middlemen bargaining with one grower against another. Seeing the benefit to be gained from collective power through their own initial efforts, the villagers subsequently sought the co-operation of soya bean growers across the village boundaries and loosely organised a Soya Bean Growers' Group in 1985 in the form of an agricultural co-operative. FEDRA helped with the organisation and operation of the new group. Two years later, the group had expanded from 6 to 14 villages and had 672 members. It was then re-named the Soya Bean Growers' Association (SBGA) [FEDRA fact sheet, 2530 (1987)].

After the SBGA was formed, FEDRA continued to help the organisation's working committee with training in administrative skills and moral support. When the members expressed their lack of confidence in the committee managing their money, FEDRA organised short training courses for the SBGA committee members and other village leaders in areas such as bookkeeping, government policies on soya bean production, market mechanisms and the principles and management of co-operatives. When the SBGA committee showed that they were able to run the organisation, the FEDRA workers stood aside and undertook other activities to support the farmers. For example, in March 1990, FEDRA workers and their colleagues from the Community Action for Rural Development (CARD), a community-based NGO working in Chiang Mai province, organised a seminar on "Soya Bean Marketing" in which 18 farmer leaders and 8 NGO workers participated. FEDRA also organised study tours for farmers to visit companies which used soya bean as raw material in making vegetable oil, soya sauce and salted soya bean (tao chieo). The aim was to educate farmers about the process of soya bean production with the expectation that they might pick up an idea or a model to develop and run their own cottage industries. In March 1990, village leaders from each village and FEDRA workers organised meetings to disseminate the information gained from the seminars and study tours.

The SBGA had grown with intensive support by FEDRA from a small group of villagers who decided to extend the aim and activities of their community culture to successfully maximise their economic gain and establish their interest group responding to the government-supported market economy. Considering the poverty could not be solved only at the village level, some forward-looking FEDRA workers introduced to the villagers various sources of knowledge and information and new areas of operation in the development process. In
the next section, I will explain the ways in which the FEDRA workers and some village leaders got involved in the political movement.

Experiencing in collective action and politics

As the tide of "free trade" promotion has been rising in Thailand since the late 1980s, the Thai government was pressed to show its commitment to the principles of the GATT agreement. For example, in 1989 and 1990, the animal food companies' association lobbied the Chatchai government to allow the import of 300,000 ton of soya bean residue for animal food production arguing that if the imports were not allowed, meat prices would rise significantly. The government decided to compromise with the association for fear of losing urban voting support. However, the import of cheap soya bean residue meant that vegetable oil companies could not maintain the price paid to small-scale soya bean growers because the price depended on the high price the companies had been able to charge the animal food companies for local soya bean residue. As a result, the farmers faced a fall in price for their soya bean from 9 to 6 baht per kilogramme.

In April 1990, 500 farmers of Sanpatong district, with the support of a Sub-district Head and an MP candidate of Chat Thai Party, assembled to demand that officials address the problem of falling soya bean prices. The next day, 46 farmers from 4 districts including the village under study went to join the Sanpatong farmers' protest. The protestors agreed to use the SBGA as a spearhead to negotiate with the government on behalf of the farmers. For the first time, the SBGA was organised to politically represent the interest of farmers and a week later about 600 farmers protested in front of the Chaing Mai Provincial Office. The SBGA leaders and NGOs used the mixture of community cultural and political movements to solve the soya bean falling price problem. For instance, while performing "rot nam dam hao" ceremony in the Songkran Festival to pay respect to the Provincial Governor along with other Governor's clients, the SBGA leaders asked the Governor to take care of the farmers' plight resulting from the government free trade policies.

The locally elected MP, Dr. Subin Pinkhayan, who was the Minister of Commerce in the Chatchai government, could not ignore the farmers' protest. He invited soya bean grower representatives, a provincial officer under the Commerce Ministry and the local politician to his Chiang Mai house to discuss ways in which the falling soya bean price problem could be solved. The meeting agreed as a short-term solution for the Public Warehouse Organisation (under the Commerce Ministry) to buy soya bean from the farmers at a price which covered their cost of investment. In the long-term solution it was agreed to research the exact cost of production and put a considered case to the government for consideration of future support.

The agreements were not implemented, however, and the Chiang Mai farmers ran out of time and patience as the new season approached. At the end of April 1990, about 2,000 farmers protested in front of the Tha Phae Gate demanding that the government urgently solve their problem [FEDRA fact sheet, 2530 (1987)]. The demonstration was led by
the SBGA with the support of local, regional and national such as FEDRA, NDWA and NGO-CORD. The protestors and NGO workers decided to send 38 farmer representatives to Bangkok to meet Phong Sarasin, Deputy PM and the Chairperson of the Food Policies Committee. He invited 6 representatives to attend a Committee meeting with officials and business agents to negotiate a soya bean price. The farmer representatives were satisfied when the Committee agreed to buy soya bean from the farmers at 9 baht per kilogramme, close to their expectation, and to reduce the amount of imported soya bean residue from 300,000 to 80,000 ton.

While there occurred the conflict of interest between social groups (e.g. soya bean growers and animal food companies) beyond the community level, NGO workers, their networks and villagers selected to use political action rather than community culture approach. To express the power in movement became another means for the small-scale farmers to respond to negative impact of the market economy on their livelihood. The "people's participation" in this situation included the development of an understanding of political structure and negotiated issues and techniques which did not appear to include the elements of community culture.

In summary, we can see that the NGOs play a significant role in using both community culture and political movement in helping landless and small-scale peasants respond to agricultural commercialisation in this village. Throughout the period of grass-roots-support NGO involvement in the 1980s, there appeared a shift of the target groups from the landless to small-scale farmers. Working with the new target group, the NGO helped encourage the small-scale farmers to use their social unity to obtain the bargaining power with local traders. This activity led to the establishment of a people's organisation which later exercised its political power to protect the members' interest beyond the community level.

Discussion and afterword

Generally speaking, my investigation shows villagers and NGOs used both community culture and socio-political movements as alternative development approaches to reverse the negative effects of the increasing agricultural commercialisation on community members. But did the community culture used by these actors counterbalance the rising tide of market-oriented economy and "capitalist" culture? The evidence of this village suggests that the answer to the question is varied.

Based on their cultural acquisition, the village leaders sought help from the FEDRA Chairperson in a simple charitable fashion to assist landless peasants cope with the economic difficulties while the farmers themselves were involving in commercial agriculture. This could be seen as relieving the farmers from responsibility to help the poor who they could not afford to help. Then the village leaders used the community culture in the form of a traditional ceremony to increase their level of investment and agreed with the NGO workers to set up a farmer group to bargain their interest with local traders.
Apparently, the community culture used by the leaders was to mainly accomplish the economic promotion of present-day economy more than other aspects of 'alternative development' as argued by the NGOs. As a result, some village leaders were moved to ask, for instance, where the spiritual aspect of the "development" was (Interview-V4-23 Jan 1993).

The FEDRA Chairperson used the abstract Buddhist teaching to intervene in social relations between the haves and the have-nots by teaching them to be generous (metta) and help each other to pass across the "suffering" (Dukkha). It seems that most people appreciated the form of alms-giving ceremony rather than understood its content as the Chairperson intended. That is to say, the charitable handout of buffaloes each year was emphasised by villagers more than the discussion about the cause of people's poverty.

According to their perception of the negative impact of the market-oriented economy on the poor as mentioned in the first section of this paper, the young NGO workers used the community culture to form the SGBA, a people's interest group. Furthermore, they encouraged the SGBA members to politically stand up against the government's decision to import soya bean residue following the demand of the soya bean company association. While protesting against the government's decision, the SGBA leaders, FEDRA workers and their NGO networks both in Chiang Mai and Bangkok used the community culture to approach provincial government officials to address the farmers' problem. Although the government agreed to buy soya bean at the price which was demanded by the SGBA in 1990, the NGO workers found that they were disappointed by the lack of full participation from SGBA grass-roots members, the conflict among SGBA leaders putting personal interest ahead of the organisation, and the discomfort of the FEDRA Chairperson with political actions (Interview-NGO2-24 November 1992).

In summary, this paper is a modest attempt to look at the NGO use of community culture and socio-political movements in response to agricultural commercialisation in a Northern Thai village. Even though the NGO definition of community culture is abstract and hard to formulate, the evidence suggests that it is a useful means in the "politics of alternative development" (Friedman, 1992). One of the examples in this village reveals that in a particular situation when villagers saw the strength of their social power which could be politically transformed to achieve economic gain, the NGO workers successfully used the community culture as a basis for organising the people's interest group. To further assess the role of community culture and movements in the future, in my view, those notions have to be concretely brought out with some basic questions addressed such as which social actors use these notions; for what declared purpose; in what situations; and with what outcome?

References

Documents

Bunthien Thongprasen, 2531 (1988), Naeokhit watthanatham chumchon nai

Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute (CUSRI), Social Research Institute (SRI-Chiang Mai University) and Rural Development Institute (RDI-Khon Khaen University), 1990, Directory of Public Interest Non-Government Organisations in Thailand, Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Publishing House


Vanpen Surarueks, 1988, "Issues and Experiences in the Use of Community Participation by NGO in Rural Development Programs in Thailand: An Analysis and Evaluation of the Foundation for Education and Development of Rural Areas (FEDRA)", in Thiraruek 72 pi Phra Thepkawi [The Commemoration of 72nd Birthday of Phra Thepkawi], Chiang Mai: FEDRA.

Interview

V=Villager

V1, 27 January 1993

V2, 23 January 1993

V3, 26 January 1993

V4, 23 January 1993

NGOs

NGO1, 2 October 1992
Influence of Education on Traders in Northwest Thailand

Niti Pawakapan

Anthropology, RSPAS

Introduction

The main argument of my paper is that formal education has strong influence on trade and the traders. Education not only provides means, such as knowledge and skills, for people to be involved in trading activities, but education itself and schools are also a kind of prestige. Local traders send their children to some expensive schools because they think the schools give the best education to their children and because there are other benefits. Education also offers almost an equal opportunity for males and females to be involved in the larger scale trade. In addition, people who have a higher level of education, for example, school teachers, gain a benefit from their status as a teacher when they take up trading. It helps them to do well in trading.

Traders

My research is concentrated on the traders in Khun Yuam town's area. Khun Yuam is a small market town, some sixty-seven kilometres south of Mae Hong Son, in the northwestern region of Thailand. These traders include, as follows:

1. Those who own a shop, or shops, or rent one and work full-time in their shops,

2. Former school teachers or government officers who are now self-employed,

3. Part-time shopkeepers or seasonal traders who work full-time as a school teacher,

4. Itinerant traders who travel and trade in the territory of Mae Hong Son Province and some parts of Chiang Mai. Almost all of this group used to be rice farmers and now live in the central and northern towns.

All of the traders are Tai, Kon Mang, and Thai speakers. The Tai, or Shan - as called by the Burmese - are the descendants of those who migrated from Burma's Shan States in the nineteenth century. The Kon Mang include those who speak northern Thai dialects, who moved from nearby districts and other provinces to settle in Khun Yuam. Many of them have lived in the town for two or three generations. The Thai, on the other hand, are those who came from the provinces in the central and eastern regions. They speak Thai (or
'Central Thai' or 'Standard Thai' - as Anthony Diller indicates) as the first language. Most of the Thai are men who married local women and have run a shop or been involved in some kind of trade for many years.

Education

First, I must note that formal education has been introduced to Khun Yuam town for some time. According to the school's record, the first primary school was established in 1922, but the headmistress suggests that the school was established four years earlier, that is, in 1918. Her (the headmistress's) mother having been one the first pupils of the school. At least in this period, children of some wealthy traders were also sent to study at the schools in Chiang Mai. Today, although there are two primary schools and a secondary school in the town's area, well-to-do shop owners still send their children, both boys and girls, to private schools in Chiang Mai. They believe that these schools provide a better education than the schools in Khun Yuam. More importantly, there are better environment and better opportunity available for the children. A shop owner told me that private schools in Chiang Mai are the centres for children from a higher social status background. They are thought to be more prestigious than other schools. Many well-to-do businessmen and traders, high-ranking government officers, doctors, lawyers, and judges, from all over the northern region graduated from private schools in Chiang Mai. Besides, they also send their children to these schools. Therefore, if his children can establish some relations with other children from a higher social status background, such connections will be great benefits for his children when they become adults and involved in the business.

All of the shop owners and itinerant traders I interviewed at least finished the primary education. Many of them completed the secondary education or a higher level. They are able to read and write the Thai language (see below). Also, they all have basic knowledge of how to keep an account book, how to calculate the prices of the goods and the profits, how to estimate their own expenses, and so on.

Although Khun Yuam has been one of the important towns in local trade since the past, today trade in Khun Yuam is larger than ever. More traders come from other districts and provinces in order to sell or buy goods. Salesmen from big companies in Bangkok bring their companies' products to Khun Yuam twice or three times a week. More locals become involved in the larger scale trade, especially women. As a matter of fact, however, women have had a significant role in trading since the past, but they were involved in, if you like, petty trade, for example, selling vegetables at the morning market or hawking food from door to door in the town area or to the nearby village. Today, many women still do this. Men, in the past, took over the long-distance trade. Men travelled to other towns or even to Chiang Mai to sell and buy various goods. Unlike the past, nowadays more women are responsible for this kind of trade. Women make contacts with any outside traders. With the help of modern technology, such as telephones and faxes, women make business deals with shop owners in...
Chiang Mai or the agencies in Bangkok or elsewhere.

One of the important means that help women to do the business or to contact other traders is the Thai language - THAI - plays the most important part. Thai is a compulsory subject and has to be taught in schools at every level, so children, both boys and girls, are able to speak, read, and write, the language. Thai is not only the official language, but it is also used in trade and commerce. All of the salesmen from the companies in Bangkok speak Thai. Radio and television broadcast the movement of the stock market and the prices of the commodity in Thai language. Any written forms used in the bank or by the salesmen or money order by mail are all written in Thai. Newspapers are printed in Thai. Moreover, most of the tourists and travellers who visit the town or even just stop to have a meal speak Thai. In fact, any communication concerning with the large scale trade is in Thai.

In contrast, the Tai language - TAI - has become less important, though it is still spoken by a lot of people. In the past, Tai was the 'lingua franca' and spoken by almost everyone - even by many uplanders, such as the Karen and Lua. It was always used in trade and other activities. The Tai written language, nonetheless, was (and is) only taught in the temples and mainly to the boys. Girls and women hardly had a chance to learn, consequently, none of them, as far as I know, could either read or write. Today, more girls have been able to learn the written language, but the number of these students is still somewhat small. One must bear in mind, however, that the Tai written language has usually been used in regard to the religion. It has been written and read, by men - of course, to tell the stories of the Buddha (jataka) to the audience whenever there is a religious function, for example, an ordination or an annual Buddhist ceremony. The jataka are also read in a social gathering, such as a funeral or any celebration concerning with an elderly Tai person. In other words, the Tai written language, unlike Thai, is a 'ritual language'.

Another point I want to make is that men of education - I mean school teachers - are also respected by the locals. Many of them who trade part-time are trusted by the people, whom they trade with. A school teacher who owns a shop in Khun Yuam town, for example, used to trade cash crops seasonally. He tells me that a couple of years ago, he drove his utility truck from one village to another, buying garlic, soy bean, and other crops, from door to door every summer. He usually paid cash to the farmers for their crops. Sometimes, however, he ran out of cash, but the farmers, after agreeing to sell their crops, would let him take the crops and pay them later. The farmers knew that he was a teacher and trusted him. They believed that he would come back and pay off his debts. This kind of trust benefitted him greatly because he sometimes had inadequate money to purchase a large amount of crops. Besides, he then did not have to carry a lot of cash with him either. He notes that there are advantages of being a teacher and a part-time trader.

* * *
Correspondence

To the Editor

Ref: Ethnicity Federalism and the Burmese Insurgency

I refer to Gehan's write-up under the above headline which appeared in No. 27, December 1994. I am particularly concerned with Dr. Lehman's reference to the so-called minority insurgencies being 'intransigent'. Here I would like to present a few points:

1. It must be noted that the nature of the various groups of "insurgencies" is different. At the outset of independence the Burmans' notion of nation-building was deeply entrenched and as Gehan rightly pointed out "compromise and community interest were ground into dust between the grinding stones of middle class nationalisms..."

By the early fifties it became apparent to the Shan leaders that the constitution that existed was not an equitable one. At the same time human rights abuses perpetrated by the Burmese army on the Shan people were occurring. The Shan leaders found that the provisions of the existing constitution did not allow them to safeguard the interests of their people. They took steps to initiate constitutional reforms aimed at equitable power-sharing between the Burmans and the minorities. A Shan State Steering Committee which examined the existing constitution in detail found serious defects and recommended amendments. This process was thwarted by the military coup in 1962. Meantime Shan university students frustrated by what seemed to be the failure of constitutional reform took up arms. It must also be noted that the first wave of Shan armed resistance was led by university students and intellectuals purely political motives. By the late sixties most of the university students and intellectuals had left the fighting due to various reasons. In the 1970s a new set of leaders had taken up the cause. At the same time the military regime established Ka Kwe Yehs, locally recruited militias who were involved in drug trafficking with the tacit agreement of the Burmese army. Thus the so called Shan 'insurgencies' were a response to the Burmese Army's human rights abuses and the failure of constitutional reform.

2. The conflict between the Burmese Army and the minorities cannot be seen as intransigence on both sides but rather the inability to resolve conflict peacefully. That is why the need for democracy is more urgent than ever to resolve Burma's diverse political problems. For imperfect as the democratic process may be, it provides a means for the conflicting parties to resolve differences through debate and non-violent means.

Yours sincerely,

Ms Jackie Yang Rettie

General Secretary
Shan State organization.

Sir

(re. Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter (27), December 1994)

Regarding Chit Hlaing's (Dr Lehman) comment about the "intransigent nationalism" of the non-Bama in Burma, it is rather like blaming both the mugger (SLORC) and victims (the non-Bama). It cannot be that Chit Hlaing is unaware that the ethnic-rebellion ball was first started rolling by Bama army bosses because he mentions the 1961 Federal Movement which was met with coercion by the military. Had there been a renegotiation of the terms of incorporation between pro-Union, non-Bama leaders and U Nu (the then Prime Minister), ethnic rebellions might have been defused. It was Ne Win who did not want a give-and-take settlement. He wanted it all (and got it, in a manner of speaking, to the sorrow of everyone and the country).

Blaming non-Bama ethnonationalism on Western preachers, spies, scribes and do-gooders is a rather strange tack for an anthropologist to take, especially given his awareness of and agreement (? earlier at least) with Leach's "role and relations" mechanism in the formation of ethnic ("tribal"/national) identity. As Leach observed, "external models" do play a significant part, and the twentieth century model (at least in Southeast Asia) has been the ethno-national state, which resulted in attempts by new powerholders and states to construct/create tribalistic "national" identities (Burmese/Bama, Thai, Cambodian and Vietnamese). This was largely carried out in an arbitrary or ethnically self-interested manner by those politically dominant.

There is, it goes without saying, much politics involved in "model building", and many other factors influence the acceptability (or otherwise), submission/resistance to constructed models. "National" identity is essentially about whose identity (culture, language and so on) is elevated as "national" (and thus hallowed and held up as the only legitimate identity), and which identities are to be junked/devalued as "tribal". Given the political nature then, of any "nationhood' project (and agenda), it is not surprising, therefore, that lites (and the "masses") of arbitrarily marginalized "tribes" would challenge the attempts of self-claimed "national" leaders at domination, especially the domination of one category of ethnicity (among many). It is the case of "tit" getting "tat", or vice versa, rather than that of ignorant "tribal isolates" being fed, as Chit Hliang puts it, unattainable, impractical, "over-simplified [human rights] doctrine" by Western busy-bodies.

Rather, it is Chit Hlaing who is oversimplifying the issue, not only by ignoring the politics involved in the construction/imposition of "national identity" (and nationalism) but as well in clinging to the flat concepts of "nations, nationhood, states, society, etc.", of the 1960s. As an anthropologist, Chit Hliang's studied ignorance of the embeddedness of culture (of ethnic markers, language, the world-view of a certain "tribe") in the
imposition or attempted legitimation of domination in fact the very soul of any domination project is quite distressing. Also, he fails to question the viability of Bama-centred "nationalism"/national identity, or Bama tribalism, as a "nationhood model" in a multi-ethnic state such as Burma. More importantly, he seems unaware of the different categories of "nationalism", that is the different kind of "national identity" in "nation-states" like the US, Australia, India, Switzerland and Canada (and why the differences with "nationalism" in Thailand, Germany or Japan). The point is that there is no "organically-embedded", "God or historically given", "natural" national identity, before which all "lesser peoples" (tribes) must kowtow. The preceding is precisely what Lehman expects in Burma, it seems, and explains his blaming both the perpetrators and victims for the violence.

Can Chit Hliang guarantee that oppression, repression and brutality, long perpetrated by the military on the non-Bama (and lately on the Bama themselves) will cease if everyone submits unconditionally to whatever it wants to do?

Lastly, it is instructive to ponder the "nation"/"tribe" dichotomy. They are both ethnic categories, yet, as per the dubious logic of convention, those who "own" a state become "nations", while those who do not are labelled "tribes". Thus the Tai in Shan State, Yunnan or Assam are "tribes", while those in Laos and Thailand are regarded as "nations": but the Chinese in Malaysia or Burma, for example, are not viewed as "tribes", even though the state is "owned" by the Malay. And why are Arabs designated as different "nations" Saudi Arabian, Iraqi, Jordanian and Syrian although they are of one tribe? What about the Taiwanese, Singaporean and Hong Kong people (until 1997) and the Chinese? These cases highlight the political (and accidental) nature of "nationhood". There is indeed much room for "puzzlement" (to quote Yul Brynner's King Mongkut). It would do well for us all to heed the confusion which prevails even (or especially) in the august halls of knowledge production, and not be swayed by political claims of self-interested powers-that-be.

Chao-Tzang Yanghwe

2063 Concord Ave. Coquitlam, B.C. V3K-1K4

The editor writes: I must take responsibility for some misunderstanding of Professor Lehman's comments. For instance I deleted a phrase in his original note which compared SLORC to the Khmer Rouge, which gave Chao-Tzang the false impression that Lehman was blaming the victim. Professor Lehman has responded directly to Chao-Tzang and has indicated that he does not wish his response to be published.

I apologize for any misunderstanding.

G.W.

Publication news


ECHOSEA NEWSLETTER

The contents are:

News from the project

Teaching economic history of Southeast Asia


ECHOSEA workshops

A modern Economic History of Malaysia

Harvesting the Sea

An Economic History of Vietnam

International Conference reports

Data from CEI Vol. 13b.

The newsletter states:

The editors of the newsletter have established an electronic forum
The forum is called ECOHIST-SEASIA-L

To subscribe to the forum send an e-mail message to majordomo@coombs.anu.edu.au

* 

Reviews

Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sungsidh Pitiyarangsan Corruption and democracy in Thailand The Political Economy Centre, Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok: 1994. 1v, 179 pp. Bibliography, tables.
This is the English version of a longer Thai book and is likely to be one of the most important works on Thailand in recent years. It is likely to become a benchmark for the examination of corruption in the third world, particularly Southeast Asia. The senior author is an economist of international repute who has written extensively in Thai and English on economic and social affairs of her country. The second author is a political scientist, the author of Thai Bureaucratic Capitalism, 1932-1960 published by the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute (CUSRI) in 1983. The authors were assisted by a team of researchers from the Faculty of Economics who are duly acknowledged in the Preface.

The book is based on extensive library research using newspapers and other writing and a number of previous academic research works. The other major source of data is a corpus of interviews, surveys and discussion groups conducted by the researchers. The result is a powerful account of corruption in Thai society and an analysis of public attitudes towards the phenomena and suggestions for its extirpation. The reader is particularly struck by the tone of the work. Though the deep commitment to an honest society is evident throughout, this is not a polemic and it tries in scholarly fashion to understand and explain the phenomena. This is particularly clear in the oft-repeated conviction that it is not simply a question of individual morality, but deep-seated cultural attitudes and institutional faults in the social structure.

The first chapter sets out the historical background and the contemporary emergence of the subject as a matter of concern in Thai society. The reviewer may note two points made here. First the traditional gin muang (kin mang in the Mary Haas-based system of transliteration favoured by the Newsletter) system which allowed all levels of the administration to live off the country and take a share of revenues due to the central administration. The other major factor dealt with in the chapter is the rise of the military in the Thai political system. The authors clearly express the position:

Within this system, concepts of corruption referred to attempts by officials to extract amounts and shares which exceeded the conventional limits. From the point of view of the king, chor rat, bang luang (lit. cheating the citizens and hiding from the king) occurred when an official was seen to be diverting too large a share into his own pocket. p. 6.

On the military in Thailand they write:

The most important modern development in the nature of the bureaucracy has been the rise in the position of the military Military leaders have occupied the prime minister's post for the majority of years since 1932. In addition the military has consistently disrupted the development of parliamentary politics by a succession of coups, and
has successfully retarded the development and acceptance of an alternative power-system based on election and parliamentary responsibility. p. 9.

Chapter 2 is an attempt to estimate the extent of corruption between the dictatorship of Sarit and the government of Chatichai. Their conclusions are that

For each year in power Sarit looted 0.14 percent of the GDP compared to 0.05 percent by Thanom-Praphat and 0.04 percent by Chatichai and his ministers. p. 45.

The chapter ends with results from their survey which rank the government departments seen by the populace as being most corrupt.

The Police Department topped the list, followed by Defence, Interior, Communications, Land Department, Commerce, Agriculture, Customs Office, the Forestry Department and Industry. p. 48.

Chapter 3 is entitled 'Jao Pho: local influence and democracy'. This is perhaps the most valuable part of the book. It examines a number of case histories of local 'godfathers' and the specific manner in which they have helped destroy the democratic process, citing names and events. It then goes on to analyze the general principles which underlie these phenomena. This is a dense piece of analysis and difficult to summarize. In effect they point out that these men were usually under-educated, but highly successful local businessmen engaged in both legal and illegal enterprises. They found patrons among military figures, local bureaucrats and politicians which often gave them the power to move from local to national stage. The authors point out that such figures were least successful in the northern and southern regions. They explain this by the presence in these regions of long-standing regional elites who dominated the business and political life. In the South it was business families who had made their mark in mining or coastal trade and in the north, princely families and families who had succeeded in the exploitation of regional resources. These elites blocked the emergence of the new phenomenon of jao pho.

Chapter 4 deals with the Police and Chapters 5 and 6 deal with public attitudes towards corruption and public views on how it may be contained. A major issue here is the difficulty of distinguishing between expressions of gratitude represented by the Thai sin nam jai and corruption. Some middle-class respondents see any payment as corruption, but the majority seems to accept that gifts have a place in normal social intercourse. It is not the solutions here that are convincing, but the general level-headedness with which the problems are discussed. The authors take the view here, and elsewhere in the book that the answer is not one of simple individual morality.

In general this is a major book on Thai society. There are I think three parts to the achievement. First, the discussion from the background knowledge and reading of the authors. This is highly intelligent and informative. Second the body of previous research,
much of it by Thai students in masters' and other theses and finally
the impressive handling of survey and interview data. This is a book
that all those interested in Thailand should beg, borrow or steal. The
English print run is quite small and I advise interested readers to
try to acquire a copy as soon as possible.

Gehan Wijeyewardene

Shigeharu Tanabe, Ecology and Practical Technology : Peasant Farming

An eye-catching cover and a promising title are immediately
attractive features of this important book by Dr Tanabe of the
National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka. The book is a modified version
of his PhD thesis submitted at SOAS, University of London, in 1981.
It is centred on fieldwork in two villages, in the Chiang Mai-Lamphun
lowland (Amphoe Mae Rim) and in Ayutthaya Province, which he studied
intensively in 1974-75, with further visits in the late 1970s. It is
not clear whether he has re-visited these villages since 1980, and
therein lies a regrettable deficiency in the book : it does not touch
the dramatic transformation of peasant farming systems in Northern
Thailand and the lower Central region which was already in progress in
1974-75.

The core contribution of the book to studies or rural Thailand
is the wealth of information it contains on rice-farming systems in
the two villages, in radically different irrigation environments, in
the 1970s. Both villages are carefully located in their spatial and
temporal contexts (Chapters 2 and 3), leading then to more detailed
discussions of socio-economic contrasts between them (Chapter 4) and
of the farming systems, patterns of land tenure and labour utilization
(Chapters 5, 6 and 7). This book confirms Dr Tanabes place in the
distinguished company of anthropologists (Calavan, Cohen, Davis,
Hanks, Kingshill, Moerman, Potter, Phillips, Lauriston Sharp, Turton,
Wijeyewardene and others) whose studies of rice-farming villages have
contributed so significantly to our understanding of rural Thailand in
the last three decades.

Dr Tanabes main research objective was ambitious. In his
preface, written in August 1994, his stated aim was to explain the
way in which the peasantry in Thailand interact (my italics) in their
environmental relations, by examining the fundamental basis of their
production process and their societal setting. The use of the
present tense, here and in the following chapters, for a rural
situation studied in the mid-1970s is of course quite misleading,
unless we adopt a rather blinkered view that what was studied in 1974
has comprehensive relevance in 1994.

For many readers the substantial introductory chapter on
Ecology, practical technology and peasant farming will be
particularly rewarding, despite the 1980 cut-off. Much of the
argument centres on the need, in studies of peasant farming systems,
to recognize the importance of practical technology, ranging from
the use of tools to cooperative irrigation systems, not merely as the

46
technical components of the production process, but as the organizing principle of customary practices (p. 19), including land tenure arrangements and the organization of labour. Dr Tanabe points out in Chapter 1, all too briefly and without elaboration later, that the introduction of modern agricultural technology to a peasant farming system - as was already happening very widely in the northern valleys of Thailand in the 1970s - requires a new appreciation of environmental constraints and the mastery of a new package of practical technology. In this context it is surprising that his substantial Chapter 2, concerned with the intermontane basin farming system in the Chiang Mai - Lamphun valley, does not draw upon the wide-ranging studies, with their strong ecological emphasis, carried out by Dr Alan Thodey, Dr Gordon Conway (Centre for Environmental Technology, Imperial College, London) and many colleagues in the Chiang Mai University Multiple Cropping Project between 1974 and 1980.

The larger part of the book, notably Chapters 5-7, is concerned with the detail of irrigation-based rice farming systems in, first, a Mae Rim village dependent on a traditional village weir (muang fai) and outside the main government-built irrigation projects in the Chiang Mai-Lamphun basin and, secondly, an Ayutthaya village within an area of government-controlled irrigation in the Chao Phraya delta. Both were carefully selected to exemplify markedly different environmental constraints on rice-farming. They shared a specialization in rice production and more, notably in respect to land tenure. In both villages landlords and owner-operators were a minority among agricultural households, compared with a large group of tenants, part-tenants and landless labourers who comprised 70 per cent in the Chiang Mai village (20 km north of Chiang Mai city) and 67 per cent in Ban Phaen (26 km from Ayutthaya city hall).

These data on main occupations, assessed in terms of household income, raise important questions about the distant and more recent past of these peasant farming villages and about the changes taking place there in the 1970s. In particular, how are the high percentages of rural labourers (34 per cent, Chiang Mai; 31 per cent, Ayutthaya) to be explained? Dr Tanabe points out that in the Ayutthaya case, traditional exchange of labour had greatly declined so that it was almost completely replaced by wage labour, while in the Amphoe Mae Rim village traditional exchange persisted, which of course restricted the employment available for landless labourers. Why, then, were there so many landless households in the Mae Rim village in 1974-75, given the fact that land clearing for pioneer settlement in northern parts of Chiang Mai Province and very considerable within-province migration had been conspicuous until the late 1960s? Dr Tanabe further points out that in the Chiang Mai village (for 1974-75) the mass of rural labourers, together with most tenants and part-tenants.....are the most oppressed and exploited class of country folk (p 117), struggling for survival. Why then did they stay? There is no complete answer in the book, though the considerable economic change commencing (in the Chiang Mai valley) in the 1960s goes part of the way (p 238). It would be interesting to know how much of the income of landless households was derived from within-village employment, and
how much from neighbouring villages within the Mae Taeng irrigation project (with second-crop irrigation) and from urban employment. Another significant factor was almost certainly the workforce explosion taking place in the 1970s, as an outcome of the population explosion which had followed the marked reduction in rural mortality (including near-elimination of malaria), in northern Thailand in the mid-1950s.

These comments help to emphasize the question-provoking value of this substantial book for all of us concerned with the continuing transformation of farming systems in Asia, whether in Thailand, Yunnan, Nepal or elsewhere. The last chapter, entitled concluding reflections is less concerned with the two villages in the mid-1970s. It returns to the ecological theme enunciated in Chapter 1 and devotes the last two pages to appropriate remarks about relevant recent work (1980s and 1990s) of Anan Ganjanapan, Andrew Turton, Philip Hirsch, Paul Cohen and others who have focussed on broad polarizing issues, such as the contrast in power relations between land-owners and the landless poor (Anan) which in Thailand are seen now as so significant in rural development. The book has an excellent bibliography.

E C Chapman, Faculty of Asian Studies
The Australian National University

Editorial arrangements.

Dr Scott Bamber leaves for Vietnam in June and will be relinquishing the position of Editor. This number has been edited by Gehan Wijeyewardene in Anthropology, RSPAS, ANU and he will continue in this position for future issues.

Fax +61 6 249 4896
e-mail gew400@coombs.anu.edu.au

* * *

* Bokeo, Luang Namtha and Udom Xai Provinces and the Chiang Rom/Hong Sa "Special Region".

1 This paper was transcribed by the editor from the recording of proceedings. It has been seen by the author.

** Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Human Geography, RSPAS, ANU.

2 An alternative development, Thai NGOs refer to the development which is emphasised not only economic but also social, political and cultural dimensions.

3 Such as Bread for the World and Friedrich Naumann Foundation (CUSRI, SRI and RDI, 1990).
4 The volunteers are paid by TVS. Different from voluntary activities in so-called developed countries whose volunteers help conduct charitable work, the TVS volunteers are mostly young graduates looking for a job. After working with TVS and selected organisations for some time, these volunteers decided to continue working with philanthropic NGOs rather than joining either government or business sector.

TVS is a Bangkok-based NGO which supports and conducts training programmes for volunteers who want to work in grass-roots communities either urban and rural areas.

5 1 tang = 10 kilogrammes.

6 A different body from the village committee set up by the Local Administrative Act.

7 It is a FEDRA economic project from which a village is able to borrow money with a lower interest rate than local money lenders.

8 The term 'self-employed' used here is to distinguish them from the first group. Several people of the second group work in the logging industry, or pig or chicken farming, and do not own nor run a shop.

9 A number of local women who married a policemen run a shop or a eating house and their husbands help in the shops occasionally. Because the shops, nonetheless, are operated mainly by the women, these policemen are excluded from this category.

10 The culmination of this series of studies, in the first stage of the Multiple Cropping Project funded by the Ford Foundation, was probably Phrek Gypmantasiri et al, with Gordon Conway (1980) An interdisciplinary perspective of cropping systems in the Chiang Mai Valley: key questions for research, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Chiang Mai, Thailand.

------------------------------------------------------------------------
end of file