Markets, policies and the environment in Thai agriculture: is an environment-friendly agricultural transition possible?¹

Ian Coxhead
Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics
University of Wisconsin-Madison
coxhead@facstaff.wisc.edu

with Dr. Mingsarn Kaosa-ard and Sasipen Phuangsaichai

Background

This project was first proposed in the early months of 1997. At that time it was evident that a decade of sustained and rapid growth in the Thai economy had exerted major effects on the rate and pattern of upland and highland agricultural development. Infrastructural investments, market development and the introduction of new crops, technologies and inputs had all helped drive a rapid transformation of upland agriculture. Farmers who had once been primarily subsistence-oriented had become closely engaged with the market; households that had once existed in relative isolation had begun to integrate with broader economic and social systems through education and out-migration. Agriculture, as a result, had changed both its character and also its relative importance in the rural Thai economy. In particular, it had become evident by 1997 that a significant fraction of the Thai agricultural labor force

---

¹ This is an edited version of the terminal report of a project supported by the Ford Foundation (Grant No. 985–1025). The project was undertaken with the collaboration of Jiraporn Plangpraphan, Thailand Development Research Institute; Jean Geran, University of Wisconsin, faculty and students of Chiang Mai University, and the participation of the people of Mae Chaem district, Chiang Mai, Thailand.

continued on page 2
was simply walking off the land in response to promises of better pay and conditions in the booming urban economies of Bangkok and regional cities. The growing labor shortage was in turn spurring an overall reduction in land use, and a transformation of agricultural production towards mechanized methods and labor-saving crops and technologies (Coxhead and Jiraporn 1999). This transformation of the Thai rural economy, it was postulated, was occurring partly as the direct result of rapid non-agricultural growth, and partly because macroeconomic policy reforms (especially the reform of trade and capital market policies) were altering the terms of trade of specific agricultural sectors with the rest of the economy.

As originally proposed, this research aimed to understand the macroeconomic sources of agricultural change in the upland areas of Thailand, and in particular to trace the effects of growth and policy reforms on farmers’ decisions regarding the use of their depletiable natural resource stocks, forests, and soils. The goals, as set out in the project proposal, were

…to generate basic knowledge about the influence of economic growth in general, and major trade and tax policies in particular, on Thai agricultural production and resource allocation, and to combine that knowledge with primary data on agricultural constraints and choices by resource managers in selected study areas to yield a more searching analysis of the microeconomic and environmental implications of present and proposed project and policy reforms.

With the onset in July 1997 of the economic collapse, however, the Thai economy subsequently entered uncharted waters. For a period of about eighteen months Thailand endured its first postwar recession, and this had far-reaching effects on the newly integrated upland agricultural sectors. Rural households were hit by loss of remittance income from migrant workers; by market failures associated with the economic collapse; by debt service problems; and in some cases by the need to support additional family members as newly unemployed migrant workers returned to the village.

In the same year the country was hit by one of the worst recorded droughts, the El Niño drought lasting from late 1997 through the 1998 growing season. The drought, like the economic collapse, precipitated dramatic changes in upland agriculture: crops failed or were harvested at unusually low yields; some land was not planted at all; and the demand for agricultural labor in crop establishment, care and harvesting dropped sharply.

Responding to the challenge posed by these unexpected twin crises, the focus of the research project expanded. The concern with the long-term effects of macroeconomic growth expanded to include the impacts of the twin economic crises, and the focus on long-term resource allocation and environmental management widened to include the capacity of rural households to absorb and recover from major short-run shocks. In the course of primary data gathering and analysis during and immediately following the year of the twin shocks, two questions emerged as of overriding importance. What were the effects of the twin shocks on the rural economy, and how did households respond to them? What mechanisms, formal or informal, existed—or might be designed—to help households weather these crises and possible future shocks?

**Research activities and outputs**

Research in the project began with the use of secondary data to analyze the ways in which long-term growth in the Thai economy had influenced agricultural resource allocation, including land use, labor demand and the adoption of new crops and technologies. This activity produced a paper in which we quantified the effects on the agricultural sector of growth in investment and employment in non-agricultural sectors. The boom in industrial and service sector growth from the late 1980s to 1996 drew much labor out of agriculture through migration. The effects on agriculture included both a contraction of overall land area, conversion to less labor-intensive crops, and the very rapid mechanization of production in much of the sector.

The first two of these trends we suspect to have had favorable environmental effects, since they are associated with reforestation, fallow period lengthening and conversion from annual to perennial crops in upland and some highland areas. However, agricultural mechanization, a rational response by farmers to rising real labor costs, may have had unexpected effects when the Thai economy fell into recession after 1997, since it meant that for the first time, agriculture could not effectively act as a “sink” for underemployed labor.

The second, and major, research activity consisted of the design and implementation of a field survey intended to elicit information about household-level decisions on land use, migration and related investments such as education, and on the household-level effects of the drought and macroeconomic collapse. After considerable exploration of survey-based literature, discussions with researchers, and several familiarization trips we settled on a study site in the Mae Chaem district, in Chiang Mai province west of Chiang Mai city (Figure 1). Mae Chaem has experienced rapid agricultural development, and yet still presents many features typical of a frontier area: deforestation, transitions from shifting cultivation to settled agriculture, recent integration of hill tribe communities into the market economy, and so on. Moreover, Mae Chaem has been a large supplier of migrants into urban labor markets in Chiang Mai, Lamphun and Bangkok, so we expected to find significant influences of economic growth on resource allocation, including land use, by households in the region. In addition, Mae Chaem—in many respects a typical upland agricultural region—was experiencing the direct and indirect effects of the twin crises.

After exploratory surveys by the entire project team, the Wisconsin-based researchers and a team of students and assistants from Chiang Mai University and Mae Chaem district surveyed 170 households in 12 villages. The first round of the survey was completed on schedule in early April 1999, and a follow-up survey was conducted in December 1999–January 2000.

**continued on page 3**
Key findings

Although the field study began with some theoretical expectations about the determinants of household decisions and the likely impacts of external and weather shocks, households in rural Thailand—like those in any other developing country—display great heterogeneity and may be subject to local and idiosyncratic factors based on history, geography, culture, or politics. Thus our approach was explicitly iterative, drawing on theory in the design of the initial survey, examining the data, then returning to develop new theory based on the findings. An important example of this approach was the shift, between the first and second survey rounds, from a relative concentration on the economic circumstances of households to greater emphasis on their social settings. Analysis of the first round of survey data quickly revealed the prominence of certain forms of “social capital” in households’ responses to the crises. In the second round we delved much more deeply into this, with survey questions and in-depth interviews intended to elicit from respondents both the nature of household social capital and the ways in which access to such a resource influenced strategies and opportunities during the crisis. Some of our key findings are based on the analysis of this component of household assets (see below).

Households in the survey derived much (in some cases all) of their income from agriculture. Land in the watershed is mainly non-irrigated. The main crops (by area) are feed corn, upland rice, seed corn, soybean, and paddy (irrigated) rice. Households with relatively poor agricultural land endowments earned additional income either from unskilled (mainly farm) labor or from a range of sources including non-agricultural employment, collection of forest products, and remittances from relatives working elsewhere.

The survey villages were ethnically diverse and displayed varying wealth levels. Four villages were mainly of the Karen ethnic minority; these were also the poorest. Of the remaining eight villages, seven were ethnically Northern Thai and one Hmong.

The four Karen villages, in addition to being the poorest, were also most heavily dependent on subsistence crops and agricultural labor. Among the Northern Thai villages were some, generally middle-income, that had very diverse income sources. Two Northern Thai villages and the Hmong village were relatively wealthy; households in these villages specialized in production of a range of specialty agricultural crops such as vegetables and seed corn.

The drought had a big impact on yields, most particularly of upland rice and feed corn (Figure 2). The economic crisis further hurt some household incomes. Corn and rice prices fell (other crop prices either rose or remained roughly steady); inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides became more expensive; and the combined effects of drought and the input cost squeeze meant that local farm labor demand fell quite sharply. Thus the households that suffered most during the twin crises were those with relatively poor land, highly dependent on farm wage labor, and with few non-farm sources of income. Wealthier commercial farmers, and households with diverse income sources, tended to suffer smaller income shocks; moreover, being wealthier, they were in general better able to smooth consumption by adjusting farm production plans, drawing down savings, and taking on new debt or extending loans from banks, cooperatives, or traders. Differences across households by type are reflected in interviewees’ subjective assessments of the relative severity of the crisis year, (Figure 3).

Thus one finding from the research was that in spite of geographical proximity and apparently small differences in initial conditions, the twin crises had substantially different trigger (causal) effects depending on household characteristics. Moreover, households displayed markedly different degrees of vulnerability, according to initial wealth, sources of income, and capacity to smooth consumption by resort to dissaving, borrowing, or other

![Figure 2: Crop yields (kg/rai) in drought (1998) and other years](continued on page 4)
Data from four villages highlights some important differences. First, in a rich and closely-knit Northern Thai village — where land expansion and adoption of highly commercialized agriculture have dominated growth — a tradition of strong local leadership based around a few individuals who also lend money, trade, and operate rice and corn mills is clear; external ties are to formal financial institutions. In another Northern Thai village outmigration has dominated in recent development. Here, although there are remarkably few kinship ties within the village, there are established friendships and employment ties to people within the village and locally in the district. The networks in Bon Na show more government and temple-sponsored groups functioning in the village than in the other network sample villages which is likely a result of its proximity to the district center.

The Karen villages provide both contrasts and similarities. Both villages analysed are adjacent to, and closely linked with, Northern Thai villages. However, although both villages are somewhat dependent on neighboring Thai for wage work, they differ from each other in some important ways such as the number of external links and the number of village-level groups. In Yang Sarn, village-level groups are dominant; these are partially the result of the strong and successful presence of an NGO (CARE-Thailand), and strong leadership provided by a headman who is well-connected beyond the village. Na Yang Din, although geographically distinct form Om Maeng, is administratively part of the latter village and does not have its own headman. The lack of intra-village leadership and the transience of many residents (this is the poorest village in our sample) results in a relative lack of bonding social capital in the form of familial and friend support networks, and a paucity of village-based groups. This lack of bonding social capital was clear from the village network data. Our data also show that Na Yang Din was the village with the highest percentage of residents reporting the crisis year as the “worst ever” or “very difficult” (see research Note No. 6).

Our findings, when analyzed separately by village type, revealed a pattern that is both intriguing and informative. Overall, group membership is higher among wealthier households, and the same households tend to have more widely distributed network ties, including a higher proportion of ties to the formal or market economy than to family, co-villagers and clan members. This contrast emerges only in part because of differences that might exist between (poor) Karen and (less poor, or wealthy) Northern Thai and Hmong. The same pattern is as clearly seen within the sub-sample of Karen villages as it is for the sample as a whole (see Geran (2000) for more data and discussion).

In a preliminary exploration of factors contributing to vulnerability, we constructed a measure of major household responses to the crisis and examined its relationship with a set of household characteristics. Changes in health expenditures, schooling, migration and forest product collection (all relative to a normal year) were judged to be to be ‘major’ responses, that is, those representing disinvestment and thus likely to have long-term welfare effects. The vulnerability measure was a simple mean. The observation and quantification of village-level and household level heterogeneity in both triggers and vulnerability has potentially important implications for the design of safety-net programs.

An important finding from this research was the role played by various forms of social capital as a mechanism for providing income protection and consumption smoothing. Although there is no widespread agreement on the exact definition of social capital, in the Northern Thai context it quickly became clear that some elements of this concept merited closer attention than others. Whereas in Western societies social capital is frequently measured by membership of groups, in the rural Thai context group membership is only one form of connection between individuals or households and wider society. Equally important — or arguably more so — is a set of “network ties” to family, wider kin, other village members, employers, traders and lenders through which a variety of functional relationships are played out. These network ties include “inherited” links, mainly to family and clan, and based on traditions of mutual support and reciprocity; and “achieved” links to others, including employers, input suppliers and produce buyers, political leaders, and the like.

In our surveys we asked households about their membership of groups, most of which have some economic function. We also asked about their network ties—in the larger sample by asking how many people a household could call upon for help when needed, and in a smaller subsample by a more detailed accounting of the types of ties by which households are linked. We plotted social ties to other individuals or groups either within the village (integrated) or outside the village (linking) and we distinguished between ties based on kinship (inherited) and other ties resulting from various life experiences (achieved). Within the inherited category we distinguish between immediate (nuclear) and extended (clan) family, and in the achieved category between ties to individuals (people) and village level or external groups (groups). Finally, we distinguish between external ties within the district (local) and external ties outside the district (external).

---

Figure 3: Subjective crisis intensity by village type (%)
binary variable taking a value of 1 if a household reported any major response, and 0 otherwise. Of 165 usable observations in our analysis, 65 reported a major response.

We then constructed a set of variables representing household characteristics such as farm size, the value of assets, income sources, ethnicity, sex, age, and educational attainment. To these conditioning variables we added two proxies for social capital: the number of groups to which a household belongs, and the number of people a household reported it could count upon for help in a crisis. The former, ‘groups’, is intended to capture membership of formal organizations; the latter, ‘help’, the strength of informal network ties. We then used probit analysis, a quantitative statistical procedure, to test the hypothesis that any of these variables was associated with vulnerability.

The results were surprising. Over a wide range of model specifications the only — and consistently — statistically robust results were that a higher value of the ‘group’ variable predicted greater vulnerability, while a higher value of ‘help’ predicted lower vulnerability. The pattern of statistical significance also varied across groups. Among the Karen, group membership did little to reduce vulnerability in the face of a shock, whereas network ties played a measurable mitigating role. For wealthier households, both group membership and network ties were significantly associated with diminished vulnerability. The pattern that emerged is thus one of wealthier households having both a greater asset base (including social capital) upon which to draw in times of trouble, but also a more diversified one, with the implication that a more diversified safety net is one less prone to collapse in the face of a major shock. Among poor households, by contrast, group membership counted for little when all households were equally badly affected. Moreover, from our qualitative sub-sample we find that the ‘achieved’ network ties of poor households are largely to employers rather than to a deeper or broader network. Both the drought and the economic collapse caused farm labor demand to decline in Mae Chaem, so for poor households these forms of achieved social capital also served poorly as safety nets during a crisis.

One would expect to find that having larger informal support networks would help households to cope with the two concurrent crises. But one would also expect that connections through participation in formal groups would also be associated with diminished vulnerability.

One potential explanation for the puzzling result is that group membership represents in some form the degree of integration of each household into formal Thai economic and social institutions. In our sample there is a weak negative correlation between the ‘group’ and ‘help’ variables, consistent with a substitution of formal for informal relationships. During growth phases the former may be more appealing as mechanisms to obtain credit and other services without the need to take on reciprocal obligations. During a crisis, however, the lack of reciprocity of formal relationships may undercut the ability to smooth consumption and protect investments, e.g. by renegotiating the terms of debt repayment or sharing incomes and responsibilities. We have begun to explore ways to test this integration hypothesis.

Another interesting result from our statistical analysis could shed more light on the social capital puzzle. From analysis of sub-samples of the data we found that relatively asset-poor Thai households and relatively asset-rich Karen households were more likely to report major responses to the crisis. This finding supports the integration hypothesis in that it is these two groups of households who are likely to be participating in many groups but be marginalized within those groups. We can assume that most Thai would have relatively equal access to formal institutions at the village level. However, poorer households may still be marginalized by group structure or function. These relatively new groups are likely still developing working procedures and if the national struggle for democracy in Thailand is any indication then we can expect that even formal institutions do not guarantee equitable access. They are likely based on past hierarchical relationships and dominated by village elite interests. For Karen households, access may be even more restrictive, so only the richer Karen are able to participate. But as with the poor Thai, they may be marginalized within more formal institutions by virtue of their ethnicity or economic status. Again, these indications need to be explored more fully before any conclusions are definitively drawn.

It seems clear that our data capture an economy, and a society, in transition. For many Mae Chaem households, rapid and sustained economic growth was accompanied by increasing reliance on formal economic institutions and market-based relationships than had previously been the case. Though this reliance on formal (and usually extra-village) links indicates another form of integration into the larger Thai society, it may also have resulted in increased exposure to risk. Participation in formal intra-village groups such as village loan funds, and market-based extra-village links to traders and banks was important (and helpful) for income increases and wealth accumulation for certain villages and households. Participation in these groups may have been a way to gain information and to reap the economic benefits of growth through increased autonomy and diminished reciprocal obligations to networks of family and friends. But by sacrificing more traditional forms of mutual help and insurance in order to “get ahead”, our analysis suggests that there were some households in the transition from traditional to the commercial economy that were exposed to an unexpected economic downturn. Naturally, the degree of exposure depended on the type of trigger, and also on the availability of compensating public sector measures.

Some policy implications

After the reform of financial and regulatory institutions in the macroeconomy, one of the most pressing issues facing the Thai government in the post-crisis years is the need to design and implement a formal social safety net mechanism. This proposal is not without controversy, since there are still some in Thailand
(as elsewhere) who argue that the extended family, and the rural economy more generally, serve adequately to absorb unemployment and provide for consumption-smoothing through income-sharing when crises occur. It is true that the extended family and the farm economy can absorb some impacts of a shock, and that these have played vital roles in minimizing the vulnerability of the poor to previous shocks. However, the rapid growth of the 1980s and early 1990s have changed Thailand’s economic and social landscape to a point where it can no longer be reasonably argued that there is no need for a more extensive set of institutions to protect the poor against a downturn.

Our findings, summarized above, contain several kinds of insight for the design of rural development and crisis management policy in Thailand and in similar developing countries. First, while network ties to kin are important, their effects are neither persuasively adequate in the face of a major shock, nor uniform across households of different types. Second, the capacity of the rural economy to absorb labor is much lower than during past economic downturns, which occurred before the era of rapid mechanization and other changes that have greatly diminished the capacity of agriculture to absorb or retain large numbers of workers in a crisis. Therefore, some forms of social safety net must be designed to replace these.

Third, membership of semi-formal groups at the local level may provide support to some households in a crisis, but our data suggest that they play little role in mitigating the effects felt by the poorest households. This may be due to differences in the type of group, or in the degree to which a group is capable of functioning during a crisis, or it might be due to systematic factors that deny some groups access to social services. Whatever the cause, if social safety nets are to be extended to Thailand’s rural poor, the village-level delivery mechanisms will have to be scrutinized and probably redesigned in order to better (and more efficiently) match the supply of social insurance with demand.

**Contributions to Ford Foundation goals**

The Ford Foundation’s international development work emphasizes, among other themes, poverty alleviation and economic security, and the welfare of upland communities. Although a great deal of progress on these fronts can be made by working directly with upland and other poor communities, it is also vital to understand the broader economic context within which members of such communities make life decisions. In a mixed economy, national markets for labor and products, and the policies affecting them, exert enormous influence on the decisions of rural households.

Our work in this project links “micro” and “macro” economic phenomena by tracing the effects of economy-wide growth and shocks through to the agricultural land use, labor market and educational decisions of rural households in poorly endowed rural areas. This approach is intended to make clear the links between economic development at an aggregate scale and the welfare of specific groups of the poor. The ways in which these links operate, and their effects at local level, is brought into sharp focus in a time of crisis such as has recently been endured in Thailand. Our research aims to provide information on two particular subjects of great interest to policy makers. First, we are documenting the sources of rural incomes and the ways in which these are affected by economic boom and bust. This information is necessary both to evaluate the poverty and distributional implications of past growth and shocks occurring in the Thai economy, and — more importantly — to evaluate the resilience of poor rural household’s incomes to the recent shocks as well as unanticipated shocks occurring in the future.

Second, by investigating rural households’ resource use responses to economic change, we can make meaningful statements about likely future trends in the use of labor, land and natural resources in upland areas. These insights are necessary if we are to be able to project with any confidence the future trend and likely resilience of income-earning capacity by poor upland households. They also shed light on motivations for land conversion (especially between agricultural and forest uses) and agricultural land use intensification, each of which has important implications for long-term environmental and natural resource management in Northern Thailand.

Although our research concentrates on communities in Northern Thailand, the themes we address and the methodologies we employ are considerably more general. Our findings will be relevant to researchers and policy advisors concerned with managing poverty and environmental resources in all developing countries of Southeast Asia and beyond.

**Bibliography**


Research Notes and Working Papers are available from: www.aae.wisc.edu/coxhead/projects/lamyai

---

*Thai-Yunnan Project Bulletin* 6
Introduction

In their provocative book on *Demonic Males*, Wrangham and Peterson (1996) describe a “remarkable” meeting between two groups of pygmy chimpanzees, a meeting that took place at the border of their respective territories. The two groups emerged into a clearing where the researchers had scattered sugar cane. “Gradually”, they write,

individuals from the two parties sat down within a few yards of each other…. It was a standoff, with the two parties separated by a sort of demilitarized zone. And then, after thirty minutes of this strange truce a … female [from one group] crossed the neutral ground and had hoka hoka [technically described as genito-genital rubbing] with a female from the other community. What followed was unprecedented for ape watchers. For the next two hours the two parties fed and rested together almost as if they were members of a single community, with only the mature males… still quietly retaining their old social boundaries.

As foreign as primatological socio-biology may be to the mainstream of contemporary social theory, this passage encapsulates important elements of the current celebratory pre-occupation with the transgression and disturbance of borders and boundaries. Concern with boundary crossing is not only “sexy” in a flippant sense, but metaphors of spatial transgression feature prominently in academic discourse on the construction of alternative gender identities and sexual orientations (Bondi 1993). In the discursive environment of cross-fertilisation between pseudo-space, gender and sex, boundary crossing, to quote Katharyne Mitchell, “carries with it the febrile fascination and flavor of the illicit” (1997: 101; see also Bondi 1993: 244).

The subversive tendencies of those whose life-paths cross national demarcations has long been a preoccupation in studies of the borderlands. In the 1950s Kristof (1959) wrote of the conflict between “inner-oriented” states and “outer-oriented” borderlanders. In a not-so-subtle intertwining of elite ideology and spatial analysis, peripheral borderlands were mapped as “frontier zones” characterised by what Kristof called “rebelliousness, lawlessness and/or an absence of laws” (Kristof 1959: 281). Numerous more recent contributions have embraced the imagery of centre-periphery conflict in highlighting the recalcitrance and subversion of the borderlanders. Post-colonial studies, in adopting the more contemporary and self-consciously lower-case language of “in-betweenness” and “hybridity”, have argued that the trans-border space is, to quote Mitchell again, a “privileged location from which to make consequential interventions in hegemonic narratives of race and nation” (Mitchell 1997: 108).

Women living in the borderlands are often portrayed as crucial agents of this counter-hegemonic intervention. As the elder male chimpanzees keep their cautious distance we are reminded that human borders are profoundly gendered, a product, we are told, of modernist penetration into the fluid and ambiguous space of the pre-modern past. Stokes (1998), for example, in his study of the border between Turkey and Syria suggests that:

…all acts of boundary making, and the acts of propriety involved, imply a male process of division, protection and control of an unbounded femininity.

In recent writing, feminine mobility is seen as an important force in destabilising these spatial and gender boundaries (McDowell 1996: 39; Bondi 1993). This writing has both analytical and normative dimensions. “The goal” Nancy Duncan (1996: 141) writes, “is to mount a multi-pronged attack on the spatial and discursive boundaries that regulate behavior and discipline difference.” Wilson and Donnan’s (1998) collection on “border identities” documents some of the prongs of this attack. Cheater (1998: 209) writes of female cross-border traders in Zimbabwe who “more attuned to globalising trends” than the nation’s mensfolk, undermine masculinist definitions of citizenship and national.

---

2 The paper was first presented at the 1998 Annual Conference of the Australian Anthropological Society in the panel “Making Sense of Space”.  

Somjit’s life: making sense of borders

Andrew Walker  
RMAP; RSPAS, ANU  
andrew.walker@anu.edu.au
self-reliance. In the same volume Hann and Beller-Hann (1998) write of Russian petty traders and prostitutes whose fair skins and cheap wares have created moral panic across the border in Turkey. In the collection’s introduction Wilson and Donnan (1998: 23) summarise the contributions, referring to women who challenge the border’s official masculinity by seeking to cross it on their own terms, thereby creating a breach through which, if unchecked, subversive femininities and other moral seepages may contaminate the body politic.

In this paper I briefly outline the life-history of one of these subversive seepages. Her name is Somjit. She is a small-scale trader and cross-river boat operator plying the Mekong River border between Thailand and Laos. My theoretical aim is to call for greater caution in attributing transgression and subversion to the lives of border crossing women like Somjit. It strikes me as ironic that academic celebration and advocacy of the supposedly transgressive lives of these women closely parallels the sexist stereotyping that are encountered among male traders, transport workers and labourers along the long Mekong border. Both discourses seem keen to frame as exotic and erotic the lives of these feminine others.

**Somjit: extracts from my notes**

Somjit came over the border [to Mukdahan on the Thai side of the border] at about 10 for drinks and eats. We walked to the market with Kluay. Somjit didn’t want to go with just me because people would look and gossip. We went to the restaurant by the river where they sold nice ice cream. Over drinks she told us a lot about her life. She was born in Sepon where her family grew rice on unirrigated fields. Her father was handsome and strong. He fought with the Americans during the war.

She remembered as a young girl having to go and hide in the mountains during the day to avoid the bombing. They went up before it got light and only came back after it was dark. The toilet in the mountains was very small. She remembered Vietnamese and Pathet Lao soldiers and said that as a young girl they liked to cuddle her. She was very attractive then with an even whiter skin than she has now.

She matured early and was much sought after by men. There were three men living in the one village who were all courting her. It ended in grief and gunshots and accusations that she had several hearts. She was 15.

Soon after an older man from a town near Savannakhet saw her and he liked what he saw. Her mother was keen to settle the matter. Somjit ran away to her grandmother’s in Takhek for two weeks, but her mother wrote a letter which persuaded her to return. She had never spoken to the man and he wasn’t handsome. He was rich then, but he isn’t now. On her wedding day she was so unhappy that when the groom saw her expression he started to cry himself. They didn’t sleep together for over a month, but the marriage lasted.

They moved to Savannakhet where two children were born. She and her husband worked as traders transporting cargo to towns along the river. Officially the border with Thailand was closed but there was often cargo to smuggle and this was a profitable and affluent time of their life. When the border opened for trade lots of others got in on the act and their profits declined. They sold the cargo boat.

Somjit took up cross-border trade in a much smaller boat that her father built for her. This involved taking orders for people in Savannakhet and buying things on the Thai side of the river and occasionally taking passengers. She regularly bought vegetables for her mother to sell in the local market. Since her mother became ill Somjit has become more involved in selling the vegetables. She would buy the vegetables in Thailand one day and sell them in Savannakhet early the following morning. She also bought other things: bicycles, clothes, drinks and small consignments of construction materials.

Somjit told me that she has never paid tax in Laos. She said that when she bought a bike recently the customs guy asked her, jokingly, why she never paid tax. She offered him 20 baht — which she claimed was the tax on the bike — but he didn’t accept it. She is friends with the customs guys and has known them for years. She is quite proud of this.

Somjit admits that she has many admirers, including quite a number on the Thai side of the border. She says that it is hard because it would be nice to sleep with someone she likes. She has been friends with men but doesn’t sleep with them. The tuk-tuk driver that often delivered her goods to the port is handsome but he was already married. His wife is very sick.

Recently she had been with her friend Seng on a trip to Vietnam. It was a disaster. In the bus across the mountains she vomited most of the way. In Vietnam things were no better. It rained a lot and she was always wet. The hotel was dirty, the toilets were terrible and the whole place smelled. She cried a lot. They bought about 80,000 baht worth of goods. Somjit had put in half. On the way back to Savannakhet, 10,000 baht worth of cigarettes fell off somewhere along the road. This wiped out most of their profit. She never wanted to go again. It was easier making money just coming across the border to Mukdahan.

Soon after our long conversation, Somjit’s trading career took another turn. She set up a small restaurant on the Lao side of the river and made regular trips across the border to buy alcoholic drinks and food, but maintained her trade in bicycles, clothes and vegetables. A small sleeping area in the back of the restaurant — which, incidentally her husband had built — provided welcome respite from marital intimacy. The customs officers and immigration police that she had befriended would gravitate to the restaurant ordering bottles of beer and shots of bitter white whiskey. As the evening closed in, their hands would start to wander.

**Transgression or collaboration**

There are several aspects of Somjit’s trans-border trading life that could be portrayed in a transgressive or subversive light. Here I will continued on page 9
focus on only two: her smuggling activities and her much admired and discussed sexuality. My argument is that in both these respects Somjit’s project is the idiosyncratic construction, not erasure, of a national border.

The profitability of Somjit’s petty trading activity is heavily dependent on the non-payment of customs duties and other administrative and service charges that are collected along the borderline. On the Thai side of the border Somjit rarely pays the 50 baht immigration entry fees. Nor does she often have to pay the “processing charges” collected by the Thai customs officers. More often than not she also avoided payment of the various port fees collected by the local boat-operators who controlled many aspects of cross-border passage. On the Lao side of the border, where import duties on many items are prohibitively high, Somjit, once again, rarely had to resort to the thick wads of Thai baht and Lao kip that were tucked away in her handbag. She was a successful smuggler.

This success was not, however, based on the stereotypes of cross-border smuggling. Somjit was not one to slip across the Mekong at night to collecting goods hidden away in an overgrown section of river-bank. Nor did she bother to travel up- or down-stream to any of the numerous river-side Thai villages where she could have readily made her purchases, well-away from the surveillance of the customs officers in Mukdahan. Her passage through the official port, was highly visible and, more often than not, commented upon by the official and unofficial regulators of the borderline. Having made her purchases in Mukdahan’s shops she would usually wait in the small cluster of riverside sheds and restaurants that lay directly opposite the customs house. Eventually her tuk-tuk would arrive and head down the concrete ramp to the muddy port below where her goods would be loaded into her boat.

Nonchalantly she would finish her conversations — or her bowl of noodles — pay the tuk-tuk driver, pole her boat out into deeper water and head off, in a huge arc, around the point of one of the large islands that marked the beginning of Lao territory.

Sometimes, when relations with the customs officers were a little strained or when the cross-river boat association was being particularly diligent in collecting their fees she would moor her boat at the far end of the port, only 50 metres downstream, and load her goods via a muddy lane that avoided the customs house but ran past a restaurant where customs officers often sat making desultory conversation and planning their evening game of badminton.

The basis of Somjit’s success as a smuggler is complex and defies precise delineation. No doubt, sexuality is involved. Somjit is much admired amongst the male port fraternity and these petty officials and cargo-port notables seem keen to involve her in the trivial but flirtatious and sexualised banter in which she excels. Some may entertain forlorn hopes of sexual access but for most, I suspect, the brief pleasantries of her pale-skinned presence are an ends in themselves. Once when I asked her what she had to pay to get her cargo through the port she replied that she only had to pay with a smile. One group of Thai immigration police seemed so captivated that, for a period, they took to giving her small gifts when she passed through the port, even bothering to ask her what brand of beer she preferred. No doubt the individual relationships that Somjit cultivated on both sides of the border varied in their nature and intensity but it seems clear to me that her smuggling was based on a personalised and, in many cases, mutually beneficial engagement with those who regulated the borderline.

Somjit’s experience highlights an obvious, but often overlooked, point in relation to smuggling. Smugglers do not seek to undermine or subvert borders — their livelihoods depend on them. Borderline regulation creates the unevenness of supply, price and demand that makes smuggling worthwhile and state agencies involved in the regulation of the border are often dependent on smugglers to service rudimentary distribution networks. Borderline regulation also contributes to the infrastructural and institutional bottlenecks that give small-scale traders like Somjit a competitive advantage over large-scale wholesalers and transport operators. State borders may impose restrictions on members of borderline communities but they also create opportunities for local enterprise. I very much doubt Somjit would want the competitive advantage of her charming smile erased by the subversion of national boundaries.

The issue of sexuality, of course, warrants some more detailed discussion. Let me return again to some fragments from my notebooks.

One afternoon, I’d taken refuge in the small corrugated iron restaurant erected for the dry season at the port. Wasan, a Thai boat driver and trader, sat opposite me smoking “Falling Rain” and worrying over the grubby shopping list he had offered to translate for a friend across the river in Lao. Nonchalantly, he glanced up, pointing out two young and attractive Lao traders, admiring their looks. I agreed. “But, be careful” he warned, suddenly assuming a masculine confidentiality, “they’re dangerous”. I asked him why. He spelt out “A-I-S-D”. Slightly garbled, but the message was clear. He said that the two women had set themselves up in a hotel across the river in Savannakhet, working as prostitutes and having as many as 20 customers over a couple of days. This he said, was a profitable sideline to their trading activities.

A year or so later on my most recent trip to the border I sat chatting with Narong, another petty trader and boat operator, while he dug manure into his riverside vegetable garden. I hadn’t seen Somjit and asked him if she still came across regularly to buy. She did, but he had some more startling news. With hushed excitement he told me that she had been to Khon Khaen some five hours bus trip away. This was unusual given that Lao border crossings are normally not permitted to travel so far afield. It seems that some deal had been done. I asked Narong why she had gone. “To sell,” he said. “To sell what?” I wondered out loud. “To sell her body.” “Her body,” he repeated it to be sure that I understood. “Oh Andrew, and now she’s so thin”, he lamented, part of her body seemingly lost in the transaction.

Somjit was regularly the subject of speculation of this kind. In the eyes of her observers she embodied a potent combination continued on page 10
of fantasy and fear. Her pale skin, slender figure, languid walk and mastery of the six-cylinder Toyota engine that powered her boat evoked sexual desire and admiration. In a linguistic play of wishful thinking she was often referred to as saaw jît, saaw denoting a young unmarried girl who was now sexually “ready”. But as the reflections of Wasan and Narong indicate, women like Somjit were seen, with little concrete justification, as prostitutes and bearers of the AIDS virus. My friendship with Somjit generated amusement but in more private moments I was regularly warned to be careful: many others had been there before me. In the local sexual discourses there was a fine symbolic line between desirable slenderness and the sickly thinness that preceded regular funerals in the riverside cluster of villages where I stayed.

On the face of it, it would seem reasonable to see this cultural response as a disciplining of Somjit’s transgression. The situation seem analogous to that reported from Zimbabwe where female cross-border traders are constructed as problem citizens in order that “the disorder of anomalies … [are] brought under symbolic control” (Cheater 1998: 208). In Southeast Asia a number of writers have similarly reported the cultural disruption and anxiety created by the mobility of women, a practice which is seen as undermining gendered boundaries between household, village and nation. As a more globalised femininities “play havoc with gender ideologies and other forms of authority” (Ong and Peletz 1995: 4) the traditional demarcations and “rules of decorum” that confined women to the social space of the village (Trankell 1993: 22) are disrupted.

My reservation with these approaches is that they seem to place too much emphasis on superficial readings of masculine anxiety and insufficient emphasis on a detailed understanding of feminine intention. Indeed, several recent contributions on cross-border feminine mobility display no evidence of direct research with the women involved. Somjit’s experience suggests that sexualised practice — personal presentation, flirtation, journeys to out-of-town restaurants to share pork intestines and whiskey and, possibly, occasional sexual liaisons — are components of her creation of a profitable niche in the highly regulated commercial environment of the border. To re-phrase Mitchell slightly in her important discussion on the “limits of liminality”:

a strategic self-fashioning in liminal and partial sites can be used for the purposes of capital accumulation quite as effectively as for the purposes of intervention in hegemonic narratives of race, gender and nation. (Mitchell 1997: 109)

This strategic self-fashioning is commonplace. At the Thai and Lao ports, tight-trousered customs officials can often be seen locked in conversation with young and attractive traders and it is not uncommon for traders to attribute their low rate of taxation to the charms of one member of their group. As Kirsch (1985: 313) has indicated, longstanding sexualised practices can now be profitably deployed on a broader and more mobile stage.

A cultural response that frames these women as dangerous is not, I would argue, a response to the subversion and disruption of borders. Rather it is a response to the success of these women in profitably and collaboratively manipulating the regimes of state and local regulation that flourish along the borderline. Borders are not usually containers or barriers, as much contemporary literature suggests, but are places where people compete to manipulate, control and profit from passage. That some women are proving successful in this regulatory game seems hard for some local men to accept, and they are keen to frame feminine success in erotic terms, a sphere where, despite their fears, these men feel more comfortable.

The contemporary academic celebration of female border transgression strikes me as a similar exercise in wishful thinking, a denial of the fact that women can be very good at the regulatory game. For some contemporary social theorists the sphere of erotica, erotica and aesthetic contemplation is a comfort zone they unwittingly share with the men I worked with on the muddy Mekong riverbanks.

Bibliography


NEW PUBLICATIONS

Redefining Nature: Karen Ecological Knowledge and the Challenge to the Modern Conservation Paradigm, by Pinkaew Laungaramsri, Chiang Mai: Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Faculty of Social Science, Chiang Mai University, 2002. This anthropological work offers a critical analysis of the development of the discourse of nature conservation in Thailand and the response of the Karen people, drawing on their ecological knowledge. Focusing on the centralisation of "nature" and peripheralisation of minority hill people, the author examines the way in which certain discourses and rhetoric regarding "hill tribes contra nature" have been made prominent and persistent, not only within state perceptions but also within the conflicts between upland people and other social groups such as lowland communities and conservationists. WP


Chao Petcharacha Buruth Laek Haeng Racharnajuk Lao (The iron man of Laos Kingdom), by Maha-Sila Veerawong, translated from Lao by Sommai Premjith. Bangkok: Art & Culture, Matichon Press, 1999. (In Thai) A socio-political biography of Chao Petchrach, the last crown prince of the Lao Kingdom. The author provides insights into his majesty’s early life and his role in the Lao independence movement. Provides an interesting Lao perspective on the events of World War II. WP

Prawatisath Sipsonchiutai (The history of Tai Dam in North of Vietnam), by Pattiya Yimrewath. Bangkok: Tai Social and Cultural History Project, SangSan Press, 2001. (In Thai) One of publications from the Tai Social and Cultural History Project — led by Chattip Nartsupha — which tries to search for “the authentic Tai culture” among the Taes outside Thailand. Based on a documentary research on the Tai Dam in the north of Vietnam — particularly Cam Trong’s work along with other English, Vietnamese and French sources — and field work in Vietnam. The book provides details of the history of Tai settlements in northern Vietnam; economic development; family and kinship; political systems; and beliefs, customs and rituals. WP

Diplomatic Missions to Tai States in 1837: the Richardson and McLeod Diaries, edited by Volker Grabowsky and Andrew Turton. To be published by Silkworm Books later this year. In four parts with extensive footnotes and appendices. More than half is contextualisation and analysis of colonial ethnography and the social life of the time, with beautiful maps and illustrations. This is a major contribution to historical ethnography and Thai scholarship. NT

Transplantations

The first-ever National Conference of Anthropologists in Thailand was held on 27–29 March at the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre in Bangkok, on the theme of ‘Observing Thai Life in Transition’. Organised (among others) by Paritta Koantakul (Thammasat) and Anan Ganjanapan (Chiangmai), the keynote speech was given by Akin Rabhibhadana emphasising the virtues of long-term fieldwork but also pointing out the relevance of anthropology to the changing conditions of post-modern Thai life. Yos Santasombat presented a plenary session on Community Rights, and discussants included Thirayuth Boomnee, Chayan Watanaputthi, Surichai Wan’kaew and Choltira Satyawattana. The conference was widely seen as a first outlet for ‘post-modern’ anthropology in Thailand, and a kind of platform for the voices of the voiceless. 42 papers were given, mostly by younger researchers, on issues ranging from local community rights to comedy on the internet, from scavengers to lesbians, from smoking to coffee-houses, women in forestry, the HIV-infected and students in the sex trade, indigenous medicine, and ethnic minorities (including the Hmong, Karen, Mon and even Kachin). There were 400 participants, and I am told a further 200 who could not be admitted.

Discussion was lively, pointing often to the critical state of Thai anthropology as, on the one hand, it enters a new stage of professionalism with increasing returns of students from overseas to take up new teaching or research posts, and on the other hand (like anthropologies elsewhere), struggles to define its borders against those of rural sociology, history, cultural and media studies. Akin Rabhibhadana had stressed the continued need for fieldwork, and in conclusion several senior anthropologists expressed their dissatisfaction with the ‘post-modern’ turn in anthropology. Ironically, it seems that just as the call for traditional fieldwork is becoming instituted, new methodologies of a more multi-sited, textually oriented kind are challenging that call. Under these new influences, Thai anthropology may continue to develop at an arms’ length, albeit an interesting arms’ length, from the dirty feet of fieldwork. NT
**BOOK REVIEWS**

**PATRONS AND CLIENTS**


This is an extremely odd book; the one thing it is not is a good introduction to the region for those unfamiliar with it. Nicola Tannenbaum’s extensive Foreword tells us how Lucien Hanks (better known for his lowland ‘Bang Chan’ work) had completed a draft of this book before his death in 1988, while Jane Hanks then worked on with the help of Richard O’Connor, Cornelia Kammerer, Hjördis Jonsson and herself. The result is 8 chapters which do not quite seem to fit together, based on the upland surveys conducted by the Hanks from the early ’60s to the late 70’s in the upper region of Chiangrai.

I found the attempt to treat autonomous villages in the uplands as if they had formed a single social system in the past deeply suspicious, and suggesting a lack of awareness of the cultural differences between the northern minorities. Very little knowledge is shown of the Hmong or Yao social systems for example. If this is what ‘constructing a region’ (Nicola Tannenbaum, xxxviii) means, then I think we are probably better off without it.

Also the depiction of a highly romanticised Chinese Empire as the inevitable background for all the ‘tribes’ is based on a misapprehension both of the nature of Chinese history and of the immediate histories of some of those tribes themselves. But this ill-informed Sinocentrism goes further than the minorities. Very little is shown of the Hmongs system, hierarchy, ethnocentrism and even ‘the concept that authority was backed by the supernatural’ (115–6) are all attributed to China and the ‘fact’ that ‘the Thai were once a minority in the Chinese empire’ — a statement wrong on at least three counts I can think of. The Shan recognition of tribal leaders is described as ‘the last flicker of the relations of the Chinese emperor with its citizens’(120!)

There is some good local politics in this book, and ‘engaging vignettes and anecdotes’ (Foreword, xx) particularly about the KMT, opium, and Christian conversions. There is some good Lisu historical ethnography (75–89) and interesting material on Lahu messianism (177–83) which might have been more generalised. But the well-meant attempt to trace the gradual impact of centralised Thai administration on the uplands and the advent of development programmes is flawed by an unquestioned overarching paradigm of ‘modernisation’, shot through (as Nicola Tannenbaum notes) with psychological assumptions, and the consequent emphasis on leadership and entrepreneurship, individual innovation and adaptability. Much of the material, where it is not directly based on demographic surveys, appears to have been culled from interviews with village headmen. The overall effect is scrappy and uneven.

One appreciates the background to this book and the just fame of the Bennington-Cornell Survey of 1963–4, the efforts of those who made it possible and their reasons for wishing to do so, but I really cannot recommend this book very highly; it seems to me to suffer from an awful lot of problems, like unabashed culturalism and sweeping generalisations (‘The proud Lisu had no sense of inferiority at all’, 118). The Foreword acts as a kind of Apology for all this, actually drawing attention to the Hanks’ background in studies of ‘national character and culture’, the ‘applied’ nature of much of their work and its ‘intertwining of the psychological and economic’. This is not great ethnography, even though it will be of interest to ethnographers of the region.

For those who might not know, ‘Provenience’ (Chapter 1; ‘Provenience and Setting’) is an 1882 corruption of ‘provenance’, a term customarily applied to fine wines and works of art or literature.

**Nicholas Tapp**

**THE SPECTRE OF COMMUNISM STILL HAUNTS**


I fear for the future of this little red book. Marxism–communism has been derided by Thai elites, ethno-nationalists, and governments of all stripes as alien and unsuitable to the country’s history and traditions. For these reasons it has received insufficient attention as a topic of serious research in Thai studies. Throughout the period covered in this book other matters have captured the attention of social scientists. These include the end of the absolute monarchy, the rise of militarism, World War II and the Japanese Occupation, and the rough-and-ready politics of the post-war era until Field Marshal Sarit routed his rivals and took control in 1958.

What interests could possibly be served by revisiting the 1920s when Marxism-communism was dominated by the lookjoen, Thais of Chinese ancestry, and their Vietnamese and Chinese comrades who were preoccupied with anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles elsewhere in the region? What is so compelling about the feuds and factions as the People’s Party struggled with its internal tensions between Phanomyong’s social democracy and Field Marshal Plaek Phibun Phibunsongkhram’s rightist authoritarianism? If, from the outset, Marxism-communism could claim few adherents and was distinctive for its failures rather than its achievements why, to use one of the author’s typically crisp formulations, so much ado about no socialists?

The short answer to these complex questions, argues Dr Kasian Tejapira of Thammasat University’s Faculty of Political Science, is that the Spectre of Communism is still haunting us and that we must continue to read and study this post-communist ghost story if we are to understand ourselves. Marxism-communism put

---

1 Originally published in The Nation, 20 July 2002
indelible mark on Thailand’s modern history for nearly five decades by forcing mainstream political culture to confront it in a myriad of ways. Some of the most creative minds of their generation bent their intellects to importing Marxism–communism, adapting it for the local market, and reproducing, distributing, and promoting it as a Thai commodity. Rather than simply narrating the history of the Communist Party of Thailand Dr. Kasian looks more broadly at the cultural realm where Marxist, communist, and socialist thinkers promoted their wares as they engaged in a bruising and sometimes deadly war of position with the ruling elites.

While other scholars have ventured to tell parts of this story before, Dr. Kasian has exceeded these earlier efforts with his empathy, and resourcefulness. He has ransacked archives and libraries to track down little-known publications, such as defunct political magazines which enjoyed only a brief life in print before being closed down by the authorities, or by the gritty financial realities of the marketplace. For insights into the politics behind Field Marshal Phibun’s coup in 1947 he has used the fortnightly summary of political events prepared by the American Embassy in Bangkok. For the business details of publications from the 1940s and ’50s he has consulted documents in the Thai Ministry of Commerce. He has read unpublished doctoral theses in Thai and English, including some that have proven difficult for other researchers to consult. For his excursions into “rhyming Marxism,” a medium exploited by the artful activists of the period, he has ventured into poetry and song. He has interviewed key figures of the period himself and made use of interviews by other students of the topic.

Such a good book inevitably stimulates topics for further study, for example, the Santibal (Special Branch), which was charged with keeping an eye on and suppressing Marxism–communism. The priorities, training, and tactics of surveillance employed by the Santibal would be difficult to research, but some hints of where to look and what to look for may be found in Dr. Kasian’s study. Another topic worthy of further research is the relationship between Marxism and Buddhism. Many writers, some wearing the yellow robe and some not, were intrigued by how to adapt Marxism–communism to a Buddhist society, so they set about trying to understand the problem.

It is quite clear from Dr. Kasian’s study, and on this point it does not differ from previous scholarship, that Marxism-communism was an urban phenomenon, studied and propagated by urban intellectuals who exploited its powers of analysis to confront authoritarian rule in the period 1947–1957. But what about rural Thailand? The secure bases established by the Communist Party of Thailand in the countryside following its declaration of revolution in 1965 and especially following the flight of people from the cities after the coup of 6 October 1976 deserve a fresh interpretation that might change the conventional picture of Marxism in Thailand as only an urban phenomenon.

What is left? This multi-dimensional question that heads the last chapter operates on several levels. Or particular interest is what it meant to be leftist in the country’s cultural wars. Early in the period the lookjin communists brokered the ideas and aspirations of Chinese, Russian and European thinkers aspiring to world revolution. Late in the period “left” meant defying the military repression supported by American policy in the region. Throughout the period the leftists were beset by dilemmas distilled in Dr. Kasian’s book as legality versus militancy, business versus ideology, community versus conflict, and plurality versus monopoly.

There is also the question of what remains today, what is left of the movement since the CPT formally disbanded twenty years ago. The fact that the revolution in Thailand never triumphed should not mislead us into thinking that the impact of Marxism–Communism on Thailand ended with the amnesty of 1980 and the final neutralization of the Party in 1984. Here Dr. Kasian is unequivocal, arguing that the radical mass movements of the 1970s and the role of public intellectuals in Thailand today are unimaginable and incomprehensible without an understanding of the history he unfolds in this volume.

The book is beautifully written with verve and a playful wit that brings to life the ironies and dilemmas in which the lookjin communists and the Marxist intellectuals often found themselves. The inventiveness of Dr. Kasian’s writing may stem from the fact that he is not a native speaker of English and has thus been freed from the genres and styles in which native speakers in English-speaking educational cultures are drilled. Publication a decade after he completed the doctoral dissertation at Cornell University under the supervision of Benedict Anderson and Susan Buck-Morss reminds us that excellent scholarship does not come quickly, or cheaply. This complex research project had many patrons, among them Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University, which must be congratulated not only for publishing Commodifying Marxism but also for providing generous writing spells to enable the author to craft this gem of a book.

Craig J. Reynolds