

Field note of Muang Sing trip

19 Dec 12, Had Gnao (หาดงา) village

In meeting session, we discussed with committee of rubber cooperative group:

- 1) Boonmee Leejongkoun: Head of rubber cooperative group
- 2) Hor Song: village headman assistance
- 3) Lou Lee: staff of rubber cooperative group
- 4) Kwanchai: Soldier

Hor Song reported that Had Gnao Village comprises 185 families, 1,259 peoples, 605 of which female. The village has been established since 1975 and people moved from Udomchai and Bor Kaew. There were only 60 households at that time. People rarely grew rice but they focused on corn, raised animal such as chickens, pigs, and cattle.

In this area, Hmong migrated from highland because they needed to grow rice in the lowlands where the owners had fled from the civil war. In 1975-1976, when the former owners returned government's officials mediated the conflict by establishing that the land should be divided between the two communities.

In 1980, people still grew crops and raised the animals, and the income was not enough. In 1992, Boonmee and his colleagues went to observe the activities of development projects in many provinces of Thailand namely Chiang Mai, Pitsanulok, and the Northeast. They also went to see rubber plantation in China in 1990, and they impress that the rubber can grow without watering. In 1994, 30 families began to plant rubber, and took saplings from China. They gradually stopped swidden practice and turned to the new crop, the rubber tree.

The villagers formed the cooperative group by borrowing 46 million kip from the District Administration. Some Chinese experts trained them in rubber plantation. In addition, Hmong villagers, who have migrated to China, moved back to Had Gnao suggesting how to grow rubber tree. Then, Had Yaow is the first village in Laos that has grown rubber. In 1994, 30 families grew 80,000 rubber trees; in 1995, 80 families grew 120,000; in 1996, villagers grew 146,000 rubber trees in 334 Hectare. After 8 years the rubber trees been planted, in 2002, 30 families could produce 22 tons of rubber and could generate money for 80 million kip (rubber price is 2.5 Chinese Yuan/Kg). Rubber plantation was distributed throughout the country in 2003. The price of rubber was increased to 15 Chinese Yuan/Kg in 2010. However, the price of rubber dropped to 9 Yun/Kg in 2012. Boonmee calculates that villager who grows 2,000 rubber tree would get 2500 Kg of rubber per month, and will earn around 25,000 Yuen/month. Villagers normally grow 2,000-3,000 rubber trees, some may grow 10,000 tree, and some family grow only 1,000-1,500 tree because of lacking labor.

Villagers would get property rights in land according to the age of rubber tree. They have to grow rubber in order to possess the land. Village headman responses in land allocation and commune land. Villagers could not sell the land, they have to pay 30,000 geeb/Hectare/year. Boonmee also shows the record of income from 2002-

2011. In 2002, they sold rubber 22 ton and got 96 million geeb. In 2011, they earn 11,806 million geeb with rubber 774 ton.

The most of labor is the member in family, villagers rarely hire outsider from other town. The young people around 12-15 years old could learn how to tap the rubber tree. Interestingly, women could do rubber tapping better than men. Rubber could be tapped until 35-40 years, or 50 years. Normally, the rubber does not need fertilizer, but after tapping for 10 years, we should nourish it with fertilizer. When the tree could not produce rubber, it is cut to make furniture.

Land allocation depends on the labor in family. Land for rubber plantation is 984 Hectare, and 30 hectare for rice. Most of villagers buy rice for eating. 130 families grow rice but it is not enough for consumption, while 50 families produce rice enough to consume.

The problem of rubber plantation is lack of tapping technique. The rubber will be damaged and died within 10 years. The land for plantation is also limited. Another problems is lack of labor, then villager who grow too many rubbers has to hire outsider for tapping. Since villagers have left the rubber in the field, other villagers or outsider steal the rubber. They need to build the storage house in the village. Security could catch the thief 2-3 times a year; they are outsider, and are penalized by paying a fine, or warning. However, villagers don't know about the impact of rubber plantation concerning with weather. They notice that wild animal such as bird is decreased and no habitat for animal. There is no food in the forest.

Ban Had Yaow is the role model of rubber plantation in the country. The government admires the village. Many groups of people from private and public sectors came here to study the activities of the village. The cooperative group establishes in 2011, the group aims to set up the best rubber price for villagers. The villager from other village could apply to be the member of cooperative group. All families are the members of the group, and they have to sell all rubber to the group. The member has to pay 2.5% of rubber price for administration and other expenses of cooperative group. The group then sells rubber to Chinese company. Most of villagers prefer to collect Chinese Yuan because it is hard currency.

The concept of cooperative is adopted from Thailand. The cooperative idea has been set up only in this village in order to negotiate for the best rubber price. The group also attempts to sell good quality of rubber. When they initiate a good policy, the villagers from other village will join the group.

19 Dec 12, The governor house

Loung Namtha district comprises with 5 cities: Moung Sing, Moung Long, Nam Tha, Phuka, and Na Lae. Moung Sing covers 1789 square kilometer, 85% is mountainous area. There are 8,335 families, and 35,000 people live in 92 villages. Akha and Lue are majority of people; they are 47% and 24% respectively. The other groups are Mong, Tai-dam, Tai-noue, Yoa, Khamu, and Phu-noi.

Moung Sing is the border town connecting Thailand and China. This town focuses on tourism, culture, and history. Since 85% of land is mountainous area, then the agricultural area is limited. The other problem is 47% of Akha could not understand Laos language.

The development project of Moung Sing 2020 aims at 7 criteria:

- 1) Irrigation system
- 2) Grazing big animal in the mountain
- 3) Raising small animals namely chicken for egg and meat
- 4) Growing crop
- 5) Agriculture and handicraft
- 6) Tourism
- 7) Rubber plantation

The project expects to generate income 1,000 USD/person/year. People earn only 876 USD now. The poor will be 10% in 2015, and people will educate 95%.

Moung Sing has 3 productive areas:

- 1) Rubber plantation
- 2) Rice area, service sector in town
- 3) Tourism and culture

Rice area covers 4,754 Hectare, productivity is 20,000 ton. People consume 630 Kg/year, but rice is exported 8,000-10,000 ton/year. Sugar cane is grown in 1,800 Hectare, it is exported 100,000 ton/year and generate 39 million gueb. 10% of rubber in 9,490 Hectare is tapped and produce rubber 470 ton. Banana is planted only for export, the productivity is 34,780 ton. Animals such as ox, buffalo are raised in the mountain and medium scale farm.

Labor in Moung Sing is 20,000, foreign labor is 1,000 (1-2% from China) working for banana and bean grower. Tourist is around 10,000. Chinese investor could ask for 3-6 month visa. Chinese people invest in agriculture namely rubber, banana, and miller. Chinese investor has rent the land with 30 years contract, the condition is 2+3: Laos provides labor and land while Chinese responds for technique, market, and capital. There are 12 projects of Chinese investors in more than 2,000 Hectare. All of land is now saturated.

For grazing project, German, EU, and ADB support pig and ox farming. Akha is supported for animal grazing in the mountain.

Because of the limitation of the land, then, in 2001 government has reconsidered the policy of development. People in highland is not allowed moving to lowland, the government will support infrastructure like road, electricity, water system, school, and hospital.

Government attempts to preserve the culture of all ethnic groups, and support woman rights to participate in development projects. Even though, there are 8 ethnic groups in Muang Sing, but the conflict among different groups is not seen. Tai-Lue is businessman and investor, while Akha is laborer. HMong are newcomers who moves from Loung Prabang and Xieng-Koeng.

The transformation of Moung Sing causes by big market in China. Agricultural product such as watermelon, sugarcane, and corn are exported to China. Laos' government imposes the policy to support farmers and investors. However, the problems are the lower price of banana, chemical intoxication, and environment degradation.

The lowland in Muang Sing is limited, then the price of land in 1995 compared with 2012 is 200 times higher. The land value is increased because the development, and

the assuming for the profit. However, the foreigners could not buy the land, they can only rent the land.

19 Dec 12, Owner of Phu-iew guesthouse

Somphet Sae-pan, 48 years old, moved from Bo-Kaew to Loung Nam Tha in 1977. She moved again to MOUNG SING in 1979 because her father is government officer who response for social welfare. Her father is Yao and mother is Lue. Somphet got marry in 1981 with government officer who controls drug trafficking. Her husband is Lao-Yuan moved from MOUNG NGOEN, XAIYABURI.

Somphet sold salt and kerosine when she first came to MOUNG SING. There is no electricity in that time, people had to use the lamp. In 1985, the generator is operated in government office. People were accessible to electricity through generator in 2000. In 2005-2006, Laos bought electricity from China, and people can use it permanently.

From 1979-1984, Somphet sold salt; and when she got marry, she started buying goods from China. She rode a bike from home in 1 AM, early morning, and slept near the border in order to bought battery, thermos bottle, and canned food from China. She earned lot of benefit from these stuff, and paid little tax because she hided the goods in the forest. Her customers are female vendor from Loung Nam Tha and Loung Pra Bang. Somphet got the credit from Chinese trader, in this way, she could take the goods without paying cash. There is 20-50 female who import Chinese goods, women became traders, while men cut firewood, took care of children, and worked in the rice field. Somphet rode the bike for 5 years, and changed to tractor because it could transport more goods.

After the border officially opened in 1985, she completed with other vendor and got less benefit. Then, she established Phu-iew 1 guesthouse in 1999 because she saw many foreigners who came to MOUNG SING without accommodation. In that time, Phu-iew 1 had only 5 rooms, she managed to help her relative run another guesthouse "Sing-chareoun" with 22 rooms. She worked with these guesthouse for 8 years, then, she built Phu-iew 2 with 8 rooms and extend into 22 rooms. Moreover, Somphet now expands her business to Loung Nam Tha with Phu-iew 3. Since Phu-iew 1 is small and far from main road, it was transformed to restaurant. She also organizes walking trip through the forest from MOUNG SING to Loung Nam Tha. This route is around 60 Km, and was built in 1962.

In 2003, Chinese came to Laos for rubber plantation. Chinese grew 16,000 rubber trees in Laos land, and share 50/50 by counting the tree. Now Chinese has to register for plantation according to Laos law in order to protect defraud. Somphet mentions that rubber can be cut in 2018 and 30% of Laos people would have their own car. Even though the rubber price is decrease, people still have money.

For drug trafficking, Somphet worries about drug from Burma, drug 2-3 ton come from Chiangsan site to southern part. However, she notes that there is little problem here. People know each other very well, then, they embarrass to make a mistake. If they get drug addict, they will cure themselves. Bar beer just take place last 2-3 years. The owner is educated people from Vieng-Chan.

Now people in MOUNG SING have to earn more money, they get less benefit from business. They spend money for children education, electricity, water, car, new house, appliance. However, the cost of food is not high. People grow rice one time a year and rice is enough for consumption. They grew sticky rice for their own consumption, and grow normal rice for export to China. Farmers grew watermelon after harvesting rice. Chinese became their partner and share a half. Finally, Somphet asserts that land in MOUNG SING is expensive because it is limited. She paid only 20,000 Baht for Phu-iew 2 in 2002, and bought 30,000 Baht for expanding her resort.

20 Dec 12, Lak Kham Mai village

Topic to discuss:

- The village on its transition time
- Rubber trees and rice field
- Government dominating

We went to Lak Kham Mai village, which is an Akha village, in the morning. Before going to the village, we went to the governor house to pick up some officers who went with us to Lak Kham Mai.

Arrived to Lak Kham Mai, having government officers with us, we were accommodated very well. Akha villagers provided their traditional food and liquor to their guests. The chief of the village read to us the village's information. The chief of this village was very young, he got this position just because he can read and write in Lao. Such skills are required for ethnic people to deal with the government.

The information we were informed said that in the past few years villagers were still doing rice farming in most of the area of the mountains. But after the coming of rubber trees, almost every families turned to plant them and abandoned their rice farm. Recently only two families still do rice farming, in a small scale that the rice could not last through a year. Villagers have to buy rice from other places for their lives.

When the chief read the village's information I noticed that he did not read or speak from his knowledge but followed a dialog, which was written in Lao, given by the officers. The chief was shivering when reading the dialog. The officers, both the group went with us and another group that appeared later, was watching the village's chief for what he read, and speak. The officers also took all turns to answer the questions we questioned, they told the numbers of families, amount of populations, how much animals the villagers raised, and so on until we asked that we wanted the villagers to answer us directly. This situation can be looked at in two ways; one for the villagers were too dumb to know the number of their own cows, and two for the officers were trying to control the information we should know. The information that the chief read to us, of course, corresponded with the information that the government officers informed us yesterday.

The villagers continuously changed from rice farming to rubber trees plantation. Some just had theirs planted these years as the trees were too small to give rubber this year. Planting rubber trees totally changed the villagers' lifestyle. They have to wake up since 2 in the morning to cut rubber trees (rubber trees give rubber until 7-8 AM). What was changed very much is their rituals. Since most of Akha rituals were bounded to rice field, they do not have much to do when they are not in their rice

field. Akha had to have rituals every month through the year but only some left these days.

There were many facilities brought to Lak Kham Mai in these years; for examples, roads and trucks for transportation, tractors, televisions, many electric appliances. Villagers' livelihood had been changed very much by these facilities. It might be said that they faced the new windows of looking at life. They did not care much about their traditions or rituals anymore. We asked the oldest villagers who has lived since there before the time of change for his opinion about the change. He said that he does not see any problem about it. He likes to have these convenient innovations in the village as it helps the villagers from tough tasks. Most of the villagers agreed.

That covered three topics I raised. I want to add up my opinion here; having government officers with us might advantage and disadvantage us. We were facilitated and accommodated well since being with the officers brought us onto high positions. People were pleased to provide us any data we want. But at the same time, it was like that data was controlled by the officers. Villagers do not speak from their experiences but from the data the officers gave. We might get totally different data if we went by ourselves.

**Association for Akha Education and Culture in Thailand – AFECT; To Restore Akha cultures and ceremonies.
Kraisith Sithichodok, Director of AFECT, Data interviewer.**

AFECT or Association for Akha Education and Culture in Thailand was founded in 1989, to restore Akha ceremonies and cultures and adapt to the global changing. This association has been settled in Chiang Rai Province, Thailand. In 1981, this association was the project of "Hill-Tribes Culture Education and Development Project" which set up by Dr. Leo Alting von Geusau, a Dutch anthropologist.

“In 1992, Akha people in Thailand had chance to study only 10 percent” Atu or Kaisith told us the main problem of Akha group and these were the priority concern of AFECT, which has supported Akha children’s education program, until now. Atu, he is the production of this program.

Atu pointed his awareness was a little by little of Akha culture lose, many young Akha people, as Akha future, do not interest in their culture. They exited on the modern and leaved their culture or ceremonies to the back. Since this younger generation was away from the villages for extended periods of time, the Akha community and traditions were disappearing quickly. The youth no longer knew how to speak Akha. They couldn't carry on the ceremonies and did not have the same knowledge of the forest. AFECT tries to restore Akha culture and adapt it to the changing, especially some Akha ceremonies which are illegal, such as twin or abnormal babies ceremonies (as long as they would be killed). Since Akha culture is unable to adapt to the changing, many Akha people could go on conversing to the new religion of Christianity.

In the past around 80 percents of the Akha people in Thailand experienced condition of suffering because of some of their traditional beliefs on the one hand, and because of globalization process on the other so that they turned to be Christians. Atu said and he told us that there are 293 Akha communities in 7 provinces in Thailand, only in Chiang Rai province has 243 communities.

In the decades of 1980s and 1990s many Akha village were replaced from the forest and try to deport Akha people from Thailand, with the allegation that they were dangerous to Thailand security and forest. Many Akha people traveled to the city for jobs, they were arrested or attracted, or their pets were killed for official foods.

AFECT invented the writing system by using the Latin (English) alphabet for their own language to storage Akha knowledge and use these invented writing system among Akha groups in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, China and Vietnam.

Atu exchanged his experience at Muang Long, in Laos that the government received United Nation budget to force Akha to replace their villages from forests to the areas nearby the road (street) in 1996, because of environmentalism and development policies. Laos government supported the education and economic plantation-rubber

tree, sugar cane, “kluai hom jan” banana, which invested by Chinese (Chinese rent Akha land for cultivation and get the production back to China). He pointed that many Akha villages do not have land for rice plantation, and more than 80 percents of Akha rituals or ceremonies relate to rice. He forecasts that Akha cultures in Laos will disappear soon, so AFECT have project in Laos to prevent and conserve Akha culture. Atu said that many years ago, Missionaries who propagated Christian religion were arrested in Laos, but for AFECT which want to conservation Akha culture was allowed by Laos government.

“Akha culture will be lost not only in Thailand but in Laos, China, Myanmar and Vietnam too. So AFECT have many project in these region, especially tourism program.” Atu said this program aims to promote and preserve Akha knowledge.

Post fieldtrip Discussion

22/12/2012

After our fieldtrip in Luang Nam Tha and Muang Sing, some issues seemed to us to be especially important, such as: the impact of the increasing tendency to mono-crops form of agricultural activity, the food security risk as a consequence of this policy, the possible conflict within the communities as a result of the spread of a new economic model and the processes both national and international at the base of this processes.

All these issues are linked one to another and are the result of the expansion of capitalism in the area in the peculiar for of frontier capitalism.

The Hmong village of Had Yao, in Luang Nam Tha Province, presents a case of almost unbelievable economic success in the new business of rubber trees plantations. The set up of a cooperative however is in itself an ambivalent vector of this success. On the one hand in fact, and according to the cooperative representants we had the occasion to have a meeting with, it is an effective instrument for to have a certain level of control and negotiating power on the rubber price, on the other hand it can become itself a form of differentiation in terms of control and power on the communities since a kind of monopoly is established in the area, eventually with the agreement of the Chinese buyers. In this sense families cannot really choose what kind of crop to grow up and the ones who own smaller portions of land are strongly disadvantaged. This also determines a new condition of class differentiation in terms of wealth within the villages.

This seems to be to us the way the cooperative in itself becomes a strong vector of the further affirmation of rubber trees plantation as a mono-crop, and an incentive to the transformation of peasants in wage laborers for the collection of the rubber that is to say it becomes the instrument for a further organization of economy in a capitalist sense.

When local initiative is not strong enough another agent of the shift from a self subsistent economy and a market economy are development projects, even though their declared goal is not usually expressed in this sense. The projects for to develop tourism in the all province can be considered as a good example of this process.

On a wider level even though communities seem quite enthusiastically to turn to this new crop, maybe even assuming it as a symbol of modernity in itself, there is however a certain level of pressure from the government for to implement rubber tree plantations at the expense of other crops, rice for first. In fact the business among Lao producers and Chinese investors and buyers is based on an agreement between the two governments and on a domestic level government is at the moment giving land in concession to communities for the purpose only of rubber tree plantation.

The government policy itself is very much determined by external and wider influences in which the goal of eradicating poverty by 2020 and the pressure of neighboring countries seem to converge in the perspective of an easy and quick exit strategy away from the uncomfortable condition and label of underdeveloped country. For this reason rubber tree plantation is not only spreading dramatically in this northern province but in the all country and with even more serious social impact in the south.

This leads to one very serious issue that is that of the food security.

Rubber is in itself a risky investment because of its long term results and the fluctuation in the price on the global market, to this intrinsic risk that of saturation should also be added for to consider a rapid fall in the price as an option leading to possible dramatic consequences for the population.

One more aspect should be underlined with reference to Had Yao village economic success and is that of the historical conditions that made this happen.

The village has been relocated in the area at the end of the war as part of a project of repopulation for the province. As a reward for the involvement of the community in the conflict at the side of the Pathet Lao the village leader became Luang Nam Tha Province governor. This allowed him to control the early processes that brought Chinese investors in the area looking for land and labor and also a certain amount of capital to invest. Moreover Hmong especially can count on a wide international network able to provide capital and knowledge and this was what happened in the case of Had Yao, in fact some Hmong families came back from China attracted by the new occasion of investment and skilled already in rubber tree plantations.

Had Yao village has become an example for the neighboring communities, however not all of them share the same optimum so that for the future the leaders of the cooperative themselves expect to increase the very small for now number of wage laborers while their income is increasingly invested in the education of the youngers. The process of differentiation and class formation among the population become quite vivid in this sense.

The Akha community of Ban Lakham Mai, Muang Sing, is a good example of a community trying to enter in the business that as a matter of fact they do as well but the condition at the base being very different. For us it was difficult to give a judgment on this village as long as the meeting has been filtered by local officials and according to their will very much oriented in showing the good results of their work in terms of implementing programs for economy, education and health. One hypothesis is however that of a control on the village economic choices by Akha wealthy families in neighboring China that eventually also through marriage with Akha women acquire land.

Another level of the reflection suggested by our meeting with the official is a certain level of disagreement between national policies and local level administrations more aware of the risks of the impact of national policies in the real contexts and also more exposed to the conflicts arising as a consequence of national policies, first of all competition for land. Mr Bunlerd Duangngern, Vice Governor of Muang Sing in fact explained to us the plan for the area now oriented in the new direction of bringing the communities back to the highlands.

Some further considerations has arisen in commenting our meeting with Atu, representant of the AFECT, Association for Akha Education and Culture in Thailand, set in Chiang Rai.

The meeting with Atu has been very significant for to have a example of how some Akha in Thailand nowadays try to preserve and to give a new value to their traditions and for to have a confrontation with a inner point of view. His experience also enable him to make a meaningful comparison between minorities' conditions in Laos and Thailand, and it is especially interesting as long as it is the expression of his very peculiar position. He is what could be defined as a neo-traditionalist: his effort is mainly oriented to the promotion of Akha culture, especially in the form of traditional festivals however adapted to modernity. Through a network they have contacts with Akha communities in northern Laos toward which Atu expresses mixed feelings of sympathy and nostalgia. To him they in fact turn to be the bearers of a genuine Akha legacy, irremediable lost for Akha in Thailand.