The informal politics of rural livelihoods in Northern Thailand: A case study of Chiang Mai's *songthaeo* drivers

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This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text.

The content of my thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my research higher degree candidature and does not include a substantial part of work that has been submitted to qualify for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis adopts a livelihoods perspective to explore the historical transition and contemporary lives of a group of northern Thai villagers who exited village-based farm work in the 1970s and 1980s to enter the emerging public transport sector of Thailand's northern capital – Chiang Mai. Through an ethnographic study of these *songthaeo* drivers, the thesis draws on the story of the drivers' shift from farm to urban-based, wage labour to interrogate dominant portraits of rural Thai history and to explore the politics through which the drivers have forged and consolidated comparatively healthy livings. In so doing, the thesis contends that rather than a monochromatic history of peasant economic passivity or political resistance to state intervention, the drivers demonstrate an adaptive, aspiration-oriented agency in pursuing enhanced livelihoods. Further, they symbolise a rural politics of actively seeking to cultivate connections with state actors identified as supporting desired exit options away from the land and into more productive labour fields.

The thesis proceeds to describe the labour-world 'invented' by Chiang Mai's *songthaeo* drivers, in terms of both its relatively stable economic dimensions and its familiar rural cultural sociality. It notes that despite the generation of modestly healthy incomes, the drivers remain discontent with their economic position. Describing their livelihoods in desultory terms, the drivers' pessimistic outlook reflects the 'status games' in which they are implicated, indicative of comparisons with men from the professional ranks, and demonstrative of anxieties arising from a new historical epoch marked by the potentially disruptive realities of the Asian Economic Community.

To negotiate the new economic era now dawning upon them, and to defend their livelihoods and familiar way of life, the drivers engage in a largely informal mode of politics. Reflective of what Partha Chatterjee has termed 'political society', this politics draws on traditional masculine modes of rural Thai power, now deployed within a modern setting of bureaucracy and electoral competition. Centred on the figures of the Presidents of the two largest driving Cooperatives, this politics operates in a murky world of connections, influence, threats, administrative innovations and legal exceptions. Rather than seeking to transform the broader political environment however, this politics is narrowly and parochially focussed, attempting to maintain the status quo rather than fundamentally change it. For the drivers, defending their livelihoods takes precedence over competing political visions of modernising the city or appeasing the city's growing middle-class residents. As such, the drivers are representative of multiple facets of contemporary Thailand, bridging the formal and informal, rural and the urban, the traditional and the emerging modern within a city itself caught within these often competing dynamics.

NOTE ON LANGUAGE

No single system of transliteration from Thai to English has been universally adopted by scholars, with drawbacks in all major systems. For the purposes of standardisation I have chosen to use the *Principles of Romanization for Thai Script by Transcription Method* ('Principles'). Two exceptions apply however, due to personal preference and my consideration that the Principles in some instances fail to capture the best English equivalent. Thus I transliterate 'จ' as 'j' when it occurs as the first consonant in a syllable rather than the prescribed 'ch', and maintain the Principles' older use of 'iu' rather than 'io' to transliterate 'ิว'. This is most relevant in transliterating the commonly used word 'คิว', which I render 'khiu' rather than 'khio'.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: CHIANG MAI'S *SONGTHAEO* DRIVERS AND THE INFORMAL POLITICS OF RURAL LIVELIHOODS

Along the cobbled pathway meandering beside the muddy waters of the Mae Ping River,[1] across from the bustling shop-fronts of downtown Chiang Mai's Warorot market, decorative shrines and ornate spirit-houses sit nestled within the branches of trees whose twisted root systems intermittently break through the constraining pavement beneath. These microcosmic sites of religious fealty comprise all manner of pious paraphernalia, ranging from trinkets, amulets, and statues of Buddha to garlands of flowers, pictures of royalty, offerings of food and the odd shot of alcohol.[2] On any given day, in the shade afforded by the generous canopies of these arboreal religious sites sit the *songthaeo* drivers, casually chatting and whiling away their ample time, awaiting their turn to depart the local transport *khiu* (queue) and ferry the next truck-load of passengers to their designated destinations.[3] They are the originators and keepers of these tree shrines, designed to protect them in their work traversing the city's sometimes unruly roads, and from the sometimes malevolent spirits popularly believed to reside in the adjacent river.

The shrines and the spirits they serve are also believed to prosper the drivers, their upkeep a considered component of the ongoing effort of the villager-drivers to draw power – of all varieties – into the service of secure livelihoods (Walker 2012). For Chiang Mai's *songthaeo* drivers the spirits, in company with the police, politicians and state regulators, comprise a local grid of power relations and field of political society (Chatterjee 2004, 2008a, 2008b; Walker 2012) within which the drivers' livelihoods are forged and protected.[4] It is the purpose of this thesis to explore the ways in which the drivers have – for nearly forty years – navigated and manipulated this political landscape in order to defend and maintain their

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[1] The Mae Ping River runs through Chiang Mai, including its downtown commercial centre and market precinct.

[2] Though the drivers never expanded on the subject, I noted it interesting that photos of Princess Sirindhorn rather than her mother or father (the King and Queen) were placed on the shrines. At the time of my first research stint in Thailand (2010/11), it was possible to interpret this as a rejection of King or Queen, and a tacit display of support for the advent of a new royal period perhaps aligned with the Red Shirt movement.

[3] *Songthaeo* are customized pick-up trucks used for public transport in Chiang Mai – see Chapter 1 for further description.

[4] See Johnson 2013 for an alternative view of urban spirits in Chiang Mai.

modestly lucrative livelihoods, as an almost exclusively male cohort of villagers who have fashioned successful careers for themselves within the city's evolving economy.

Over their four decades of work in the city, it appears that the drivers have indeed been well-served by the both the spirits and the more mundane powers regulating the city's decrepit public transport sector. First entering the transport trade in the mid-1970s, the *songthaeo* sector rapidly enriched many of its new operators, a considerable handful of whom continue to sit under the shade of the *khiu* trees, plying their trade, until the present day. A self-designated golden age emerged for rural men with the capital or daring to invest in a vehicle and join the transporters of the ever-expanding rural-to-urban labor-force.[5] Symbols of rural prosperity and peasant aspiration, the drivers and their colourful trucks swiftly entrenched themselves within the daily life and rhythms of the city, and within the imaginations of fellow villagers. Men working in construction longed for a day when they too might join the ranks of the *songthaeo* men (Ritchie 1996). Free and independent, cruising the streets, daily bringing home cash to spend – often conspicuously – in the growing village economy, the *songthaeo* drivers emerged as a story of success within the broader sweep of northern Thailand's peasant exodus from the land and entry into new labor markets within the modernising economy (see Anan 1984; Turton 1989a and 1989b; Pasuk and Baker 1995; Ritchie 1993, 1996; Anan and Hirsch 2010).

For near on 40 years, the *songthaeo* and their administering Cooperatives have monopolised the procurement of public transport concessions within the city, elbowing aside any potential contenders and, through carefully crafted relations with police and other elements of local state power, run roughshod over any attempts to transform and modernise the transport system. They are the literal vectors and ferriers of the city's mobile population and the dominant source of public transport within the city's metropolitan street-grid and between the city, its peri-urban rim and the villages which punctuate its verdant countryside. Through their politics and local activism they have ensured that more modern forms of transport – trains, light rail and rapid bus systems – have been unable to find a foothold within the city's public transport system. Perhaps precisely due to this inhibiting of urban transport renewal, the *songthaeo* remain conspicuously unpopular with large segments of the population. Recent survey results, for example, and local election outcomes – in which upgrading the city's public transport system formed a key aspect of

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[5] According to interviews with *songthaeo* Cooperative officials, the early drivers were not from the poorer echelons of the village economy, but rather represented men with sufficient capital to purchase a vehicle or act as equity against a loan.

policy debates – indicate majority support for ending the decades of *songthaeo* transport dominance.[6]

In many ways, this somewhat strange fact of the otherwise progressive northern capital remaining hostage to a public transport system dependent on customised pick-up trucks and their governing Cooperatives, generates the principle empirical question with which this thesis wrestles. How can Chiang Mai, with its aspirations to position itself as a modern regional commercial and tourism hub, remain dominated by the antiquated, polluting and unruly *songthaeo*? Are they, like the *tuk tuk*, considered somehow iconic of the cultural moorings of the city, an item of 'cultural heritage' to be preserved in the face of modernity's relentless assaults? Or, as the many whispers I heard on the streets and in the offices of civil servants suggested, are we dealing with something else, with a mafia-type arrangement in which the *songthaeo* Cooperatives deploy the dark arts of 'influence' and violence to maintain their stranglehold over the city's lucrative transport system? As it turns out, I will argue that both of these form some part of the answer to the longevity of the *songthaeo*, though neither analytic captures what I consider to be the main factors addressing *songthaeo* domination. Rather, I will suggest that it is within the substance of contemporary rural politics – reworked and reconfigured, though with clear historical lineage – that the answer lies, with themes of rural political agency and peasant-state relations key to understanding the predominance of the *songthaeo* drivers over a city increasingly unwelcoming of their trade.

Presently, some 3,700 vehicles and drivers comprise this dominant *songthaeo* sector, divided into two sub-sectors, the *rot daeng* (red trucks) and the *rot khiu* (queue vehicles). The red trucks ply their trade within the metropolitan grid of the city and number some 2,800 vehicles. They are overseen by the Lanna City Transport Cooperative (LCTC), a feared organisation within the politics of local transport, and headed by a self-declared 'man of influence' (*phu mi itthiphon*) who considers himself the 'backbone' of the Red Shirt movement in the northern provinces (see Chapter 5). The *khiu* vehicles are smaller in number, totalling some 900 pick-up trucks of assorted colours. Unlike the *rot daeng* which drive haphazardly over town searching for clients and which have no set routes, the *khiu*-men exist in a more ordered system, operating out of the Wararot *khiu*, from where clients await to be ferried to designated destinations. They are administered by the Chiang Mai

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[6] Surveys were conducted by the Master Plan team, a group of public transport experts commissioned by the Chiang Mai Governor's Office with designing an upgraded public transport system for the city. The results of the surveys (unpublished) were communicated to me in private conversation. The team indicated an 'overwhelming' response seeking to transform the transport system, ease out or diminish the role of the *songthaeo* and introduce a mixed, modern transport system.

City Transport Cooperative (CMCTC), a less politically active organisation than their red counterpart. Collectively, the two Cooperatives oversee a long-standing duopoly over the city's transport sector, actively working to counter any threats to their ongoing domination of public transport in the city.

The vast majority of drivers are men, with a tiny fraction of female drivers active as substitutes for male relatives or husbands either sick, deceased or called away on other business. Almost to a man, the drivers identify as *chao ban* (villagers) rather than *khon mueang* (city folk), indicative of both their rural origins, their distaste for the city in which they work, and their ongoing residence within the village or within evolving peri-urban areas. It is because of this composition and self-identification of the drivers – as ongoing *villagers* – that despite their work often taking place within the city, I draw on them in discussions within the thesis of *rural* politics and *rural* economy. Both terms are admittedly somewhat misleading 'ideal types' (Marini and Mooney 2006), occluding the hybrid, conjoined nature of actually-existing rural-urban interfaces. They also risk concealing the in-between reality of the drivers, straddling the rural-urban divide in their daily occupations, extracting wealth from the city for their village-based lifestyles, and stretching rural forms of sociality and culture into their daily, urban work places (see Chapter 4). I consider the drivers however to be an interesting case study illustrating the *politics* of Thailand's contemporary 'rural economy', an economy increasingly deagrarianised, intimately linked with the city, and dependent on patterns of mobility and diversified, off-farm livelihood portfolios (Rigg *et al* 2008; Rigg and Vandergeest 2012; Walker 2012).

As framed by Marini and Mooney (2006), rural economies never cohere to their 'ideal type' and in practice – as exemplified by the *songthaeo* livelihood field – are economic ensembles of local and distant, urban and non-urban connections (p91). The same could be said of 'rural' politics, despite its salience within recent political commentary. As Chapter 4 elaborates upon, there is broad recognition within sociological literature that 'rural' and 'urban' are increasingly anachronistic categories, with each inevitably bleeding into and reconfiguring the other, and increasingly functioning within immaterial, imagined discourses rather than as meaningful descriptors of differentiated, concrete space (in relation to South East Asia see for example Mills 2014 and Thompson *et al* 2012). Taking the drivers as it cue, Chapter 4 will pick up on aspects of this ever-evolving relationship between the rural and urban, including the political dimensions of rural-urban relations (Thompson *et al* 2012) as they are being worked out – sometimes painfully – across contemporary Thailand.

It is not just the spirits, dining on the drivers' largesse, who have well-served and enabled the livelihood interests of the drivers. Other configurations of power have played pivotal roles, linking drivers to the state and the political class. The *songthaeo* Cooperatives, for example, quickly emerged as sites of organization, financial credit and political advocacy supporting new drivers and embedding themselves within local networks of influence and power (see Chapter 1). Constitutional democracies, the Cooperatives elected leaders from among their own, village-men of prowess and standing whose role it was to deploy their fluency in the idioms of local political machinations to craft and sustain livelihood spaces for the drivers amid the contested zone of interests and agendas seeking to transform, or at least profit from, Chiang Mai's public transport system. Intersecting with these machinations, from the beginning until the present day, stand the police, enigmatic state officials who in the pre-Cooperative days regulated the influx of transporters into the city. While taking their cut through the imposition of informal levies upon new drivers, the police facilitated the development of a stable economic field in which drivers – for a fee – could depend upon them to maintain order, turn a blind eye to driver infractions, and generally assist them in the course of their enterprise (see Chapter 2). In time, as government took more interest in regulating their work, Cooperative leaders nurtured productive relations with other strategically identified local state actors. Politicians too, became part of this broader field of 'connections' (see Chapter 5).[7]

Lubricated by exchanges both licit and otherwise, this matrix of relations comprising the Cooperatives, police, politicians and the bureaucracy, in turn generated an economy in which the drivers have been able to productively conduct their work, earning for themselves comparatively handsome incomes. But more than this, the economic field has also become a desirable site of state penetration, of benefit and prosperity for those state actors inducted into its operations. For governors and transport officials, substantial flows of Cooperative money enter private pockets in the process of procuring transport concessions. To police, tea-money, gifts and favors are delivered in exchange for virtual legal immunity for the drivers. And for politicians, the Cooperatives serve as perfectly formed, bounded communities through which they attempt to mobilise electoral support in return for astutely-timed cash handouts.

The Cooperatives however, like some of the tree shrines adorning the Warorot *khiu,* have elevated themselves above the everyday and mundane level of the street. Precisely through this field of personalized connections and illicit exchanges – of what Partha Chatterjee

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[7] I note here that several leading Cooperative officials used the English word 'connections', rather than a Thai equivalent, to refer to this web of productive relations between them, the state and politicians.

(2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c) has termed *political society* – the Cooperatives have risen to a position of potency within the local landscape of public transport politics and associated state agendas to modernize the city's decrepit transport system. Securing the support of police, state-brokers and politicians through gifts and solicitations – much as they do their protective spirits – the drivers' Cooperatives have evolved to a status of local power, able to navigate the halls and offices of bureaucracy as easily as they do the urban street-scape. Their thick web of connections has stymied successive governments' attempts to transform Chiang Mai's public transport sector, changes which include the elimination or radical reduction of the *songthaeo* from the city's streets, and their replacement with an ordered mix of buses and light-rail. Such modernist visions coalesce with grander state and business plans of re-positioning a remodelled Chiang Mai as a regional commercial and IT hub, plans compromised by the city's antiquated transport system. It is a vision of urban modernity which clashes with the village-drivers' interests and to which their unruly politicking has to date been able to hold at bay.

And it is a clash which may be about to reach a climactic moment, intensified by the advent of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), due for uncertain implementation in 2015, and posing an existential threat to the drivers' monopolisation of transport and preservation of livelihoods. The *songthaeo* Cooperatives fear that they may be outmuscled by foreign players within the new flows of foreign direct investment (FDI) permitted under the AEC. Additionally, they recognise the increased pressure on politicians and administrators to modernise the city – including its transport system – in order to render it attractive to these anticipated streams of new capital in an increasingly competitive regional marketplace. The *songthaeo* Cooperatives are deeply cognisant of the political currents swirling around them, and even as they express fears for the future of their livelihoods, are busily setting about negotiating either the terms of their eradication from the streets or, more likely, of an ongoing – but altered – presence. Imperative to either option is compensation or income guarantees, indicative of the expectations the drivers place on the state, and to which their current political efforts are directed (see Chapter 5).

At the time of writing this introduction, the future of the *songthaeo* sector remained open and uncertain. The LCTC was waging an ongoing battle against a so-called Master Plan (see Chapter 5), a bureaucratic blueprint outlining a modern and re-visioned transport system for the city. They were also transforming their vehicles into mobile advertising platforms, forging new connections with the owners of Chiang Mai's glistening new suite of upmarket malls, with huge triangular billboards now sitting atop the rooves of many of the *rot daeng*. For their part, the CMCTC has turned to upskilling its human resources,

introducing English language classes to enable their drivers to better communicate with foreign clientele. It is hoped that this will be considered by state administrators as a sign of good faith that the drivers can continue to perform a vital role within the new flows of people and capital within the aegis of the AEC. Either way, both Cooperatives' actions are illustrative of what I will argue undergirds a long and multi-layered history of rural politics.

A brief word on the use of the term 'politics' as I use it within the thesis. Unless the context makes it obvious otherwise, 'politics' is used to capture Chatterjee's sense of political society canvassed earlier, or what Andrew Walker – deploying this analytic of political society to the study of contemporary rural Thailand – has described as the 'fundamental desire to be productively connected to sources of power… [the] thoroughly modern political goal is to bind itself to the state, not to oppose it (2012: p6). For the sake of clarity, and invoking Yoshifumi Tamada's (1991) much older discussion of Thai politics, I would add that the politics I explore is one of 'binding itself to the state' not through the contest for formal power (Thai *amnat*) or position (what Tamada calls 'capital city politics' (p456)), but rather the informal efforts to influence (Thai *itthiphon*) the contours of official political direction into channels befitting local livelihood aspirations. While Tamada concentrated on elite businessmen's informal influence over state actors, the present study focusses on the way in which ordinary rural people attempt to connect with and cajole state officials and official processes in their pursuit of livelihood maintenance within the informal economy. Informality and livelihoods are thus the focus of the political within this study though, as will be discussed, this necessarily intersects with more formal aspects of official politics, political actors (including bureaucrats) and processes (including elections), and policy making.

Theoretical framework

The largely empirical narrative arc of the thesis outlined above – of the deliberate reconfiguration of rural livelihoods in concert with shifting macroeconomic currents, and the politics of forging and sustaining these livelihoods – sits nestled within a broad set of theoretical considerations and questions. Principally, it functions as a further contribution to the already vast literature exploring the dynamics of rural change which have swept across Thailand since the 1960s and, by extension, as a comparative lens to read alongside other regional studies focussing on rural change (see Kelly 2013; Rigg and Vandergeest 2012; for other studies on rural transition in Thailand see Textor 1961; Pasuk 1982; Gray 1990, Ritchie 1996; Mills 1999; Ryoko 2004; Hickey 2010). Specifically, it adopts a

'livelihoods' approach (Scoones 2009) to processes of rural change – a process of change understood principally as a multi-complex matter of deagrarianisation and the subsequent delocalising and diversifying of rural income streams. Such an approach is conceptually uncomplicated and little more than it suggests. It prioritises livelihoods as central to analyses of rural lives, focusing on elements of opportunity and constraint, of both the local and non-local dimensions of livelihoods, and of the admixture of personal agency and broader structural changes in the political, economic and discursive regimes in which particular livelihood endeavors are forged. I have attempted to maintain some kind of balance of these multiple dimensions throughout the paper, though may be accused of erring on the side of emphasising agency and the local. This is not intended to ignore structural elements, or betray a lack of recognition that agential actions are configured at least partially by (and within) particular structural matrices. It is however a conscious choice to give voice to a rural political subjectivity that I consider too commonly displaced. As I discuss in Chapter 1, recent historical reconstructions of rural politics have focussed on structural elements of state repression or economic marginalisation of rural livelihoods, producing a certain kind of agency – one of resistance or struggle for 'normative' democratic and legal processes. This is not however the story of the drivers. The structural elements within which they lived and formed decisions – the commercialisation of agriculture, the diversification of the rural economy, land squeezes and the like – were responded to quite differently. It is an alternative form of rural political agency emerging from these particular conditions that I have focussed on, highlighting the drivers' desire to connect with the opportunities presented within the diversifying economy, even as older models of livelihood became less and less viable. In the latter chapters of the thesis, I attempt to show that this agential rural type continues within the more recent structural changes marked by the imminent advent of the AEC and ongoing government efforts to restructure Chiang Mai's economy and modernise its transport sector.

Ian Scoones (2009) has been at the forefront of a livelihoods approach in the analysis of rural studies, and in line with my desire to explore the politics of rural change has argued for the 'need to inject a more thorough-going political analysis into the centre' of such studies (p171). For Scoones, this involves an examination of how people gain 'access to assets' in the pursuit of livelihoods, and is intrinsically linked to questions of politics, power and the 'rules of the game' which cover such dynamics (p187). These are questions eagerly adopted within the thesis, with its discussion of *songthaeo* Cooperatives' access to the key assets of transport concessions and bureaucratic influence, and of the politics and accepted rules through which Cooperative officials negotiate with and manipulate the local state. It

is a discussion cognisant too that the political dimensions of rural livelihoods extend well beyond analyses of elections, and are rather locatable at the everyday micro-level, such as the 'fine-scale negotiations' between Cooperative office holders and state actors determining the parameters of 'who gets what, when and how' (Thompson *et al*: p9). My elaboration on the politics of transport concessions in chapter 5 is a direct engagement with this approach.

This coupling of livelihoods with fine-grained political analyses is in turn one which Andrew Walker (2012) has commended in terms of contemporary Thailand, to the point of arguing that political identities within rural Thailand 'are now formed by the productive intersection between external power and local livelihoods' (p9). This linkage of local livelihoods and productive relations with power is noteworthy here, and is a concept that will be pursued throughout the thesis. In fact, one of the arguments to be made is that the politics of the drivers is productive not just in terms of maintaining their livelihoods, but also for bureaucrats seeking to supplement otherwise meagre incomes.

Walker is also following the lead of Partha Chatterjee in recognising that peasant politics now tends to be defined not by resistance to power, but by attempts to productively encounter it for livelihood purposes (see Chatterjee 2004, 2008a, 2008b). This in turn picks up on wider anthropological insights self-consciously seeking to fracture the normatively assumed link between rural or subaltern politics and acts of resistance (Abu-Lughold 1990; Walker 2012; High 2014). Collectively, these multiple, linked perspectives conjoining a politics of collaboration and partnership with rural livelihoods – of the analyses of who gets what, when and how – is at the forefront of the case study of Chiang Mai's *songthaeo* drivers.

A livelihoods approach also connects well with the question of 'exit options' (Li 2009) within peasant and rural studies, of how, why, through what means and to what effect rural people exit village-based, agrarian livelihoods and transition into off-farm, frequently urban labor pools. Until more recent times, the departure from farm to off-farm work has tended to be conceptualised somewhat negatively, in terms of 'distress migration' (Rigg *et al* 2012: p1470) – as the disruptive and unwelcome side-effect of the restructuring of the economy and the penetration of capital into the countryside. Many analyses of agrarian change in Thailand have adopted some such version of this view (Turton 1978, 1989a, 19896; Anan 1984; Bello *et al* 1998). More recently however, a growing sentiment recognises the widespread desire of rural people to leave the land and exit the peasantry in search of enhanced livelihoods, greater consumer power or simply to experience the adventure and trappings of urban modernity (Mills 1999; Chatterjee 2008b: p54; Li 2009:

p634; Vandergeest and Rigg 2012; Keyes 2012;). Mary Beth Mills (1999) was one of the first to inject studies of rural migration in Thailand with this concept of rural desire and agency, connecting it with rural aspirations associated with consumption, modernity and status. I will argue that this remains a key analytical contribution, and will tie together this combination of exit, agency, desire and status in discussions of the drivers.

Moreover, there is a recognition that the quality and sheer availability of exit options matter to rural people (Vandergeest and Rigg 2012: p21) and play a central role in whether such options are, in Tania Murray Li's words, a 'step forward or a step backward for rural' dwellers (2009). Part of the value of this study of the drivers is its exploration of their particular exit option and the dynamics which have seen it function as not just a 'step', but a great leap forward for the driving-men. At the heart of these dynamics are a series of *informalities* – of informal economy, informal connections and informal politics with select agents from within the bureaucratic and political classes. This is a pathway of change infrequently canvassed within studies of rural transition, which tend to focus on formal, legible processes such as education programs, skills development, credit schemes and the like (see World Bank 2007). Moreover, there is a sense in which informality – particularly work in spaces of informal economy – is somewhat normatively viewed as 'precarious' (Hewison and Kalleberg 2013; Hewison and Woradul 2013), as particularly vulnerable sites of livelihood endeavours. The informal field of the *songthaeo* economy both lends weight to and nuances this view, exploring the ways in which drivers attempt to mitigate precarity through the medium of informal pathways, including informal political-bureaucratic connections. In so doing, the drivers are depicted as exemplary of an alternative to modes of transition focused on formality, of an organic 'inventiveness' (Hart 1988) which has seen them institutionalize informal processes and access to state resources – principally in the form of transport concessions and legal immunity.

In addition to these themes of livelihoods, politics, exit options and rural desire, a number of additional theoretical discussions punctuate the thesis. The question of the rural and the urban is never far away from the surface, and has already been discussed above. The drivers are an excellent example of the relentless inter-weaving of rural and urban categories, both in their labor and in their work of identity construction . The *khiu* drivers in particular, daily transiting passengers from the city to the village, are symbolic of the hybrid, 'in-between' (Sopranzetti 2014) nature of many rural Thais, embodying elements of both the rural and urban. In Chapter 4, I discuss some of the internal contradictions this poses for the drivers, who formulate diatribes against the alienating city, and yet in more candid moments acknowledge that many of the worst features of urban life now define the

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world of the village. The discussion also carries resonances with Thailand's red and yellow shirt politics of recent years, exploring how the villager-drivers' engagement with the city merely serves to affirm their status and identity as subordinate and distinctively rural subjects, opposed to an alternatively constructed image of the urban, and fuelling ongoing antagonisms between rural and urban despite their many points of similarity and connection (see Chapter 4).

It is perhaps worth noting that the thesis doesn't contribute a great deal directly to analyses of rural politics as it's intersected with the Red Shirt movement over recent years. To my mind, Red Shirt politics remains thoroughly under-researched and under-theorised, and I remain quite unconvinced about its dominant representations as either: the politics of respect, equality, inclusion or emergent citizenship (Yukti [in Pravit 2010]; Taylor 2012a, 2102b; Chairat 2012) which some have tried to paint it as; as the vanguard of a grass-roots democratic revolution (Ungpakorn 2014); or as the amalgamation of a class of uneducated, duped villagers merely serving elite interests (see the innumerable media stories within the mainstream Thai press). Elements of all of these may well be part of the rather heterogenous movement (Haberkorn 2014). Where I think my case study may be helpful is in its brief discussion of the relationship of political influence between the Red Shirt aligned LCTC president and his drivers, of the streams of money which flow from political parties to the drivers, and of the connection between driver livelihoods and perceptions of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's positive impact on Chiang Mai's economy. That is, guided by my observations of the LCTC, I suspect that Red Shirt politics, at least for a good deal of its allegiants, is just as readily – if not more so – about local livelihoods, the state of the economy, elite circles of friendship, networks and influential patrons as it is about 'normative' democracy or legal equality. One of the key findings from the research is that the Red-Shirt dominated LCTC prosper not due to democratic and egalitarian standards, but precisely through undemocratic presidency, access to legal double standards (through connections with police) and commercial monopolisation (of transport concessions) serving narrow (rather than the 'public') interests. For the interested reader then, there are some important points to note in terms of wider debates about Red Shirt and rural politics. For the record, I am much more attracted to ideas of rural politics tied up with the unruly, unsanitised and the uncivil (Chatterjee 2004, 2008a, 2008b; Walker 2012, 2014; High 2014: pp6-7), the highly pragmatic, insular and self-interested, than attempts to package it up as some kind of enlightened movement for liberal change. This remains of course merely an informed opinion, and is open to contestation and change should the evidence warrant it.

Having set out some of the theoretical parameters of the project, it is worth re-forming the empirically-based research question above into more explicitly theoretical terms, the focus being on the politics of rural livelihoods emerging from within one particular trajectory of rural change. At the broadest level, the thesis addresses the question of 'how has this particular exit option from agriculture into the modern economy worked so well, and for so long?' Tailored specifically to the drivers, the question can be further sharpened: 'how have the drivers managed to infuse their informal, semi-precarious labor field with a measure of stability and predictability such that it has continued to provide superior livelihoods to those within its confines for nearly 40 years?' Put more succinctly, 'how have they managed to successfully institutionalize their informal livelihood field?' The thesis will build to an answer to this question, beginning with a focus on rural agency in chapter 1, the significance of political connections in chapter 2, the informal mechanisms through which economic form has been infused into the *khiu* in chapter 3, before climaxing in chapter 5, with an in depth discussion of the politics of transport monopolisation, and in particular the informal politics of monopolization which first enabled, and subsequently sustained, the drivers' livelihoods. Partha Chatterjee's concept of political society will form the primary lens for my articulation of the drivers' political activities.

Methodology

The material presented within the body of the thesis is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Chiang Mai in 2011 (6 months) and 2013 (1 month) among *khiu* and *rot daeng* drivers, *khiu* managers, Cooperative officials (including presidents), local (Chiang Mai) academics, public transport planners and bureaucrats from the Transport Department and Provincial Administrative Office. The majority of this time was spent at the Wararot *khiu* mentioned above, observing, conversing with and interviewing drivers. I completed around 50 formal interviews with *khiu* drivers either at Wararot or surrounding 'rest areas' (see Chapter 4). Engagement with *rot daeng* drivers was less formal, partly due to their need to be constantly mobile (unlike the *khiu* drivers), and relied more on *ad hoc* (though intentional) conversations with drivers, sometimes even in the course of catching a ride with them and thus while they were 'on the job'.

During the fieldwork I formally visited the *songthaeo* Cooperatives on five separate occasions, where I interviewed the respective Presidents twice – always accompanied by their trusty treasurers – and on one occasion interviewed a handful of (LCTC) committee-men. I made a similar number of visitations upon the local Transport Department office

and Provincial Administrative Organisation (PAO) precinct, and spoke twice with academics connected with the Master Plan seeking to re-vision Chiang Mai's public transport system. It's worth noting that the state officials I interviewed were generous with their time and, perhaps weary of the power wielded over them by the *songthaeo* Cooperatives, appeared candid and forthcoming whether in expressing complaints, frustration or more generally in the provision of information.

Outlining the broad mode of research – ethnography – and detailing some of the techniques deployed in undertaking this ethnographic study – observation, conversations, semi-formal and formal interviews – reveals only so much about the method adopted in conducting this project. In Chapter 3, I offer a brief ethnographic account of what I call the *khiu* universe – of the people, objects, sounds, movement and activity which constitute the daily bedlam that is the downtown *khiu*. I make particular note that the *khiu* appeared to me for quite some time as a chaotic and impenetrable mess, its rhythms and patterns undetectable or uninterpretable to me. I say this to indicate that my approach to studying the *culture* of the *khiu* (and more broadly the culture of *songthaeo* livelihoods and its associated *political* culture) was based on the idea of culture as a symbolic field (Geertz 1975; Keesing 2006), a semiotic domain comprising pattern and order, structure and meaning, and which was in principle open to identification and reception to the persistent researcher. I also note (in chapter 3) that I had to be *inducted* into the symbolic world of the *khiu*, by an insider – a *khiu* manager, who spent time explaining the actors, flows, sights and colours that may otherwise have forever remained opaque to me. In this sense, I learned to read the basic grammar and syntax of the *khiu*-world (Geertz 1975) with the help of a local guide, from where I was able to branch out into my own interpretative matrix.

Within the thesis, I pay particular attention to certain of the symbolic markers identified in the research – as to why, for example, some drivers upgraded their vehicles at great expense despite the fact they could attract or carry no more passengers than the oldest, beat-up trucks still doing the rounds. I also explore the symbolic dimensions of story, of what I call the drivers' *lay narrative* (Halfacree 2006: p46) of city and country, and how this in turn feeds into processes of identity construction and rural-urban politics. Accompanying this attention to the symbolic nature of culture, I self-consciously sought to fashion a thoroughly perspectival representation of the drivers. As indicated in the 'theory section' above, my interest was in livelihoods, *rural* livelihoods, the *politics* of rural livelihoods, the *informal* politics of rural livelihoods. While to me the broader context within Thailand, of a red and yellow shirted political conflict tearing the country apart – and within which rural actors played a leading role – made this a natural point of selection,

this is a completely subjective and selective decision. There are of course an endless number of themes which could have been explored, and the drivers' lives and stories of transition of course amount to much more than simply their work or their politics. Having said this, their work and politics *are* key elements of their lives.

I say this to indicate an awareness of the *partial* and *perspectival* account I have produced, emerging from interviews with select questions eliciting responses on particular topics (and not others). As Rigg *et al* (2012) have wisely stated, 'all accounts of agrarian change or rural transformation are inevitably partial – partial views of agrarian change arising from the "vantage point" that is adopted'. I have already indicated the vantage point so adopted, and labelled it as but one facet of the much broader process of rural change effecting Thailand. More broadly, is to recognise that, as Clifford Geertz (1975) and Roger Keesing (2006) write, the kind of symbolically-oriented ethnographic approach such as I have undertaken throughout the thesis is irreducibly *interpretive* in nature. Both Geertz and Keesing note the interpretive quest of anthropology, of the search for meaning – a meaning that only ever captures part of a much deeper whole. I openly acknowledge therefore that the interpretation I have offered, and the meaning I have articulated, remains partial and provisional in nature, and influenced a great deal by the political theorising of Walker, Chatterjee and High, who all emphasise the limits of searching for a rural politics of resistance, and who encourage a much broader approach to rural politics based on connections, collaboration and what High describes in terms of the politics of *delirium* (see Conclusion).

I would also add that the representation of the drivers I have produced is but an *approximation* of their reality. It is a set of frameworks which may or may not cohere with their own, indigenously formed ways of interpreting and analysing their lives. This struck me with particular force in an interview with the LCTC president, in which I put to him my view of his organisation as having ascended to a position of considerable 'local power' within the city's transport politics and politics of modernisation. After hearing my reasoning for reaching this conclusion, the president nodded sagely and responded in agreement, proceeding to reason that the Cooperatives' concessionary monopolisation had remained unchallenged for nearly 40 years, and that the drivers continued to ply their trade on the city's roads despite numerous governmental attempts to diminish or eradicate them. It was clear from his response that this idea of 'Cooperative as local power' was not one which he routinely thought with, but which he consented to once given consideration. This is what I mean by the term 'approximation', and happily on this occasion at least it appears that the approximation was a valid one, even if one imposed by me as an outsider.

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Finally, it's worth noting that I was also drawn to the idea, as expressed by Roger Keesing (2006: pp162-163), of culture as 'deeply ambiguous, and open to multiple meanings, even by those within the culture'. This is an important insight, and one which I attempted to respect in my fieldwork and subsequent representation of the *songthaeo*-men. There is much that remains ambiguous and open to multiple meanings within the activities of the drivers and the politics of their Cooperatives. The act of driver street-blockades covered in chapter 5 is but one example. For the Cooperative presidents, this action is considered a legitimate means of 'livelihood defence', of protecting the drivers' incomes from the encroachment of alternative models of public transport. For the police, it's an opportunity to lend support to a social class of northern villagers with whom they share geographical origins and with whom they enjoy reciprocal relations (see chapter 5). For civil servants, it's a slap in the face, and another example of the drivers' unruly, self-interested obstinacy. For city administrators and the Chiang Mai business class it's a regressive obstacle to modernisation compromising the city's standing within the impending AEC. Additionally, for some academics, it may well be considered an act of 'post-colonial democracy' (Chatterjee 2004: pp41, 76-78, 2008b: p56). There is then no single 'meaning' to the blockades, but rather a multitude of possible meanings depending on one's vantage point and one's interests. I have tried to represent this multitude, though may be guilty of revealing a preference for the drivers' subaltern rendering, reflective of my own intellectual interests and subjective preference for analyzing and articulating Thai working – rather than professional – classes.

Chapter Overviews

The thesis proceeds in three key sections, with chapters 1 and 2 exploring the drivers through a historical lens, chapters 3 and 4 exploring the *khiu* as a micro-universe (economy and social world), and chapters 5 and the conclusion focusing on the politics of the drivers. As such, the early material in chapters 1 and 3 find their respective conclusions in the latter pages of chapters 2 and 4.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 explores the emergence of the drivers through a historical lens, placing their transition from farm to urban services sector within a broader pattern of Thai historiography and specifically historical representations of the Thai peasantry. Acknowledging the elite-focus of most Thai historical work, the chapter proceeds to critically interrogate two recent attempts (Haberkorn 2011; Keyes 2014) to redress the dearth of historical work covering rural Thailand. In so doing, it identifies in both works

an underlying political narrative centred on the binary pair of state repression and rural resistance. In turn, it suggests that this analysis of power focused on repression-resistance fails to capture the more heterogeneous contours of rural Thai history. Based on ethnographic research, the drivers are presented as a counterweight to this dominant historical paradigm, with their exit from agriculture and entry into the modern economy in the 1970s and 1980s conceptualized in terms of rural *agency* and strategic intentionality responding to local desires to shift into off-farm, wage labor. The chapter contends that this places them within a much longer, alternative tradition of peasant history, in which rural agents have frequently deployed tactics of mobility, adaptability and livelihood experimentation in order to satiate growing aspirations for cash, wealth, consumer power and status. In describing the drivers in this manner, the chapter seeks to inject rural history with a sense of dynamism and subaltern power, with villager-drivers active agents in the unfolding scripts of their lives and livelihoods, navigating structural change with skill and dexterity.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 continues the historical focus of chapter 1, setting the emergence of the drivers within a broader political field of connections with local state actors and agencies. In so doing, the chapter seeks to expand accounts of rural politics in the years preceding the drivers' transition from agriculture to off-farm work, shifting the focus away from the twin poles of rural political passivity and peasant revolution, and instead makes a case for a history of increasingly productive connections between villagers and the state. In particular, it notes the role of brokers – agents of connection – in the efforts of villagers to locate a place in the expanding, non-agricultural economy. In the case of the drivers this role was performed first by the police and then by the Transport Department. The chapter concludes with a brief schematic account of rural Thai history, in dialogue with the key works engaged in chapter 1, in which rural political history is conceptualised as climaxing not in a revolutionary politics of democracy and inclusion (Vandergeest 1993; Haberkorn 2011; Keyes 2014), but with the pragmatic, local efforts of non-urban people to connect livelihood aspirations with the resources and power of the state (Walker 2012). This form of political activity is in turn picked up in the contemporary moment in chapter 5.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 shifts from the preceding historical focus to a discussion of the contemporary livelihoods of the CMCTC's *khiu* drivers. The point of connection with the preceding material is in terms of describing the labor-field into which the drivers transitioned.

Beginning with an ethnographic description of the *khiu* as a distinct social and economic micro-universe, the chapter traces the prosperous and multi-dimensional livelihoods of the *khiu*-men, which I describe as the apex of the city's *songthaeo* sector. These livelihoods comprise comparatively lucrative incomes, informal market and welfare mechanisms, and position drivers within the upper echelons of the region's rural economy. Theoretically, the chapter draws on the conceptual work of Keith Hart (1988), highlighting the inventiveness displayed by drivers in creating stable economic form within their livelihood field, situated as it is within Thailand's sprawling informal economy. The chapter concludes by noting that the livelihood field of the drivers also serves as a productive site of extraction for state officials and, for some drivers, as a portal into the formal economy.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 sits as a companion piece to chapter 3, outlining the non-economic factors which render the *khiu* a highly desirable field of livelihood endeavours. These factors centre on the politics of place, and I set forth an argument to the effect that drivers have invented for themselves urban-located work-spaces infused with village sociality. In so doing I draw on Keith Hart's (2001) concept of translocality, or the stretching of cultural practices across disparate space. These urban-village spaces comprise both material and non-material facets, including desirable work-cultures preserving 'traditional' rural male preferences for autonomy and ease. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the complexities of status and identity within the hybrid livelihood spaces of the *songthaeo khiu*, before ending on a sober note cautioning that these prosperous and culturally attractive labor-fields remain precarious – despite their 'economic form' (Chapter 3) – due to their *informal* status and the impending threat posed to them by the introduction of the AEC.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 grows out of the preceding two chapters, describing the politics through which the desirable but precarious livelihood field of the *songthaeo* drivers is preserved and defended in the face of widespread resentment towards *songthaeo* domination of the city's public transport system. At the centre of this politics of livelihood defence sits the figures of the Cooperative presidents, local men of prowess who operate both in zones of informal connections with politician and state brokers and the world of formal, administrative governance to ensure the ongoing duopoly of the Cooperatives. The chapter focuses on the president of the LCTC, a widely-perceived mafia-figure who has presided over the institution for some 20 years. It pays particular attention to discourses of rurality and modernity surrounding the president and the *songthaeo* more broadly, exploring ways in

which discursive practices are used by both the president and his opponents as forms of power in the contest over the future shape of Chiang Mai's transport system. The chapter concludes with a description of the connections between the Cooperative presidents, local politicians, police and bureaucrats, contending that these connections form the basis of Cooperative power, and in turn to the preservation of livelihoods for the city's near 4000 drivers.

CHAPTER 1: *SONGTHAEO* STORIES AND THE CONTOURED PLANE OF RURAL THAI HISTORY

On a hot afternoon in early 2011, I pulled up alongside a row of yellow *songthaeo* parked conspicuously along a residential side-street near the US consulate and just a few minutes' drive from the bustling Wararot *khiu*. The side-street functioned as a 'rest-spot' for the Mae Rim *khiu* drivers, a place to which they would retreat between routes. Here, drivers were often to be found sleeping, reading, chatting or eating in the rear of their vehicles, shaded from the sun and able to stretch out along the padded seats (*songthaeo*) after which their vehicles are named. As a researcher, rest-spots were particularly productive places to locate and talk with the drivers, enabling prolonged discussions in an environment of relative peace and privacy. On this particular occasion, I found myself seated in the *songthaeo* of a driver named Manit, who had been working the Chiang-Mai – Mae Rim line since 1975. He was one of the handful of drivers from the very earliest years of the *songthaeo's* emergence in the city, and was as such an excellent source on the history of the *songthaeo* men and of their transition from village farmers to public transporters. As I was to discover, Manit's story of entering the *songthaeo* sector echoed those of so many others who joined him on the frontlines of the new 'urban frontier' being pioneered by rural laborers (Pasuk and Baker 1995: p43) from the 1970s onwards, a frontier precipitated by the restructuring of the rural economy away from subsistence-farming and towards an export-oriented model of commercial agriculture and the state-led expansion of the country's manufacturing and services industries (see Pasuk and Baker 1995, Rigg 2001, Anan 1984).[8]

In fact, it was Manit's father who insisted that, at age 24, he desist from farming and find work within the mushrooming off-farm sector within Thailand's changing rural economy. For Manit's father, farming had become increasingly difficult and, bound to the vagaries of crop prices and production, the family found itself in a precarious economic situation, socially and economically marginalized within the new village economy dominated by cash and conspicuous consumption. Nor had it gone unnoticed that other young men from the

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[8] Although beginning with the first 5 year National Development Plan of 1961-1966, the shockwaves of Thailand's economic restructuring began to take effect in the 1970s, and then onwards through the 'boom years' of the 1980s.

village who had joined the transporting crew appeared to daily return home with pockets laden with the proceeds from the days' earnings. Manit's father encouraged him to do likewise and collectively the family invested in a vehicle which would become the locus of Manit's 35 year career as a driver.

Within a short space of time, Manit recalled that he 'felt like I'd become rich'. And although he complained of the current downturn in the economy and the passing of an initial golden age for the drivers in the 1980s, the productive effects of the strategic and deliberative decision to exit the farm were ongoing. Now 60 years old, Manit told me that he would soon retire. Upon doing so, he advised, he would look to sell his vehicle and his 'place' in the Mae Rim *khiu*. There were always men looking to buy into the *songthaeo* trade, he said confidently, noting that the collective value of car and place stood at around 850,000 baht (see chapter 3). This represented a significant windfall and informal nest egg for Manit, particularly *in lieu* of meaningful state support for retirees. Manit also revealed that it was a particularly important day for him and his family. For it was the day when his son would graduate from the city's prestigious Chiang Mai University, culminating an education paid for with driving wages, and the first in his family to earn himself a tertiary degree. From farm to *songthaeo* to university graduate, Manit's decision to transition into the driving game had enabled the economic transformation and social elevation of his family in just one generation. By his reckoning, he grinned, this represented an excellent return.

The period of time around Manit's entry into the transport sector was a particularly turbulent one within Thailand's modern history, punctuated by the 1973 and 1976 state massacres of anti-regime activists in Bangkok, and a targeted campaign of violence and assassination waged against peasant leaders throughout the northern provinces. In 1974, just one year prior to Manit's life-changing decision, the Farmers' Federation of Thailand (FFT) formed in Chiang Mai. Responding to the increasingly difficult conditions facing local farmers, the FFT campaigned against what they considered to be unreasonably exploitative tenancy arrangements, and advocated for the implementation of the Land Rent Control Act (LRCA), designed to stabilise tenancy rental costs at around one-third of crop yield. In a two month period during 1975, eight FFT leaders were killed, with 33 murdered nationally between 1974 and 1979 (Turton 1978, Witayakorn 1983, Haberkorn 2011). All the while, a communist insurgency was spreading, particularly throughout the North and Northeast, in part drawing on rural grievances of landlessness and tenancy exploitation. In response, a proliferating range of paramilitary state agencies arose, using often brutal tactics

– including napalming northern villages – to quell the emerging threat (Turton 1978, Larsson 2012).

The early driving-men were not immune to these broader forces sweeping the countryside and, like thousands of farming families of the period, many were soon signed up as members of the FFT. In an interview at the LCTC headquarters in 2013, I discussed this matter with a group of committee-men who, in reflective mode, recalled that though FFT members, the drivers that they knew played no role in FFT activism. Indeed, they advised that the FFT was of no great significance to the driver-members, in part because the drivers had little time or interest in the activist politics of the organization. For them, though they shared the hardships propelling the FFT's political agenda, they differed in their response to the situation. Rather than trying to shore up fairer, farm-based livelihoods, the committee-men and the early driver-members they were discussing, had been more interested in leaving the farm behind and, like Manit, navigating their way out of agriculture and into more productive sections of the economy. For, as with Manit, they too had done well out of driving and, as committee-men, commanded a daily stipend for committee-related activities, complementing ongoing driving incomes. Sitting in their new multi-million baht headquarters on the outskirts of town, the drivers were aware that despite contemporary challenges (see chapters 4-5), the transition to driving had served them well.

After interviewing the committee-men, I recalled an event I'd attended at Chiang Mai University two years earlier – a book launch for Tyrell Haberkorn's (2011) *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law, and Violence in Northern Thailand.* A work full of pathos and conceptual imagination, Haberkorn's book explored the story of the FFT in the 1970s, lauding their courageous activism and lamenting the premature end to their revolutionary politics. A number of former FFT activists attended the launch and, in the question and answer time following the main presentations, spoke at length both about their experiences of the period and the current age of Red Shirt politics, some drawing clear connections between the two. Listening on, it became evident that the lives of these FFT stalwarts had been marked by ongoing hardship and livelihood struggles. Of similar age to Manit and the LCTC committee-men, it was clear that the relative wealth accrued by the drivers – men who'd left behind farming and its contentious politics – was something they had not enjoyed. Where once they had shared the same set of conditions and livelihoods, the gap between the drivers and the FFT-men now appeared stark, with different life choices producing markedly different outcomes for the two sets of northern villagers.

In many ways, the shared conditions of the villager-drivers and the FFT activists in the mid-1970s – of increasing agrarian hardships – and of their differing responses and subsequent livelihood trajectories, functions as a useful metaphor for the content of chapters 1 and 2, and of the thesis more broadly. For the contrast between the two groups symbolizes the heterogeneous reality of rural Thailand, of multiple actors, groups, subjectivities and pathways, and of variegated livelihood and political options. In the current and following chapter, I explore this fact in terms of select academic portraits of rural Thai history, engaging with recent historical accounts which I argue capture but one portion of this multidimensional reality. Replacing older misrepresentations of rural idylls, I identify a new discursive reality narrowing in on imagined 'long histories' of peasant revolt and resistance against a repressive state apparatus. Alongside these long histories I position the story of the *songthaeo* drivers, who I suggest represent an alternative *long* rural history – one not of revolt and resistance, but rather of livelihood-oriented agency, adaptability, mobility and increasingly productive connections with local state agents. It is this second cluster of themes which I explore here and in chapter 2. The intention within these two chapters is not to discredit the long histories of rural repression and resistance, but rather to complement them and broaden the historical scope of histories of Thailand's countryside. In so doing, I also pay attention to the relationship between history and representations of the present, and argue that alternate long histories of rural agency and increasingly productive relations between state and rural society help explain aspects of contemporary rural politics. This will in turn find its culmination in chapter 5 and the conclusion in which I explore the politics of the drivers in some depth.

History and representations of rural Thailand

The historiography of rural Thailand has long struggled to capture the diverse realities of the lives, livelihoods and politics of the country's numerically dominant population. From initial scholarly disinterest to subsequent portraits of rural idylls or political revolutionaries, the Thai countryside has been variously represented, though with nowhere near the attention as that lavished on the histories of the court, the city or the country's elite, national politics (Thongchai 1995, Reynolds 2011a: p39). This relative lack of attention, alongside a paucity of historical material available prior to 1960 (Reynolds 2013: p8), has meant that despite their recent prominence in the country's fractious political convulsions, and notwithstanding increasing academic and media attention (Walker 2012, Haberkorn 2011, Nishizaki 2011, Keyes 2012, 2014), rural people still remain somewhat unknown,

frequently subsumed within caricatures and national social hierarchies portraying them variously as backward, ignorant, vote-buying dupes. Picking up on this 'known-unknown' tension within representations of rural subjects, Katherine Bowie (1992: p797) decried some 20 years ago that 'for decades, scholarship on the Thai peasantry has proceeded as if the history of the peasantry were known. Scholars have luxuriated in tourist brochure images of primeval abundance'.

The history of this luxuriating has long antecedents within Thai 'history', and is identifiable within the contentious, almost epoch-making '13th Century' Ramkhamhaeng Inscription, in which rural flourishing and unfettered trade are described,[9] images of historical 'reality' popularized under King Mongkut (19th Century) and by virtually all Thai elites ever since. Such was the power of the Inscription in shaping the city's imagination of the countryside that for a long time, as a rare early writer (Phya Anuman Rajadhon, writing in 1948 – see Bowie 1992: p801) on rural Thailand wrote, 'no one is interested in knowing about country people', presumably because their idyllic lifestyles had already been rendered cognizant through the Inscription's images of 'rice in the fields and fish in the water'. The interest in knowing histories of actual rural people apart from rural idylls has however gained recent momentum, no doubt in part connected with the emergence of rural Thailand as a central political figure in the ongoing crisis engulfing the country's national politics. As a result, works exploring the marginal, unrealised or incomplete histories of rural and provincial people (Haberkorn 2008) have begun to emerge (examples include Reynolds 2011a, Nattakant 2011), in turn challenging the well-trodden script of elite history writing or, perhaps more accurately, myth-making about the countryside (Bowie 1992, Dayley 2011).

The emergence of critical academic engagements with rural Thailand is, unsurprisingly, not without its own challenges. Common to all history writing, these include the perspectival reality of historiography, and the kinds of assumptions and political stances which propel certain writers to produce certain kinds of historical reconstructions. They also include the very real way in which the present and past overlap and interweave with one another, with historians drawing on live contemporary prisms through which to view and represent the past (Herzfeld 2001). On these points, I want to consider two recent works, Tyrell Haberkorn's (2011) aforementioned *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law, and Violence in Northern Thailand* and Charles Keyes' (2014) *Finding their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State*. Both are examples of the recent push to redress the dearth of historical work on rural Thailand, and both produce excellent accounts of historical events in rural northern

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[9] On the controversy surrounding the authenticity of the inscription see Vickery 1987.

and northeastern Thailand respectively. They both also generate clean historical plot-lines, representations of rural history inextricably related to current political events, and roughly configured in terms of rural resistance towards repressive states.

Much as the fantasies of the Ramkhamhaeng Inscription formed a baseline against which imaginings of rural history could be measured, so too this more recent representation of rural Thailand in terms of hardship, resistance and repression, forms a second kind of schematic sieve through which rural histories can be sifted. And it is through this latter lens that I want to run the story of the *songthaeo* drivers, contrasting them with the political narrative of resistance and repression in much the same way as I contrasted the drivers with the FFT in the opening pages of this chapter. Indeed, as noted above, Haberkorn's work focusses specifically on the FFT and northern Thai farmers' activism in the mid-1970s. Keyes, for his part, adopts a more sweeping approach, mapping out a history of the neighbouring northeast region (*Isan*) ranging from the *phu mi bun* (charismatic leaders) uprisings of the early twentieth century through to the present day of Red Shirt politics. In reading these works against the emergence of the drivers, it is my intention to broaden the horizons of clean narrative lines of rural Thailand's history, and to adjoin to the politics of resistance and revolt identified by Haberkorn and Keyes an alternative political path in which partnering and collaboration with the state is recognised as integral to rural subjectivities. In other words, the brief history of the *songthaeo* drivers' emergence below is intended to complement not displace the historical narratives of Haberkorn and Keyes, to augment not compress the expanding historical record.

Keyes and Haberkorn's thematic choice of state repression and rural resistance is itself part of a longer history of representations of the countryside within 'Thai studies', most fully explored in the wake of the events of the 1970s student-farmer massacres and communist suppression, and represented by a politically-engaged troupe of mainly North American scholars (Williams 1973, Turton 1978, Bell 1978a, Mallet 1978, Caldwell 1978). For these writers, the 'situation' of the countryside in the 1970s was depicted as one of intolerable injustices in which aggrieved peasants transformed into 'revolutionary villagers' and pitted themselves against the oppressive hand of a 'totalitarian state' (Turton 1978). For its part, the state was taken to be the destroyer of rural society, tearing apart historically-cultivated moral economies of agrarian subsistence in favor of an urban-centered strategy of appropriation and exploitation of rural production. This kind of analysis in turn fed into and animated a widespread tendency within Asian Studies to follow James Scott's (1990, 2009) pioneering work on peasant escape, retreat and resistance against states perceived to be cajoling and subjugating marginal peoples. Capturing the mood of this ongoing

propensity within the academy (see now Caouette and Turner 2009), Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) described this phenomenon in terms of the 'romance of resistance', a 'thin' form of scholarly description which tended to gloss over the potential 'embarrassment' that the 'politics of the dominated' may not be quite as noble and unsanitised as the repression-resistance model suggests (see Ortner 1995).

There is no doubt that the repression-resistance model captures something real and indeed stark within Thailand's rural history. The campaign of assassinations and disappearances retold in both Haberkorn's and Keyes' works are all too tragically matters of fact, as is the reality of napalming of northern villages and other atrocities waged against those suspected of communist affiliations in the 1970s. And while there is a necessary obligation for scholars to tell and re-tell these stories, and to link them to contemporary instances of political repression, there is also a risk involved in terms of constructing the appearance of coherence and homogeneity in the historical record, including that of relations between state and peasants. And just as earlier generations of scholars romanticised the countryside, so I suggest there is a risk that more recent generations, in their commitment to critical and *ethical* reconstructions, concentrate their focus on one particular strand of historical reality which thereby unwittingly distorts a much broader canvass of historical heterogeneity. My concern is with the partial (but real) being mistaken for the whole, not least because the particular partiality fits a 'progressive' political agenda.

In Keyes' (2014) account of Isan political history, for example, there is a clear focus and insistence on the 'problematic relationship' between the people of Isan and the 'Thai nation-state'. Keyes traces this back to the *phu mi bun* uprisings of the early 1900s, 'the first mass *resistance* [italics added] to integration into the Thai nation-state', through the assassinations of Isan 'separatists' in the late 1940s/early 1950s,[10] the turmoil of the communist era of the 1960s and 1970s and on to the present day of Red Shirt uprisings against the state – 'the most recent in a *long history* [italics added] of confrontations between rural northeasterners and the Thai state' (p6). And while he acknowledges – and indeed has been at the forefront of describing in many of his published works (see for example Keyes 2012) the 'radical transformation' which has unfolded in the countryside throughout the century between millennial (*phu mi bun*) and Red Shirt uprisings, Keyes maintains that 'a constant theme [has] remained the fraught relations between villagers and agencies of the Thai state' (p175). Throughout, Keyes highlights the 'struggle' waged by the people of the

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[10] Keyes tells of the assassination of up to 5 Isan leaders (including Members of Parliament) who were considered to be separatists by the state (pp73-74); I say 'up to 5' as Keyes notes that we do not know whether the fifth leader – Tiang Sirikhan – was killed or rather escaped to a neighbouring country (the former being the most likely outcome, as corroborated by later court proceedings [p74]).

region to gain a voice and dignified place in the emergent nation-state, a process continually frustrated and repressed by the state and in particular its security apparatus.

Beyond state-Isan society relations, Keyes' work also offers a reading of Isan *political subjectivities* identified from 1932 onwards, the year of transition from monarchical to civilian government. It was following this event, Keyes writes, that 'the people of the region came to recognize that democracy afforded them an opportunity, through their elected representatives, to have their voices and interests heard on a national stage' (p3). And while Keyes subsequently narrates a history of state neglect and repression of Isan aspirations, he nevertheless insists that from this early (1932) experience 'the memory of a democratic society [has] remained strong among many northeasterners'. It is this 'memory' and its hoped for implications of representative and responsive government which Keyes considers a driving force behind current Isan politics as expressed in the Red Shirt movement. For Keyes, the Red Shirts represent this long-desired hope for democracy, and the 'right to have a legitimate voice in a parliamentary democracy of the type first envisaged in the overthrow of the absolute monarchy in 1932' (p190). Memory and politics, history and action, here coalesce and find crystallisation in contemporary events.

While much more contained in scope, with its focus on events in the mid-1970s, there are broad similarities in theme between Keyes and Haberkorn (2011), with the latter's history of the FFTs struggle for the equal application of the rule of law, for legal enfranchisement and tenancy rights, again centred on themes of state repression, rural victimisation and rural struggle (of one form or another) against the state. Haberkorn's study is an extended and theoretically-informed meditation on the meaning of revolution in the context of the Chiang Mai-based FFT's struggle to secure the implementation of the Land Rent Control Act (1974), a key plank in the farmers' quest for standardised and just rules governing the relationship between landlords and the increasing numbers of tenant farmers throughout Thailand's northern provinces in the 1970s. Central to Haberkorn's narration of events is the FFT's organised protests against the state – actions she describes as 'the head of a *long trajectory of revolt* [italics added]' (p4) – and of the brutal response comprising a sustained and targeted crackdown of FFT leaders in the form of assassinations, assaults and disappearances (see above).

As with my comments on Keyes, there is no intent here to contest the main tenets of Haberkorn's historical work. Rather, is to note, as indicated above, the similar focus on overarching themes of state violence and repression (noting the campaigns of

assassinations outlined by both),[11] and of rural struggles against this kind of state for inclusion, legal enfranchisement, dignity, voice and respect, channeled through a politics focused on democratic representation (Keyes) or the equal application of the law (Haberkorn). My point of contention however – if it even amounts to such – is that narratives accentuating 'long histories/trajectories' of rural 'resistance', 'confrontation', 'struggle' and 'revolt' against a repressive (or 'totalitarian') state, and of political peasants struggling for 'democracy' and legal equality, captures only part of a far more variegated Thai rural past, one in which it is arguable that the majority of rural subjects were little interested in the radical activism of those such as the FFT.[12] In the following section I will begin to draw out elements of a broader historical rural subject in order to pave the way for the subsequent discussion of the emergence of the drivers, not in resistance against the state but in *agential* partnership with local state operatives.

It would be wrong however to argue that there has not already been robust debate within the field of Thai rural historiography, with vastly differing interpretations of key elements of rural society put forward. The historicity and content of the Thai village is a case in point. Long championed as traditional sites of rural society embodying moral economy and communitarian impulses (Nartsupha 1999), others have argued that they are better rendered as either fairly recent administrative creations (see Kemp 1991, Reynolds 2013) or as site of internal conflict and disunity (Rubin 1973, Foster 1976).[13] So too have recent historical accounts of rural policing challenged the representations (see above) of long rural histories of villagers seeking justice and the rule of law. Rather, emerging histories of rural law and order reveal a patchwork of actors and orientations towards the law, populated by figures such as rural bandits, gunslingers, cattle-rustlers and their various *entourages* (Johnston 1980, Reynolds 2011a).

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[11] It should be said here, as Haberkorn does, that no-one has ever been charged or found guilty of the FFT assassinations. Despite this, the majority of commentators regard them as either conducted by state-aligned operatives, or at least with the tacit approval thereof (see for example Keyes 2014: 120). The failure to ever clarify such matters is indeed part of Haberkorn's broader reflections on the nature of justice and its *modus operandi* within Thailand.

[12] I have, of course, made no attempt to quantify this claim. It is a statement of rhetoric – to be unpacked below – and not verified empiricism. I am reminded however of Yoshinori Nishizaki's (2013) comments in his review of Haberkorn (2011): 'Haberkorn's accounts conjure up an image that many Thai farmers in northern Thailand got involved in social activism during the 1970s. Actually, *few seem to have* [italics added]. A protest normally involved a few thousand farmers at most. The FFT claimed a seemingly impressive 1.5 million members nationwide, but this number constituted a minority of the entire farming population. This begs the question: What were the rest, the majority of farmers, doing?'

[13] Foster's work on friendship among Thai villagers is fascinating. Foster points out that 'suspicion' dominated villagers' relations with each other, with special friends tending to be nurtured with people from outside one's home-village. Foster writes this to help explain why it was difficult for the state to cultivate village-wide programs and cooperation among villagers on state-initiated projects.

From a slightly different angle, Pasuk and Baker (1995) reimagine notions of a static, traditional peasantry, and instead point to the presence of clearly demarcated waves evident within the rural population. Of the country's pioneering peasant farmers expanding outwards along Thailand's rural frontier in the early-mid twentieth century, they write:

> **This peasantry was in no way "traditional". It was totally new. At the start of the nineteenth century, most of the area which it later settled was covered by jungle, scrub and marsh. The agrarian population was small, and was bound by labour indenture to the nobility. The *new peasantry* [italics added] broke through the boundaries of settlement and bonds of social control to create *a new rural society* [italics added] on a moving agrarian frontier (1995: p3).**

That is, Pasuk and Baker identify broad differentiation within the peasantry over different periods of time, with distinct differences between the 'indentured labor' of the early nineteenth century and the frontiersmen of the early twentieth. This in turn reflects the theoretical work of Robert Elson (1997) on the Southeast Asian peasantry more generally, which while remaining controversial and overstated in its claims for 'the end of the peasantry' (Vandergeest and Rigg 2012, Walker 2012), remains pertinent in its efforts to de-essentialise the peasantry and articulate its internal permeability and dynamism (see also Yos 2008). As Elson (1997) argues, 'the concept of peasantry is rooted in time. It is not a fixed, permanent and timeless category, but rather a social formation which appears at certain times and under certain conditions' (p22). As Pasuk and Baker (1995) indicate, these conditions included the widespread availability of land and the 'freedom' to move unbound by restrictive social relations (denied to their 'indentured' predecessors) – that is, relevant factors included mobility, social license and the presence of resources which could be turned towards productive livelihoods.

In the case of Thailand, this 'un-fixed', more dynamic notion of the peasantry finds support in the sociological research of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. John Embree (1950) for example described Thailand as a 'loosely-structured social system', quaintly observing that 'when two or three Thais walk along the road together there is no attempt to keep in step or to swing the arms in rhythm' (183). While such anecdotal observation would be unconvincing as evidence today, it can be seen as a metaphor to describe what Embree considered as the highly individualistic nature of Thai culture. In a somewhat more sophisticated manner, Michael Williams (1978) supplements and up-scales the metaphor, writing in support of Lauriston Sharp's (1963) argument that 'rural Thai society lacks horizontal organization, which could link villagers across the country' (p428). Elaborating on this point from his Marxist perspective, Williams writes that, 'on the basis of the Marxian conceptual schema it is possible to perceive the peasants of Thailand as a social

class and as a mass of separate individuals, a class *of* itself but not *for* itself' [italics added] (p428). More recently, Andrew Walker (2014: pp200-201) has written of the paucity of historical associational life capable of drawing peasants together into political action, noting that rural politics up until the 1970s was largely channeled through local village representatives, akin to traditional patron-client models. Together, Emblee, Williams and Walker's work inscribes into historical peasant society a degree of individualism, subject distinctiveness and social incoherence. It makes good sense to think that historical portraits should in turn reflect and capture this multi-dimensional rural reality, including of rural-types (bandits and the like) whose political and legal dispositions place them at odds with, for example, Haberkorn's law-embracing FFT.

Despite my use of Keyes and Haberkorn as a point of critical departure, their work contains much needed antidotes to preceding generations of unexamined rural idylls. They're also vitally important for the way in which they use the past in relationship to subsequent and contemporary events, in an explanatory manner in order to discuss key historical occasions *and* the production of certain types of rural (political) subjectivities. In terms of the former, it's worth noting that the 'long histories' evoked by both authors are used to help explain watershed moments of national crisis and violence – the eruption and repression of rural activism ('revolution' in Haberkorn's provocative rendering) in the 1970s and the deadly outcomes of the Red Shirt rallies of 2010 respectively. That is, the 1970s activism becomes explicable within a much longer history of protest and resistance. So too is Keyes explicit in linking historical Isan resistance with the work of the contemporary Red Shirts, as a continuation of a frustrated search for voice, representation and inclusion. The implicit assumption is that there is some kind of connection between the past and the moments of national rupture described by the authors. This is valid historical method, with past and present shaping and informing each other (Herzfeld 2001).

Again, we might note the implicit suggestion of a connection between these long histories and the particular kinds of rural subjects said to be produced by them – that history has in some way *generated* the activist peasants seeking democracy, inclusion, equality and legal enfranchisement. As raised earlier however, the question remains as to how such histories as identified by Keyes and Haberkorn account for the alternative political trajectories and subjectivities of those like the drivers, who in contrast to the politics of agrarian resistance pursued a politics of state partnership in the search for diversified livelihoods. In other words, if historical traditions offer explanatory power for trajectories of rural political resistance, then what are the historical traditions lying behind this alternate politics of state

collaboration? It is in answering this question that I suggest the *songthaeo* men have an important contribution to offer.

Consider for example, that in the years between 2006 – 2010, in which the Red Shirt movement first began and then organised into mass 'pro-democratic' rallies – and which Keyes connects with the history of *Isan* resistance seeking democratic inclusion – the *songthaeo* drivers were actively working in league with state officials, often towards thoroughly undemocratic ends. As per their own tradition of localized state-society relations, the drivers were paying bribes and kickbacks to corrupt officers to enable them to disregard restrictive traffic regulations and to undermine the meritocratic credibility of the transport concession process. Further, they used their leverage with the local constabulary to intimidate and threaten violence against any competitors in the local public transport sector in an effort to shore up their monopolistic control of the local trade. Nor should we imagine that any of this enjoyed widespread support from Chiang Mai's metropolitan-based citizens, the majority of who desired (and voted for politicians promising) the implementation of a modern, cleaner, more efficient public transport system (see chapter 5). This is hardly 'democratic' or lawful action being conducted, but rather the apparently uncivil tactics of rural actors seeking to perpetuate a narrowly defined, monopolistic interest. This is, in any case, one way of representing the situation (see chapter 5 and the Conclusion).

The point to be made is that the *songthaeo* drivers, many of who grew up alongside or were themselves FFT members, and many of whom identify as Red Shirt supporters, have little time for legal niceties or normative accounts of democracy. For them, Red Shirt politics and support for its patron, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, is much more immediately tied to the positive effect he is perceived to have had on Chiang Mai's economy in the years under his Prime Ministership, and the upswing drivers noticed in their own earnings which they attributed to Thaksin's economic management of his northern home-province. Further, for the driving men, law is not sacrosanct but rather something to be negotiated and if necessary circumvented. Far more important than formal legalities is the imperative to maintain driver livelihoods and Cooperative control over the city's decrepit and unpopular public transport system. And within this endeavour, the state is not something to be resisted or appealed to for more genuine expressions of democracy, but rather a productive agent to be collaborated with, sometimes in formal, civil ways, just as often in illicit and illegal ways, and on occasion through the medium of vigorous disputation.

The question then, is how does history account for the emergence of *this* kind of rural subject, and for the kind of watershed moment that they represent in terms of the widespread, and often highly desired, transition by peasants out of the village economy and into the burgeoning off-farm, manufacturing and services sectors that so many northern villagers undertook in the 1970s? Are there long histories which help account for such behaviour in the same way as Haberkorn and Keyes imply for their rural subjects, and which may also help explain the kind of robust politics of the drivers briefly outlined above (and explored in chapter 5)? In the following and remainder of this chapter I will explore two such counter-narratives to help explain the desired transition of the *songthaeo* drivers from farm to services sector, and which in turn historically grounds their husky political actions enabling their now decades-long monopolistic hold over the business of local transport. These two alternate long histories coalesce around the themes of peasant agency and of peasant aspirations productively articulating with an increasingly expanding and internalising state. Put another way, I will explore what I see as a long history of peasants making calculated decisions, actively seeking to improve their lives and enhance their livelihoods, and the pragmatic tactics deployed to further these interests through adaptations to, and connections with, state, market and environment (Popkin 1979).

From farm to khiu *– change and transformation*

Processes of peasants exiting agricultural-based livelihoods have long aroused passion and debate (see Bello *et al* 1998, Li 2009). There are those who view the transition away from subsistence-oriented village communities as a sign of modernist disintegration (Turton 1989a, 1989b; Anan 1984), reflecting an often unspoken 'moral preference' effectively insisting that 'rural people [should] remain in the countryside and in farming' (Rigg 2006: p8). In the case of Thailand, the changing rural economy and the leakage of farmers into commercial agriculture or non-farm enterprises since the 1970s has been variously couched in terms of rural 'displacement' (Kuhonta 2011), 'distress migration' (Rigg 2012: p1470, quoting UNDP language), 'profound crisis' (Bello *et al* 1998) or 'deeply polarising' (Glassman 2004: p8). Cultural elites, bureaucratic planners, military brass, religious fundamentalists and seasoned intellectuals have all variously advocated in the direction of maintaining Thailand's 'agrarian myth' (Dayley 2011), the idea 'that culturally-based, small-scale subsistence farming is the most desirable form of community life for rural families' (Dayley 2011: p342). The disruption of this myth – due to state, capital and shifting labor markets – is consequently viewed as deleterious and disruptive of a sustainable, rural idyll.

As represented in a number of sensitive ethnographic works however, an alternative position is formulated, foregrounding the role of *peasant agency* and *rural desire* in the process of transition from agricultural worker to off-farm laborer (Textor 1961, Gray 1990, Mills 1999, Ryoko 2004, Brody 2006, Li 2009: p634, Keyes 2014; see High 2014 on 'desire'). Collectively, they highlight what Mary Elizabeth Mills (1999: p10) describes as a resounding 'strength of purpose and sense of personal agency' in the pursuit of 'urban careers'. In the case of Mills' Isan-originating, Bangkok-bound female factory workers, part of the satisfaction experienced in entering urban and off-farm labor is in terms of desired engagements with culturally-constructed modes of national modernity – not least through consumption – and of the elevated levels of status such engagement brings. For others, it simply reflects perfectly 'ordinary desires to save labor and increase profits' (Dayley 2011: p353), reflecting the hardships associated with farming and the increased salaries on offer in urban labor fields such as manufacturing.

These latter studies, grounded in the personal stories of rural-urban labor migrants, draw attention to the fact that – and of which the 'sufficiency economy' and 'agrarian myth' schools appear completely oblivious – as Partha Chatterjee (2008b: p54) has written in relation to India, there exists 'a strong and widespread desire… of peasant families *not to live the life of a peasant* [italics added] in the village and instead to move to the town or the city'. Sharpening the point even further, he notes the presence of 'a generation of peasants whose *principal motivation seems to be to stop being peasants* [italics added]' (2008b: p58). In a more tempered vain, Jonathan Rigg (2006: p5) notes that 'not only are non-farm activities becoming central to rural livelihoods but also that an increasing number of rural households have *no commitment to farming whatsoever* [italics added].'

Where then might Chiang Mai's *songthaeo* drivers fit into this complex of reflections on the place and role of the (Thai) peasantry, and does their own trajectory from agriculture to off-farm labor contribute to our understandings of rural transition? As noted above, the position I will argue in the following pages is that personal 'agency' must be placed at the forefront of conceptualising the emergence of the drivers, an agency which in turn articulates with structural changes within the rural economy, and reflective of considered and calculated decisions – often involving extended family networks – to leave farming and enter labor sectors considered more profitable. The privileging of agency in the subsequent ethnographic description does not however seek to marginalise structural factors at play in the rural political economy of the mid 1970s and early 1980s. Rather, the point to be explored below is that both structure and agency must be viewed as part of a relational whole, together defining opportunities and constraints available to farmers seeking to leave

the land (see Scoones 2009: p168). Further, once we recognise the role of 'status' and status economies within the construction of peasant agency, I will argue that external forces (structure) become vital components in the peasants' quest to actualise deep-seated desires to 'stop being a peasant'.

The passage from peasant farmers to local transporters is one collectively remembered by the drivers in predominately positive terms. For most drivers, the transition into the transport sector is described as a strategic decision to withdraw from farming and experiment with more modern, lucrative forms of livelihoods. Change was experienced as *progression* and normative. 'My parents owned a farm', one of the older drivers told me. 'But I didn't want to follow in their footsteps. For me, people must change in the path of their lives. At the time I began to drive, society was changing, the economy was changing and I thought that I should change too'. And in quick time this change led to markedly increased incomes, the formation of new identities and enhanced social standing. Drivers unexpectedly found themselves identified as sources of village pride and envy, parading around town in their shiny, colourful vehicles, performing a valued service to fellow villagers, and conspicuously reaping the rewards of comparatively substantial sums of cash.

As reflected in the literature analyzing rural conditions in the 1970s and 1980s, and particularly those associated with land (Ramsay 1982, Cohen 1983, Anan 1984), 'first generation' drivers (those entering the *khiu* in the mid-1970s to early 1980s) confirm that farming was an increasingly tenuous enterprise, with nearly all these early driving-men connecting their move to the *khiu* with intimate stories of land. Some speak of the forced sale of land, others of unstable crop prices, while others note the simple dynamics of land inheritance – split between several siblings – producing diminishing plots unable to sustain livelihoods. Debt was a common problem, though somewhat surprisingly for a large number of men this was not associated with land, but rather with expenditure on consumer goods, including motor vehicles. Beyond livelihood factors, health and lifestyle elements also contributed to desires to leave farming. Many drivers spoke of health concerns emanating from experiments with new chemical fertilizers, while others simply recall the sheer toil and hardship of working the land under the beating sun. Moreover, farming was considered an increasingly low-status rural job, mainly due to its inability to generate steady cash streams and thereby facilitate consumption urges. There were many reasons then, why leaving the farm and turning to driving was an appealing option for those with the courage to do so.

Such courage took two forms – first in terms of the willingness to absorb risk and either expend or borrow a significant amount of money on a vehicle, and secondly in terms of leaving the unfamiliar (if undesired) and moving into a work-space bringing the men into daily contact with strangers and the strangeness of the urban environment. The latter phenomenon was a source of some anxiety for the early drivers, aware of their low social standing in comparison with educated, urbane city-folks, and unfamiliar with the intensified rhythms and pace of urban life. Reflecting the experience of many, Somchit recalled 'when I started driving, I wanted to return to the village. I had to come to the city every day for work. Gradually I felt less anxious, as I got to meet and become familiar with other people.' Drivers proved a source of comfort and support to each other in their new urban surrounds, with anxieties often placated by the increased standing driving-men now held back in their home-villages (compare Textor 1961).

But buying into the *khiu* was an expensive business, especially for those who, according to their own recollections, had previously been struggling on the land or in unrewarding intermediate jobs, with the willingness to invest indicative of the determination of drivers and their families to instigate change. Admission to work the *khiu* was granted only to those owning an appropriate vehicle – either a *songthaeo* purchased from a previous driver or a suitably customized new vehicle.[14] Incoming drivers were also required to buy a 'place' in the *khiu* (see chapter 3). Each route had a fixed number of places available within it, meaning that entry was only possible upon someone else's departure. The price of this *khiu* place varied from route to route, with the more lucrative lines – those servicing higher numbers of passengers – able to demand premium prices. Together, vehicle and *khiu* place could cost hundreds of thousands of baht.

The financial capital necessary to join the *khiu* was often derived from a mixture of sources, including formal and informally-secured loans, again reflective of individual agency and the calculated risks many were willing to take. In some cases, it was a shared family effort that led to the accumulation of sufficient funds to send a son, husband or son-in-law off to work the *khiu*, the driver in turn becoming the chief bread-winner of an extended family unit, and a source of pride within his kin-group for his ability to perform this role. The relative deluge of cash daily lining the pockets of *khiu*-men soon made it clear to other villagers that any investment – even if painful in the short term – was likely to accrue long-term financial gain for families.

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[14] The very earliest vehicles used were simply livestock vehicles, previously used to transport pigs and other animals and only slightly modified to accompany human cargo.

Loans assisting families to purchase vehicles were available from multiple sources, with drivers borrowing money from the state-owned Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), the newly constituted *songthaeo* Cooperatives, informal lenders or from retail distributors selling the vehicles. Of these, BAAC was by far the most frequently utilized, although loans were only available to those owning land. For landless drivers, the preferred option was to borrow from Cooperatives. These too received their finance from BAAC, and extended loans with slight – usually between 2-3% – mark-ups on BAAC interest rate levels. They were still far cheaper than sourcing finance from private or informal money lenders. Both BAAC and Cooperative loans permitted flexible repayment options, and could be extended over a number of years. Annual repayments were calculated in relation to a drivers' income in the given year, such that if drivers had a good year they would pay back a lot, and if a bad year they would pay back a little. Most drivers proudly boast of being able to repay loans within a 5-6 year period, again indicative of the income levels earned during these heady, early years.

Predominantly, loans were used to supplement personal savings that individuals or family members had acquired over a preceding period of time. One of the surprising factors in discussing this subject with the drivers is in recognising just how much cash was swilling around certain sectors of the village economy. In 1975 for example, Udol entered the San Sai *khiu*, having bought his vehicle for 80,000 baht and his *khiu* place for a further 100,000 baht. Of this total of 180,000 baht, only 30,000 baht was borrowed from BAAC. The remaining 150,000 baht – a substantial amount of money for the period – was taken from pre-existing family savings. Ten years later, in 1985, Chamlong began work on the Mae Rim *khiu*, purchasing a car for 390,000 baht and a place in the *khiu* for 240,000 baht. After taking out a 200,000 loan from BAAC and selling an old car for 100,000 baht, Chamlong used personal savings to cover the remaining 330,000 baht. Such stories of substantial rural savings are common amongst the drivers, despite their own discursively produced narratives of struggle in the period prior to driving.[15]

For most drivers – and the fact that many first generation drivers continue driving to the present day reflects this – the decision to move and the courage to invest was soon rewarded with incomes dwarfing those previously available from the land. 'I felt like I'd become rich', recalls Manit (see above) of his entry into the *khiu*. 'I'd never had so much money'. Beyond anything else, the ability to earn daily cash was the single most significant

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[15] The fact that drivers could accumulate such savings suggests that they weren't at the bottom end of the village economy. But nor were they at the top. In a 2013 interview with LCTC officials, they advised that most of the drivers in these early days (and since) were just 'ordinary' villagers, and certainly not part of the village elite (described in chapter 2).

consideration in decisions to move into transporting. For most men, moving to the *khiu* was considered a luxury, a high earning prospect for rural men with few skills and average education levels of 4 years of primary school. For those who had been struggling on the land, or engaged in other forms of temporary or unskilled, low-income jobs, driving provided access to unprecedented levels of wealth.

For Somchaat, formerly a local farmer and whose driving career commenced in 1985, his income went from around 2,500 – 3,000 baht per month to 15,000 – 18,000 baht per month. While this increase is at the very top-end of the scale, more modest increases still offered substantial benefits and lifestyle revolutions. Rae, who had previously earnt around 2000 baht a month working a fuel pump at a local Esso petrol-station in the 1980s, upon entering the *khiu*, began to earn around 7,500 baht per month. Doubling and tripling of incomes was a common phenomenon for new drivers, though incomes varied depending on the route plied and the number of circuits a driver would choose to complete in a given day (see chapter 3).

Importantly, money was earnt on a daily basis, enabling drivers to return home every evening laden with cash. Unlike the farm, where crop sales might take place once or twice a year depending on individual farmer's land usage, driving provided a constant flow of cash into drivers' hands and the village economy. This financial liquidity in turn permitted drivers a sense of fiscal security, financial power and the ability to consume on a scale previously unknown. Cash incomes quickly translated into consumer items conspicuously displayed within the village. Drivers' children were sent off for extended, higher level education in the city, paid for by driving incomes. Driving men were able to make prominent contributions to local temples and village festivals, further raising their budding local profiles. Echoing Mary-Beth Mills' (1999: p48) description of the increased incomes of Bangkok factory workers, cash served as a symbolic marker, a 'resource used to maintain dignity and respect within the community'. Certainly, the drivers indicate that their move to the *khiu* significantly raised their profiles within local village status economies, to the point that some drivers accumulated sufficient social capital within their local village community to transition from driving into local elected office (see chapter 5).

Status is a key analytic in considering the drivers transition, and the recognition of how this intersected with their decision and desires to leave farming – that is, of their *agency* – is an important contribution to broader scholarship. In Bourdieusian (see Bourdieu 1993) terms, driving enabled the drivers to re-position themselves within their local *social field* or, in other words, to elevate their profiles and positions within the village status economy. Drivers

were well aware of the effect driving – and the consumption it enabled – had on their place within village status games, with many acknowledging this as a key feature of their transition. 'People admired and praised us because we had vehicles to drive', one *khiu*-man recalls, while another notes that 'driving was a high status occupation, far better than going to work on the farm or working as a casual labourer for someone else. It was better too, than working construction'.[16] Mark Ritchie (1996), in a study of construction workers in a northern village in the 1980s, confirms this elevated status of the drivers, noting that the construction workers admired and envied the drivers, with many harbouring long-term aspirations to one day join their ranks.

As noted above, status was directly linked to cash, (conspicuous) consumption and the ability to patronize public communal events. Beyond this, drivers engaged in internal status games within the *khiu* itself, seeking to enhance their standing among their peers through the upkeep and upgrading of vehicles. This was often an expensive business, with little utility apart from status connotations. Once embedded in the *khiu*, it became common place for the more successful drivers to upgrade vehicles every 4-5 years. While some drivers explained this in terms of safety or to reduce costs of repairs, others acknowledged that the economics of this argument didn't stack up; maintenance costs were often far higher on newer vehicles than older ones. Nor was there any practical benefit in upgrading. Newer vehicles couldn't carry any more passengers than older ones, and due to the nature of the *khiu* system, passengers were unable to be selective about which *songthaeo* they rode – they simple boarded the next one to leave regardless of condition. Though no driver said as much, my interpretation of this practice was that – as Textor (1961) described in terms of his 1960s Bangkok pedi-cab drivers – the upgrading of vehicles was simply a further extension of status games, of village men striving to differentiate themselves from, and render themselves 'distinct' among (Bourdieu 1984) their peers and neighbours.[17]

Beyond cash and status, the preference to move to driving also entailed considerations of identity and lifestyle. For those able to enter the *khiu*, as with Mills' (1999) female rural-urban migrants, the men too were able to experiment with new senses of identity and esteem, emerging as more cosmopolitan, confident career-men. Consider the following

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[16] On one occasion, while having this discussion with a group of older drivers, they proceeded to list in order jobs available to village men according to status. And while driving ranked highly in the early days, in current times it sits towards the bottom of the list, above only the positions of construction worker, farmer and *rap jang* (casual labourer).

[17] In a recent work on Bangkok taxi-drivers, Maureen Hickey (2010) has described drivers' preferences for new vehicles, and describing this in terms of that Thai cultural love-affair with 'newness'. She goes on to say that this newness is in turn associated with feelings of being modern and respectable. This dovetails well with my analysis, with the ability to display modernity and respectability through consumer items again part of broader social status games.

quotes from drivers, now older men in their late 50s or early 60s, describing their recollections of moving to the *khiu*:

> When I came to the city to work as a driver, I felt that it meant I was finished as a peasant (*chao na*), as driving work resulted in me feeling more self-confident and self-reliant. Yeah, I felt more confident. And I felt like I had more freedom. I certainly earned a better income than if I returned to life as a peasant.

> Now that I've become a driver, I no longer think of myself as a peasant, as I no longer have time to farm. Working in the city, driving, leaves me feeling more confident in myself, and I feel free – whether I come to work or not is up to me.

It's important to note here the shift in identity – from peasant to driver, from farmer to confident worker in the cash economy. There appear also to be implicit links between *peasant*-ness and confidence, with drivers implying that shifting out of the peasantry and into a driving career generated increased levels of self-assuredness. It's almost as if drivers are ascribing to peasant-ness a certain lack of self-confidence, with driving enabling them to transcend this self-esteem deficit and to personally develop as confident, 'free' men.

The theme of freedom (*isara*), invoked in both quotes above, is also part of the self-identification of drivers, and an important trope within transition recollections.[18] As evidenced from other conversations with drivers, it carries connotations of control over the use of one's time, autonomous decision over space and activity – where one wants to be located and what one wants to do – and the lack of direct supervision or surveillance in the work-place. As described by Phaey, 'you can work whenever you want, stop work whenever you want, go wherever you want. *We are our own bosses*'. The values inherent to *isara* were in turn contrasted with other potential labor-options for unskilled male villagers, particularly construction, with its constraints over time and place, and the presence of supervisors to dock pay should one arrive late or need to leave early (see chapter 4).

The drivers and broader histories of rural agency, adaptability and articulating aspirations

As historical agents, the drivers were far from the first rural Thais to experiment with and adapt modes of rural livelihoods. In the case of northern Thailand, the desire to do so appears to have been widespread by the time of the drivers' irruption into the transport sector, and indeed it was the mounting numbers of increasing rural-to-urban commuters who created for the drivers a market in which to ply a new trade. To some degree, this coincided with the expansion of manufacturing into northern Thailand, with the most notable example being the Lamphun factory belt developed in 1983, some 20 kilometres

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[18] See Hickey (2010) for an interesting discussion of what she calls the *isara* discourse in relation to Bangkok taxi drivers.

south of the northern capital (see Ryoko 2004). Studies of these early rural migrant workers among female factory workers (Gray 1993, Ryoko 2004) and male construction workers (Ritchie 1996) echo the positive sentiments earlier associated with the drivers, with those in manufacturing in particular viewing their transitions in favorable terms, as an outlet for rural aspiration and signifier of realised modernity (Gray 1993, Ryoko 2004).

In the remainder of this chapter, I will briefly argue that these emergent cohorts of rural-to-urban labor stand within a much longer tradition of flexible and aspiring peasants, long-motivated by the desire to improve livelihoods and enable social mobility within localised status economies. In so doing, I will suggest that attention to this dimension of rural enterprise generates an additional 'long history' of the Thai countryside which might sit alongside those I've critiqued above focusing on peasant resistance and revolt. For although the evidence for rural pasts prior to the 1960s is somewhat thin on the ground (Reynolds 2013), a careful reading of select historical and anthropological material reveals a more textured, mobile rural subject, aspiring for connections with market and state just as frequently as opposing these poles of power. This not only helps ground the drivers' transition in terms of desire and agency, but will also be relevant for the discussion in following chapters exploring in greater detail rural subjectivities, politics and livelihoods.

The work of Katherine Bowie (1992) has been foundational in reframing representations of Thailand's historical peasantry. In her article 'Unraveling the Myth of the Subsistence Economy: Textile Production in Nineteenth-Century Northern Thailand', Bowie attacked elitist representations of the peasantry as static and self-sufficient, and through an oral-history based study of nineteenth century textile production, argued that 'most northern Thai villagers were not self-sufficient in rice production and… were *traditionally* dependent on *trade* [italics added] to make ends meet' (p805). She further asserts that the 'subsistence-economy paradigm' seriously underplays the 'complex division of labor… dire poverty, *wide reaching trade networks* and… *dynamism* [italics added]' inherent to peasant society during the period studied (p819). We note here Bowie's emphasis on the role of trade, markets and dynamism in peasant livelihood strategies – in their attempts 'to make ends meet'.

Jamaree Thiengthong (1996), in her important thesis researching changing modes of rural livelihoods in northern Thailand, adds significantly to this picture of rural dynamism, arguing for an early twentieth century pattern of *strategic peasant mobility*. The 'major theme' or 'early dynamic' of peasant livelihoods, writes Jamaree (1996: p38) of the 1920s and 1930s, and echoing Pasuk and Baker's (1995: p3) nation-wide motif of the 'moving agrarian frontier' (see above), was 'the peasants' efforts not to be confined to a limited space – but

rather to spread out as much as they could to ensure a living'. She continues by emphasizing the cultural value ascribed by peasants to 'versatility' and the 'capacity to be adaptive', the virtue of not being fixed to anywhere or anything, and the livelihood asset of what she refers to as 'looseness' (1996: p161). Jamaree describes these practices of adaptability, mobility, versatility and 'looseness' to place and mode of livelihood as intentional peasant livelihood tactics.

Nor was early peasant mobility solely restricted to moving along the agrarian frontier (Pasuk and Baker 1995). It could also involve traveling into upland and forest areas in search of local products which villagers then commodified and sold at market. Jamaree (1996: pp47-49) notes that northern villagers would often trek into surrounding woodland areas, for periods of time ranging from several months to several years, in order to search for wild tea leaves (*miang*) which would then be traded or sold for cash. Of this practice, she writes that 'mobility to *miang* settlements was very popular to the extent that the oldest villagers compared it to the contemporary practice of going to Chiang Mai for wage work' (p48). Chatthip Nartsupha (1999: pp22-23) also highlights the role of forests as sources of goods procured and traded by peasants, and notes that though they were subject to high taxation rates, still on occasion such forest produce would provide for their peddlers a 'surplus above subsistence' (p22; see also Reynolds 2009).

Charles Keyes (2012), writing of northeastern peasants of the early 1900s, is another who draws attention to widespread practices of peasant mobility, citing a number of rural trends of travel and journeying, or what he describes as a 'long tradition of young men leaving their families in northeastern villages in the quest for experience and *status* [italics added]'. Central to these practices was that of young men joining the Buddhist *sangha*, many of whom would circulate throughout networks of provincial temples or overseas mission sites. Other young men would continue the well-established tradition of *pai thiaw* – of leaving home and pursuing non-agricultural work in surrounding provinces or distant cities in order to gain broader knowledge about the world.

Keyes' linking of peasant mobility to the quest for 'experience and status' is a critical observation. Jennifer Gray (1990) and Michinobu Ryoko's (2004) research is important in this context, describing the experiences of northern female factory workers and echoing Mills' (1999) findings to the effect that labor migration was a desirable pathway enabling identity experimentation and the engagement with modern culture not permitted within the more rigid social confines of the village. This recognition of the role of 'experience' and 'status' as important analytics through which to explore peasant mobilities is significant,

paving the way for a broader understanding of motivational and cognitive frameworks within the 'traditional' peasantry.

For northern Thailand, the historical record indicates that status and livelihoods were increasingly linked with consumption and cash from the 1920s onwards. Werasit Sittitrai (1988), in his study of 'rural transformation in northern Thailand', notes as early as the 1920s what he describes as the 'monetization of everyday life' (p350). He also suggests that the 'lure of manufactured commodities' (whether clothing, food, furniture and the like) was the primary way peasants sought to improve their standard of living, and to thereby demonstrate their enhanced status amongst fellow villagers (p319).

Writing of the 1940s, Jamaree (1996: p171) describes the way in which peasants embracing off-farm labor moved from a subsistence to cash economy, and were thereby able to purchase consumer items increasingly desired by village people. The consumption of residential furnishings, fashion items and the emerging practice of buying one's meals from local street 'restaurants' began to distinguish those with purchasing power from those without, with the former accorded higher status within the developing status economy of the local village.

Jamaree's findings in turn resonate with those of Sharp and Hanks (1978), whose research into the dynamics of a 1950s central Thai village led them to speak of the new 'cultural values' of consumption and cash – 'soft drinks, store clothes, home furnishings and pressure lamps were setting up a more expensive *respectability* [italics added]' (Sharp and Hanks 1978: p194). Although they don't explicitly use the word, clearly Sharp and Hanks are drawing a close connection to peasant status and the ability to participate in the consumer economy through the medium of cash.

Jamaree, in two important theoretical interventions, argues that this emerging rural dynamic of cash-consumption-status produced a new understanding of 'poverty', which came to refer to a lack of cash rather than a shortfall of rice or other crops (1996: p172). Second, she suggests that from the 1970s onwards, 'subsistence' came to incorporate not simply notions of producing enough crops to enable survival, but rather sufficient to generate cash enabling participation in the efflorescing village cash economies (1996: p117).

Though not referring to northern villagers specifically, Robert Textor's (1961) account of Isan pedi-cab drivers in 1950s Bangkok also outlines a number of relevant factors. First, Textor notes as one of the driving forces behind peasants' move to Bangkok the 'pursuit of enhanced *prestige* [italics added] back in the home community' (p15). While we have seen

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this kind of rural desire for status and prestige previously in Keyes's (2012) work, what is worth emphasizing here is that the pedi-cab drivers were not seeking prestige within the new urban fields to which they moved. There was a realistic assessment that they simply could not compete in this elevated status economy. Rather, the status they sought was for the purposes of deployment within the local status fields with which they were familiar and in which they felt they could compete – their home village.

Second, Textor notes the fact that drivers did in fact enjoy 'enhanced prestige' upon returning to the village:

> **The driver himself returns in style, bringing or wearing items of high prestige value. Perhaps he will arrive carrying a leather suit-case, and wearing a prestigeful long-sleeved white shirt and long white trousers of European style. A wrist watch is another prized item. One driver told me that he never wore dark glasses while pedaling his vehicle in Bangkok (despite the glaring sun!), but saved his dark spectacles to wear when attending temple ceremonies back in his home village'** (p31)

Third, despite the condescension often displayed towards them by Bangkok residents, drivers would compete for status within their own driving community. Textor writes that drivers would often rent out an embellished, elaborately decorated pedi-cab, despite the fact it cost an additional 2 baht a day, simply due to the 'prestige' that piloting such a vehicle brought its driver amongst his fellow peers (p4).

Finally, is to draw from Michael Moerman's (1969) northern Thai village study from the 1960s, in which peasants eagerly adapted agricultural methods to new forms of technology, and in turn ferried increasing surpluses of produce to market along newly constructed roads. Far from resisting these state interventions, villagers sought to take advantage of technological innovations and infrastructural instalments in order to connect their goods with market in search of enhanced livelihoods. Although it seems thoroughly commonsensical to describe such processes, it remains necessary in order to counter historical (and contemporary, in terms of sufficiency economy ideologies) images of subsistence-oriented, static peasants. Moerman's counter example shows that, once structural conditions permitted, peasants keenly adapted livelihood strategies to embrace state inputs and market opportunities.

It is then within this historical and regional matrix, covering the period from the late 1800s-1960s, with several case studies specific to the north, that we should endeavour to locate and construct models of the Thai peasantry reflecting this partial historical and ethnographic record. And when we do, it becomes clear that far from a static, passive, subsistence-oriented and unchanging social form, bound to land and crop, the Thai

peasantry is better portrayed as a strategic, mobile, versatile and adaptable agent, variously oriented towards livelihood enhancement, identity experimentation, cash and consumption, trade and market, status and prestige. In real terms, the peasantry simply reflects the same cultural traits and orientations of the Thai middle and upper classes. And it is towards this model of the Thai peasantry that I suggest the drivers' transition from farm to *songthaeo* belongs, of a long history of livelihood-oriented adaptability and agency, a historical trajectory able to sit alongside other long rural histories of revolt and resistance. In so doing, it becomes possible to account for the emergence of the drivers in the mid-1970s, and indeed to frame their transition from one form of livelihood to another as part of this much longer and *broadly traditional* rural pathway, a rational and calculated decision (Popkin 1979) in the same vein as their northern forebears who headed up into the highlands to source tea leaves, or of north-easterners leaving their village in search of worldliness and status.

The shift from village to urban work does not then have to be rendered as part of a process of disruptive displacement or profound crisis caused by state and capital on rural society. Rather, it may be portrayed as a common mode of rural agency, of navigating structural change to best position oneself in the search for livelihoods, desired lifestyles and enhanced status. When visions of status economies replace those of moral economies, it becomes clear that drivers – like so many others of the period – were driven to change not simply by push-factors, but also by the attraction of cash, consumption and status considerations. To do so however required the presence of external, structural factors such as the new factories and construction sites, as 'urban fields' within which agency could find concrete expression. Without these structural elements or 'exit options', desires for change would have been stifled and frustrated, with farmers denied the opportunity to adapt and experiment with new forms of livelihood.

In the following chapter, I will continue this exploration of the drivers' exit, highlighting the growing importance of the state in facilitating such movement. In so doing, the intention is to again take the Keyes-Haberkorn narrative arc as a point of critical departure, and to argue that state-society relations in rural Thailand are historically more nuanced than binary models focused on repression and resistance. Abutting such power relations were numerous examples of collaborative activities between state agents and rural people, including by those such as the drivers seeking to forge pathways into the off-farm, modern economy.

CHAPTER 2: EVOLVING PATTERNS OF RURAL POLITICS AND THE TRANSITION OF THE EARLY *SONGTHAEO* DRIVERS

Portraits of rural politics from the time preceding the emergence of the *songthaeo* drivers in the mid-1970s tend towards two orientations. The first emphasises the passive and apolitical nature of the peasantry up until a point in the 1970s (see Walker 2014),[19] usually considered to be around the emergence of the Farmers' Federation of Thailand (FFT) in 1973, from which a second strand of politics is identified focusing on struggle or 'revolution' (Turton 1978, Bell 1978b, Thongchai 1995, Haberkorn 2011). In this second movement, the FFT and Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) are singled out as prominent vehicles for emerging activism. Within this reading of rural political history, farmers became 'politicised' in parallel with – and to a degree through their contact with – students and other political ideologues, joining with wider agendas and movements heading towards either a democratic or communist polity, and enjoying early success in the opening of a democratic window in the years 1973-1976. Even should we admit that the FFT were focused on less nationally-oriented issues (see below), and were intensely concerned with local matters specific to rural people, the common picture of rural politics continues to trend towards compliance with the resistance – repression models of power relations, with politics considered a matter of engaging the state and local or national level issues from a stance of opposition, conflict and defiance.

This picture of apolitical-to-revolutionary peasants is not without historical basis. Early and highly astute ethnographic accounts of village politics from the 1960s acknowledge that the vast majority of villagers remained distant from the political arena throughout this period, apart from the small substrata of village elites who interacted with local officialdom (Neher 1972).[20] And the 'revolutionary' political movements (FFT and CPT) certainly did gain traction among fragments of the countryside, though their presence, numbers or hold

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[19] The work of the Communist Party of Thailand in the decades preceding the 1970s is an exception to this generalization though, as Keyes (2014) argues, it was not particularly successful in attracting ordinary villagers into the movement.

[20] Neher (1972 and 1974) indicates that over 90% of villagers (in Neher's three northern Thai research sites) remained what he described as 'apolitical' – that is, they did not tend to have direct contact with state officials. I note here that this is only one dimension of the political process, and may not take into account what later scholarship would proceed to describe as subaltern or 'everyday' politics – see for example Kerkvliet 1990.

on rural imaginaries should not be overstated.[21] Many of the older drivers spoken to as part of this research project, as discussed earlier, noted the presence of the FFT in their village but expressed little interest in their work. *That* kind of *confronting* political activism was considered undesirable and likely to eventuate in trouble. While this may reflect subaltern fear of a repressive state, it also signifies a widespread *pragmatism* among the drivers and, as we will see, a willingness to engage and partner with the local state in their desires to exit the peasantry and enter the non-farm, cash economy.

Neither political passivity nor revolutionary fervour however captures a far richer array of political options present in the village in the years prior to the drivers' transition and expanded on throughout this chapter. Nor do they account for the discernible pattern of productive connections emerging between villagers and state officials as rural people began to assert their needs and expectations of the state through a bolder idiom of political engagement. Rather than a Scottian politics of evasion or resistance, these connections became increasingly attractive and necessary to villagers searching for facilitators to aid their transition into the more productive reaches of the off-farm economy. This politics was then more localized in scope and predominantly focused on narrow, proximate, livelihood-oriented issues. It was not however a completely bruise-free affair, with villagers deploying a range of tactics to achieve livelihood ends, including a staple of protests and subtle forms of 'everyday' resistance (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986). As I will argue throughout this chapter, these are best seen not as expressions of a rural citizenry seeking to distance itself from the state (that is, of 'resistance'), but were rather expressions of villagers articulating demands to the state, seeking to provoke and procure its productive powers. To borrow the language of Andrew Walker in describing contemporary state-rural society dynamics, the kinds of protest and everyday politics to be discussed below is primarily exemplary of villagers intent on drawing officialdom into productive circuits of local exchange.[22]

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[21] See again Keyes (2014) on the limited success of the CPT among ordinary villagers. In a memorable quote, Herbert Phillips (1979) quips, 'I, for one, give short shrift to the so called "insurgency" in Thailand's Northeast and in many respects consider it one of the most outrageous hoaxes inflicted upon thinking people'. In a more measured light, he goes on to note, 'Even at the height of its greatest "success" in 1967, the insurgency movement involved no more than one-tenth of one percent of the peasant population of the Northeast, and this expressed the culmination of twenty years' organizational activity in village communities… The extraordinary failure of the communist movement in Northeast Thailand is, for any comparative communist standard, absolutely scandalous (p445)'.
See also Nishizaki's (2013) comments in Footnote 13 above.
[22] This idea of villagers seeking productive state inputs reflects Andrew Walker's (2012, 2014) descriptions of contemporary Thai rural politics, with his work principally focused on the northern Thai peasantry. I am arguing that the lineages of Walker's peasant politics can well be traced back into the historical record.

The nature of these circuits is a further topic to be discussed in this chapter, as it is the medium through which a certain form of rural politics developed. I will make the argument that these circuits – or sites of exchange between villager and state official – evolved and diversified from state-villager relations normatively mediated by middlemen (Neher 1972, Hall 1980) and village elites (Neher 1972), to interactions between villagers from varying strata of village society and agents representing varying levels of the local state. It is possible, for example, to trace the dilation of state-villager relations from the middlemen-state official dynamic just noted to the emergence of formal village associations (usually concerned with the interests of village-elites) interacting with the local state, and then to the development of informal groups of 'ordinary' villagers (such as the *songthaeo* drivers) seeking to engage the state in the search for livelihood support. In this latter case, ordinary villagers would act with a level of autonomy from the traditional village elite in search of forging their own useful connections with local officials. As we will see for the drivers, it was connections with the police and transport officials which created the possibilities of developing a new field of labour which the drivers could then seek to monopolise and make their own. Collectively then, we can observe the evolution of a key strand of rural politics through paying attention to the efflorescence of state-villager connections, as interactions between villager and state shift from semi-institutional brokerage arrangements between village elites and local officials to broader, informal relations between villagers entering urban or non-agricultural work through the direct mediation of the local state.

The purpose of the current chapter is then to explore the spectrum of rural politics beyond the poles of passivity and revolution, and to highlight a more variegated history of rural politics culminating not in 'revolution', resistance or participation in national-level movements – whether for democracy or communism – but rather in the rise and deepening of new sets of connections between villagers from all social strata and representatives of the local state. These connections are, I suggest, best understood in terms of rural people's pursuit of better livelihoods and the access into new sectors of the economy which state official could broker, both through formal and informal channels. Following a brief survey of literature outlining the varieties of rural political options and evolution of state-village relations in the years preceding the drivers entry into the transport sector, I will then turn to the drivers' own 'political' story of transition from farm to off-farm labor, a project which will be unpacked in the remaining chapters of the thesis.

From one angle, the emergence of forms of localised protest politics in rural Thailand appears as a striking innovation within rural society, defying pervasive cultural norms of villager deference, fear, awe and *kreng-jai*.[23,24] Nowhere is this peasant profile drawn with such clarity than in the work of Herbert Rubin (1973, 1974) and his description of 'will and awe' (1973) permeating state-villager relations. Within this cultural matrix, villagers were overcome with awe and deference in the presence of acknowledged superiors, with state officials obligated and forced to generate motivation and 'will' amongst a peasantry rendered inert by their sense of inferiority in the face of state *phu yai* ('big men'). For Rubin, this relationship was not so much one of tension or resentment, but merely reflected the hierarchical nature of social reality, religiously and culturally legitimated and broadly accepted by all involved. Opposition from peasants to superiors – including village patrons and state officials – was culturally untenable, with 'overt expressions of disrespect toward a superior [are] flagrantly improper. Even an incompetent superior cannot be attacked openly…' (Siffin 1966: p220). According to Rubin, tensions and frustrations were just as likely to be felt from the side of local state officials as they were disaffected villagers, in their frustrated efforts to successfully implement development programs in the face of uncooperative peasants, inter and intra-village factionalism, and the unwillingness of villagers to work on projects unless motivated by the presence or encouragement of state officers. Rubin argues that such cultural traits were a significant hindrance to state-led rural development projects (Rubin and Rubin 1973: p271) and forced local officials to spend much of their time trying to instill 'will' within a diffident and indifferent peasantry.

In the 1970s however, this relationship of 'will and awe' between state and villager, of cultural notions underpinning stable inferior-superior relations came, in some instances, to a grinding halt. This could take the form of nationwide movements such as the FFT and also arose on a smaller scale, focused on local events. In 1973 for example, in the same year that the FFT was founded, a watershed event took place in an otherwise unobtrusive

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[23] *Kreng-jai* is a difficult term to translate into English. Herbert Rubin (1973) unpacks the meaning of *kreng* in terms of the sense of fear, awe, respect and deference with which peasants held officials. According to Rubin, there were two important elements to this *kreng*:

    i. It served to protect the superior from endless requests for benevolence from the inferior

    ii. It was borne not so much out of the peasant's sense of the official's 'bigness', but conversely on their own sense of 'littleness' (p432).

While appreciating Rubin's discussion, the best sense of *kreng jai* is in terms of the desire not to disturb or cause inconvenience for another through some kind of request for action. This may be due to a sense of 'smallness', of a fear of the requested person refusing, or a number of other factors, but usually involving some measure of *anxiety* about the process of needing to make a request of someone else.

[24] For discussion on 'apolitical peasants' prior to the emergence of rural protest politics see Neher 1972, 1974 and Moerman 1969; see Rubin 1973 and Vandergeest 1993 for a discussion on deference, awe, fear and *kreng jai* among the Thai peasantry.

southern village in the district of Satingpra (Vandergeest 1993: p150). Marking a profound 'moment in the shift in relations between villagers and officials' (Vandergeest 1993: p15), and in a rare moment of grassroots mobilisation, village members publicly demonstrated against the state's unpopular appointment of their village headman. In response, rather than act dismissively or with repression, the District Chief arranged elections, allowing villagers to choose their own local leader, a practice of local democracy unbroken from that time forward (Vandergeest 1993, p150).

In the same southern village, just a few years later, villagers again took to the street to stare down perceived state injustices. In this case, a road-building project organised by the District Chief was illegally sourcing sand from the beach behind the village – an area considered a public commons by villagers. In response, villagers took to the streets and literally blockaded the trucks' access to the beach. Standing in the middle of the road, one villager shouted out to the drivers, declaring that he knew the law, and daring them to bring the District Chief down to discuss the theft of sand belonging to the village. In the face of this opposition and subsequent threats to demonstrate at the District Office, the drivers backed off, never to return. In the mind of the villagers, it was their knowledge of the law, and their willingness to publicly expose official acts of illegality, which provided them with their new ability for political expression and local political victories (Vandergeest 1993, p151).

According to Peter Vandergeest, villagers considered these events a moment of profound historical significance, a rupture with a previous era of state repression and authoritarianism (Vandergeest 1993, pp150-151). For now, peasants had become willing to publicly air grievances, take to the streets in open protest and to boldly make claims on their district officials. And, for a variety of reasons – not least to do with the villagers' knowledge of the law and their willingness to publicly shame officials flagrantly violating it – these demonstrations were able to influence the state and compel it to act in greater accord with villagers' interests. In Vandergeest's reflections of these events, this new mode of villager politics based on protest and demand sat at the apex of a historical trajectory of rural politics commencing in the 1930s. His assessment can be schematized in terms of: 1) early villager rejection of state officials' leadership and resistance towards state modernisation programs; 2) an increasing state turn towards coercion and violence to combat village recalcitrance; 3) the growth of public resistance against the state (as in the 1970s events above); and 4) the contribution of this localised resistance to the overthrow of the military government in 1973. In other words, rural Thai politics can be portrayed as reaching a kind of climax in the localised and nation-wide movements of protest, demonstration and

resistance against the state symbolized in the actions of the Satingpra villagers, and contributing towards a broader-level goal of open, democratic political space, such as that which emerged in 1973-1976. I will return to this narrative of rural political history later in the chapter.

These small-scale village protests reflect in microcosm the much wider-ranging politics of protest and demonstration which surfaced in 1973, the year which ended nearly 40 years of military rule and in which the FFT commenced its work. As noted above, the FFT was the highest profile and largest actor within this new politics, with their work combining public rallies, letters and petitions, education programs and event organising, in its cross-regional agenda attempting to secure the implementation of the LRCA. One of the fascinating dimensions of FFT protests was the extent to which ordinary peasants were willing to transgress lines of culturally sanctioned authority and to openly denigrate potent symbols of the state. In August of 1974 for example, central Thai farmers threatened to renounce their citizenship, burn their state-issued identity cards, cease paying taxes and end their recognition of the Thai state's leadership over them (Haberkorn 2011: p1). At its peak, the FFT claimed to represent some 1.5 million members, which though impressive remained a small fraction of the entire farming population (Nishizaki 2013: 462). And although membership numbers appear high, actual rallies were usually patronised by no more than a few thousand protestors, at most (Nishizaki 2013: 461). Without labouring the point here, I draw attention to the point that Haberkorn's account of the FFT (outlined in chapter 1) essentially echoes that of Vandergeest's historical schema above. Both view the emergence of rural political resistance as an epochal moment in Thai history, a casting off of the shackles of political passivity and domination and the act of staking a public claim in the national political process.

The budding appearance of public protests in 1973 does not however mean that less overt, more subtle forms of opposition weren't practiced in preceding years by disaffected villagers. Foreshadowing by some years the later scholarly attention granted to 'everyday politics' (Kerkvliet 1990, Scott and Kerkvliet 1986) and 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985), Rubin and Rubin wrote in 1973 of various 'indirect' measures through which villagers opposed what they considered illegitimate ('non-benevolent') authority. These included 'recalcitrance in working on officially sponsored projects… poor attendance at meetings… rumor and requests for aid' from politicians believed to have authority over local-level officials unwilling to comply with villager requests (1973: 272). Specific to the south, Vandergeest (1993) also relays ways in which traditional puppet-shows became underground political events, encoded with political meanings, subverting normative

power-relations and reversing entrenched social hierarchies. While by no means as demonstrative as the public work of the FFT and others, these examples demonstrate an everyday politics at the village level which in time flourished into the more overt political protests of 1973 and beyond.

Connection politics, peasant demands and state supports

One of the risks in identifying and recounting examples of 'everyday' and local protest politics is the attendant impression that subaltern resistance dominated what politics there was in the life of the village. The trap of romanticizing resistance (Abu-Lughold) remains common throughout studies of rural politics – in Thailand and beyond (see for example Caouette and Turner 2009) – and threatens to mask what I consider to be a far more pervasive set of rural political processes and peasant dispositions *vis a vis* the state. These encompass the development of varying modes of connections, and increasing instances of productive interactions, between villagers and local state officials. This in turn reflected growing villager expectations in terms of the state's duty to support the rural economy and facilitate villagers' entrée into expanding labor markets beyond the village (Rubin and Rubin 1973: pp271-272, Piker 1968: pp790-791). That is, while there was frustration and opposition towards the state which manifested itself from time to time in various degrees of opposition, I will argue that peasant–state relations were marked not so much by this opposition, as by the desire for the state to facilitate growing peasant aspirations for development and livelihood diversification. And where it was resourced to do so, I will also argue that the state increasingly sought to deliver on these expectations and demands, often finding mutual benefit in performing the role of middleman (Hall: 1980) or broker.

From the mid-1960s onwards, though interspersed with moments of antagonism between state and village, a more normative, benign and pervasive set of local political arrangements emerged marked not by conflict, but by converging desires of state and village for productive forms of engagement and connection. From the state's perspective, a certain bureaucratisation of everyday rural life, including through an evolving repertoire of development inputs, was considered a necessary element of development-oriented counter-insurgency measures, seeking to render the village legible, loyal and supportive of the government (Neher 1974, Vandergeest 1993, Larsson 2012). From the village's perspective, increased interactions with the state presented opportunities to articulate an evolving repertoire of demands and expectations, with state inputs and villager expectations fused together in an escalating spiral of village demands and state responses. One of the significant but less-discussed dimensions of the increasing interactions between

state and village which followed was a certain level of de-authorising of the state's 'awe-some' (Rubin 1973) authority and inviolability, as the expanding and internalising state was rendered increasingly local, familiar, mundane and amenable to connections serving villagers' interests and aspirations. In the following section, I will elaborate on this mode of 'rural politics' – of relations and interactions between village and state at the local level, over local interests – and suggest that the growing range of connections between village and state, not least for those in need of 'middlemen' and brokers in the transition to work outside the village, helps set the scene for the emergence of the drivers in the mid-1970s.

Rural politics in our period of concern is somewhat complicated by the need to first disaggregate the composite social entities 'state' and 'village'. The Thai 'village' of the 1960s and the early part of the 1970s was a surprisingly differentiated social unit, with points of distinction including differences in wealth, power, political access, location and kinship group. Clark Neher (1972, 1974), for example, has classified the village into 'apolitical', 'political' and 'village-elite' strata, comprising around 90%-95%, 5%-10% and a handful of individuals respectively (1974). Village 'politicals' were usually those with the means to act as patrons to client-groups comprised of 'apoliticals' within the village, while elites were a select group from within the politicals – usually wealthy merchants or landowners, village or commune heads. Distinguishing the politicals/elites from the apoliticals was the contact made between the former and representatives of the local state, through formal meetings and informal channels, and through which village and self-interests would be presented to local officials. In Neher's account of village politics, the political and elite classes functioned as general representatives of villagers (or, more narrowly, of client-groups), and 'interceded' on behalf of villager-clients (1974: p73), aggregating, converting and presenting villagers' demands to state officials (1972: p215).

In an aligned manner, R.A. Hall (1980) has also divided the village into three segments, this time based on economic power, comprising wealthy, outwardly-oriented villagers, middle-peasants and the landless. According to Hall, each group possessed a differing ability to articulate demands to members of the local state (pp463-464), reflecting Neher's model of politicals and elites mediating villagers' needs to officialdom.

Beyond economy and state access, other factors distinguishing villagers from each other included kinship and physical location. Frequent accounts in the anthropological literature highlight disputes between different kin groups in the village, or between people from differing 'hamlets' within the one 'administrative' village. Herbert Rubin (1973: pp 433, 437-438, 440) for example, who conducted research in Chiang Mai in the late 1960s, noted

how village disunity hindered development efforts, with differing groups unwilling to cooperate and requiring state intervention in order to progress development projects. On one occasion, the construction of a road linking village to market – a project Rubin states was desired by villagers – became untenable due to quarrelling hamlets refusing to work together. Rubin notes that such disunity was one of the reasons why villagers actively sought state officials' involvement in the development process, as the presence of a respected official was usually sufficient to mediate disputes and encourage the cooperation of quarrelling factions in development initiatives. Nor were kinship circles without internal problems. Rubin also writes of enmity within kinship groups, particularly when economic differences arose. In one instance, he notes the disdain with which wealthier villagers felt towards their less well-off kin (1973: p.433). This kind of intra-kin or intra-family dysfunction is one reason why certain villagers, particularly those weary of the financial burdens associated with kinship obligations, considered the more impersonal state an important point of potential connection to livelihood supports unavailable (or unavailed) within kin or patron groups.

For its part, the state too was a heterogeneous reality, represented at the village level by the District Office, and comprising an assortment of roles and actors including the District Officer, Assistant District Officials, and a range of lower-ranking officers. These latter could include development and community-development officers, agricultural extension officers, land surveyors, forestry regulators, health and animal welfare officials, police, educators, military draft officers and general clerks (Neher 1972, 1974, Hall 1980, Rubin 1980). Each role sat at a particular point within the bureaucratic hierarchy, possessed different levels of power and independent authority, and related to villagers in differing ways. The District Officer, for example, tended to evoke strong feelings of fear, awe and deference from villagers, which was not the case for lower ranking technical or administrative officials (Rubin 1973). This is an important point as it helps us to understand that relations between state and village could take multiple forms, from the rather choreographed and predictable formal functions involving the powerful District Officer, to the thoroughly mundane interactions between villagers and low-level functionaries involved in form-filling exercises at the District office, and including informal or semi-formal interactions between villagers and technical or regulatory officers within village confines. Disaggregating the state in this way also enables recognition of the different ability various officers had in terms of providing desired resources. Whereas the District Officer might be able to announce the disbursement of funds to support a particular project, his clerk or low-level technical officers had no such delegation, and were

dependent upon the District Officer for any such approvals. For many officials, this sense of powerlessness was in fact a major cause of job stress and dissatisfaction (Rubin 1980).

A meaningful discussion then of rural politics in the decade or so prior to the emergence of the drivers must take into account relations between state and village society – both now disassembled into their composite parts – focusing on the nature and increasing frequency of interactions between both parties. For its part, the state's counter-insurgency agenda led it to intensify relations with the village, sometimes coercively, but more normatively in ways it intended to be productive and developmental. This was often done for entirely pragmatic reasons, to secure loyalty (Neher 1972, Larsson 2012) and win the hearts and minds (Walker 2012) of villagers. As one Assistant District Officer in Chiang Mai put it in describing the implementation of a development program in 1967: 'It started… in this area to defend against communism, to grab the people before the communists grab the people' (Rubin & Rubin 1973: p284). The state's policy of productively engaging the village centered on a range of development programs, inputs which – as noted earlier – were frequently desired in the village, and which served to further enhance already growing expectations of the state's role in supporting the rural economy.[25]

On some occasions, District Chiefs would go to great lengths to engage villagers in his district, travelling long distances, often involving walking several hours along impassable roads. In some northern districts, District Chiefs instigated a 'visit-the-people' program, travelling to each village to seek out villagers' needs and to provide assurance of the state's desire to support. Neher (1974) tells of District Chiefs who wore local costumes and spoke local dialects in order to relate to villagers on such visits. On occasion, Chiefs would take along American films or well-renowned monks in order to entertain the people and encourage them to feel at ease and express their needs (Neher 1974: pp 86-90). For some officials, the implementation of successful development programs could mean career advancement (Rubin 1973, p441), providing incentives for aspirational officers to ensure productive development outcomes. For others, rural development simply reflected a personal desire to help rural people (Rubin 1973).

It is within this context of the state's security-oriented development agenda that villagers were drawn into more frequent and intimate relations with the state, within which a growing sense of village demands and entitlement was articulated. Rubin and Rubin (1973: p271) for example, speak of a 'proper sphere of governmental activity' perceived by

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[25] Moerman (1969) is an interesting counterpoint in his case-study of villagers mocking the state's development efforts. This would appear to be due to the comparatively wealthy status of the village (a point Moerman makes) and their perceived lack of need of external support.

villagers of the state, incorporating a wide range of development tasks, and which villagers would refuse to undertake without state resources and support. Elsewhere, Rubin writes of 'endless requests' made by villagers of state officials (1973, p432), indicative of a village view of the state as a source of resources and inputs. In one set of surveys conducted in Chiang Mai villages, Rubin's respondents (ordinary, 'apolitical' villagers) outlined the greatest 'needs' facing the village in terms of inputs possible only with state support – roads, a health station, police, more grades in schools and a train stop (1973: p440). Again, this is revealing of basic villager orientations towards the state – of desiring support and inputs. Complaining about this emergent practice of incessant village demands, one officer was moved to say, 'they, the villagers, now see the officials only as servants' (Rubin and Rubin 1973: p284). For other villagers, practical reasons determined their desire for state involvement in the development process. As noted earlier, villagers often sought out state officials to help generate cooperation amongst quarrelling factions, while villagers also recognised the state's technical superiority and the knowledge which it could bring to the development process.

There are two particular strands of the rural political process which I want to emphasise in the remainder of this section. The first revolves around the process of channeling village interests to state officialdom, the evolution of this process, and the subsequent implications this generated for the *songthaeo* drivers. The second traces the effects of the increasing interactions between state and village, arguing that these interactions led to the familiarisation of the local state in the eyes of villagers, in turn producing a certain informalisation of interactions, a process I will argue is relevant to the emergence of the *songthaeo* drivers.

The process of channeling village needs to the state, and of securing the allocation of state resources, takes us into the heart of 'rural politics'. As outlined by Neher (1972, 1974), village politicals – or what Michael Moerman (1969) called 'synaptic leaders' – functioned as middlemen and brokers between village and officialdom, aggregating and presenting village needs and demands to local officers. According to Neher (1972: p208), such demands were accompanied by high levels of expectation about the state's capacity and willingness to positively respond, though this was dependent on resource constraints, particularly in areas not designated as counter-insurgency zones. While Andrew Walker (2012: p12) has suggested that 'villagers expressed their needs not on the basis of their own agenda of livelihood challenges but according to the specific development agenda of the village leadership', the kinds of survey work undertaken by Rubin (see above) and the kinds of responses villagers gave to District Chiefs during 'visit-the-people' programs (Neher

1974: pp86-90) indicates that, even if they did reflect elite interests, expressed needs also reflected the interests of ordinary villagers. During one visitation for example, villagers presented a range of needs and concerns including village electrification, the high price of potato seeds and the practice of young girls being lured to Bangkok for sex-work (Neher 1974, pp86-90). There is no reason to think that any of these issues would not have been of immediate interest to ordinary villagers, regardless of whether they also served elite interests.

One of the more interesting developments within this model of rural politics is the emergence of what Clark Neher has termed 'functional associations', akin to single-interest organisations such as farmers groups or irrigation associations (1972: p214). The innovation of these 'interest aggregating groups' was their habit of presenting to state officials the interests of the group and its members rather than those of the village as a whole (Neher 1972: p214). Moreover, members tended to be drawn from the upper stratum of the village, with ordinary villages feeling somewhat uncomfortable about joining them. For its part, the state preferred dealing with these groups rather than trying to take into account a more disparate range of villager demands and needs. In the words of one state officer in response to a villager's complaint about officials favouring the functional associations, such groups were considered 'organised and could be contacted more efficiently by officials', obviating the need to waste time in contacting individual farmers (Neher 1972: p215). The broad effect of these groups was to increase and, on occasion, re-route connections between village and state. Rather than politicals alone representing the village to the state, a partly overlapping and partly displacing process emerged, to the effect that elite interests – represented by the functional associations – became those more readily tendered to local officials.

The emergence of the functional groups is significant in the way they allow us to observe the proliferation of village nodes of connection with the local state, the formation of particular interest groups and their ability to interact with the state and source desired inputs. Just a few years later, as will be described below, the drivers mimicked such tactics, forming discrete groups which interacted with local officials in organising and regulating the nascent public transport sector. While it's not possible to draw definitive inferences from the rise of the functional groups, their emergence does enable us to reconstruct an evolving politics of state-village connections, beginning with Neher's model of politicals/patrons representing apoliticals/clients to local officials, to the development of the elite-serving functional associations, to the appearance of groups like the *songthaeo* drivers who worked more or less independently from village elites in their less formal

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engagement with state officials in instigating public transport services. Collectively, the development and dispersal of points of village connection with the state reflects, I suggest, broad levels of rural desire to productively engage the state. For its part, the state too was undergoing its own processes of change and evolution.

The amenable state

The proliferation of interactions between state and village outlined above set the conditions for the emergence of discrete groups like the drivers in a further way, with the increased frequency and changing scale of relations leading to a certain informalisation of state-village relations, including the de-authorising of the sense of state inviolability and authority noted above by Rubin (1973) and Vandergeest (1993). This process unfolded in several ways. First, was the sheer frequency of contact between villagers and the state. This could take the form of state officials visiting the village for development, surveying, educating, policing, health and other forms of regulating purposes, to the rapidly escalating numbers of villagers daily visiting the District Office, usually for mundane purposes such as registrations and form-filling exercises (Neher 1974: p78).[26] Neher (1974: p78) provides statistics from villages in Chiang Mai demonstrating that up to 100 individuals from the one village might daily visit the District Office and interact with local officials. For some commentators, these enhanced levels of contact with the state for fairly mundane purposes represented a kind of 'regulation of everyday life' (Vandergeest 1993: p143), a process evoking negative connotations of heightened control, surveillance and discipline over everyday village affairs. While this may be partially true, Neher (1974) has suggested a less ideologically driven and, for my purposes, more interesting outcome of this everyday rural bureaucratisation. Neher observed that villagers who came into contact with officials developed stronger feelings in relation to such officials, with these feelings 'consistently on the positive side' (p78). That is, rather than alienating villagers, enhanced bureaucratic contact cultivated *better relations* between state official and villager, decreasing cultural gaps and helping to shed the veneer of state inviolability. Through its deliberative expansion into village life, bureaucratisation grounded the remote and sometimes haughty state, humanising its officials as villagers became more familiar and confident in dealing with them.

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[26] Neher (1974: p78) lists the following as among the reasons why people might contact the District office: to complete forms for the military draft, forms for building approvals, forms for land acquisition and forms for voter registration.

The diminishment of cultural distance between state and villager was also an intentional design feature of certain government development programs. In the mid-1960s for example, the state introduced the Commune Council 275 program as a means of increasing villagers' participation in the local development process, deliberately replacing the top-down, authoritarian development model encapsulated in Commune Council 222. As described by Rubin and Rubin (1973: p273), Commune Council 275 aimed at being 'more democratic, less dependent upon the officialdom'. That is, it sought to improve villager participation in the village development process by decreasing the role of high-ranking officials (specifically at development meetings between the state and village representatives), and of encouraging villagers themselves to take the lead in development decisions. Specific measures included removing the District Officer from meetings, replacing him with lower-level, technical officers with whom villagers felt more comfortable to talk and debate, and granting villagers greater control over development decisions and the allocation of local development budgets. It also enshrined in policy the right of villagers to disagree with officials, to protest official decisions and even level allegations of corruption against officials. In one such meeting, Rubin and Rubin describe a headmaster complaining about corrupt behaviour of the District Officer, to which the lower-ranked Assistant District Officer responded not with defence or chastisement, but by affirming to the meeting the right of villagers to protest in this way (1973: p278).[27]

In some ways, this is quite an extraordinary evolution in state-village relations, with the state implementing a program whose design was intended to inculcate within villagers the rights and indeed obligations to become robust, assertive development agents. According to Rubin and Rubin (1973), such programs were intended to overcome the perceived culture of dependency in the state-villager relationship, and to improve village perceptions of the government. One of the actual effects however was the creation of a new cultural paradigm in which villagers now felt entitled to robustly engage with local officials, publicly interrogating, complaining, debating and leveling allegations against them. By design, this process produced similar effects to the intensification of mundane state-villager interactions noted above, reducing official's authority through the process of compressing cultural gaps and opening state officials up to public critique, exposure and engagement.

More generally, the bureaucratization of everyday rural life required ever-greater numbers of state officials, with lower-level officers often drawn from the ranks of the local village.

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[27] Interestingly, Rubin and Rubin (1973: p441) also record that the Assistant District Officer's comments were met with laughter from the assembled crowd, indicative of the sense of shock and newness (and perhaps skepticism!) at this about-face in state-villager relations.

This again served to render the state familiar to villagers, removing the 'awe-some' shadow which previously defined village sentiments towards the state. Rubin notes (1973: p441) for example that the more frequently villagers interacted with officials, the less *kreng* villagers felt and the more willing they were to ask for favours. Through increased contact between villagers and the state – often initiated by the state or simply part of the bureaucratization of everyday life – the state took on a more proximate, domesticated guise, actually encouraging participation and critique, and in so doing lost some of its awe-inspiring, authoritarian lustre.

In summary, through the swelling of the local state into ever-expanding domains of rural life (agriculture, development, animal welfare, (military) drafting, policing, health, education, surveying, taxing and so on), the increase of routinized, mundane bureaucratic interactions at places like the District Office, the drawing of lower-level officials from village ranks, and through deliberate policy initiatives permitting participation in decision-making and critique of local officials, the state rendered itself familiar, proximate and amenable to rural society in ways historically unique. It was towards this less-austere, developmentally-oriented, increasingly common-place and everyday state that villagers from differing layers of rural society sought points of productive connection, first through representative middlemen (Neher's 'politicals'), then in terms of elite associations, and then from individuals from various 'classes' of village life who increasingly engaged the state either at the District Office or within the village. Finally, as will be discussed in terms of the drivers, groups of ordinary villagers – particularly those outwardly-oriented, entrepreneurial, and seeking to venture into the economy beyond the village – formed connections with the state to enable them to navigate this transition. As Steven Piker (1968) has well-noted, as far back as the late 1960s such a transition could be a fraught and uncertain journey, with the move to employment beyond the village presenting challenges requiring middlemen and patrons (pp790-791). It was just such connections with the local state which enabled the driving men to create for themselves a new labour field in the delivery of public transport.

The emergence of the drivers and expanding Thai political histories

At the centre of the *songthaeo*-mens' transition from peasants to drivers was the ambiguous, though productive, role of local police officers. While often despised by villagers for their

capriciousness and general habit of *kin mueang* (Keyes 1979),[28] police could also be desirable figures within village life. In response to Rubin's (1973) survey (noted above) enquiring of ordinary villagers' greatest needs, one prominent response for example was for additional police. On another occasion, also canvassed earlier, in villagers' interactions with a visiting District Officer, one of the chief concerns relayed by villagers was about young village girls being lured into urban sex-work. In response, the District Officer promised greater policing efforts, including police taking greater note of 'strangers' within the village (Neher 1974). In both these instances, police were considered valuable assets within village society.

For the drivers, the police remained a thoroughly ambiguous figure in their transition from farm to transport trade. The earliest interactions were informal in nature, with drivers and police engaged in a mutually beneficial collaboration in which police extracted a small fee from drivers in return for protection, conflict resolution, and the guarding of driving routes from incursions from newcomers or outsiders. And although these fees were exemplary of typically extractive police behaviour (*kin mueang*), they served the productive purpose of generating for the drivers a stable field of economic activity – organised and predictable. For the majority of drivers, payments of 'tea money' to police evoked little grief, and was considered a means of establishing a productive relationship, with police regulating the new routes established by the drivers and ensuring that their driver-clients were granted unfettered access to work them. Though the early drivers quite naturally worked a route between Chiang Mai and their village of residence, with men from Sankhamphaeng, for example, working the Chiang Mai – Sankhamphaeng route, some drivers would occasionally enter other drivers' territory and operate in areas beyond their nominal jurisdiction. Tension and conflict could arise, and it is at this point that drivers speak of the productive role of police, as agents of peace-keeping, organising the drivers into their respective domains and settling disputes should conflict arise.

In time, the police's role took on formal dimensions, in addition to the continuation of the informal practice of fee extraction. In the mid-1970s, provincial state agencies requested the police to manage the affairs of the incoming drivers in an official capacity. The Traffic Police adopted this role and began formally regulating the emerging transport sector. In addition to managing driver disputes, the police instituted a 1500 baht fee per route – a *de facto* concession fee granting particular groups of drivers exclusive rights to that route. In

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[28] *Kin mueang* literally translates as 'eating the country', carrying the figurative connotations of state corruption.

1979, this system was formalised under the Department of Transport Act (1979), which set 7 year concession rights at the price of 7,000 baht per route.

Towards the end of the 1970s, drivers began to form relations with other branches of the local state, with the Transport Department taking over formal regulatory control of public transport activities. Again, though in one sense forced upon the drivers, the relationship was one of mutual benefit. The drivers performed an important public service on behalf of the state, ferrying passengers around at virtually no cost to local government. For their part, drivers were granted exclusive rights to operate concessional lines, with much of the regulation of key aspects of the system left in the hands of drivers. It remained up to drivers, for example, to regulate the numbers of vehicles assigned to each route. The state-run Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) also became an important agency with whom drivers interacted. In order to engage BAAC to access cheap credit, drives formed Cooperatives, beginning in 1976 with the Chiang Mai City Transport Cooperative (CMCTC), and followed in 1979 by the creation of the Lanna City Transport Cooperative (LCTC). The LCTC was a breakaway group from the CMCTC, formed after the drivers decided to split driving operations between a designated metropolitan service (the *rot daeng*) and those who would continue to work city-to-village lines (the *rot khiu*). The LCTC represented members from the *rot daeng* driving community, with the CMCTC's membership comprising *khiu* drivers. The formation of Cooperatives enabled drivers to source low-interest loans from BAAC, either directly or through the Cooperative. As discussed in Chapter 1, such loans enabled men to either purchase or customise vehicles to enter the trade, or to upgrade them once established in a driving group.

As noted above, the intervention of the state was not necessarily instigated or always desired by the drivers. Practices of *kin mueang*, whether by the police or the Transport Department could be disconcerting for some drivers. The point to be emphasised however is not that connections between state and drivers were completely 'pure', above-board or representative of relationships of equality. Rather, is to note that despite the frequent absence of these factors, they remained thoroughly *productive* for drivers, and instigated relationships not of equality but of mutual benefit. And, as alluded to above, current day drivers reflect on the general role of the police in the period as an important and enabling one, providing order and stability to an otherwise *ad hoc*, conflictual and dis-ordered system. Drivers were not displeased with the police's – and later, the Transport Department's – formalising of the initial informal arrangements concerning routes, fees, vehicle standards, driver numbers and the like. Rather, they viewed this as a form of legitimation and professionalization of their new livelihoods, transforming otherwise

makeshift and haphazard arrangements into a respected, professional occupation, to which other rural men aspired (Ritchie 1996). The earliest drivers, for example, simply used pig-ferrying farm-vehicles to convey passengers around the city. The transition to customised *songthaeo* – though a financial imposition – was a source of much pride to those who purchased them, the ability to garner loans from BAAC also welcomed and obviating the need to deal with predatory loan sharks.

Collectively then, the interaction between peasant-drivers, the police, Transport Department officials and BAAC generated a regulated, supported and productive field for the drivers to operate in, enabling them to articulate their desires to exit farm work and to metamorphosise into autonomous, professional, career-men. While state inputs could be extractive in nature, I have suggested that they were never simply predatory. Rather, they functioned in a *productive* manner, generating reciprocal relationships, expectations of protection, regulation and ordered stability, legitimation and sanction for the drivers' work. Further, in the drivers' own decision to form Cooperatives, we can observe a sort of mimicking of the role of the elite-serving functional associations, emblematic of the drivers desire to engage the state (BAAC) and to collectively represent their interests with state agencies (Transport Department). In sum, through their relations with the state – both illicit and productive – swathes of village men were enabled to articulate into a new enterprise, fulfilling long-held aspirations to venture into more profitable off-farm ventures, and reflective of the many ways in which the localising state played a productive role in villager livelihoods.

For men like the drivers then, and for others who stayed on the land and levelled increasing demands for development aides from the state, state-village politics was not at all like that envisaged earlier by Vandergeest, or of Haberkorn and Keyes' narrative trajectories discussed in Chapter 1. Rather, an alternative trajectory of rural political history is observable, marked not by state remoteness and repression or of village resistance and revolt. Rather, we can observe a history of the state becoming increasingly familiar and de-authorised, of the state expanding and internalising itself within rural society, and of villagers seeking to engage the state and its myriad productive roles. This does not exclude the practices of *kin mueang* and other undesirable elements, but sees them enfolded within a larger pattern of productive, mutually beneficial relations, serving both state and villager interests, though of course not always equally.

Rural political history can then be inscribed with this alternate account of state-village relations, culminating not in the 'revolution' of protest and demonstration of the early-mid

1970s, but rather in the consolidation and expansion of productive connections enabling groups of villagers to articulate livelihood aspirations with enterprises co-produced with the state. A politics of connections and interactions is just as much – if not more – a part of rural political history as the politics of grievance and protest. In the following chapter I will outline the 'productivity' of these connections for the drivers, providing an account of the *songthaeo*-men's livelihoods and the comparative rural wealth they have been able to generate in the years subsequent to their transition into the wider sectors of the modern economy.

CHAPTER 3: INVENTED LIVELIHOODS: INCOMES, INFORMAL WELFARE AND MARKET MECHANISMS IN THE *SONGTHAEO* ECONOMY

The Warorot *khiu*, occupying the heart of downtown Chiang Mai and set between the muddy Mae Ping river and the city's busiest day-market (the *talat* Warorot, after which the *khiu* was named), forms the hub of the northern capital's city-to-village public transport system and constitutes a livelihood field in which some 900 present-day local drivers make their living. Scores of brightly painted and customised pick-up trucks at any one time align the curb of the Wararot *khiu's* main thoroughfare, clustered together according to their colours and destination points, awaiting their passengers and cargo. Other *songthaeo* drift by, turning down one of the many labyrinthine side-streets where they sit idle for a time before moving off to one of the proximate 'rest-spots' from where they await their next turn at the *khiu*. A random mass of colour, noise and movement to the uninitiated, the *khiu* is in fact a highly-ordered micro-universe comprising its own set of rhythms, regulations and rationalities, a bustling arena of economy and village sociality set in the midst of metropolitan Chiang Mai. It is also the 'urban' space into which many of the early drivers transitioned with the aid of local state brokers and which has in the years since functioned as a livelihood field of relative prosperity, drawing envious comparisons from the more numerous metropolitan *rot daeng* drivers.

For quite some weeks I had little idea of how to 'read' the activity of the *khiu*-world, bedazzled by its noise, colour and constant movement. In addition to the perpetual motion of *songthaeo* pulling in and out from the curb and passengers boarding and disembarking often overcrowded vehicles, a cacophony of blaring horns, shouting drivers and barking *khiu*-managers disoriented the uninitiated observer. They movement and noise also masked a parallel domain of commerce and enterprise which had emerged around the *khiu*, servicing the drivers and their clientele, and packed under low-hanging awnings forming their own microcosmic economy along the roughly 100 meter stretch of footpath constituting Chiang Mai's central 'bus-stop'. For, in addition to catching a ride, passengers could also consume an array of snacks and street-food, grab a coffee, enjoy a massage, consult a fortune teller, purchase mobile phone cards or buy any of the various home-spun or low-grade goods that itinerant hawkers and petty-sellers peddled to waiting passengers

and indolent drivers. More than a mere bus-stop, the *khiu* functioned as a distinct social and economic universe, and for quite some time its internal logic and patterns escaped me.

One of the first people to help orient me to the operations of the *khiu* was *Lung* (uncle) Oo. Lung Oo was one of the many *khiu*-managers working at Wararot, their collective task that of generating order in the manic world in which they labored. Each of the 19 CMCTC routes operating out of the *khiu* comprised its own *klum* (group) of drivers – the men (and small number of women) who daily worked the same circuit between Wararot and a fixed rural destination point, and the small committees which administered them.[29] Each *klum* had its own *khiu*-manager. And most of them, like Lung Oo, on a daily basis sat at a fold-up card table set back from the clamor of the road, recording the details (time and vehicle number) of each *songthaeo* arriving at the *khiu*, and assigning to them a time and place to enter and commence each of their daily circuits. In between circuits, drivers retreated to nearby rest-stops, no more than makeshift shelters on the side of a quiet road or, for the luckier *klum*, a spot by the river, from where drivers whiled away their time with food, conversation, play and sleep. On occasion I would observe 'resting' drivers thumbing through wads of cash, at times startling in their thickness and indicative of the amounts of money flowing through the *khiu* economy. Pocket-book ledgers recording incomes might accompany these public displays of cash-counting, though not for taxation purposes but rather to maintain records of repayment schedules for loans taken out from the Cooperative or other financial institutions. Truth be told, the majority of the driving men's day was spent at 'rest', a phone call from the *khiu*-manager notifying them of their next departure time effectively interrupting their leisurely breaks. It was the job of the *khiu*-manager to regulate their *klum*-drivers, and ensure that vehicles entered and departed according to their appointed time. It could be a serious business too, with drivers receiving financial penalties or suspensions from work should they arrive even a few minutes late to their allotted departure time.[30]

For the most part, the position of *khiu*-manager was a fairly perfunctory one, reserved for friends or kin of the drivers, with many appearing somewhat down on their luck or unable to find alternative work. Amputees, the poorly educated and quite a few women who always seemed to be shouting served in the role. Nor was Lung Oo shy when it came to raising his voice, yelling out to drivers, spruiking his *klum's* services to *khiu* interlopers, and

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[29] Although not strictly uniform across the different *klum,* committees tended to comprise three to four members: the *klum* President, vice-President, treasurer and secretary. In smaller *klum*, one office-holder may perform several of the roles.
[30] Penalties changed from *klum* to *klum,* but tended to operate in the range of 300-400 baht fines for arriving more than 3 minutes late, or even 2 day suspensions from working (see Chapter 4 for further discussion).

animatedly shepherding passengers onto waiting vehicles. Ever resourceful, he had taken the initiative of carrying around a megaphone, ensuring that his voice lifted above the discordant cacophony that constituted the aural backdrop of the *khiu*. Like Lung Oo, the other *khiu*-managers would sit at their little tables, exposed to the elements, with little more than a notebook, pen and mobile phone at their disposal to organise the daily operations of the *khiu,* the rather unruly heart of Chiang Mai's city-to-country public transport system.

For these managers, work days began in the small hours of the morning, before 2am when the first drivers ventured to the *khiu*. The weary manager would list in order the arrival time of the *songthaeo*, thus forming the departure times for the first circuit of the day which would begin around 6am. First in, first out, was the basic order of the day. For drivers, an early departure time meant the opportunity to squeeze in an additional circuit and bout of passenger fares, thereby increasing their daily earning potential. Drivers would often return home for another few hours of sleep or nap in the back of their vehicles once their order in the *khiu* had been established, a luxury not available to the *khiu* managers. For their trouble, the managers received incomes a little above the regional average (see Tables 1 and 2), a fact that failed to bring any great pleasure to Lung Oo. On one occasion he told me with some disgust that he received around 6,000-7,000 baht per month, less than half the average income of the drivers. Within the *khiu* economy this marked him out as a separate, lower class from the majority of drivers. He seemed only too aware – and none too pleased – about the social differentiation and unequal earning capacities enjoyed by different actors within the *khiu*. It was on such people though, tired and shouting throughout most of the day, that the chaos and bedlam of the *khiu* was ordered, taking its daily shape and form. And it was from Lung Oo that I was inducted into an understanding of the form and structure governing the daily life and economy of the *khiu*, which generated for him (despite his protestations) a comparatively decent wage, and for its drivers monthly incomes around 3 times that of the regional average (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

The drivers of the Wararot *khiu* represent the pinnacle of Chiang Mai's *songthaeo*-transport sector, and the end point for many of the enterprising drivers discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Now high-earning operators with daily work-lives punctuated by rest and recreation, a healthy minority of contemporary drivers remain from those initial cohorts. Many of the newer generations of drivers are sons or family members of these first-men, with places in the industry tending to pass down familial lines, inheritable commodities functioning in the way land once may have, or continues to do so for those who have maintained agricultural holdings (see Chapter 4). It is these present-day drivers, both young and old, that the

present and following chapter addresses, collectively focusing on the *khiu* as a social and economic livelihood field patched together by the drivers and from which they derive healthy incomes and a range of additional financial supports. The current chapter sets out the economic dimensions of *khiu* livelihoods while chapter 4 canvasses the social and lifestyle factors which have made the *khiu* a desirable field of labor. The purpose is to give shape to the kind of world which has been *invented* by the drivers as they've transitioned away from farm-based livelihoods into the services sector of the modern economy, continuing the theme of rural *agency* explored in the opening chapters. Towards the end of chapter 4 however I will suggest that such agency may now be reaching its limits, with cumulative forces stacked against the ongoing viability of the *songthaeo* sector. For, like many others laboring within Thailand's informal economy, the drivers find themselves at a particularly precarious juncture, vulnerable to the unfolding changes imminent within the regional economic-integration project of the Asean Economic Community (AEC). Whether the comparative financial rewards historically available to the drivers (and outlined below) continue into the AEC-shaped future will be an outcome of the drivers' ability to preserve their prosperous livelihood fields, the topic to which the final chapter turns.

Economic form and the khiu's *professional-income villagers*

In the early 1970s, anthropologist Keith Hart (1973) coined the term 'informal economy' to describe the industrious livelihoods crafted by rural-urban migrants outside of 'formal opportunity structures' in the Ghanaian capital of Accra. For Hart, informal economy represented the world of the street – of hawkers and vendors, hustlers and pimps, all striving to make an uncertain living beyond the world of corporate structures, formal regulations and state laws. Of this subaltern activity, Hart wrote:

> **The central task for everyone was to find a reasonably durable basis for livelihood and even for accumulation, a stable core in the chaos of everyday life. That was why even a poorly paid job was valued: it was an island of regularity and predictability in a sea of ephemeral opportunities. I now think of this as the *search for economic form* [italics added], the search for the invariant in the variable, for rules and regularity in a world constituted by flux, emergence, informality' (1988: 176).**

Hart proceeded to describe the various means through which his research subjects managed to 'invent the conditions of their participation in the market economy, rather than passively accept whatever its formal institutions' might offer' (1988: 180). Here, he wrote of rural migrants' entrepreneurial activities, often involving diverse portfolios of

investment, petty capitalism, street trading, theft and criminality. Interestingly, Hart held transport out for special mention: 'transport was the riskiest but most lucrative form of investment' (1988: 181).

Hart's work on informal economy is important for the present study for a number of reasons. First, is his concern with the 'search for economic form', of the recognition that people from all layers of the economy strive to instill into their livelihoods properties of stability, durability and predictability. Hart's great contribution in his early reflections of his Ghanaian fieldwork was to identify this questing for economic form among rural-urban migrants operating in the informal economy within the Ghanaian capital. For Hart, the chief concern was in tracking the myriad ways in which people crafted reasonably stable livelihoods within the cracks, or beyond the bounds, of the regulated, formal sectors of the economy. Second, is Hart's invocation of the idea of subaltern inventiveness, of conceptualizing the informal economic activity of his rural-migrant research subjects as an act of rural industriousness and thereby rural *agency*. For Hart, people *invented* these reasonably stable and predictable incomes within the informal economy, a task of some achievement and, as Partha Chatterjee has more recently elaborated upon, a work of constant updating and negotiation, often with members from within the governing formal economy (Chatterjee 2008a, 2008b). As Chatterjee hints at, and as will be explored below, the informal and formal economies exist in webs of intricate relations, with subaltern entrepreneurialism frequently dependent on access to actors and resources from within the formal economy.

Hart's capturing of rural inventiveness in the search for economic form overlaps with the idea of peasant agency as I described it in the preceding chapters, and helps provide a conceptual bridge for the creation of the *songthaeo* economy, co-produced by the drivers in collaboration with local state agents. In the present chapter, I want to outline the way in which the drivers have generated for themselves livelihoods of relative economic form, of stability and predictability despite their location within Thailand's informal economy. In so doing, I will describe the incomes and other financial instruments embedded within the *khiu* economy, including a range of 'hidden mechanisms' largely beyond the bureaucratic gaze and functioning for the drivers in terms of 'social insurance' and 'shadow banking' (Townsend 2013: pp101, 105).

Despite the fact that the drivers deliver a public service partially-regulated by the state, and despite the fact that the public transport system is officially governed by a state-run concession process, the livelihood field of the *khiu* remains located within Thailand's

sprawling informal economy. In official Thai legislation and state imagination, 'informal economy' has a specific meaning attached to the provision of certain forms of state welfare as established under Thailand's Social Security Act (1990). Those whose work falls *nay rabop* – or 'within the system' of work subject to the Act – are classified as belonging to the formal economy, while those who *raeng-ngan nok rabop* (labor outside of the system) fall into the informal economy. The latter are unable to access various forms of social insurance available to those whose work is administered under the Act, including benefits comprising injury or sickness pay, maternity leave, invalidity, death and child benefits, old age pensions and unemployment support. According to Hewison and Woradul (2013: p450) the 2010 split between formal and informal workers in Thailand sat around the 25%/75% mark. Within Northern Thailand too, some 75% of total workers are classified as 'informal', a figure which rises to 82% of all people over the age of 40, of which the majority of *songthaeo* drivers are (National Statistics Office 2007). Despite the connotations of the literal translations of the Thai terms, it is clearly those 'outside the system' who form the majority of workers, and might well be considered normative or mainstream workers.

For my purposes, the interest in locating the drivers within the informal economy is to indicate that they receive no wages or benefits from the state, and to in turn demonstrate the way in which they've invented economic conditions mirroring many of the wages and benefits available to those in the formal sector. Differentiating the two however, and the subject of Chapter 4, is the fact that the *economic form* crafted by the drivers is not protected by law in the way it is for those working within the scope of the Social Security Act, lending to their livelihoods a measure of precariousness and the ongoing need to stabilise livelihoods through negotiations and other forms of engagement with the state. In other words, precisely because informal work is inherently precarious, and yet occupied by workers striving to inject a measure of stability into their uncertain livelihood fields, *informality generates politics* as people strive to preserve and defend informal incomes and informal benefit arrangements through strategic relationship with the state (see Chapter 5).

By any comparative measure, the drivers' earnings place them in a position of comparative rural wealth. Across five *klum* researched in some depth (see Table 2), average monthly wages amounted to around 15,000 baht, a figure significantly above average regional levels as well as those of Bangkok residents and district and provincial level government officials (see Table 1 – 'Comparative monthly income rates').[31]

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[31] We might note here that 'official wages' are only one element of state bureaucrats' income streams, with office being a means of accruing wealth through additional 'informal' means. As Hart (2006) writes

Table 1 - Comparative monthly income rates (Thai baht)

Average driver income (2011)*	Average income (Bangkok 2009)	Government officials: OBT/OBJ (2011)**	Northern Thai average income (2009)***	Andrew Walker's *Middle-income peasants*****	Poverty line (rural north 2007)*****
15,000	11,924	9,000	5,114	2,155-2,875	1,437

* See Table 2 for further details.
** These figures were widely published in the Thai media prior to the 2011 elections. Government officials were pushing for pay rises to 18,000 baht per month. OBT represents *tambon* (district) level officials, OBJ *jangwat* (provincial) level ones.
*** NSO (2009)
****Walker calculates middle-income peasant incomes at around 50%-100% above the relevant (Northern Thailand) poverty line, which is shown above as 1,437 baht. (Walker's case study is based on a northern Thai village).
***** From Walker (2012: p40)

Although driver incomes vary significantly between different *klum*, average 2011 monthly incomes were around 14,000 – 16,800 baht (see Table 2), which I have conservatively rounded down to an average of 15,000 baht. As the data in Table 2 indicates, the middle three *klum* – working the San Sai, Doi Saket and Mae Rim lines respectively – earn in this vicinity, and are I suggest fairly representative, mid-range driving incomes. They don't represent the highest earnings, which are up to 28,000 baht per month from the lucrative Mae Tang line, but are considerably more than the lower end *khiu* earners, in this case represented by the Mae Kuang line, which entails earning of around 5,600-8,400 baht per month.

Table2. Comparative monthly *khiu* driver income rates – by decade from 1980 (Thai baht)*

	Mae Kuang	San Sai	Doi Saket	Mae Rim	Mae Tang	Per-capita income (North))**
2011	5,600-8,400	14,000-16,800	14,000-16,800	14,000	22,400-28,000	5,119
2000	5,600	11,200	8,400-11,200	8,400-11,200	11,200-14,000	
1990	8,400	5,600-8,400	2,800-4,200	5,600	5,600-8,400	
1980	2,800	2,800-5,600	1,400-2,800	2,800	2,800	

* Data calculated from survey responses by *songthaeo* drivers based at the Warorot *khiu*. Incomes based on an average of 28 working days per calendar month (this may vary slightly from driver to driver). Incomes are 'net-incomes', already deducting the main daily expense – fuel costs (noting that drivers pay no official tax on earnings).
** Per-capita income for the North is provided as a point of comparison. Income figure is from NSO (2009)

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elsewhere, 'everyone' tries to straddle the formal and informal economies, and to combine incomes from both, not least state officials.

Drivers receive no salary or standard wage as such, and in fact have never received *any* money from the state in terms of remuneration. Instead, drivers' daily and monthly takings depend on passengers and fares. This is important to understand, as it means that declining passenger numbers, either through an increase in private vehicle rates, or through declining population or tourist rates, affect drivers' bottom lines. It also accounts for the significance drivers place on the ability to violate regulations and to overload vehicles. For their part, drivers implement fare rates determined by the Transport Department, rates which have climbed steadily over the years (see Table 3). Drivers themselves have played a considerable role in shaping fare rates, pressuring the department to raise fares, particularly in times of rapid fuel-cost increases.

Table 3. Number of vehicles in *klum* / price of fares – by decade from 1980 (Thai baht)

	Mae Kuang	San Sai	Doi Saket	Mae Rim	Mae Tang
2011	21/25	100/25	51/16	44/16	52/31
2000	21/18	100/18	50/5	44/10	52/10
1990	27/5	7/8	32/2	42/6	52/7
1980	27/3	?/3	32/0.5-1	42/4	52/2-3

A number of important observations about driver income-levels follow from the preceding data sets. First, is that even the very low-end *khiu* earners sit quite comfortably above the average northern Thai income mark of 5,114 baht per month (comprising *all* northern incomes, both rural and non-rural). They also sit well beyond the ranks of the 'poor' and the 'middle-income peasantry', accounting for around five times the 2007 poverty line, and around three times the income levels of the middle-income peasantry.

Second, is to note just how prosperous the *khiu* is for those in its mid and upper echelons. For such earners, comparisons to the poverty line are almost meaningless, as are those to the average income levels. Middle-income *khiu* drivers (15,000 baht) earn around three times the average income rate for *all* of Northern Thailand, while those at its top end can earn over five times that rate. When compared against farming incomes the results are even more telling. According to the *Report of the 2007 Household Socio-economic Survey* (in Walker 2012: p43), only 2.5% of landowning farmers and 1.9% of tenant farmers earn above 15,000 baht per month. By this measure, those 'average' *khiu* drivers earning in the vicinity of 15,000+ baht per month form part of the new rural elite, alongside successful rice millers, contract farmers and the like. I raise this

last point as the drivers – as noted earlier – remain both resident of, and embedded within, villages and village life, and within this context their earning levels puts them in the upper echelons of villager incomes.

The emergence of the drivers into these highly prosperous livelihood fields corresponds more generally to broader changes within Thailand's rural economy. For many decades now, the rural economy has been expanding and diversifying, moving away from agricultural-based livelihoods (Walker 2012: pp36-44, Rigg and Vandergeest 2012, Rigg, Salamanca and Parnwell 2012) to household portfolios comprising on- and off-farm labor, both within and beyond the village, and through strategies of 'spatially-dispersed' livelihood footprints (Rigg, Salamanca and Parwell 2012). This latter phenomenon describes the pattern of different members of the household deriving incomes from multiple locations, often through domestic or transnational migration. As Walker (2012: pp38-42) has convincingly argued, these dynamics have dramatically reduced the incidence rate of poverty in rural Thailand, with a discernible trend towards rural people now being situated within the domain of 'middle-income' earners, with a 'substantial buffer against outright livelihood failure' (p41).

The drivers exemplify this movement within the rural economy of branching out into diversified, off-farm livelihoods. And though they are aware of how historically rewarding their transition from farm to *khiu* has been, the overwhelming sense held by them is that even these levels of income fail to meet their growing consumer aspirations or furnish spiralling levels of debt.[32] We note here Chatterjee's (2008b: p56) shrewd observation to the effect that evaluations of livelihoods are 'contextually determined, socially produced… [and] will therefore vary with social location, cultural context and time'. The same holds true, I would argue, more broadly, and certainly in the case of post-peasant livelihoods. And in their own estimation, within their own social worlds of culturally-construed meanings, and despite the healthy comparisons outlined above, the drivers evaluate their livelihood positions with a degree of contempt.

Lung Oo is significant here in terms of comprehending the divergence between empirical and perspectival analyses of driving livelihoods. Lung Oo's complaint, about an income level that placed him above the regional average (and noting that he had

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[32] Although I have no detailed data on debt levels borne by drivers, one of the enduring images from my fieldwork is that of the vice-president of the LCTC emotionally lamenting the levels of debt carried by him and drivers more generally. Much of this debt is, of course, tied to Cooperative loans and the upgrade of new vehicles which, I have argued earlier, is largely for symbolic purposes. The links between debt, consumption and status in the rural economy deserves further investigation.

limited education and employment skills), was in terms of how it compared to those in his proximate social universe –the *songthaeo* drivers. That is, in addition to the social, cultural and temporal factors outlined by Chatterjee above, is the need to recognise the role played by symbolic factors in the analysis of incomes, of considerations of status and social positioning in relation to others identified within one's proximate social space. For the *khiu*-manager, his reference point was the drivers, and on this front he was aware of the differences in incomes and the subsequent consumer and symbolic power arising from this fact.

For the drivers, their reference point is not that of abstract poverty lines, or even of fellow villagers or 'middle-income peasants'. Rather, when drivers assess their income levels, they do so in relation to incomes derived from the *professional* class, specifically in relation to the police and soldiers with whom they interact in their village or working lives. According to drivers, mid-high ranking police and military officers (and it is these who they compare themselves with) earn in the vicinity of 12,000-18,000 baht per month. By this measure, drivers' incomes compare well. What this doesn't take into account though, and which the drivers are only too aware (as they are habitually subject to police extractions), is the opportunities available to soldiers and police to use their position to extract unofficial income from within the shadow economy. While drivers also cultivate secondary sources of income, these tend to be accumulated from actual time-intensive labor – most commonly micro-agricultural enterprises (small orchards, piggeries, mushrooms and so on) – and draw modest returns at best.

In summary, by almost any measure (except their own), driver incomes are highly respectable. Mid-level driving incomes start off at around ten times that of the poverty line, and nearly three times that of the average regional income. In most instances, they have risen rapidly from decade to decade, even taking into account rising input costs such as fuel. And compared to fellow villagers still working on farms as either tenants or landowners, drivers' incomes place them within the top 2% of such earners. From the drivers' perspective however, while they recognise their relatively affluent positions *vis a vis* farmers and other villagers, their tendency is to measure themselves against males from the *professional* or semi-professional ranks, not least police and soldiers. And even though official incomes are comparable, drivers lack the ability to use their positions for illicit extractive purposes in the way that members of the security apparatus do. To compensate, many drivers continue to operate secondary income sources, usually associated with household and land, ranging from orcharding, small livestock enterprises and boutique endeavours such as mushroom growing. That drivers consider a need to supplement

driving-incomes from secondary sources indicates their desire to maximise income opportunities, and demonstrates their distance from the intent and imperatives associated with Thailand's sufficiency economy doctrines. It also further increases the distance between them, in pure-earning terms, and Walker's middle-income peasantry. Given the competitiveness of their incomes with those they compare themselves with – soldiers and police – we might well say that the villager-drivers have ascended to the status of *professional-income villagers.*

Beyond incomes: the hidden welfare and market mechanisms of the *khiu*

Beyond the handsome incomes available from working the *khiu*, a number of additional welfare, support and market mechanisms contribute to driver livelihoods within the *khiu* economy, including Cooperative credit facilities, *klum* loans and welfare supports, and the sale of *khiu* places. Collectively these amount to what Robert Townsend (2013) has described in terms of 'informal markets', 'social insurance' and 'shadow banking', common features of Thailand's rural economy and village micro-economies. For Townsend, such 'hidden mechanisms' play a valuable role in sustaining rural households, mimicking formal economic instruments unavailable to the majority of rural people working within the informal economy.[33] They are also key elements within the *songthaeo* economy, supporting drivers and providing a measure of financial certainty for drivers in times of economic downturn or changes in personal circumstances.

The most valuable of these mechanisms is the sale of one's *khiu*-place to an incoming driver. As of 2011, these place-prices reached up to 800,000 baht, forming what I will describe as a lucrative informal pension facility for drivers exiting the *khiu* and entering the next phase of their life – usually retirement underpinned by the kinds of micro-farming activities noted above. The sale of the *khiu* place, like the localised welfare and support mechanisms particular to each *klum*, exists beyond the bureaucratic gaze of the state. Transport Department officers acknowledged to me that they had little idea about the practice or the exchange value thereof. This evasion of state intrusion in turn benefits the drivers, avoiding the requirement to pay taxes, just as they pay no taxes on their driving incomes. In many ways, we might conceptualise the ritualised tea money

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[33] For an alternative reading of these kinds of informal networks and features stumping up the village economy, see Rigg, Promphaking, & Le Mare (2014). The argument in Rigg *et al* is that these features mitigate the kinds of economic distress that would otherwise force rural people into more productive sectors of the economy, functioning as a safety net which actually retards the transition from low-productivity to higher-productivity labor choices.

and other informal contributions to the state (see Chapter 4) as part of an indirect taxation network channeling money from the drivers to the state, though of course these 'taxes' benefit not the general public but particular receiving officers.[34] There is nevertheless a kind of informal system of redistribution at play here, particularly in terms of recipient police and bureaucrats being part of the wider rural economy in which the drivers operate, such that drivers' indirect taxes are filtered back into the rural economy. We might also note that the one small tax drivers are required to pay, their annual 'car tax' or registration, is described by drivers using the language of 'wasting money' (*sia tang*). In contrast, the informal taxes paid to police, as noted in the previous chapter, are described in positive terms, as a useful and productive exchange from which drivers derive benefit and thereby value.

The khiu *place*

Something of the 'inventiveness' noted earlier by Keith Hart, in terms of rural labor-migrants' fashioning of meaningful ways of participating within the market economy, is evident in the manner in which the market for *khiu* places has developed over the years of the *songthaeo* drivers' participation in the public transport sector. From an initial price of as low as a few thousand baht in the 1970's, drivers have developed the *khiu* place into a lucrative and appreciating commodity functioning as a *de facto* pension for retiring (or departing) drivers (see Table 4 for historical *khiu*-place price data).

Table 4. Comparative *khiu* place prices – by decade from 1980 (Thai baht)

Year/*klum*	Mae Kuang	San Sai	Doi Saket	Mae Rim	Mae Tang
2011	100,000	250,000	500,000	500,000	800,000
2000	50,000	250,000	350,000	400,000	500,000
1990	40,000	25,000	60,000	200,000	300,000
1980	20,000	15,000	25,000	5,000	50,000

As a brief snapshot of the appreciating value of the *khiu* place, we might consider three of the five *klum* displayed in Table 4 above – Mae Kuang, Mae Rim and Mae Tang. Respectively, these represent *klum* operating at the lower, mid and upper scales of the *khiu* economy. In 1980, a driver could buy their way onto the Mae Rim line for just

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[34] In fact, as Haanstaad (2008) explains, this kind of tea money is circulated throughout the police force (though usually upwards, to higher-ranking officers), with collecting officers often 'forced' by superiors to make these collections as part of their daily operations.

5,000 baht, or some 50 times worth the average daily driver income (100 baht) at that time (see Table 2 for historical data on driver incomes). That is, buying one's way onto the *khiu* cost around the equivalent of two working months' income. In 1990, the price had increased 40-fold to 200,000 baht, by 2000 it had further doubled to 400,000 baht, and at present Mae Rim *khiu* places sell for around 500,000 baht. This amounts to around 1000 days' (approximately 3 years) driving income, and an overall 100-fold increase from the beginning to the end of the 1980-2011 period (noting a decrease in factors of multiplication in the past two decades). For drivers who bought their place in 1980 and continue to work to the present day, their initial 5,000 baht outlay has returned some 495,000 baht or nearly 10,000%. Based on 2011 average monthly incomes (for the Northern region) of just over 5,000 baht, the sale price of this *khiu* place amounts to some 100 months' (8.3 years) income, bearing in mind drivers' tendency to continue with low-earning agricultural enterprises post-retirement. By comparison, social security pensions available to drivers would amount to just 50,000 baht over the same period of time.[35]

In Mae Tang, by contrast, a small town some twenty minutes further out from metropolitan Chiang Mai than Mae Rim, a *khiu* place was available for 50,000 baht in 1980, some 500 times (or nearly 18 months of work) more than the average daily wage of 100 baht at the time. By 1990, the price of the place had sky-rocketed to 300,000 baht, to 500,000 baht by 2000 and to 800,000 baht at 2011 values. This represents a 750,000 baht return for those drivers who bought into the Mae Tang *khiu* in 1980 and who have held on to their *khiu* place. As another point of measurement, this equates to around 150 months (or 12.5 years) of earnings at the average northern Thailand income rate in 2011, representing a significant retirement nest-egg and a significant return on initial investment.

There are a number of points to note about the Mae Tang *khiu* and the rapidly-appreciating nature of its *khiu*-places. First, is that Mae Tang prices represent the upper end of the scale and is the most lucrative of the *klum* in terms of returns on *khiu*-place sales. Second, is that part of the reason why places within this *klum* have remained so valuable is, according to drivers, precisely because Mae Tang has failed to develop as a peri-urban centre in the way that places like Mae Rim and San Sai have. That is, Mae Tang residents are less likely to have the income of Mae Rim or San Sai residents, and are therefore less likely to own private vehicles to make the trip from village to Chiang

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[35] This is calculated on the current (conditional) pension amount of 500 baht per month for retirees over 60 years of age. See Thailand Development Research Institute (2012).

Mai. Even for those who own motorcycles, the common view is that it's both a reasonably long (around 45 minutes) trip into town on motorbike, and one which many people prefer to take by *songthaeo*. Tyre punctures, fuel loads and a general sense of danger in riding such a distance by bike are given as reasons why the *songthaeo* is considered preferable. In this way then, underdevelopment or economic stagnation, combined with distance from town, are advantageous factors for drivers working certain routes. Put differently, general rural development may be bad business for the drivers.

The Mae Kuang route however has failed to prosper in the way Mae Rim and Mae Tang has, and represents the lower end of the *khiu* economy. As noted above, livelihoods are far below that of other *klum*, as are place-prices, selling for only 100,000 baht in 2011. We may note however that this still represents a five-fold increase from 1980 purchase prices, and still accounts for around 20 months of average income. Though not nearly as lucrative as retiring from the Mae Tang or Mae Rim *klum*, 100,000 baht still represents a not-insignificant sum of money for Mae Kuang villagers.

Not all those who depart the *khiu* decide to sell their place in the *klum*. An increasingly common strategy for retiring drivers is to hold on to their *khiu* place and to instead rent it out, thereby deriving a monthly income from the place-rental while also enabling them to sit on an appreciating asset which can be offloaded at a later point in time. In this way, departing drivers have begun to function as capitalist entrepreneurs, using their purchased assets to derive further income. These rental prices vary across *klum,* are subject to market forces (that is, to negotiations between owner and renter-driver) and can be substantial. An 800,000 Mae Tang place, for example, accrues rent at the rate of 4,000 baht per month (2011 prices). While I won't discuss the point at length, it's worth noting that this emerging practice in effect injects a further level of stratification into the *khiu* economy, and is a kind of evolution within the economy, as drivers look to capitalise on their assets (vehicles). A small number of drivers have even prospered to the point where they have purchased additional vehicles from which they derive multiple rental incomes. While forms of class differentiation already existed in terms of the incomes and *khiu*-place prices between different *klum* (Mae Kuang and Mae Tang being cases in point), we are now witnessing the intensification of processes of differentiation between owner-drivers and renter-drivers. Conversations with the latter group of men indicate that it is their ambition to eventually save enough money to purchase their own vehicle and to work the *khiu* as owner-operators. And though

renting a vehicle is a means of access into the lucrative *khiu* economy, from another angle it further intensifies class distinctions into *khiu* culture, and creates barriers to full access as owner-operators. It's also indicative of driver mentalities –pragmatic, profit- and market-oriented, with *khiu* places used to maximise returns despite the fact that it erodes equality and generates new forms of class differentiation and inequality. It also serves to distinguish such operators from the 'agrarian myth' (Dayley 2011) inherent within Thailand's sufficiency economy dogma, illustrating how anomalous values of economic modesty, sufficiency and subsistence – as opposed to market-oriented profit seeking – are within at least this particular cohort of villagers (see Walker 2010, Elinoff 2014a).

It's important to recognise that the value of the *khiu*-place is a completely market-derived mechanism, negotiated solely between seller and buyer. Neither the state nor the Cooperatives play any role in the sale-price, which is considered a private economic exchange. In reality, the appeal of income-levels derived from driving ensures both that place-prices continually appreciate, and that those seeking to enter the *khiu* do so in what can only be described as a "seller's market". As a rule, sellers attempt to add 10,000-50,000 baht to the previous sale-price for a place in the same *khiu*. The eventual price depends upon the negotiating skills of both departing and incoming driver, who are most likely friends, family or kin. This doesn't however temper driver's efforts to extract as much as they can from the transaction. Sellers are fully cognisant of market mechanics and the fact that they hold a scarce and desirable product. And, as the appreciation in place-prices over the past few decades indicates, drivers have been spectacularly successful in operating within the confines of this informal market.

Although the *khiu*-place sales price depends on market factors, these factors reflect historical differences and are also an outcome often of sheer luck and happenstance. There was little indications 35 years ago, for example, that the Mae Tang route would take off as it has and become as prosperous as it now is. Generally speaking, returns drivers are able to make operating a particular route are the most important element regulating sales-prices. As such, more lucrative lines such as the Mae Tang route are able to sell their places at a higher price. Second, the future prospects for a given route are taken into account. A quickly developing area might signal greater passenger numbers and therefore increase the price of the *khiu* place. But it may also signal increasing local wealth and personal vehicle numbers, thereby decreasing passenger numbers. Incoming drivers have to evaluate such factors and make an independent

assessment as to how best to read the given data. Further, sharp increases in patronage on a given route may also lead to public pressure upon the Transport Department to increase vehicle numbers on a route. This in turn reduces drivers' daily income and thereby threatens the value of place- prices. It may even lead to the Transport Department issuing an additional concession to operate a new or second route close to an existing one to service swelling passenger numbers. Again, this increases competition and may reduce established drivers' passenger numbers, income levels and *khiu* place prospects. This is precisely what happened in San Sai, and accounts for the stagnation in place-prices from 2000-2011. Here, the Transport Department created a second route by introducing a new concession. This state intervention, while it may have generated better public services, has had a detrimental effect on *khiu*-place prices and the retirement prospects of those working this line.

In summary, the drivers have used market mechanisms in order to generate their restricted place in the *khiu* as a valuable, highly desired commodity-item. Upon departing from the *khiu*, drivers either sell or rent out their *khiu*-place to an incoming driver. Despite these new drivers being friends or relatives, sellers endeavour to place upward-pressure on sale prices, and to date, except for the state-induced example of stagnation in San Sai from 2000-2011, have been spectacularly successful in doing so. Profits generated from these sales subsequently function as *de facto* pensions, *in lieu* of the fact that as workers in the informal economy, drivers receive only a very modest monthly state pension, despite the fact they essentially delivered public services on behalf of the state. We might argue therefore that though the sale-price escapes any kind of taxation, this is balanced by the fact that drivers in turn receive next-to-nothing from the state for their years of service. This is to echo the kind of argument we earlier made in terms of the lack of income taxes finding some kind of balance with the tea-money and other informal payments which made their way into state-pockets. In broader terms, it points to the informal and internal 'swings and roundabouts' which inject a measure of balance within 'invented' economic fields such as the *khiu* economy.

Cooperative loans and klum *welfare supports*

Supplementing their impressive incomes and the substantial informal pensions deriving from the sale of the *khiu* place, drivers are able to access significant loans from their administering Cooperative, while within each *klum* smaller-scale loans and other forms

of informal welfare mechanisms support driver livelihoods. Strictly speaking, Cooperative loans are only available to drivers who are Cooperative members, those paying the annual Cooperative fees which in 2011 stood at 2,100 baht. While the majority of drivers are Cooperative members, those who either rent their place in the *khiu* or 'substitute' for member-drivers – usually sons or other relatives, even occasionally wives of sick or deceased husbands – who may be sick or perhaps engaged in some other temporary enterprise, tend not to take out membership. Through the Cooperatives, drivers are able to access credit of up to 400,000 baht per loan. The Cooperatives source this capital from BAAC at interest rates of around 7-8%, and pass on this capital as loans to drivers at a slightly higher interest rate of 10-11%. The increase in interest between BAAC and outgoing rates is part of the Cooperatives' strategy of accumulating capital. Drivers borrow from the Cooperative rather than directly through BAAC due to BAAC-loans' lending criteria, which require borrowers to be agricultural workers. While some drivers maintain this status through the kinds of small-holdings noted earlier, most don't and therefore welcome the opportunity to make use of the Cooperative's credit facilities.

Cooperative loans are quarantined for drivers seeking access to finance for the purposes of purchasing new or updated vehicles or to fund major repairs or maintenance of vehicles. The minutes from one of the CMCTC's monthly meetings I observed (February 2011) indicate that 14 loan-applications were approved in the previous month, totaling some 1.73 million baht, or an average of just under 125,000 baht per loan. The purpose of the loans was fairly evenly split between drivers seeking funds for repairs, and drivers seeking to upgrade their vehicles. Importantly, of the 14 loan applications, *all* were approved by the Cooperative's committee. Anecdotally, drivers confirm that this is standard practice, with it being unusual for loans to be denied.

Cooperative interest rates compare well against those from commercial banks, with many drivers in any case lacking the equity or credit record to secure a loan from commercial outlets. Cooperative loans are also preferred due to their friendly repayment conditions. Drivers are able to repay over a 6-7 year period, with interest rates reduced by 1% per year should drivers meet their repayment schedules. This policy forms part of an incentive scheme aimed at encouraging high rates of repayment. Evidence from drivers and Cooperative committee members indicates that repayments rates were in fact high, and far more the norm than the exception. Regular repayments

in turn enable the Cooperatives to make their own, larger-scale repayments to BAAC or other lending facilities. As discussed in Chapter 5 below, the LCTC for example took out a 130 million baht loan in connection with the building of its new headquarters.

In addition to Cooperative loans, drivers in most *klum* are privy to smaller-scale loans. The purpose of these is to support drivers in difficult times. These loans are derived from drivers' monthly *klum* fees – a varying amount between *klum,* but averaging between 30-50 baht per month – and are capped at 10,000 baht. Unlike the Cooperative loans, they are available to fund personal or non-vehicular needs. Drivers are limited to accessing the *klum* loan-fund once per year, and are required to repay loans within a year. The loans are approved and administered by a *klum* committee, usually comprising an elected President and treasurer. Interest rates are negligible, operating at between 1-3% depending on the decision of the *klum* committees. Penalties apply for those unable to repay within a year, with some *klum* raising the interest rate by an additional 5% for tardy re-payers. Of note, in some *klum*, drivers advised that presidents would on occasion draw on personal funds to top up the *klum* loan-fund in order to ensure sufficient reserves were available should members require them. In this way, *klum* Presidents functioned as conscientious and supportive patrons of their driver-clients.

Beyond these loan options, drivers offer further forms of welfare support to fellow *klum* members. These include financial support for funerals and education expenses for drivers' children. Should a *klum* member have a family member die, the other members will make a contribution of around 200 baht each, which for a *klum* of some 50 drivers amounts to 10,000 baht. Where drivers themselves die, the Cooperative pays out the family to the tune of 79,000 baht. Some *klum*, depending on their size and wealth, also offer education loans to drivers of around 10,000 baht, usually used to support drivers in funding their children's education. Again, these all function to mimic the kinds of welfare mechanisms available to workers within the formal economy, and are indicative of the kinds of informal social insurance which workers attempt to inscribe into their informal livelihood fields in order to cultivate a sense of assurance and certainty in financially parlous times. As with *khiu* places and the politics governing the transport concession process (see Chapter 5), they are all exemplary of the search for economic form and the preference, where possible, to work within livelihood sites governed by a certain stability and predictability.

Beyond driver livelihoods: Khiu *as 'portal' and site of state desire.*

There are three further factors to be considered in understanding the *khiu* economy as a prosperous livelihood field. First, is to note the non-transport economy that has grown up alongside the *khiu* – the vendors, hawkers and stall-owners who daily populate the *khiu*, selling their wares to drivers and passengers alike. Though I undertook no economic survey of this facet of the *khiu* economy, I note its relevance in light of discussions in the following chapter in which I will argue that the *khiu* functions as a predominantly *rural* social, spatial and economic zone within the urban-confines of the city, with the petty merchants operating out of the *khiu (*as is the case with the drivers) villagers who daily commute for the purposes of work.

Second, is to recognise that the *khiu* as an informal economic space is desirable not just in terms of driver livelihoods, but also to elements within the local state, enabling it to deliver public services 'on the cheap', to create a prosperous economic field from which they can extract, and as a source of labor absorption. It's worth noting that the state has never dropped a single baht into the *songthaeo* economy, either in terms of drivers' wages or driving infrastructure, to the point that costs associated with minor items such as the signs and public amenities (a single toilet cubicle) recently added by council to the *khiu* were subsequently recouped from the drivers.[36] Rather, and demarcating the *khiu* as a site of desire for state agents to operate within, the drivers pay state officials – both formally (through concessions) and informally (through bribes - see Chapter 5) – for the temporary entitlement to work their *songthaeo* in the delivery of the city's dominant mode of public transport. Off-the-books payments (at 2011 rates) alone amount to over 29 million baht flowing from drivers' pockets to paid-off bureaucrats and police over a three year period, consisting of informal concession payments and monthly police-bribes.[37] In return, drivers operate in a cash-economy generating over 210 million baht in passenger fares over the same period, all off-the-books, and all beyond tax scrutiny.[38] For the state brokers who derive secondary incomes from the

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[36] One could argue that the state has had input into the broader infrastructure – such as roads – which the drivers use to conduct their business. There are also costs in terms of wages to the civil servants who administer and regulate various elements of the public transport sector (licensing, registration collection, environmental monitoring, Cooperative audits and so on). The broader point however is that money associated with these costs does not flow to the drivers, but is rather money which circulates internal to the state.

[37] See Chapter 5 for further details of informal monetary exchanges lubricating the *songthaeo* economy, including monthly 'tea money' figures.

[38] See below for details of fares and average wages. The figure of 'over 21 million baht' is calculated from multiplying Chiang Mai's 3,900 drivers' 'average' wage of 15,000 baht per month by 36 (ie over a three year

songthaeo economy, I have no reliable figures of who exactly gets what, except to say that higher office equates to higher rewards, all the way up to the governors' office.[39]

Third, is to identify the *khiu* as a *portal* through which some may transition from the *songthaeo* economy into the hallowed ground of local politics or bureaucratic administration, from where 'inventive' operators can use their formal positions of authority to extract illicit funds, much as police and other bureaucrats do of them. Such transitions are not particularly common, and tend to be reserved for drivers who have demonstrated administrative talents in Cooperatives or as *klum* committee-men. *Klum* presidents in particular are well-positioned to develop a wide network of friends and acquaintances, both within the *khiu* community and with the state agencies with which the *khiu* intersects. They are also able to build a profile for themselves through patronising village fairs and temple events, representing the driving *klum* associated with a particular village.

In turn, Presidents may seek office as village-heads, within district or sub-district councils or within local bureaucracies, and will campaign for such positions based on their good records as *klum* presidents and the profile that this position has enabled them to develop. In this way, a President's aspirations to higher office, and the need to build for himself a clean record of administration, beyond any intimacy or familial relations with his fellow drivers, serves to regulate his own activities in the *klum*, and partly explains why rather than perhaps trying to extract from the drivers in the *klum* loan-process, Presidents instead often contribute from their own funds, as noted above. Importantly, drivers make no bones about the fact that the main attraction of positions within the local bureaucracy is the ability to divert public funds into private pockets. Indeed, they speak with some pride of peers who have been able to make this further career transition. And yet despite the opportunity to shift into the potentially-lucrative world of the bureaucracy, few drivers clamour for *klum* or Cooperative positions, aware of the 'politics' involved in such roles, and lacking either the motivation or confidence to extend themselves beyond the mere task of driving.

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period, corresponding to the concession period for which 'informal' payments cover). The exact amount arrived at is 210,600,000 baht.
[39] See Chapter 5 for the role of the governors' office in approving transport concessions.

Summary

The preceding chapter has attempted to demonstrate the way in which one segment of the rural population invented – to borrow a term from Keith Hart – a means of meaningfully participating within the emerging market economy, through the development of stable livelihood spaces within the broader informal economy. These livelihood fields are in turn marked by *economic form* and structure mirroring that of the formal economy. Exemplifying this form and lending specificity to the concept of *agency* foregrounded in earlier chapters, I have highlighted the way in which the drivers have created an economic field comprising investments (in vehicles and *khiu* places), market mechanisms (*khiu* places), loan funds and other welfare supports. Collectively, these have produced viable and predictable livelihoods replete with healthy incomes, lucrative nest-egg arrangements, and access to loans, credit and other forms of financial support. I have also noted the drivers' dissatisfaction with income levels, despite their comparative wealth, and indicated the depth of consumer and status aspirations which propel driver subjectivities. This in turn has been linked to the social/class differentiation processes within the *khiu*, highlighting the thoroughly pragmatic and rational efforts to maximise returns, not least on *khiu*-place sales. I also noted that such behaviour is quite against the script of rural economic activity as enshrined in the country's sufficiency economy doctrines, pointing to a profound misrecognition of rural economic reality from policy makers. In the following chapter, I will continue to describe the world of the *khiu*, focusing on the non-economic elements which have made it such a desirable space for rural labor. The chapter will be completed by a discussion of this prosperous and attractive domain as increasingly *precarious*, in turn paving the way for the final chapter's discussion on the politics through which the drivers seek to defend their invented livelihood world.

CHAPTER 4: FAILURE TO TRANSITION: THE POLITICS OF PLACE AND PRECARIOUS *KHIU* LIVELIHOODS

Chapter 4 forms a companion piece and extension to the previous chapter, moving beyond the economic dimensions of the *khiu* to a spatial analysis highlighting the non-economic features of the *khiu* and arguing that the drivers have intentionally created desirable *translocal* work-spaces befitting their needs and preferences. This will primarily focus on the politics of place (Bonisch-Brednich and Trundle 2010) and practices of spatial production (Halfacree 2004, 2006) governing the *khiu*, arguing that the *khiu* and its associated rest-spots represent a domain of village society embedded within the urban spaces of the city, providing for the drivers a daily refuge of familiarity within a discursively produced urban dystopia. In so doing, we can suggest that in addition to the drivers' search for and partial instantiation of *economic form* within the *khiu* (Chapter 3), so too have they managed to 'invent' for themselves a certain *social form* in their daily work-space. The chapter will outline a number of key features of this social form, focusing on identity, status and the work, community and political cultures of the *khiu*. It is these elements, I argue, which in addition to the livelihoods available from driving, have demarcated the *khiu* (and wider *songthaeo* economy) as such a desirable space for rural labor.

I will then juxtapose this multiply attractive labor-field with the fact of its ongoing status as a *precarious* field of labor (Hewison and Woradul 2013). Despite the drivers' search for economic form and largely successful inscription of village social form within the *khiu,* its location within Thailand's informal economy earmarks the *khiu* as a site of livelihood vulnerability. In common with the majority of Thailand's work-spaces, the *khiu* lacks the kind of legal rights and protection available to 'proper citizens' (Chatterjee 2008a, 2008b) working in the formal economy (Hewison and Kalleberg 2013), and is indicative of what I will call a partial 'failure to transition' by the drivers in their trajectory from farm to the modern economy (Chatterjee 2008a, 2008b). That is, their exit pathway has led them from one form of precarious work (small-scale, on-farm enterprises) into another, which although lucrative and desirable is now under threat as the onset of the AEC casts an uncertain shadow over the northern Thai economy.

Creating the *khiu* as village place

In a mid-sized *soi* (side-street) around half a kilometre away from the Warorot *khiu,* a tight cluster of yellow *songthaeo* can be found at any one time of the day parked along the side of the road, their drivers congregating together under a makeshift awning. Chairs and table, a bin and whiteboard, sit housed beneath the plastic roof, covering a space not much bigger than a small bedroom. At the table, men sit around eating and playing games, with an assemblage of timetables, notices, accounting ledgers, meeting dates and other information listed on the whiteboard for the attention of drivers passing through. It was on this whiteboard that I was amused to read this particular *klum's* budget, publicly displayed and including in its expenses column an item listed as 'police alcohol', a figure of 250 baht written adjacent to it. This makeshift space was the 'rest spot' for the *Doi Saket* drivers, the place where they would retreat after finishing one of their daily Warorot-Doi Saket circuits, and from where they would await a phone call from the *khiu* manager indicating it was time to head back to the *khiu* for their next circuit.

Of the many interesting facets of the Doi Saket rest spot was the fact that many of the drivers working this particular line were younger men, in their mid-twenties or early thirties. From my time spent at the *khiu,* this clearly distinguished them from the vast majority of drivers who were in their fifties or sixties. As it turned out, this younger set formed what I call the 'second-generation' of drivers, the sons and nephews, the heirs and successors of men who entered the *khiu* as part of the first wave of drivers in the 1970s and 1980s. And unlike their fathers and uncles, several of this second-generation cohort were high school and even university-educated, with some working the *khiu* temporarily while awaiting for work that may or may not come in the formal economy, and others simply adopting it as their chosen family vocation.

For the purposes of the current section, I introduce this second generation of drivers in order to make the point that the *khiu* has remained a work-site preserved for *villagers*, with access to the *khiu* socially regulated and almost exclusively dependent on personal or familial ties. Like so many other jobs and labor-fields in Thailand, the *khiu* functions as a closed-shop, with entry almost impossible without intimate knowledge of a departing driver. Blood ties, social links and village networks are all avenues through which new drivers might make their way onto the *khiu.* For the young Doi Saket drivers, many of them inherited their place from their fathers, just as in generations past (and still for many rural Thais) they might have inherited a plot of land. In this way,

both the *songthaeo* and a place in the *khiu* have become a livelihood asset to be passed down through family lines, and have tended to preserve each *klum* as a social microcosm of a particular village, and the *khiu* more generally as a space of village labor and rural social forms. Throughout this chapter I will explore this rural-village dimension of the *khiu,* outlining the ways in which it and its surrounding rest-spots capture and embody both material and imagined (even fictive) aspects of this rural social form, creating a series of village places inhabited by the drivers within the urban labor frontier.

As Mary Beth Mills (2012) has correctly noted in relation to Thailand's ongoing national political crisis, 'rural-urban divisions remain powerful symbols in contemporary Thai society' (85). Indeed, one of the earliest analyses of the Red Shirt mass-rallies which enveloped downtown Bangkok in 2010 (Thongchai 2010) highlighted these rural-urban spatial divisions as central elements within the unfolding political drama, encoding social meanings associated with differing levels of civilization. As Thongchai explains, within Thai social hierarchies rural people are considered backward and uneducated (*ban nok*) while urbanites are considered progressive and enlightened. In the ensuing collision between the uncivilised 'red masses' and urbane Bangkok residents, Thongchai notes the latters' horror at the 'invasion' of their city by the dirty, ugly and vulgar *phuak ban nok* (backward rural folks).

Elsewhere, Mills (2012, 2014) has echoed the notion of long-standing symbolic hierarchies privileging Thailand's urban minority and subordinating the rural majority, arguing that this produces differing experiences of 'cultural citizenship'. For Mills, this refers to 'differentiated' or 'stratified' experiences of citizenship, 'marked by the uneven distribution of entitlements' (2012: p88). Drawing on Aihwa Ong (1996) and James Holston's (2008) work on cultural citizenship, Mills notes the 'critical distinction between formal and substantive dimensions of citizenship in everyday experience' (2012: p88). For Mills, these critical distinctions are spatially defined, comprising (privileged) urbanites and (subordinated) rural people. Although I won't follow through in any great detail Mills' discussion of differentiated citizenship, I will adapt her useful conceptualization of Thailand's stratified urban-rural divide and suggest that this is also in evidence in terms of livelihoods. That is, whereas urban/e people tend to inhabit the formal economy, rural people overwhelmingly remain within the scope of informal economic enterprises, with rights and protections officially granted to the former and absent from the working lives of the latter. These rural inhabitants of the

informal economy form then the bottom tier of Thailand's stratified cultural system, their 'backwardness' seemingly confirmed by their struggles to make a living in a second-class labor-zone bereft of the entitlements granted to the minority of citizens employed within the formal economy. It is the drivers' 'failure to transition' to the formal economy and the world of first-class citizenship – in this case in terms of rights and entitlements governing formal employment – which I will argue leaves the drivers in a somewhat precarious position.

At a more intimate, localized level, I will also discuss the ways in which drivers reflect these higher-level currents and engage in a smaller-scale politics of place in which they contest and re-work rural and urban categories. That is, through their production of social form and meaning (Bonisch-Brednich and Trundle 2010: pp1-2) within the *khiu* and surrounding rest-spots, I will explore how this particular cohort of rural Thais negotiate the wider rural-urban politics in which they are embedded. This is not so much the politics of collapsing rural-urban divides into single categories, whether Jones' (1997) influential *desakota* idea or Eric Thompson's (2004) 'urban-village' (see also Naruemon and McCargo 2011). Nor is it a politics of the deterritorialisation of identity (Bonisch-Brednich and Trundle 2010: p2), or of what Arjun Appadurai (1996) has described in terms of locality having lost its 'ontological mooring'. Rather, with Bonisch-Brednich and Trundle (2010), I suggest that there is an ongoing importance of *place* in everyday lives (pp1-2), particularly in Thailand's fractious political context, and that this plays out at both national, local and personal levels.

But this politics of place in which categories of rural and urban shape everyday identities and practices plays out on multiple scales. For example, there are *concrete* expressions of rural and urban materialities, just as there are *imagined*, discursive elements. These latter form what Keith Halfacree (2006) has called the 'social representation of space', in which spatial categories reflect and perpetuate nostalgic, idealized and even fictive dimensions of a (rural or urban) past that may or may not have existed in concrete space and time. Both Thailand's urban classes and Thailand's rural classes perpetuate, for example, the myth of the rural idyll (see Bowie 1992, Dayley 2011), though they serve different political purposes for rural and urban proponents of this fictional depiction of the countryside. Part of the discussion below will be in terms of tracing through the drivers' narrating of their social space, just as it will be to describe its concrete manifestations. Both elements, I suggest, reflect an *intensification* of the drivers' identification as villagers, a thoroughly political identification

which has emerged despite the daily interaction with the city, and which in turn is productive of multiple forms of politics (see Chapter 5).

The *khiu* functions as a potent symbol of this micro- and macro-level politics of place, symbolizing both the growing dissolution of rural and urban categories *and* the ongoing salience of these distinctions. In terms of the former, the *khiu* is emblematic of the rural-urban flows which conjoin country and city as drivers, commuters, migrants, consumers and tourists traverse spatial categories, facilitated by the *songthaeo,* and piloted by villager-drivers laboring within urban space. In terms of the latter, as hinted at above and explored below, the urban space of the *khiu* is filled with rural social forms, and inhabited by villagers whose exposure to the city has accentuated their self-imaginings as rural people. In other words, the *khiu* is representative of the 'contradictions' (Bunnell, Parthasarathy and Thompson 2012) inherent in Thailand's evolving rural-urban interface, of points of both 'cleavage and connection' and of ongoing negotiation in the politics of place, identity, rights and belonging. Put more simply, despite the increasing intermeshing of rural and urban worlds (Hirsch 2009), not least in rural Thailand's extensive linkages with the national economy (Mills 2014), rural and urban labels *matter* to ordinary people. In the case of the *khiu*-men, I will explore some of the ways in which they matter, focusing on issues of status and identity, and of the work, community and political cultures which the drivers have embedded in their work-space, and which in turn render such spaces desirable sites of labor.

Work Culture: isara *(autonomy) and* sabai *(wellbeing)*

Beyond income levels, drivers generally highlighted their ability to operate within a labor-field of relative autonomy (*isara*) and comfort/ease (*sabai*) as the most compelling reasons for valuing the work of the *khiu*. These terms, *isara* and *sabai,* defy straight-forward translation into English, with both containing a cluster of related ideas. At its most basic level, *isara* conveys the sense of freedom, autonomy and independence. Certainly this is the intention of the drivers in drawing on the word. In the context of labor spaces moreover, the drivers' elaborations around this theme (see below) indicate that it also connotes the specific idea of working beyond surveillance regimes and supervisory direction, of acting with agency in terms of self-organising one's activities, space and time. Drivers compared the *isara* of *khiu*-work with the *isara* they previously experienced as farmers (at least before contract-farming became widespread). For, despite a common narrative among drivers to

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the effect that the toil of farming had become increasingly unbearable, they also recalled with affection the way in which it enabled them to operate as autonomous agents, with no-one to supervise or regulate their work, and with the success or otherwise of crop and labor dependent on the individual.

So too, was driving considered *isara*, a largely autonomous field of endeavour with the few regulations surrounding *khiu* entry times and uniforms simply considered part of the professional arrangements governing the *khiu* and (partially) informing new senses of self. At the forefront of driver *isara* was the flexibility over time and daily quantum of hours spent at the wheel, and the lack of management or oversight apart from the zealous (but lower-status) *khiu*-managers. Reflecting this sense of freedom, one driver noted 'you can work whenever you want, stop work whenever you want, go wherever you want. *We are our own bosses*'. This sense of autonomy, of spatial and temporal freedom, was directly contrasted by the drivers with other work-sites, and particularly with construction and manufacturing, options many of them had considered over the years, and labor-fields which had absorbed many of their fellow male villagers. Of such spaces, drivers complained of repressive labor environments: 'there was no *isara* – it's tiring and you have to work according to strict time regulations. If you go late, your wages are deducted. And your boss always watches what you do.' By contrast, drivers could enter the *khiu* according to their own time-table, work as many circuits as they chose or were able, with their in-between times unregulated, social affairs spent at informal rest-spots or anywhere a driver might choose to go.

Accompanying this desire for autonomy and agency was the associated value placed by drivers on the quality of being *sabai*. While a ubiquitously used word in the Thai language, *sabai* doesn't translate well into English. Its basic meaning is that of being 'well', 'comfortable', 'untroubled' or 'fine' – the common response to the polite question 'how are you?' But to be *sabai,* in the sense that drivers talk about their work as *sabai*, carries deeper inferences, and is marked as much by what is absent as what is present. To be *sabai* in one's work is to be not just well or comfortable, but to be at ease with oneself, and at ease because there is an *absence* of pressure, stress, surveillance, burdensome regulation or responsibility in one's work. This links back to the idea of *isara*; drivers are *sabai* precisely because they consider their daily work to be a space of autonomous agency. Again, this is contrasted with the work of construction and manufacturing where timetables, work orders, rules and responsibilities, learning of complex tasks and the like are part of work culture.

It's worth noting that the *khiu* as a site of *isara* and *sabai* linked to rural pasts both contrasts with dominant scholarly accounts of contemporary Thai labor-spaces and is part of the reason why the drivers value the *khiu* and set out to defend its viability (see Chapter 5). Increasingly, scholarship on the culture and practices of Thai labor sites conceptualises them in terms of repression and resistance, as sites in which neoliberal impulses dominate and subjugate workers (see Brody 2006, Hickey 2010). Alyson Brody's (2006) and Maureen Hickey's (2011) work on Bangkok mall cleaners and taxi drivers respectively, are two pertinent examples of mobile villagers transitioning into work-spaces dominated by repressive neoliberal logics. For Brody, the rural migrant workers labouring as cleaners within Bangkok's glitzy shopping complexes are subject to forms of spatial and temporal control, constantly monitored by supervisors and bosses, chastised and disciplined should they fail to be where they are supposed to be at any given time. Moreover, cleaners face the burden of continuously trying to render themselves invisible within the mall environment, a constant reminder that they are forever *out of place* as lower-class, rural migrants operating in and interrupting the middle and upper-class dream-scapes of urban consumer palaces. For Brody, moments of daily freedom and wellbeing are rare, acts of potentially risky everyday *resistance,* in which cleaners might steal a minute or two of private time, perhaps out of the view of surveillance cameras, in order to cease work and share some brief time with a sympathetic colleague.

Hickey's (2010) Bankgok taxi drivers by contrast are not spatially constrained in the ways the mall-cleaners are, but instead find themselves subject to the repressive impulses of neoliberalism, in which a de-regulated taxi industry permits an unlimited amount of drivers to compete for ever-diminishing returns. For Hickey, the *isara* discourse is also prevalent among the capital's taxi-drivers, but here twisted and subverted to serve the logic of neoliberalism. For while drivers are encouraged to consider themselves as free, autonomous entrepreneurs, in reality they are increasingly *un-free*, as deregulation produces an environment of shrinking returns, increasing competition and ever-expanding time required to simply maintain income levels. Further, the desirable trait of operating as free-entrepreneurs places the drivers beyond the state's welfare arms, masking the fact that drivers are an increasingly marginal, economically struggling population. For Hickey, this discourse of *isara*, while valued and somewhat internalised by the drivers ('we are entrepreneurs!'), has been turned against them by a neoliberal sleight of hand, rendering an increasingly unfree population (of drivers literally *bound* to their vehicles as they spend more time for less return) discursively free in order to *depoliticise* and neutralise them (pp96-106).

In some ways, the de-regulated Bangkok taxi scene offers a dystopic vision of one possible future for the Chiang Mai *songthaeo* drivers, should the state ever intervene in the city's 'quaint' public transport system, deregulate the quota system governing the number of vehicles per route, and modernise it according to the logic of neoliberalism and the dictates of market competition. There is a sense then, in which this 'invented' world of the *khiu*, reflecting a desirable everyday work culture of autonomy and ease, is as much about lifestyle as it is livelihoods, about the preservation of a 'traditional' rural male labor culture, marked by pre-neoliberal logics of freedom and ease,[40] independence and inefficiency, sociality and lack of responsibility. Even the simple task of occasionally assisting passengers secure luggage on the roof of *songthaeo* was sometimes remarked on by drivers as a burden and interruption to their' 'ease', a going beyond the simple task of driving.

This desire for *sabai* which I have argued dominates the everyday work-culture of the *khiu* is reminiscent of what French poet-sociologist Arthur Rimbaud, many years ago, described as the 'right to be lazy' (in Merrifield 2006: p10). Rimbaud was making a serious point here in relation to French culture, and had in mind the defense of a disappearing everyday sociality and festive conviviality in the industrializing latter decades of the 19th Century, a period he considered blighted by alienating and mechanical work and social cultures. In a similar vein, the drivers value and seek to preserve their 'right to be *sabai*', to not work any harder or bear any more responsibilities than are necessary. This point was reinforced to me in an interview with LCTC committee-men in 2013 when, in reflecting on possible changes to the city's transport system which might displace the drivers (see below), the Cooperative treasurer acknowledged that the drivers would find it hard to adjust and find alternative employment. In his words, the drivers as northern Thai men were 'lazy'. He wasn't being critical in his observation and indeed was likely including himself within his own evaluation. The point he was making was that the drivers have, by their own estimation, managed to successfully construct for themselves an informal work-space enabling them to participate within the broader economy, derive a meaningful income, and do so within an everyday work-culture of *sabai,* in which freedom and flexibility, rest and recreation, socialising and play punctuate their everyday lives and constitute their preferred experience of 'work'.

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[40] By 'ease', I do not infer that farming was 'easy', but that it lacked complexity in the way that the drivers complain that construction and other forms of work entails. It is not that the drivers are incapable of complexity, but simply that learning new tasks provides the opportunity for failure and a loss of face which they would prefer to avoid.

Many of the early drivers' entrance into the urban *khiu* was marked both by excitement and a sense of profound anxiety, with trepidation a result of entering an unfamiliar, urban world, and of the inevitable awareness of social and status differentiation between themselves and the city-folk they encountered in the contact zone of the *khiu*. Reflecting on this experience, Somchaat, who has been driving since the early 1980s, stated: 'when I started driving, I wanted to return to the village. But I had to come to the city every day for work, meaning that I gradually felt less anxious, especially as coming to the city meant that I got to meet with other people.' The 'other people' who allayed his anxieties were other villagers also working the *khiu,* and who collectively set about the task of emplacing themselves within the heart of the city, and of weaving their rural social lives into the urban spaces of the *khiu* (Bonisch-Brednich and Trundle 2010: p1).

Alongside the accompanying swarms of villagers circulating through the *khiu* and populating the streets, markets and work-sites of Chiang Mai, the drivers cultivated forms of 'modern community' (Walker 2009: p1) – new social groupings emerging from within Thailand's changing economy, and transforming urban space into what I will term *translocal* village fields (Hart 2001, 2006, 2011). As described by the drivers, at the core of these new spatial arrangements lay forms of sociality reminiscent of 'traditional' village community and marked by new modes of mutual assistance, shared presence and felt belonging in the *khiu*. For many drivers, the echoes of a rural ideal reverberating in urban space provided comfort and familiarity even as they recognised that this ideal was itself a fragile and disappearing reality. From an etic perspective, and recalling the work of Rubin (1973, 1974) and Foster (1976) in Chapter 2 highlighting the lack of trust, unity, cooperation and friendship within the 1960s village, it may be that the rural ideal was not only disappearing, but something of an imagined reality to begin with. From another perspective, the new sociality permeating the *khiu* might be viewed as exemplary of the *new* forms of community Walker (2009) notes as emerging within the modern economy, discursively drawing on – but perhaps a distinct departure from – representations of village life which may or may not reflect concrete pasts.

Anthropologist Keith Hart developed the term 'translocal' to describe the way in which rural West African migrant workers whom he studied in the 1960s were, in his own words, able to 'make society across large distances' (Hart: 2001). Hart noted the way in which migrant workers reproduced forms of rural society in their new urban work-spaces, describing this as 'translocal' society. In this initial sense, translocality refers to the way in

which social practices are increasingly de-territorialised, existing 'across place' and to 'some extent independently of it' (Hart: 2006). Or, to put it another way, social practices are increasingly distantiated from their 'traditional' points of observance, and are reconstituted or stretched over a range of diverse spaces or circumstances.

A second dimension to translocality for Hart is the way in which it binds spatially separated places together, forming a common 'field'. Reflecting on his experience of witnessing rural Ghanaian migrant workers making society 'across place', he writes that 'I came to see rural and urban areas as a single field traversed by social networks in all directions. In retrospect, this was a vision of society as essentially translocal, an anticipation of globalization as it later unfolded…' (Hart: 2011). In relation to the *songthaeo* drivers and their emerging city *khiu*, 'translocality' as it is doubly envisaged here by Hart, enables us to posit not only that social practices traditionally belonging to the village were now being transposed by the drivers and their human cargo into the city, but also that both spaces, urban *khiu* and rural village, had effectively become part of a singular field – a translocal village society encompassing sets of familiar 'rural' practices, now dispersed throughout expanding rural-urban translocal fields.

According to the drivers' 'lay narrative' (Halfacree 2006) describing their new social existence, rural life and village community traditionally comprised three main tenets: the *mutual provision and reception* of aid, support and assistance, *shared sociality and attendance* at regular and ritual events, and a *shared sense of belonging* to a particular place (village) and collective group. In order, these might encompass reciprocal work in the fields, collective work on public buildings or infrastructure, assistance in constructing private dwellings, caring for sick neighbours or others' children, attending village meetings, ceremonies and rituals such as weddings, ordinations, funerals and temple fairs and so on. And although drivers spoke with some eloquence as to the diminishing presence of these factors within village life, they had in fact fairly successfully secreted (Halfacre) them into the translocal society of the *khiu*, creating a space alternatively conceived as capturing elements of the 'familiar' and 'traditional' or, from a critical standpoint, as perhaps creating *new* forms of community that may have only been faintly practised in the village past (see Walker 2009). Consider the following points.

First, is the fact that the *khiu*, like the village, is a familial affair, a network of villagers linked by family or kin relations, and described by drivers using familial language. As outlined above, brother follows brother into the *khiu*, a son his father and so on. And though this may be exclusionary and undemocratic, this closed-shop mentality serves the

purpose of preserving the *khiu* – and each *klum* in particular – as a micro-village population. Second, the *khiu*-economy and its various in-built mechanisms of informal social insurance outlined in the preceding chapter mirror the mutual aid and assistance ascribed to the traditional village. The informal *klum* loans, the access to Cooperative credit, the funeral and education support, the informal counselling provided by presidents to distressed drivers, all echo the impulses of mutuality and support drivers recall as once materialised in reciprocal agricultural labor practices.

Third, the *khiu* and *klum* rest-spots are places of conviviality, conversation and recreation, and in the chatter and play of down-times something of the informal sociality that drivers lament as disappearing in the individualising village is partially reconfigured. Or again, we might suggest that *klum* and Cooperative meetings (see below), which discuss *khiu* matters, finances, policies and regulations, and the regular *klum* offerings to, or attendance at, local temples or shrines, replace and reconfigure the old village meeting and village temple fair. Fourth, the structure of *klum* administration, with its elected President as 'synaptic leader' (Moerman 1969) mediating between villager-drivers and state officials, and of arbitrating over petty driver disputes, carries resonances of the role of village leader overseeing his village population. Finally, we might note that drivers feel a sense of attachment and belonging to both their *klum* and their *songthaeo*. Though it may be idealising relationships, drivers speak openly about their 'love' for one another, their sense of fraternity, and the expectations that their *klum* leaders will take care of them. All these combine to produce their work space as a site to which they feel a sense of belonging. Moreover, the presence of fellow village-types, of the vendors, hawkers, passengers and stall-holders also inhabiting the *khiu* communicates to the drivers that they (drivers) are the new *village elite*, whose earnings, assets (*songthaeo*), associational form (the Cooperatives), official links, ease and predictability of income set them apart from the other urban villagers (Nareumon and McCargo 2011) whose livelihoods are marked by much greater flux, hardship and struggle than those of the driving-men.

Collectively, these five points describe patterns of social form and everyday life created and performed by the drivers, which in turn lend to the urban spaces of *khiu* and rest-spot modes of rural sociality identified by the drivers with remembered village pasts. These pasts may, in part, be 'mere' social representations or fictive accounts fueled by nostalgia. For the drivers however, they connected their present everyday experience with personal and communal histories, their lay narratives of their work-fields providing them with familiar templates and a sense of home. Whether corresponding with actual pasts or reflecting new forms of community generated in the midst of the evolving, modern

economy, the *khiu* and rest-spots functioned as part of a discursively coherent translocal field, invented by the drivers and productive of a work-space valued by the drivers.

Political culture

For those who navigate their way past the gatekeepers and exclusionary practices which maintain the *khiu* as a world of 'insiders', a political culture of participation and calibrated democracy beckons. Within the administration of the *khiu*, regulations are socially produced (Harris-White) through participatory decision-making processes, regular meetings and formal elections, covering the everyday administration of drivers' work-lives, rules surrounding loans and the regulation of *klum* and *Cooperative* office.

In terms of the everyday regulations which govern conduct at the *khiu*, the most important are those surrounding *khiu* etiquette and attempts by drivers to 'jump the *khiu*'. Already noted in the previous chapter, breaches are managed differently by each *klum*, indicative of the social regulation of such matters through localised *klum* decision-makers. Infractions generally attract a fine of around 200-300 baht, with any disputes arising from such sanctions mediated by the *klum* President. If a driver is unwilling to yield to such authority, he may be banned from working the *khiu* for a period of days or have his case transferred to the Transport Department which has the authority to temporarily cancel his *songthaeo* license.

Other regulations include guidelines around driver behaviour and etiquette. Drivers are forbidden from fighting or quarrelling among one another, with punishments of up to 3 days exclusion from work applicable to any who violate this rule. Again, the President will involve himself in handing down such sanctions, and is again able to draw upon the authority of the Transport Department should an offending driver refuses to accept his punishment. Drivers, this time in collaboration with the Transport Department, have also assented to regulate their appearance, with drivers agreeing to wear long pants, closed shoes and a collared-shirt. Sundays are permitted as a 'free-dress' day.

The key point of these regulations is that they are democratically agreed upon by the drivers themselves. Most *klum* hold meeting every 6 months attended by the drivers, and at which regulations are discussed, reviewed and, where necessary, voted upon if a decision needs to be made. Drivers indicate that votes are freely and fairly held, with each driver having the same power to influence the outcome. Most drivers actually indicate that they appreciate the modest set of regulations with help keep *khiu*-operations orderly and

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professional, especially in terms of maintaining fairness and discouraging *khiu*-jumping practices.

In the same way, drivers determine those who will govern their *klum*, with committee-positions subject to annual elections. As noted above, there is rarely competition for positions on the committees, and all drivers I spoke with indicated that these were unlike national elections in terms of aspirants or incumbents attempting to influence outcomes or buy votes. Rather, they were opportunities for drivers to hold office-bearers accountable, and they noted that on rare occasions they took the opportunity to vote out incumbents who they suspected may have been 'cooking the books'. In this way, drivers have strong expectations that those who administer them will do so fairly, and there is little tolerance for leaders exploiting their role. This distinguishes the political culture of *klum*-level politics from Cooperative-level, where there is a measure of tolerance granted to Presidents to use the position for private gain, echoing evaluative matrices of fairness and acceptable corruption as outlined in Andrew Walker's *rural constitution* (Walker 2008). This recognises the amount of work Cooperative presidents are required to do in order to maintain concessionary monopolies, and of sustaining ongoing productive relations with a broad suite of civil servants (see Chapter 5). At the level of everyday *klum*-life and politics however, democracy, fairness, transparency and participation all form part of the political and moral economy of the *khiu*, embedded within village-kin networks of trust and expected support.

Status and identity

Like Robert Textor's (1961) Bangkok rickshaw drivers of the 1950s, the Chiang Mai *songthaeo* drivers are implicated in multiple, complex status games, which though projecting them upwards in local status economies, have also simply entrenched in drivers' minds their subordinated position within national social hierarchies (Mills 2012, 2014) as *rural* rather than *urban* figures. Several of these layers of status-complexity have been touched on earlier in terms of the internal games that drivers play with each other, symbolised by the upgrading of *songthaeo* or the capacity to invest in rental vehicles for the entrepreneurial, capitalised few. We've noted too the eminent position drivers hold within the everyday translocal *khiu*-fields in which they labor, and of the 'distinction' which their incomes grant them within the *khiu* and broader regional economies. From a historical perspective, we also explored the envy and admiration directed towards the drivers in the earlier years prior to the increased frequency of personal vehicles (see Ritchie 1996). Today however driving

doesn't connote the same kinds of prestige, though it does continue to distinguish the drivers from those who persist in agriculture or work in construction. In fact, though once a symbol of rural pride, the *songthaeo* are now something of a source of city shame, articulating for the urban middle-class the backwardness of the city, symbols of not only its failure to progress, but of the sordid politics popularly believed to accompany this inability to modernise the public transport system and keep up with other regional centres (see Chapter 5). Drivers also remain only too aware that despite their relative standing in the village and within the *khiu*-world, they are unable to compete in the status games of the city. Their lack of education and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993), their location within the informal economy and their association with the so-called mafia-types who run their Cooperatives (see Chapter 5) continues to mark them out as a lower class than the polished, urbane residents of metropolitan Chiang Mai.

The effect of these multiple status-games, including the drivers' everyday positionality as local lords of the *khiu* economy, is somewhat complicated. One thing however seems clear, and that is that despite an often decades' long presence within the city, drivers remain intractably self-identifying as 'villagers' (*chao ban* or *khon chonabot*) rather than 'city people' (*khon mueang*). This is, I suggest, precisely an effect of the status economies in which they are situated, and of their ability to secure status recognition within the village/translocal *khiu* in a way they are not within the city. Indeed, the cultivation of urban spaces as translocal village places has in many ways created a ghetto-effect on the drivers, enabling them to daily enter the city without having to leave the familiarity of village 'home'. And given their elevated status within this home, identities as 'modern', comparatively successful villagers have intensified rather than mellowed or transitioned towards more hybridised forms of rural-urban selves captured in terms such as 'urban villagers' (Nareumon and McCargo 2011) or 'cosmopolitan villagers' (Keyes 2012).

For the drivers, identity is also tied to remembered pasts, and to a narrative trajectory of having exited the peasantry and having found a certain sense of confidence and self-reliance through their work in the city. Consider these following to comments from drivers:

> 'When I came to the city to work as a driver, I felt that it meant that I was finished as a 'peasant', as driving work resulted in me feeling more self-confident and self-reliant. Yeah, I felt more confident. And I felt like I had more freedom. And I earned a better salary than if I returned to life as a peasant.'

> 'Now that I've become a driver, I no longer think of myself as a 'peasant', as I no longer have time to farm. Working in the city, driving, leaves me feeling more confident in myself, and I feel free – whether I come to work or not is up to me.'

For these two men, the transition to driving meant the end of one mode of identity – the 'peasant' farmer – and the beginning of another, as a confident, self-reliant, rural male laboring in the urban frontier. As indicated in the first quote above, there is a sense in which 'peasant' and 'self-confidence' are posited as mutually exclusive categories. That is, part of the meaning being given to the term 'peasant' is a certain lack of self-confidence, particularly when that peasant finds themselves in unfamiliar urban contexts, and as discussed earlier, one in which he or she has little leverage in the shape and stakes of local status games. As such, 'peasant' doesn't simply describe a pattern of labour, or a way of life, but also indicates a certain state of mind and sense of one's place in the world. For the incoming drivers, identities were re-worked such that the old timid and daunted peasant was increasingly replaced by a more confident, self-assured and urban-literate wage-laborer.

These newly confident 'post-peasant' (Kearney 1996) urban-workers remained however thoroughly identified with the village, and though increasingly urban-literate, remained far from *urbane* with its associated values around education, formality and cultural capital.[41] For their part, drivers almost universally rejected the city as a site of desirable residence or society. Echoing Keyes' (2010: p18) findings from long-term research conducted among domestic migrants returning from Bangkok to the northeast, drivers continued to self-identify as *chao ban*. Mary Elizabeth Mills (1999, p137) notes a similar phenomenon in her somewhat paradoxical finding that rural migrants' exposure to the city – even when, as with the majority of her female research subjects, migration from the village to the city was a matter of agency and desire – *accentuated* rather than diminished self-identification as 'villagers' (see also Hickey 2010). That is, urban migration *intensified* rural identities as domestic migrant workers banded together in the face of the urban experience and in shared recognition of their subordinate positions within national social hierarchies (see Mills 2012, 2014).

A further dynamic driving this play of identities involved the drivers' production of a situated critique of the city, portraying it as a dystopic version of an imagined rural idyll, and in turn reinforcing a sense of village moral superiority over and against the decadent metropolis. In generating this 'lay narrative' and everyday social representation of rural and urban spaces (Halfacree 2006), the drivers 'imagined' the world which they daily traversed,

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[41] Recall Thongchai's (2010) horrified Bangkok residents and their descriptions of 'rural' red shirts as dirty, ugly and vulgar. While these sentiments are gross caricatures and reflect the prejudices of their authors, they do point to the cultural distinctions identified by urbanites between themselves and rural people. That is, while these representations are themselves 'vulgar', they point to identifiable distinctions between urban/e and rural people. I would be surprised for example, if the *songthaeo* drivers considered themselves 'urbane'. They appear perfectly well aware of their lack of urbanity, and in fact re-work this as a source of moral superiority (discussed below).

from village to city, into a series of sharp binary distinctions. Whereas the city is considered hot, dirty and polluted, the country is cool, clean and a place of natural beauty. Whereas the city is chaotic, hectic and congested, with crowds and traffic jams, the country is a place of nature, of open fields, rivers and forests. Whereas urban culture is selfish, materialistic and therefore *uncivilized*, village culture is one of mutual sharing, communal support and neighbourliness. Whereas city folk are alienated and estranged from one another, villagers are communal and sociable. And so on the narrative goes.

The drivers were of course perfectly aware that their vision of the city was in fact – at all kinds of levels – simply an unhappy reflection of the urbanised villages in which they also lived (Thompson 2004), and in more candid moments, they offered a second, *subjugated* narrative of space, in which the village too now functioned as a 'world of strangers' (Thompson, Bunnell and Parthasarathy 2012), increasingly alienating, materially-focused and communally fragmented. The point however, as Keith Halfacree (2004: 284) notes, is that social representations of space are imagined discourses, 'categories of thought… the category is not only empirical or descriptive; but it also [carries] a representation or set of meanings, in that it [connotes] a more or less explicit discourse ascribing a certain number of characteristics or attributes to those to whom it applies'. For the drivers, primary-level social representations focused on the dystopic city and the civilised village, repressing the secondary-level, material realities of the consonant village. In so doing, the drivers maintained an ability to effectively counter and unmask ideological constructions of the city's superiority over the countryside (Mills 2012, 2014, Thongchai 2000, 2010), displacing urban pre-eminence with a re-imagined vision of the world in which the village was the source and location of morality, nature and *civilisation*. And it was from within this reimagined world, projected from and embedded within the *khiu*, that drivers chose to consolidate identities as morally superior Thai subjects – as modern villagers (see Keyes 2010) – despite the nagging awareness that reality was more complicated and contradictory than their discourses and performance of it permitted. Identity then, as with status, was multiply complicated within the world of the *khiu*, both matters of constant negotiation and evolution, permitting the drivers enhanced senses of selves, and a greater ability to articulate these selves within national discourses and social hierarchies.

The empirical material in the current and preceding chapter, outlining the prosperous and desirable social world invented and inhabited by the village drivers, contributes to wider discussions on the dynamics of rural change and the processes of remaking rural lives in modern Thailand (and beyond). At the heart of much contemporary analysis of these dynamics as they occur more generally (that is, beyond Thailand), is the recognition that the classical form of analysing rural change and agrarian transition, conceptualized as the capitalisation of agrarian production, subsequent processes of rural class differentiation, and the potential political effects thereof (see discussion in Kelly 2013, Moyo *et al 2013*, Byres 1982), masks much broader patterns of change and differentiation at play (Rigg and Vandergeest 2012, Kelly 2013). These include the fact of plural agrarian transition*s* (Kelly 2013), of multiple pathways of rural change (Rigg and Vandergeest 2012), and call us to move beyond marxist-inspired meta-narratives of agrarian dissolution and subsequent proletarianization (see Kelly 2013). Rather than concentrate on dissolution or patterns of deagrarianisation as the core of transition processes, scholars are increasingly interested in questions of the *persistence* of the peasantry, and the particular conditions under which this preservation unfolds (see Rigg and Vandergeest 2012, Kelly 2013, Chatterjee 2008b).

Partha Chatterjee has been a prominent figure within this latter approach to conceptualizing rural change, challenging the salience of the very idea of (agrarian) *transition* and arguing that 'the narrative of transition is no longer valid' (2008b: p55). Drawing on the work of Kalyan Sanyal (2007), Chatterjee argues that the *changes* brought about by processes of rural transformation – and here he has in mind principally processes of dissociation between rural workers and traditional modes of labor (2008b: p54) – no longer constitute *transition*. That is, these changes fail to produce the kinds of arrangements inherent to classical narratives of agrarian transition, 'ranging from the inevitable dissolution of peasant societies to slogans of worker-peasant unity in the building of a future socialist society' (2008b: p54). Instead of trajectories culminating in either capitalist-proletariat or socialist *telos* points, a third outcome tends to be produced.

For Chatterjee, this third space is that of the displacement of peasants into informal, frequently precarious labor in the urban economy. This displacement is in turn not considered to amount to transition at all, but rather underpins the persistence of the peasantry, now dissociated from land and traditional labor forms, and existing under

what he calls 'completely new conditions' (2008b: 53). At the core of these 'new conditions' lie the twin factors of the governmental state and the informal economy, and of the imperative of the governmental state to provide some kind of basic means of livelihood and welfare to the rural masses now trapped within the confines of the informal economy (2008: pp54-58). Rather than transforming their fundamentally precarious position, this governmental care merely ensures their survival and mitigates against the fulmination of social unrest. [42]

It is my suggestion that Chatterjee's re-conceptualisation of contemporary processes of rural change sheds much light on what I will describe as the *partial transition* of the drivers into the ranks of the semi-proletariat (Moyo *et al* 2013) and helps account for what I will argue is the present precarious (Hewison and Woradul 2013, Hewison and Kalleberg 2013) state of the *songthaeo* economy. That is, though drivers have 'successfully' *exited* from the ranks of farm labor into a desired livelihood domain within the modern economy, the trajectory of this exit has been into the informal economy rather than the ranks of legally-protected, formal employees. And it is precisely because of their position within the informal economy, and the loose arrangements under which their particular sector is regulated, that the drivers' ongoing viability is now threatened by processes under the auspices of the incoming AEC. I will unpack this argument in the following chapters.

From a certain angle, the crafted exodus of thousands of local villagers into Chiang Mai's public transport system has been a spectacular success. I have gone to some lengths to point out the comparative prosperity available to drivers through their invention of economic form within the *khiu* – of the regular and predictable incomes and the cluster of informal support mechanisms which grant drivers many of the benefits available to workers within Thailand's formal economy. I have also noted that on none of these livelihood products do the drivers pay tax and thereby contribute to the public commons. Further, I have argued that the very informality of the *khiu* has enabled the invention or preservation of forms of everyday rural culture and sociality highly valued by drivers, and increasingly displaced from work-sites subject to the impulses of neoliberalism. And yet, despite the cultivation of this desirable economic and socio-cultural mosaic, deeper structural factors within the drivers' partial transition

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[42] In the case of India, in relation to which Chatterjee's theorising is principally addressed, Akhil Gupta (2012) would disagree that the governmental state even manages to accomplish the survival of India's poor and rural classes. Part of the purpose of Gupta's *Red Tape* is to explore the disjuncture between the governmental discourses and programs of the state, and the ongoing fact of preventable deaths among those the state claims to care for.

– consonant with the new conditions invoked by Chatterjee – mark the *khiu* (and broader *songthaeo* economy) as an increasingly precarious field of labor.

Paramount to any analysis of the transition narrative of the drivers is the recognition that they exited from one form of informal labor (small-scale agriculture) into another. That is, their work in delivering the city's public transport services was never incorporated into the formal economy, but remained within the country's sprawling informal sector (a decision we must imagine was deliberately and strategically adopted by the state). Though the informal *songthaeo* sector is partially regulated by the state, in terms of seven year concessions awarded to the Cooperatives (see Chapter 5), there is beyond this no legal protection for the drivers or insurance that the state will continue with these particular arrangements. They are in effect vulnerable to the changing whims of governmental decisions, whims which are currently looking to reduce or eradicate drivers from the road in preparation for the advent of the AEC. The logic of this new thinking is that the city needs to modernize its public infrastructure in order to attract the new streams of income predicted to flow through the AEC's deregulated economic integration project, and to remain a viable and competitive destination point for these economic flows and the associated business and tourist numbers searching for new outlets (see Chapter 5). As such, the drivers' livelihoods have become increasingly precarious, with no legal framework to protect them and few options to shift into alternate industries.

The point of noting the current challenges facing the drivers is that they represent what I have described as a partial transition in the trajectory from farm to modern economy, having failed to transition fully into the realm of the formal economy in which livelihoods enjoy far greater protection and stability. This failure is structural – not personal – in nature, a widespread feature of Thailand's modernizing economy and of regional economic structures more broadly (see Hewison and Woradul 2013, Hewison and Kalleberg 2013). In Hewison's terms, such features enable the kind of flexibility desired by capital, but which leave the formerly rural masses in degrees of precarious work within the informal economy. Or, to adapt the kind of theorizing described earlier by Mills (2012), it represents the continuation of the majority of national subjects as second-class citizens, or in Chatterjee's language, not 'proper citizens' (Chatterjee 2004, 2008b: p57). That is, they lack the formal rights, protection and stability granted by law that is enjoyed by only a privileged (and predominantly urban) minority.

As such, the drivers represent something of the contradictions of the modern rural economy, of pathways and exit options of apparent success which yet conceal the underlying vulnerability and precarity of livelihoods propelled from one form of informality into another. As we have seen, the drivers are not passive victims of this structural feature of the modern economy, but rather act with agency to embed what economic form they can into their informal livelihood field. So too, does this informality benefit them in terms of enabling them to create an everyday work culture that preserves forms of sociality and 'laziness' highly valued by the driving-men. And yet this form of life and labor remains vulnerable. In the remainder of the thesis, I will continue the focus on rural agency, exploring the robust and assertive politics which the drivers' ongoing informality, present precariousness and failure to fully transition into either the formal economy or the ranks of first-class citizenship, entails and engenders.

CHAPTER 5: COOPERATIVE POWER, CONNECTIONS AND THE POLITICS OF LIVELIHOOD DEFENSE

> **'If the government can ensure that drivers can eat well, live well, then fine, they can do it [decommission the *rot daeng*]. But it must be bold to invest on this point. If the government does not do this, what will happen is that street closures and protests will follow, as this is our way of protecting our role and our jobs.'**
>
> **- Singkham Nunti (LCTC president)**

The preceding two chapters portrayed the livelihood field of Chiang Mai's *songthaeo* drivers as a comparatively prosperous and desirable one, focusing on the *khiu* as a localised economy and social world 'invented' by the drivers following their exit from agriculture and foray into the modern, off-farm economy. Chapter 4 however concluded on a cautionary note, suggesting that despite the financial, social and symbolic attractions of the *khiu*, the *songthaeo* economy remains perpetually precarious, an informal field of *partially*-stabilised, semi-regulated arrangements reflective of the drivers' 'failure to transition' into the legally protected realm of formal economy. In this final chapter, I will outline the multi-faceted *politics* generated by this failure to transition and due to the widespread resentment towards the drivers' domination of Chiang Mai's public transport system.

The politics discussed below focuses on the drivers' engagement with the local state as the two major *songthaeo* Cooperatives fight to maintain their concessionary duopoly over the city's public transport system. This duopoly is opposed by an active coalition of public, political and bureaucratic forces, while also enabled to persist by certain elements with the local, fragmented state. Reflecting Yoshifumi Tamada's informal 'politics of influence' (1991: 456) and Partha Chatterjee's concept of political society, the chapter traces the drivers' productive engagement with amenable local state agents and their staunch resistance against those elements threatening to the *songthaeo* economy.

Throughout the chapter, I will pay particular attention to the role of the Cooperatives and the Cooperative presidents, specifically focussing on the figure of Singkham Nunti, the long-term president of the LCTC. Widely described by Chiang Mai locals and administrators as a mafia-type figure, the chapter will argue that Singkham is at the

forefront of defending driver livelihoods through his ability to wield influence over select state agents. The methods and outcomes of this influence will be explored, as will the resistance to this influence by certain state figures.

At a theoretical level, the chapter pays attention to the way in which the contest over the future of the city's public transport system plays out at a discursive level which interacts with the material interactions between Cooperatives and state officials. That is, both Singkham and his assorted opponents draw on charged symbolic language reflecting modernist ideas of progress and development, and reflective of power relations around who should be permitted to exercise power over projects of modernisation such as contemporary public transport systems. The chapter concludes with an extended discussion of how the drivers' engagement with the state echoes Chatterjee's 'completely new conditions' of local-level political activity focussed on the efforts of everyday people to productively engage a state expected to be supportive of local livelihoods.

Modernising agendas and songthaeo *resistance*

Resentment towards the *songthaeo* was a recurring feature of discussions with Chiang Mai locals during my fieldwork stints. A wide array of complaints was levelled against the drivers, their vehicles and the *songthaeo* Cooperatives. The trucks themselves were considered dirty and polluting. The system was considered antiquated and inefficient. Driver behaviour was felt to be rude and erratic. Moreover, the dominance of the *songthaeo* Cooperatives hindered the introduction of modern forms of public transport desired by increasingly sophisticated consumers. As exemplified in the recent establishment of three sparkling new malls carrying all the designer brand names, other areas of the city's retail and service sectors were rapidly modernising. The transport system appeared to be left behind, out of place in the modernising city. Everyone knew too, or at least the sentiment went, that the Cooperatives were mafia-type organisations, their unwelcomed overstay based on coercion and criminality.

Pursuing their own ends, a string of local politicians had – for more than a decade – attempted to capitalise on this public resentment towards the *songthaeo*, successfully campaigning on policy platforms including the eradication or reduction of *songthaeo* from the roads and corresponding introduction of new forms of public transport. At the administrative level too, bureaucrats were increasingly frustrated with the transport dominance of the *songthaeo* Cooperatives. Their misgivings were multifaceted in nature. In

part cultural and personal, they resented the uneducated, rural drivers besting their rational policy agendas. In part professional, administrators also faced escalating pressures to implement projects of modernisation such as public transport renewal in order to position the city and province in the most competitive light given the additional flows of tourism and foreign direct investment anticipated with the advent of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). As told to me by Public Transport and District Administrative Organisation officials, the coming of the AEC had introduced new levels of competition between cities, with each trying to leverage market advantage and position itself to best capture the hoped for benefits of the new common economic era. Administrators knew only too well – as did the general public – that neighbouring Chiang Rai had recently upgraded its transport system. In response, Chiang Mai's Governor's Office and other agencies had allocated an unprecedented sum of money (218 million baht) to a new Master Plan which would reimagine the city's public transport system (discussed below). Collectively, these coalescing forces – both local and regional, public and official – reflected powerful desires for change and agendas to modernise the city's public transport system.

None however have yet succeeded. Standing in their way have been the *songthaeo* men, their Cooperatives and specifically the figures of the Cooperative presidents. The LCTC's president, Singkham Nunti, has been particularly active in opposing modernising agendas threatening his drivers' livelihoods, to the point where officials from Chiang Mai's Transport Department have singled him out as 'the chief obstacle to change', his power based on 'connections with politicians and police'. Not that this has stopped several high-level attempts to 'change' the transport system over the past decade.

In 2007 for example, the Bangkok-based Ministry of Transport commissioned a review of Chiang Mai's transport system. The review led to the production of a Master Plan, authored by academics considered to be transport specialists. The Plan set out to overhaul the *songthaeo*-dominated system, formulating a blueprint for an integrated transport system comprising small-buses, light rail and motorcycle-taxis. The *rot daeng* would be retained, though on a diminished scale, with vehicle numbers reduced and vehicles consigned to specific, set ancillary routes. In the end, and somewhat ignoring the Plan's recommendation, Ministry officials settled on the introduction of a Bus Transit System (BTS), relegating *songthaeo* to the role of 'feeder-vehicles' to the incoming buses.[43] The *songthaeo* Cooperatives were not consulted as part of this state-academic collaboration.

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[43] Information on the 2007 review and Master Plan gleaned at interview with the 2013 Master Plan authors.

According to interviews with workers of the 2013 Master Plan (discussed below), the President of the Chiang Mai's Provincial Administration Organisation (PAO) – a local businessman-politician named Boonlert Buranupakorn – became aware of the reviews findings. For reasons not entirely clear, though possibly linked to promises he'd made to upgrade city transport as part of his PAO presidential election campaign, Boonlert set about pre-empting the public release of the review and purchased 48 buses with PAO funds. He proceeded to introduce the buses along city school routes, routes which encroached on concessionary areas purchased and operated by the *rot daeng*. Unsurprisingly, the LCTC was furious with this turn of events. In response, under Singkham's instructions, *rot daeng* flooded into the central tourist district of Chiang Mai, blocking key entry points to the moated 'old-city' and paralysing the down-town traffic grid. Boonlert made public noises to the effect that the drivers were acting illegally. The police however refused to act, indicating that they would not intervene. Boonlert was left with few options. Singkham and Boonlert entered into negotiations. With city traffic at a standstill, and risking a public backlash for his pre-emptory introduction of the buses, Boonlert was forced to concede to the LCTC's demands to stop bus services and to promise that they would never again enter the metropolitan routes worked by the *rot daeng*. Somewhat humiliated, Boonlert was left to try and recoup some of the losses involved in purchasing the buses by selling them off to local council offices.

This episode was not the first entanglement between Boonlert and the LCTC. In 2005 he had proposed to purchase a fleet of 'eco-friendly' buses. This venture failed to materialise however, due – in Boonlert's words – to 'vocal protests from passenger pickup operators' (ie the *rot daeng*). On several occasions since, Boonlert has campaigned for the position of PAO president on the back of promises to upgrade the city's public transport system, as has his nephew Tassani Buranupakorn in his own successful (Chiang Mai) mayoral campaigns. In fact, the Buranupakorn clan is a powerful local political-business family, with other family members also occupying prominent political positions in Chiang Mai (Kemasingki 2014).[44] Tassani, in particular, has frequently noted what he considers the inadequate state of the city's public transport in public interviews. In 2010 for example, he lamented that 'public transport is another issue [for the city]. There is no point spending

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[44] Though it won't be discussed in detail here, it is worth noting that the Buranupakorn clan, like Singkham, is aligned with Thaksin-affiliated political parties. Master Plan authors advised me that Singkham and Boonlert belonged to competing factions within the broader Red Shirt / Phuea Thai movement, with enmity between the men so intense that they refused to be in the same room together, even at Red Shirt or Pheua Thai events. There is then a local, factional political element to Boonlert's interventions in the city's public transport agenda, though how much this effects his motivations is unclear (I was unable to interview Boonlert during fieldwork stints).

millions on a bus system when we know the *songthaeo* will not cooperate' (Kemasingki 2014). More recently, in 2014, Tassani appears even more resigned to the city's transport fate, responding to complaints about the transport system by suggesting that people take up walking and cycling (Kemasingki 2014). Tassani's response indicates that the LCTC and their police-backed protests/blockades have beaten the PAO and mayoral office's transport reform agendas into submission.

The LCTC has also used blockades to stymie more modest reform efforts from the Chiang Mai Transport Department in 2009. In this instance, in response to community concerns about the environmental impact of the *songthaeo*'s notoriously polluting exhaust fumes, the Transport Department established a monitoring and inspection framework for the *rot daeng* vehicles. Taking exception to the unwanted regulatory oversight, Singkham organised a small flotilla of *rot daeng* to block the entrance and exits of the Transport Department's headquarters. This was done early in the morning, before the start of the work day, effectively preventing officials from accessing the building. Again, police were unwilling to intervene, leaving it to the two parties to sort out the issue. The LCTC refused to retreat and the Transport Department agreed to cease vehicle inspections, fearing an escalation of this localised blockade into the kind of city-wide drama witnessed in 2007.

Furthermore, in interviews with Transport Department officials, officers explained that they had repeatedly devised plans to modernise the city's public transport system, with each project falling by the wayside due to opposition from the LCTC. As noted above, they singled Sinkgham out as the 'chief obstacle to change'. 'For change to come', it was explained to me, 'he would have to go. He would have to be replaced as president by a "no-name" person, someone without connections with the politicians and police'. When asked as to the relevance of these connections, officers advised that it was politicians who informally determined the career paths and promotional opportunities of high-ranking civil servants. It was therefore tantamount to career suicide for an aspirational official to advocate a policy pathway that would marginalise Singkham and risk career reprisal from Singkham's politician associates. As already indicated, the relevance of police is their refusal or inability to curtail disruptive LCTC blockades.

The latest project of transport modernisation in Chiang Mai is the 2013 Master Plan, reviving the earlier 2007 plan, though on this occasion – and for the first time – including the LCTC as stakeholders and consultants within the planning process. The 2013 Master

Plan is financed by the Governor's Office and linked with the PAO.[45] It borrows heavily from a similar exercise recently undertaken in Chiang Rai, employing the same academics to formulate settings for a revised public transport system. As with the 2007 plan, it envisages a system of mixed public transport options, with the *songthaeo* reduced in number and allocated specific routes.

During interviews with Master Plan authorites however several important considerations emerged. In addition to their inclusion of Singkham and the LCTC within this envisaged project of change, the Master Plan authors had also consulted widely with the general public, conducting large surveys to try and understand the transport choices of Chiang Mai residents, and gauging attitudes towards the current transport system. According to the authors, the (unpublished) surveys indicated high levels of dissatisfaction with the *songthaeo* system and an overwhelming desire to reduce the *rot daeng* and introduce alternative, cleaner and more efficient means of public transport. The authors also attributed escalating numbers of private vehicles per family in Chiang Mai to the lack of public transport options in the city, again connecting this with widespread reluctance to use the *songthaeo*.

Echoing the sentiments of the Transport Department officers, Singkham was cited as the chief architect of resistance. From their perspective, and as demonstrated by the success of the Chiang Rai project, it was not the technical or financial elements of transport change that was the problem they faced, but rather the *politics of change*. They too were aware of Singkham's connections, describing him variously as a *nak leng* (rural strong man) and *andaphan* (mafia) figure. They did however indicate that they had found their dealings with him open and pragmatic, noting his apparent honesty, straight talking, business acumen and managerial skills. They further explained that Singkham had indicated a willingness to change, but only on terms that preserved his drivers' livelihoods. As indicated in the opening quotation to this chapter, and as reflected in the Master Plan authors' dealings with him, Singkham's principle concern remained to ensure the drivers could continue to 'eat well, live well'. Any other options would result in the kinds of 'street closures and protests' described above. Although unrelated to fieldwork for the present thesis, a recent trip to Chiang Mai in late 2016 indicated that nothing had changed on the city's roads. The *songthaeo* continued to dominate the streets, the *rot daeng* as numerous as ever on the

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[45] The involvement of the Governors' Office is important. At the time of commissioning of the Plan, the Governor was considered to be an appointee of the Shinawatra clan, and therefore politically-aligned with Singkham. The Master Plan authors indicate that his involvement was a deliberate attempt to try and sway Singkham. As an earlier protest demonstrates however, Singkham is also able to differentiate between his political allegiances and his role as patron of the drivers. In 2003 for example, he publically denounced a *Thai Rak Thai* MP (and relative of Thaksin) for supporting the introduction of a bus-pilot program which threatened driver livelihoods – see Supatatt 2003.

metropolitan streets. It is unclear what the outcome of the Master Plan was or why it again failed to curb the Cooperative's dominance.

The LCTC President: Power and influence

I first met Singkham in early 2011 at the LCTC headquarters on the west side of Chiang Mai city. He had presided over the LCTC – the city's largest *songthaeo* Cooperative – for over 20 years. Waiting outside his glass-walled office, I couldn't help but notice that he was entertaining two senior-ranking police officers. This was my first impression of the man who I had heard so much about from various government agency officials, and it was hard to imagine that this was not an example of the 'connections' so frequently commented on. Upon meeting him, Singkham confirmed as much, matter-of-factly explaining that the meeting had been a mediation session regarding an accident in which one of his drivers had been at fault. When asked whether this particular driver – or any of them – would ever be held legally accountable for such accidents, Singkham chuckled and dismissed the possibility out of hand. '*No one* will arrest a *rot daeng* driver', he stated emphatically. 'If they do, I will take it as an opportunity to flex my muscles and demonstrate my power over the arresting officer'. Here, in a nutshell, Singkham articulated the power of these productive state connections through their ability to protect the drivers. In this instance, his relations with high-ranking police officers effectively co-opted the entire chain of constabulary command, granting to him and the drivers an effective legal immunity.

Singkham was equally forthcoming about his connections with members of the political class. In explaining to him why I had chosen to conduct research on the city's *songthaeo*, I recalled my initial puzzlement at seeing so many *rot daeng* at the nightly Red Shirt rallies of 2010. Following this declaration of interest in Red Shirt politics, Singkham swiftly declared his own prominent role within the movement. 'I'm connected with Pheua Thai' he stated, before somewhat more boldly declaring himself to be the 'backbone' of the Red Shirts in the northern provinces. He proceeded to list his close ties with Thaksin Shinawatra and other party and Red Shirt notables, some of whom had recently fled the country as part of a broadening crackdown on Red Shirt activism.

Singkham described Thaksin as a 'friend', noting that they were both from Chiang Mai, and explaining that these ties had been strengthened in recent years due to his favourable relations with the kind of high-ranking provincial policemen I'd seen in his office. 'Sometimes' he explained, 'when they [Red Shirt supporters] have troubles here with the

police or courts they call me – for help and to bail them out'. With some disgust he noted that bail for Red Shirt supporters was usually double that of other offenders, reflecting the common 'double-standards' discourse rife throughout Red Shirt rhetoric. Turning the conversation back to Thaksin and his various parties, he continued, 'they should lead the country through its critical problems and into progress that is better for our occupations… when the government (Democrat Party) is ousted, tourism in Chiang Mai will increase. The incomes of the drivers will increase.' He also indicated that the *rot daeng* drivers supported Thaksin-aligned parties at election times, receiving 500 baht per driver from party representatives to display *Pheua Thai* signage and stickers over their vehicles. Singkham made a point of explaining that he took every opportunity he could to educate his drivers on the merits of Thaksin and the Red Shirt movement. According to him, political discussions with the various drivers who visited the headquarters to use the Cooperative's financial services or for recreation were a daily affair. It was clear from the fervour with which he explained this fact that Singkham placed great weight on this pedagogical role.

I reflected at the time upon the various portrayals and assessments civil servants and other Chiang Mai residents had offered me regarding Singkham. A rural strong man (*nak leng*), a mafia figure radiating dark influence (*itthiphon muet*), a 'grass roots' man with unaccounted wealth or even a gunslinger were all options proffered to me.[46] These sat alongside the Master Plan authors' evaluations of him as a man of high business and managerial acumen. In this vein, they'd revealed to me that under Singkham's stewardship, the LCTC had maintained the highest possible credit rating, indicative of outstanding financial management. I was intrigued to put these representations to Singkham and enquire as to his own perspective on his role and persona. Somewhat hesitantly, given his reputation, I indicated that various people I'd spoken with had referred to him as a *nak leng*. As explored below, this term possesses a long historical lineage in rural Thai power dynamics, though where once it could be used to describe rural men valued for their prowess and toughness, it has become increasingly used to connote criminality and violence.[47]

Following the pattern of his response to my earlier question about police sanctioning his drivers, Singkham's response consisted of a short laugh followed by a more elaborate dismissal. Rather than take any offense, he seemed rather amused by the portrayal. 'Within the LCTC there are no *nak leng*' he emphasised. 'I am *phu mi itthiphon* (a person of

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[46] These latter two descriptors were given by officers from the Chiang Mai Transport Department.
[47] I discuss the *nak leng* and other related categories below. On *nak leng* see Reynolds 2011a, 2011b, Ockey 2000, 2004, McVey 2000b, Pasuk and Baker 2000, Thongchai 2010.

influence)!' he emphasised, somewhat more defiantly. 'If mafia-types or *nak leng* come to the Cooperative, they have to lift their hands and *wai* as a sign of respect to me!'[48] In a single statement, Singkham had rejected public perceptions of himself as a mafia or *nak leng* type, and rather positioned himself as a 'man of influence', a term which I will unpack below as carrying clear connotations of exercising authority over government officials. Rather than the mafia/*nak leng* type who tended towards the illegal and coercive accumulation of wealth from morally questionable enterprises, Singkham defined himself squarely in terms of his situated relatedness to the bureaucratic-political apparatus within Chiang Mai. As his statement indicated, at least in his mind, this placed him in a position of power over any other mafia/*nak leng* types, whom he expected to literally bow down and honor him (though initiating the *wai* greeting).

The figures of the *nak leng* and the *phu mi itthiphon* are important types of masculine power within provincial Thailand, [49] with the *nak leng* in particular enjoying long historical representation. Like many forms of Thai power, the role and meaning of the *nak leng* has shifted and morphed over time. Generally though, the term has maintained its core essence as a descriptor of a rural tough-man serving as patron and protector to a set of followers with whom he lives in a relationship of mutual loyalty (see McVey 2000b, Ockey 2004, Reynolds 2011b). One of the earliest accounts of the *nak leng* derives from archival material dating to the 1890s, in which the *nak leng* is said to be distinguished by his 'manly bearing and courage, readiness to fight in single combat or in a riot, fidelity to friends, deep loyalty and respect to parents and feudal lords' (Johnston 1980: 91). In days prior to the village's incorporation into a centralized administrative system, *nak leng* were particularly important rural figures, providing protection and security to fellow villagers, particularly from banditry and buffalo-napping. As David Johnston indicates, they were also partial to acts of thievery, though tended to share any related spoils among their friendship circle (91).

The historical record demonstrates that relations between the *nak leng* and the state ranged from co-option by the state (Johnston 1980) to acting in criminal enterprise against it (see Reynolds 2011a for several examples). Of the late 19th Century for example, Johnston (1980) has written of Bangkok's choice of 'imposing its will upon' or 'compromising with' local leaders. Frequently, as a matter of expedience, it chose the latter, filling official, local

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[48] The *wai* is the traditional Thai symbol of greeting, with hands clasped together in the lotus shape in front of the chest or head. Culturally, the lower-status individual initiates the *wai* towards the higher-status person, who may or may not choose to reciprocate. This is the meaning of Singkham insisting that other 'strong-men' initiate the *wai* when coming to meet him.

[49] The *nak leng* and it's various subtypes are not exclusively male roles – Ockey (2004) for example discusses the emergence of *jao mae* (godmothers).

administrative or policing positions with *nak leng*. Regardless, whether co-opted or rebel *nak leng* types, the fact of the necessity for the state to find ways to accommodate them is indicative that the *nak leng* has been a constant mode of rural power with which the Thai officials have had to contend.

Over subsequent years, the *nak leng* figure variously adapted and evolved, presenting in different guises, though maintaining its roots in the earlier traditions of rough and ready masculinity, of guardians protecting their followers through combinations of violence and shrewd judgement. In the 1950s and 1960s, James Ockey (2004) argues that a new style of *nak leng* emerged, with greater connections to the state and its development agenda, and popularized by the 'tough-man' guise of Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat (1958-63). Like their forebears, these men cultivated a set of clients with whom they lived in reciprocal relationship. The *nak leng* would protect, care and provide for his entourage, who in turn would exhibit loyalty to their *nak leng*-patron. For Ockey, these figures eventually morphed into a second, later type of rural power – the *jao pho* (godfathers).

Although derived from the same cultural roots (Ockey 2004: p81), the 'godfathers' transcended the localised role of the *nak leng* and transitioned into national politics, their motivation increasingly turning to personal accumulation (85-86) and the pursuit of state-connected business opportunities. Many abandoned the more traditional role of patron to local clients, focussing on the construction of familial political-commercial dynasties.[50] Their rise to power, reaching its apogee in figures such as former Prime Ministers Banharn Silp-archa (1995-6) and Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006), also marked a period of increasing violence in national level politics and its provincial operations (Anderson 1990). As Pasuk and Baker (2000: p30) write of the period, 'new men were emerging. New and violent methods were being used to determine the local allocation of power'. Here, in the figure of the godfather, we see the transferance of a traditional mode of provincial power into the national-level political realm, continuing to trade in violence, though now as often in the pursuit of private/family business interests rather than a vulnerable set of followers.

Not all *nak leng* transformed into provincial *jao pho* however. According to Ockey, local level *nak leng* persisted, some now in the form of leaders of poor urban communities, continuing to serve a more traditional role as patrons, advocates and protectors (1996: 126-150). Rather than seeking personal enrichment like the *nak leng-jao pho* figures, these 'community leader' *nak leng* continued to place the needs of their clients above or alongside

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[50] See Scott (1972) on the decline of patron-client relations in Southeast Asia.

their own, attempting to mediate between the state and local interests to ensure the well-being of the members of their community.

According to Sombat Chantornvong (2000), a further classification within the broader *nak leng* typology emerged in terms of the *phu mi itthiphon* such as invoked above by Singkham in descriptions of himself. Following Ruth McVey (2000b), Sombat argues for a distinction between 'influence' (*itthiphon*) – the informal power possessed by the *phu mi itthiphon* – and 'power' (*amnat*), the latter belonging solely to the formal state. Yoshifumi Tamada had a decade before Sombat's work also drawn this distinction between *amnat* and *itthiphon*. In Tamada's words *amnat* describes authority deriving 'from any official position or [that] is sanctioned by law', whereas *itthiphon* is the 'power which a man in authority exerts beyond his authority or which a man without an official position exerts' (455). Tamada explains that 'amnat is formal power and itthipon is informal power', and proceeds to argue that *phu mi itthipon* work to exert influence over government officials (holders of *amnaat*) in pursuit of personal interests, with *phu mi itthipon* frequently being the patron or greater power-holder within the relationship (456). For Tamada, this process of exerting influence over the bureaucracy comprises the 'the politics of itthipon' (456). Intriguingly, he notes that 'in addition to wealth, information, sensai[51] with a high official, an ability to mobilise a number of people, or even violence can be an effective source of itthiphon' (465). While he notes – though doesn't elaborate – that there are 'various types of phu mi itthipon' (456), Tamada's focus is on the influence provincial businessmen wield over the bureaucracy. Echoing Tamada's distinction, Sombat states that 'whereas the influence of a *nak leng* is often limited to his immediate community and does not denote power over government officials, a *phu mi itthiphon* is someone who can exert such pressure' (55).

A more recent appraisal of provincial figures of influence notes the *phu mi itthiphon* as particular targets of eradication under the Thaksin regime, with Thaksin launching a 'war on influential people' analogous to his 'war on drugs' (Prajak 2014). According to Prajak, Thaksin sought to eliminate the provincial power structures surrounding local men of influence as part of his battle to embed political party structures and power bases throughout Thailand. Of interest to the present discussion is Thaksin's relentlessly negative framing of these influential figures. He lambasts them as criminal peddlers of dark influence and particular obstacles to the democratic process (Prajak: pp9-11). In clarifying who he has in mind, Thaksin stated:

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[51] Tamada uses the word sensai to describe the warm personal relations existing between the man of influence and his client.

> **"my definition is simple, influential figures are the ones who use gunmen or officials or political power to harass and oppress people for their own illegal interests… in the past influential figures were subordinates to officials but then they got stronger and became officials' bosses." (Prajak: p9)**

For Thaksin then, the *phu mi itthiphon* is identified as the proverbial provincial boss, exercising power over officials for selfish personal gain. Elsewhere Prajak indicates that it was not just Thaksin who was opposed to these figures, stating that these provincial bosses were loathed by academics and journalists (p3). Further, he argues that 'Like the war on drugs, the war on influential figures had massive support from the Thai public as they thought it tackled a social problem that gravely affected their livelihoods and safety' (p11).

In bringing this discussion back to Singkham, questions arise as to why he invoked this title of *phu mi itthiphon*, specifically given its apparent lack of popularity (Prajak) and due to its negative connotations as clearly articulated from Singkham's friend and political leader, Thaksin Shinawatra. Further, Singkham appears to exhibits traits across the spectrum of types explored above. Like the 'traditional' *nak leng*, he protects his driver-clients through defending their livelihoods, exhibiting loyalty to them and at times deploying the use of violence. To this end, in one of the more interesting stories told to me about Singkham, a group of *rot daeng* drivers recalled the time he led a group of LCTC committee-men down to the *khiu* to ignite an old-fashioned fist fight with *khiu*-drivers suspected of encroaching on LCTC routes. What drew most praise in retelling this event was Singkham's sheer bravado, of going into a battle he could never have won given the small *posse* (three or four committee-men) accompanying him against the scores of drivers who at any one time populated the *khiu*. The fact that Singkham ended up bloodied and bruised seemed only to enhance his reputation, symbolic of his loyalty to his driving-men. One recalls Johnston's (1980) description of *nak leng* from the 1890s highlighting their 'readiness to fight in single combat or in a riot, fidelity to friends…'

But so too does Singkham display traits of the *phu mi itthiphon*. As evidenced through his power over police and as will be discussed later in terms of his power over local bureaucrats, Singkham exerts an influence over the bureaucracy in the pursuit of his (that is, the LCTC's) rather than 'public' interests. In so doing, he too has transcended the localised role of the rural *nak leng*, and is firmly ensconced within the provincial bureaucratic-political apparatus of Chiang Mai. He is not however a *jao pho* or god father. His interests are not those of businessmen-politicians.[52] Rather, he appears more akin to

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[52] I specifically asked Singkham whether he held political aspirations. While it is possible that he was masking his true intentions, I take his response at face value (recalling the Master Plan authors' description of him as transparent and straight-talking) when he emphatically dismissed such

Ockey's community-leader, in this case a community-leader *phu mi itthipon* rather than *nak leng*.

For present purposes however, it is not necessary to definitively classify Singkham, but rather to note that there are a range of options which may be used to describe him. Further, is to note that Singkham's insistence on describing himself in terms of *phu mi itthiphon* rather than *nak leng*, and his bravado in illustrating the power he held over any such *nak leng* who visited the LCTC raises interesting questions. Why assert one label over the other so defiantly, and why boast of exercising such power over the *nak leng*? Alternatively, why did his opponents choose to describe him in terms of *nak leng* or *andaphan* even as they simultaneously acknowledged (often in complaint) the influence he wielded over state administrators?

Several anthropological studies focussing on the politics of discourses of modernity in contemporary Thailand may prove useful in addressing these questions. Hjorleifur Jonsson's 2004 study of the discursive framing of the Mien highlanders of Northern Thailand as unmodern – specifically in relation to projects of modernity – provides a number of helpful insights. First, Jonsson argues that in the case of Thailand, discourses of modernity deployed post 1950 conflated ideas of modernity, national wellbeing and progress. That is, modern goals were equated with collective, national goals. The implication of this is that 'Thai-ness' is associated with national projects of modernity, and to oppose such projects is to risk being categorised as against the national interest – as 'un-Thai'. This holds even when projects of modernity – such as the commercialisation of agriculture – disrupt and displace traditional modes of livelihood. In fact, such disruptions become discursively naturalised, encompassed within the necessary national project of developing the country.

Secondly, Jonsson notes that cultural discourses of modernity classify people into different social categories, as modern/urban or traditional/rural. These discursive classifications are in turn linked with agency, specifically political agency. It is the modern, urbane actors who are expected – and arguably, who demand the right – to exercise agency in the fields of politics and policy making. Agency is then the prerogative of modern subjects. In this vein, Jonsson invokes the idea of 'time politics', again indicating that those classified 'modern' or 'urban' are those invested with political agency over and against the 'rural' or 'traditional' subject.

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notions. In fact, he expressed a desire to retire altogether from his role with the LCTC once he felt the drivers' livelihoods had been secured.

Further, it is against culturally-infused ideas of modernity which 'unmodern' or rural people come to measure themselves, such that ideas and discourses of modernity become a kind of compulsion for people to deploy or adopt. The corollary of this is that even as 'unmodern' people embark on projects of self-modernisation – whether as a matter of 'desire' or compulsion – they continue to be misrepresented or misrecognised as rural, backward or unmodern. This persistent discursive rendering of them continues to marginalise them in fields of political agency.

Mary Beth Mills echoes many of these points in her 2012 study focussing on her long-term research cohort of urban-migrating Isan women. Mills speaks of 'powerful symbolic hierarchies' and 'national imaginings' operating within Thailand which again classify people as rural or urban. Mills proceeds to argue that processes of differentiation attach to these classificatory poles, with greater worth and social prestige granted to the urban/modern subject as opposed to the rural/unmodern one. As such, discursive terms invoking ideas or images of the rural/traditional and urban/modern become powerful symbols, assigning Thais to particular locations within culturally-constructed social hierarchies.

Mills also links this discursive practise to projects of modernisation. She writes:

> **In other words, rural-urban dualisms operate as powerful subject-making discourses of cultural citizenship. Specifically, they justify and normalize differential valuations of citizens as more or less capable of the individual effort and self-regulation required for the society to achieve its developmental goals and modernizing potential'. (90-91)**

According to Mills, one consequence of this kind of thinking is to relegate people classified within the 'negative' pole (rural, unmodern, traditional) to a kind of marginal status, 'not deserving of full participation in national arenas of privilege and power'. (91)

For both Jonsson and Mills then, Thai discourses of modernity classify and differentiate people, negatively assessing those categorised as rural, backward, traditional or unmodern, and excluding them from arenas of political agency. Further, both writers link discourses of modernity to projects of modernity and the politics of agency in relation to these projects. Within this field of power, discourse contains a political function, classifying and categorising people into those who are or are not considered worthy of agency within 'modern' life. In so doing, discourse works to consolidate power relations between different elements within Thai society, marginalising the discursively produced rural, backward or unmodern person, even as it masks the actual ways in which such classified people adopted (and often internalised) signifiers of modernity in their everyday lives.

It is within this context that Singkham's denotation of himself as a *phu mi itthipon* and his opponents' various descriptions of him as *nak leng, andaphan*, grassroots or gunslinger – or references to him and his drivers having only minimal levels of education[53] – take on greater significance. Both deployments of language may be considered as 'cultural perfomances' (Mills 2014) working within this mutually recognised realm of discursive politics. From Singkham's perspective, the category of *phu mi itthipon* was invoked as a way of locating himself within the positive poles of Thai symbolic discourse which privileges and legitimates the urban and modern, while marginalising the rural and unmodern. For whereas the *nak leng* could remain a local (rural) figure, trading in violence, the *phu mi itthipon* – as indicated even within Thaksin's disparaging use of the term – was clearly linked with national level politics (centred on Bangkok) or provincial bureaucracy and held an influential position within the official political arena. Moreover, as discussed above, they are a modern iteration of rural/provincial power and authority. Rather then, than allow himself to be cast as a marginal rural figure, Singkham's invocation boldly asserts his social and political location in the heart of the bureaucratic-political apparatus, identifying himself as a provincial power-broker rightfully able to exert influence over public policy directions, refusing to be sidelined from the decision-making process around the city's transport system even as bureaucrats and others sought to do so through their classification of him as merely a *nak leng* or criminal figure (mafia or gunslinger).

It is then possible to read Singkham's self-imagining as a *phu mi itthipon* as a thoroughly political statement, a rhetorical shot deployed to challenge the persistent and disempowering discourse bifurcating the Thai social order into dualistic categories which determine who is permitted to participate in decision-making roles in relation to projects of modernity. Correspondingly, his opponents' own insistent choice of language aimed to exclude him from a role they did not consider him suited for, and which they sought to maintain for themselves. As a 'grass roots' figure, of limited education and questionable moral connotations, their language sought to constrain and reverse the role Singkham had crafted for himself, and to circumscribe key decision-making functions about city transport to people of their own ilk. To put the matter another way, Singkham's choice of *phu mi itthiphon* functioned as a discursive blockade to bureaucratic intentions, echoing the literal street action discussed earlier. In both ventures, Singkham bested his more highly credentialed opponents.

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[53] This point was made to me several times by Transport Department officials, lamenting that the 'uneducated' drivers held *de facto* policy control over transport decisions, over and against the educated policy-makers employed within the department.

Having declared himself as a 'man of influence', I was interested to know how this influence related to the LCTC's dominance of public transport concessions within Chiang Mai, particularly given the coalition of forces opposing it. I put the question to Singkham. His somewhat perfunctorily explained, 'When the concessions are finished, we go and extend them… there will always be an automatic extension of the concession'. Echoing the sentiments of the CMCTC President who I'd also interviewed, Singkham indicated that it would be 'impossible' for the Cooperative to lose its concessionary rights. From my research with Transport Department officials, I knew that Singkham's statements captured only part of the truth. For the reality was that the expiration of concessions led to a public tender which, in theory at least, was a competitive process with no pre-determined outcome. Pressed, Singkham provided further insight into how this 'automated' extension of concessions worked in practice. 'This is due to the under-the-table payments we make to the Transport Department and the Provincial Governor', he confided. 'It is my job (Thai: 'duty')', he explained, 'to coordinate with the Provincial Administrative Organisation, the police and Transport Department… It's their job (duty) to approve our concessions… We pay them for this service.' According to Singkham, 'coordination' and payments facilitated this automation of concessions, despite the formal tender process. Continuing on, Singkham pragmatically noted, 'If you don't have money, you can't do business… This is Thailand. It's not like Australia. If all the money we paid [illegally] was used for public service, the streets here would be paved with gold…' 'Does it ever involve violence?' I asked. 'To date', Singkham responded, 'it hasn't come to this point… but if they give our concessions to a competitor, then it could'. Singkham proceeded to clarify that any envisaged violence would target tender competitors rather than the bureaucrats with whom he interacted.

From Singkham's comments and interviews with Transport Department and PAO officials, a fuller picture of the actual world of transport concessions in Chiang Mai emerged, reflecting an 'off-stage' world in which Singkham's 'coordination' and under-the-table payments held sway, and complemented by a formal administrative tender process for the 19 *khiu* and 32 *rot daeng* concessions which expired every 7 years. It is in this off-stage world that Singkham's connections come to the fore, and through which Tamada's 'politics of *itthiphon*' comes into play as Singkham leverages his political links to ensure compliance from public officials.

The formal dimension of the Cooperative's concession bids is a predictable and mundane administrative affair. Responding to the Transport Department's issuance of a public procurement notice seeking interest from organisations wishing to bid for transport concessions, the Cooperatives submit bids outlining their financial viability, performance record, management structures and organisational resources. The Department then evaluates bids against set criteria, assigns scores to each criterion and tallies a total. The bid with the highest score should in theory be forwarded to the Governor's Office for approval. The Governor's endorsement should in turn be forwarded to central officials in Bangkok for final approval.

Informally however, the Cooperative presidents are also at work 'coordinat[ing] with the PAO, police and Transport Department'. This primarily involves the identification of relevant brokers with whom the president can partner and the subsequent distribution of envelopes of untraceable money to these brokers. Both Cooperative presidents emphasised that connections formed the basis on which all other concessionary business rested. They also indicated that nurturing such relationships was not always straightforward, as not all public officials could be relied upon to accept the bribes on offer from the Cooperatives. Although it had yet to scupper their tender efforts, presidents considered this an area of potential vulnerability within their operations. Both presidents expressed a certain satisfaction at their ongoing capacity to successfully identify and cultivate relationships with government officials, men from different social classes than themselves.

According to Cooperative leaders, brokers from the Transport Department, the PAO and the Governor's Office all required under-the-table payments. In 2011, going rates for these informal payments for metropolitan (*rot daeng*) concessions was between 500,000 and 600,000 baht per route, or a sum of between 16 million and 19 million baht for the entire suite of 32 metropolitan routes. The majority of this money goes to the Governor's Office, always I was advised in cash-laden envelopes. The Cooperative president or a trusted committee-man would carry out the exchange. The use of banks or money transfers was strictly prohibited in the process in order to avoid leaving any kind of evidentiary trail.

These illicit cash exchanges, though necessary, were not in themselves sufficient means to ensure victory. It was possible for example for competing bidders to also offer under-the-table payments, matching or even out-doing the established Cooperatives' bribes. It is here that Singkham's connections with police and politicians granted the LCTC a further competitive advantage, based on the influence Singkham could wield over any over any public officials he considered to be equivocating in their decision-making process. This

influence consisted of several factors, any of which could be drawn upon by Singkham, and which Transport Department officials made clear to me they were all too aware of.

Yoshifumi Tamada noted more than 25 years ago that 'bureaucrats fear politicians as the disbursers of reward or punishment' (1991, p460). The 'reward or punishment' Tamada references include a politician's ability to influence the promotion or demotion of an official. Or, it may involve a sideways movement in the form of a transfer to an undesirable post. As officials from the Chiang Mai Transport Department indicated to me, as a 'friend' of Thaksin and other aligned politicians, Singkham too is imbued with the politician's influence. When asked why they didn't look to alternative organisations in the tender process, perhaps ones offering a mix of transport options, or who they could more easily manage into a mixed-transport system, they acknowledged that Singkham's political connections made such a move too risky. They noted with some sympathy that it was not worth their supervisors ignoring Singkham's wishes and drawing onto themselves the possibility of career recrimination from one of his politician allies.

Transport Department officials also provided another illustration of how his connections with police enabled him to influence the tender process. During one particular concession process, Singkham evidently became concerned that the process was taking longer than he had expected, and considered this a sign of potential equivocation on behalf of the Department. As seen earlier, he drew on his drivers' unimpeded ability to blockade roads or the Department itself, and issued a threat that this would again occur unless the tender process was finalised in favour of the LCTC. According to the officials, this was sufficient for the tender to be promptly granted to Singkham's organisation.

Collectively then, the Cooperatives' connections cultivated with relevant state brokers, their substantial informal payments to these gatekeepers and decision-makers, their relations with and protection from police, their access to politicians with control over bureaucratic movements and the spectral threat of violence to any competitors in the tender process, enables the Cooperatives to 'automate' the transfer of concessions and maintain their duopoly status. It is an expensive, elaborate and time-consuming exercise, though the rewards are significant, with livelihoods derived from the possession of concessions supporting nearly 4,000 local villager-drivers and their respective families and kin groups.[54] For the state brokers and decision-makers internal to the process, it also provides highly desired access to informal funds, to supplement often meagre bureaucratic salaries with a

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[54] Both Townsend (2013) and Rigg *et al* (2014) explore the way in which the kinds of urban-derived incomes such as earned by the drivers play vital roles within the broader village economy, and specifically the household economy connected with the urban-laboring villager.

secondary income source extracted from the *songthaeo* economy. In the words of Singkham, it is an arrangement of 'shared benefit', to everyone's advantage. He takes home the concessions, his prowess as a negotiator and political coordinator intact.   His state collaborators derive their substantial kickbacks and drivers are enabled to continue plying their modestly lucrative trade. Arguably, all but the lower-echelons of bureaucrats, those devising and attempting to implement transport improvements in the city and who are positioned to financially benefit from the Cooperative's under-the table payments, find benefit in this world of bribes and connections, threats and influence.

Connections, immunity and livelihood predictability

The politics of *itthiphon* extends beyond the public transport concession process, with Singkham's influence over the police chain of command a pivotal factor in injecting a measure of stability and predictability in the drivers' livelihoods. Due to Singkham's connections with high-ranking police officers, his drivers are able to flagrantly disregard traffic and transport laws and to instigate the kinds of street blockades described earlier. As with the relationship with the Transport Department however, police cooperation must also be purchased, requiring a constant, ritualised flow of bribes or tea money distributed by drivers to police. This is a largely ordered, semi-formal exchange carried out according to established patterns of conduct. For the *khiu* drivers, each driving *klum* pays a monthly sum of money to the various police officers, police boxes and police stations situated along their particular route. For each *klum*, this may mean making monthly payments to half a dozen or more different police outfits.[55]

The transfers made between drivers and police are colloquially referred to as 'tea money' or 'newspaper money', indicative of the modest amounts at play. The drivers use the term 'newspaper money' to reflect their perception that police spend much of their time reading the local papers, particularly the sports sections. Research across a number of *khiu* indicates that monthly contributions amount to less than 1000 baht per *klum* per police outlet. In many cases, *klum* advised that they paid a given police station around 900 baht per month, a figure negotiated between the police and the *klum* president. Though individual amounts

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[55] Small police 'boxes' are common features within Chiang Mai. These may sit at busy intersections, in market places, or on the side of the road. In my experience they are usually staffed by one or two officers – frequently seen watching TV! A busy route may pass through several of these boxes.

are small, police stations or boxes will often receive monthly contributions from multiple *klum* whose routes are within their 'jurisdiction'.[56]

The money used to pay police is deducted from drivers' monthly *klum* fees, and is delivered in an envelope to a police officer who will make monthly (or possibly more regular) visits to the *klum's* rest spot in order to 'collect'. These 'collects' may be quite sociable occasions, accompanied by convivial conversation and shared meals between drivers and police.[57] The overwhelming driver sentiment expressed towards police and these rituals of exchange was one of gratitude and appreciation. None of the drivers I spoke with considered it a particular grievance or burdensome act of predatory state action. Indeed, some drivers and Cooperative officials welcomed the opportunity to make payments to police, valuing the protection and immunity which such payments bought for them. In the logic of the *songthaeo* economy, the payment of bribes is considered a shrewd and inexpensive investment, producing a stable regulatory environment for the drivers and enabling practical forms of meaningful legal immunity (see Chapter 3).

Drivers frequently disregarded traffic laws, a point repeatedly made in locals' complaints to me about the *songthaeo*, and a fact arising from their legal immunity. While officially required to observe traffic rules like any other vehicle on the roads, the *rot daeng* in particular are notorious for their erratic and dangerous driving. In their search for clients they swerve in and out of traffic, changing lanes and pulling over to the side of the road at a moment's notice, without indicating on spotting a potential client. On one such occasion, while riding a motorbike, I was the victim of such an incident, cut off and, with nowhere to go, forced to crash into the back of a *rot daeng*. While sprawled across the road, an off-duty police officer came to my aid. Although sympathetic and helpful, the officer was also quite clear in his advice that I should leave matters where they lay, for there was 'nothing that could be done'. And he was right. As noted above, rank-and-file police do not sanction *rot daeng* drivers, even when involved in at-fault accidents. This was a somewhat firsthand lesson reinforcing this reality.

The drivers' relationship with the police also enables the *songthaeo*-men to transgress transport regulations. Most commonly, this means that *songthaeo* will disregard the legal limit of passengers they are supposed to take on their vehicles, and – in violation of regulations – permit the overflow of excess passengers to hang off the backs of the trucks

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[56] It should be noted as well that the drivers are but one of a vast array of 'clients' who pay 'fees' to police. The police are able to keep the fees modest precisely because of the volume of clientele. It also reduces the likelihood of backlashes against the police from single clients, given the modesty of the fee.
[57] See High (2014: pp24-43) for an interesting discussion on the multiple valences of meaning in such occasions of 'eating' with the state, carrying connotations of both predation and friendship.

or atop their rooves. There are no repercussions from the police. Again, they are complicit in these acts, paid off by drivers and the Cooperatives.

Beyond the routinised monthly transfers of tea money, connections between drivers and police are lubricated by a range of additional services and exchanges. It is common for officers to approach drivers and request alcohol or the money to purchase it, especially around festival times or major public holidays (see Chapter 3). Drivers might also be asked to purchase 'tickets' to police events – junior police officers on occasion organize parties to 'entertain' senior officers from their particular station as part of informal career-advancement efforts. They will sell 'tickets' to 'clients' like the drivers, enabling entry to the events. They may even ask the drivers to 'sponsor' the event rather than buy tickets, which in practice means a donation for alcohol and any other entertainment expenses. It is part of the *klum* leaders' role to negotiate with police around the number of tickets to be purchased or amount of sponsorship money to be granted. Drivers may also be asked to provide 'complementary' transport to these events or for other occasions in which police need to ferry large numbers of people about.

Somewhat more contentiously, drivers may be asked on occasion to provide money to police in order for them to *tham bun* (make merit) at various *wat* (temples). Rather than donate their own money to the temple, police will use their social and economic client-networks to co-opt money. Drivers or certain *klum* may also be drawn upon by police in *ad hoc* circumstances. One *klum* was asked to contribute funds to the refurbishment and extension of a local police station, 2000 baht per month for the duration of the building project. On other occasions police will use drivers as part of criminal investigations, deploying drivers as undercover operatives in attempted drug stings. Likewise, police may ask drivers for information about local events in their village that may assist in investigations. There are then a variety of transactions sustaining the connections between drivers and police, undergirded by the ritualistic offerings of tea money and complemented by additional services and favours. Collectively, they create a stable and predictable field of legal immunity in which drivers can search for income uninhibited by law or regulation.

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Cooperatives and the politics of change

'But what of all those who are looking to change the transport system?' I asked Singkham, noting Chiang Rai's recent public transport system upgrade, locals' wishes for greater transport options and the pressures civil servants felt to modernise Chiang Mai's decrepit

system. Singkham took a moment, before responding in a thoughtful and measured way. He openly acknowledged that change was needed, but was adamant that it had to be on terms which didn't disadvantage the drivers. In fact Singkham spoke with awareness and some envy of modern public transport systems in other cities and countries. He appeared caught in something of a dilemma. His 'duty' as LCTC president, he explained, was to protect his drivers at all costs. And yet, he was perfectly aware that protection of the *status quo* did not reflect the preferences of the city's inhabitants, administrators or, it seemed, even his own sense that a modernised transport system would be desirable. For him, the solution to this problem lay not with the LCTC relinquishing its role and the associated livelihoods this generated for the drivers, but rather for the government to broker an acceptable solution. From Singkham's perspective, this could well involve modernising the transport system and introducing of other forms of public transport into the city. But only on terms that ensured that his drivers would be looked after.

As quoted at the outset of the chapter, Singkham attitude to change and the role of the state is reflected in his comment: 'If the government can ensure that drivers can eat well, live well, then fine, they can do it (decommission the *rot daeng*). But', and here he emphasised, 'the government will have to be bold to invest on this matter'. He continued, 'If the Transport Department wants to change the transport system in Chiang Mai, then it can do so. But if the *rot daeng* are not able to operate as a result, or their incomes are reduced, the department and the government must accept responsibility. There must be income assurances or compensation for the drivers. If the department wants to reduce the number of *rot daeng*, it must buy them [that is, the decommissioned vehicles] for a price of 1 million baht per vehicle'. In the absence of this kind of state intervention, Singkham assured me that 'street closures and protests will follow, as this is our way of protecting our role and our jobs'.

In outlining his terms of cooperation with any overhaul of the public transport system, Singkham is articulating a particular mode of contemporary rural politics. Specific to his circumstances, Singkham both acknowledges the state's right to modernise the city's transport system in line with community expectations – a process that may lead to the job displacement of his members – while also insisting on state support for those members, to the point of significant allocations of state funds to mitigate any negative impact which structural changes may have on the drivers' livelihoods. Nor are these demands mere hollow expectations; rather – as seen already – they involve robust strategies of engaging the state through a combination of coercion, connections and disruptions.

In many ways, Singkham's political disposition towards the role of the state in the livelihoods of his drivers reflects what Partha Chatterjee has described as the 'completely new conditions' (2008b: p53) governing rural and informal livelihoods. For Chatterjee, these new conditions have largely superseded a previous era of naked state predation on rural livelihoods and a reflexive response of peasant resistance. Rather, these new conditions envisage a governmental role for the state, now thoroughly internal to and supportive of rural livelihoods. On this matter, Andrew Walker has noted that the Thai state in particular has since the 1970s shifted 'from taxation to subsidy' in terms of its role within the rural economy, implementing a range of policy measures to support rural livelihoods (2012: pp49ff). Moreover, according to Chatterjee, rural people – particularly those who have left 'traditional' modes of subsistence farming behind – expect the state to actively reverse any deleterious effect on livelihoods should they be disrupted (p54). This again reflects a contemporary political attitude in which the state is presumed to be an agent of support for rural endeavours. As just quoted, Singkham too expects the state to reverse any negative impacts a modernised transport system may have on his drivers, setting out an ambitious suite of demands. In addition to the vehicle buy-back scheme, income assurances or compensation mentioned above, he elsewhere indicated to me that his drivers should be given meaningful retraining packages to help shepherd them into alternative employment. On these terms alone would Singkham submit to the decommissioning or restructuring of *songthaeo* services.

More broadly, Chatterjee's 'completely new conditions' governing rural livelihoods sit within his concept of a reconfigured 'political society' (2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2012), an analytical attempt to capture a domain of contemporary political life 'outside the designated spheres of modern politics' (Nigam 2012). Within this undesignated domain, the 'untutored masses' (Nigam 2012) directly engage with and make claims on the state through a sometimes unruly cocktail of unlawful, informal and unsavoury means. 'Those in political society', says Chatterjee, 'make their claims on government, and in turn are governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations' (2008a: p56). These claims are made in the pursuit of welfare and livelihood supports, in circumstances of uncertainty and precarity, often by associations or 'community groups' tacitly inscribed with the malleable authority of moral legitimacy.

Distinguished from civil society, inhabitants of political society – though formal citizens – are forced to negotiate the terms of their welfare and livelihood precisely because of their position located within the informal economy, and the lack of predictable rights governing

informal livelihoods. The transfer of resources necessary for viable livelihoods within these realms of informality is dependent upon this process of negotiation or direct transaction between the beneficiaries of governmental goods and local state operatives. It is this necessity of negotiation, bargaining and cajoling in the making of claims on the state which render this sphere of modern life as political, in contrast to the administered world of civil society in which state resources are channelled to the inhabitants of the middle and upper-classes through predictable, regulated flows of rights.

Chatterjee illustrates his concept of political society through case studies of railway squatters, street vendors, informal book-binders and urban rickshaw drivers. Routinely, members of each group form associations, act in violation of laws and regulations, and collectively negotiate – often through charismatic, locally renowned leaders – with state officials to ensure they are permitted, on an always exceptional basis, to continue with their livelihood pursuits. Typically, these negotiations unfold in shadowlands outside of public purview or scrutiny. Permeating these off-stage arenas are a litany of temporary state-sanctioned exceptions to the law. Thus, squatters are excepted from laws governing land encroachment and the illegal siphoning off of electricity and water, street vendors are excepted from laws prohibiting the erection of permanent stalls on pathways and so on. The bases of these exceptions may be several. State officials or local politicians may do so in the expectation of electoral returns, they may do so in order to pacify combustible social-groups, they may do so out of a sense of social obligation or recognition of moral legitimacy on behalf of those making the claims, or they may receive some kind of benefit (bribe) in return.

For Chatterjee, the point of any of this is that such decisions by the state to permit exceptions, or transfer resources to claim-making communities, are always and intractably matters of contingency and calculation, such that any entitlements – including entitlement to be excepted from the law – only ever amount to provisional and *ad hoc* arrangements. Temporary arrangements never amount to the status of rights, they never grant recipients a sense of complete certainty or stability, and they are always open to being revoked, modified or re-directed. Hence the need for ongoing negotiation – 'politics' – and the imaginative tactics deployed by local leaders and associations in exercising influence over selected state officials (2008a: p58). The 'politics of the governed' (Chatterjee 2004) in these circumstances is to act with as much skill as possible in 'manipulating and pressuring' the levers of the state into calculating and facilitating the transfer of resources on terms alleviating something of the precarity of lives lived in the informal economy (Chatterjee 2008: pp54, 60). And for Chatterjee, those who conduct themselves within this realm, the

organisations and local leaders through whom claims on the state are channelled, are to be reckoned as political actors, as political leaders within what Chatterjee argues can be understood as a sphere of post-colonial *democracy* [italics added] (2004: p50, 2008: p60,).

In his recent examination of 'Thailand's political peasants', Andrew Walker (2012) has adopted Chatterjee's concept of political society in his description of Thailand's modern rural politics. Leveraging culturally construed understandings of power, Walker focusses on the way in which rural people seek to domesticate state power and draw it into productive networks of local exchange, much as they do with the amoral and malleable inhabitants of the spirit world. Echoing Chatterjee (2004) and Nigam (2012), and unsurprisingly given his culturalist reading of power, Walker recognises that political society – which he describes as the intermingling of livelihood aspirations with state power – undermines 'modernist narratives of national citizenship and liberal democracy', with their respective emphases on 'universal rights, the formal rule of law, civic virtue and bureaucratic rationality' (22). He proceeds to write that it (political society):

> **… is characterized by special interest groups, charismatic and controversial personalities, and recipients who are skilled at negotiating access to the state's resources. In the world of political society, benefits flow primarily from connections, manipulation, calculation and expediency, not from the universal rights of modern citizenship (2012, p.22).**

It is my contention that the activities of the *songthaeo* Cooperatives in engaging the state, as discussed in this chapter, fit neatly into this domain of political society, of direct transactions between a sectional association and local state agencies over 'access to assets' (Scoones 2009) considered necessary for livelihood and welfare purposes. In such a reading, the Cooperatives function as political organisations, Singkham as a political leader, making claims on the state through direct, personalised transactions with select brokers, negotiating the transfer of state resources (transport concessions) necessary to the sustained viability of driver's 'informal' livelihoods. So too, relations with the police secure the transfer of another valued resource – legal immunity and protection – and provide the basis for a series of legal exceptions productive to drivers' livelihoods. In so doing, the Cooperatives act neither in accordance with civic virtues nor with the city's progressive interests in mind, but rather act with grand skill in manipulating a range of state agencies into ensuring the ongoing monopolisation of public transport services for the Cooperatives. Bribes and blockades, violence and brokers, are all means of negotiation, comprising a field of productive political society through which the drivers secure a measure of stability in a livelihood field governed by temporary concessions and ongoing threats from those seeking to eradicate the *songthaeo* from the roads.

We should note also, that within this reconceptualised sphere of livelihood politics, the role of violence or coercion often assumes a different meaning than in eras past. For, as Chatterjee argues, rather than signifying resistance against the state, of a desire to be free from state involvement, coercive acts now rather signify calculated means of 'drawing attention to specific grievances with a view to seeking appropriate governmental benefits' (2008a: p125). I suggest that this is the meaning of blockades and protests. It is not that the LCTC wants to simply be free from state regulation or act independently of the state. Quite the opposite. It would arguably be better for the state to increase and formalize its regulation of the *songthaeo* and to incorporate them into the protected world of the formal economy. Given this is unlikely to eventuate, expressions of Chatterjee's political society are invoked in order to defend driver livelihoods.

Summary

In this chapter, I've explored the various means through which the drivers protect their livelihoods and the Cooperatives ensure their ongoing duopoly over the city's public transport concessions in the face of widespread resentment and active opposition. At the heart of both processes stand the figures of the Cooperative presidents, exemplars of traditional, male rural power adapted to the modern economy. Within this contemporary role, the presidents cultivate connections with politicians and state brokers, enabling them to exert influence over the Transport Department, Provincial Administration Office, the police and (to a lesser extent) the Governor's Office. When necessary, the Cooperatives also deploy tactics of street blockades and threats of violence. I have suggested that both modes of activity – calculated connections and resistance – are reflective of the new conditions of state-society relations captured in Chatterjee's concept of political society. Finally, I have outlined the fact that the politics of the Cooperatives, as opposed to the efforts of state officials and political actors, has to date proved triumphant. The broader significance of this fact and what it may reveal about the functioning of Thai politics, will be explored further in the following Conclusion.

CONCLUSION: RURAL AGENCY AND THAILAND'S UNRULY POLITICAL CULTURE

I begin the conclusion with two short vignettes. The first is drawn from my fieldwork in early 2010, in the comparatively docile weeks and months preceding the April-May bloodshed in which scores of Red Shirt protestors were killed by Thai authorities in and around Bangkok's prestigious Ratchaprasong Square. Its setting is a modest stretch of road between the Warorot Hotel and Wat Prasingh temple precinct in Chiang Mai's moated old-city, which in the months preceding the bloody crackdown was co-opted by local Red Shirt supporters, barricaded with bamboo spikes and rubber tyres, and transformed into a semi-militarised site of protest and festival. Local Red Shirts, their 'black-shirted' security forces and other interested onlookers nightly gathered to watch live feeds of political speeches – and the odd karaoke number – beamed in from much larger rally sites in Bangkok and televised on a makeshift stage-screen. Here, gifted orators delivered stirring speeches espousing the highest ideals of liberal democratic values – of equality and the rule of law, of an end to discriminatory double standards, demanding a new politics of electoral enfranchisement and respect for the democratic rights of each and every Thai citizen. The gathered crowds eagerly responded to these platitudes with sonorous cheers and applause, before breaking into song or laughter as the same political leaders shifted gear and began singing familiar country songs. In this cordoned off back street, under the cover of night and watch of armed guards, the stirrings of a subaltern yearning for democratic inclusiveness appeared to find expression and an embracing audience.

Among the crowds of supporters and curious bypassers, the *rot daeng* formed a conspicuous presence. Their vehicles snaked along the curb-sides of surrounding streets, adorned with large, red flags, pro-Thaksin stickers and other political paraphernalia demonstrating their allegiance to Chiang Mai's most famous son.[58] Their drivers formed part of the vibrant throng. As noted in the previous chapter, their LCTC president was the self-declared, 'back-bone' of the movement in the country's northern region, daily teaching the drivers the benefits of a Thaksin led-regime. From the drivers' perspective, as they frequently relayed to me, Thaksin mattered to them because of his ability to stimulate the economy,

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[58] Thaksin was born and raised in Chiang Mai. Shinawatra silk stores continue to operate in the city.

increase tourism within Chiang Mai, which they in turn linked to more prosperous livelihoods for themselves.

The second vignette is drawn from a re-study by Peter Vandergeest of a district, Sathing Phra, in the southern Thai province of Songkhla (Vandergeest 2012a). Specifically, I am interested in Vandergeest's description of Satingh Phra's fishermen, and their various modes of defending their fishing livelihoods. Vandergeest presents a situation of ongoing precariousness of fishing livelihoods in Sathing Phra, brought about by a combination of declining fish stocks, illegal trawling and offshore oil extraction. He proceeds to note the mobilisation of fishermen into fishing networks – described by him as 'militant' (p148) – who mobilise and engage the state in a range of ways in order to defend their livelihoods. In response to large trawlers illegally entering fishing exclusion zones, for example, fishermen contact officials from the Department of Fisheries and seek enforcement of exclusion laws. In turn, Vandergeest attributes responsiveness from the Department with the fishermen's past militancy, including participation in the 1997 Assembly of the Poor protests. Elsewhere, he indicates that local fishing groups have blockaded the port and demanded community participation in the planning of artificial reefs crucial to their livelihoods. The fishermen have also made demands on state agents to compensate them for income losses due to offshore oil extraction which they consider to deplete fishing stocks (p153). While not specifically addressing the fishermen, Vandergeest notes the kind of collective engagement with the state in issuing these kinds of demands and accessing livelihood resources continues through patron-client networks, connected to election results, and considered by him to be 'undemocratic' (p153).

Both vignettes offer important insights and points of departure in considering the livelihoods and politics of Chiang Mai's *songthaeo* drivers. The significance of the first episode is to highlight the disjuncture between the democratic values and ideals espoused in Red Shirt rhetoric, the far more pragmatic, self-interested local driver-discourse surrounding economy and livelihoods, and the actual undemocratic and unlawful practices drivers' collectively engage in (chapter 5) to preserve their livelihoods. The significance of the second vignette is to illustrate that what I have described in terms of the drivers' enacting of 'political society' is not isolated to the *songthaeo* men, but appears to find resonance in other sectors and parts of the country.[59]

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[59] See Walker 2012 for further discussion on political society among Thailand contemporary 'peasants'.

To press the point further, their appears to be a yawning chasm between the 'staged' political values of Red Shirt speeches and the intimidation, threats, bribes and legal exceptions the *songthaeo* Cooperatives deploy in order to maintain their duopolistic power. How to account for such apparent contradictions, and what might they reveal about the current state of 'rural' politics as it operates in Thailand?

A short response could be to suggest that what I have described as the 'politics' of the drivers is a perfectly rational expression of agential action aimed at preserving precarious livelihoods within the informal economy in an environment where formal expressions of democracy and political participation (elections) are routinely negated and denied to people either self-designating as *khon chonabot* (rural or country people) or who are discursively classified as 'rural' despite the adoption of 'modern' lifestyles (see chapter 5). That is, where military or 'judicial' coups oust governments elected by people like the *songhthaeo* drivers, and considered to support *songthaeo* (or, more broadly, 'rural') livelihoods, a rational response is to work through local, amenable, state officials to craft alternate local arrangements serving livelihood needs. This was, after all, the way in which the drivers initiated their foray into the off-farm transport sector in the first place (chapter 2), and is consonant with what I have described in chapter 1 as a long trajectory of rural agency and adaptability in the search for meaningful livelihoods. In a similar vein as I have argued the drivers 'invented' the *khiu* and *songthaeo* economy (chapter 3), so too, I suggest, they have invented a mode of engaging the state (where structural elements have rendered elections and the whole process of democracy itself somewhat meaningless) in pursuing their livelihood interests.

A slightly longer response again invokes the conceptual work of Partha Chatterjee, for whom the kinds of illicit and at times unruly actions of the drivers are locked-in components of the new conditions governing political society. There is a 'dark side' to political society according to Chatterjee (Chatterjee 2004: p75), a tendency to descend into unruly violence and forms of criminality (p47), which he is perfectly aware will appear unpalatable to many who prefer 'progressive' views of modern politics tracking in the direction of civil society and its constituent elements of law, order, civic inclusivity, aggregated social agendas, elections and virtue. 'As I have mentioned a few times' writes Chatterjee (2004: p74), 'political society will bring into the hallways and corridors of power some of the squalor, ugliness and violence of popular life'. Elsewhere he writes of the widespread middle-class complaint that:

> politics has been taken over by mobs and criminals. The result is the abandonment
> – or so the complaint goes – of the mission of the modernizing state to change a

backward society. Instead what we see is the importation of the disorderly, corrupt, and irrational practices of unreformed popular culture into the very hallways and chambers of civic life, all because of the calculations of electoral democracy' (2004: pp48-9).

Here, Chatterjee partially addresses Vandergeest's implied critique that political society is mere political or electoral expediency. Cognisant of such critiques, Chatterjee prefers however to view the activities of political society as the substance of a contemporary democratic politics beyond the domain of the middle and upper-classes, describing it as a form of popular sovereignty contributing to 'an expansion of democratic political participation' by enabling people otherwise excluded from meaningful participation in political processes to shape and choose 'how they should be governed' and how the state should relate to their livelihood needs (2004: pp41, 76-78).

It is tempting to cast the politics of the drivers as a form of subaltern, popular sovereignty in a political moment in Thailand that can well be described as post-democratic. This would be to somewhat ignore the evidence however, in that the drivers' – and specifically the Cooperatives' – robust and illicit engagement with state officials did not begin with the recent coups, or even with the rise to power of Thaskin Shinawatra. Rather, the cultivation of state brokers, the payment of bribes and the threats of violence or recriminations against uncooperative officials have always been the way in which driver livelihoods have been preserved. It is simply 'business as usual', reflective – as indicated above – of long-standing rural desires to act with agency within given structural contexts, and to forge meaningful livelihoods.

More broadly, is to note that the politics of the drivers in maintaining their transport duopoly, does not appear to align with the public interest of the city's residents, at least as much as can be known of this through local election results and the more recent Master Plan surveys. Drivers are aware, though largely unconcerned, about this fact. There is a real sense then in which the drivers' refusal to relinquish their position of domination of the transport-service market, and to open it up to more modern modes of transport, is a thoroughly insular and self-interested form of livelihood politics. Rather than serving any democratic ideals or notions of the betterment of the city, the drivers livelihood defence is better seen as tying in with their efforts to cultivate 'modern' lifestyles within their village retreats, replete with consumer items requiring ongoing incomes, and implicated in the kind of local village status games discussed in chapter 1. This latter analysis of the drivers' politics of livelihood defence is not intended as a criticism of their actions. It is simply an attempt to provide critical context of what 'popular sovereignty' as imagined by Chatterjee

might consist of in this particular context, and to note the kinds of cultural values with which it is implicated.

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The advent of the Red Shirt movement was received with excitement by many commentators of Thai politics and society. In line with the kind of reading of rural history explored in the works of Keyes and Haberkorn (chapter 1), for many the Red Shirts appeared as a further, deeper expression of long-held rural desires for democracy, equality and belonging. This study of Chiang Mai's *songthaeo* drivers is intended to problematize this portrait of rural Thai politics. Rather than finding local political sentiments and practices demonstrating the liberal-democratic ideals of Red Shirt rhetoric, a thoroughly pragmatic form of engaging the state has been identified, demanding ongoing state support for local livelihoods, and armed with an array of under-the-table and off-stage weapons to ensure the compliance of the local state. This particular iteration of what I have conceptualised in terms of Chaterjee's political society is not one which has sought to overturn the contours of political culture within Thailand, so much as it is one which has sought to elbow its way into the political arena, mimicking the very strong-arm tactics (exclusion, money-politics and spectral violence) which Thailand's elite political actors embody. This is most evident in the figure of Singkham Nunti, a local strong man who has carved out a fearsome reputation for himself and which he deploys to manipulate local state officials. It is perhaps in Singkham that the politics of the drivers is best expressed, and best expresses itself as a reflection of Thailand's broader political culture. For Thailand's political system remains bound to strong-man figures, whether locally, in what I have described as a 'community-leader *phu mi itthiphon*' like Singkham, or of provincial bosses, military generals or royal leaders. Strength, influence, profile and connections predominate, in both elite and local 'rural' settings such as that in which Chiang Mai's village-based drivers craft and defend their living. The informal politics of livelihood defence practiced by the drivers is but a localised version of a national cultural practice, and one which has well-served Chiang Mai's *songthaeo* men, even as it confounds the expectations of many of the city's residents.

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