

Title	Making of Community in a Commercialized Community in Northern Thailand
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Citation	東南アジア研究 (2009), 47(1): 89-110
Issue Date	2009-06-30
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2433/108376">http://hdl.handle.net/2433/108376</a>
Right	
Type	Journal Article
Textversion	publisher

## “Making of Community” in a Commercialized Community in Northern Thailand\*

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### Abstract

The community-based development approach has been applied to development projects for a long time. Recently the Thai government launched the “sufficiency economy” policy, which promotes subsistence agricultural production and claims to strengthen rural communities. However, on the ground implementation of this policy does not necessarily result in the strengthening of rural communities as the government claims it does. A strong sense of community can be built among farmers even if they practice commercial agriculture. Strengthening a community, however, is dependent neither on subsistence farming nor commercial farming. Rather, as I argue in this paper, the idea of “community making” involves collective actions in relation to political and economic conditions. I will illustrate this point by examining the process of strengthening an upland community in Northern Thailand through agricultural practices of farmers in relation to their political and economic conditions.

**Keywords:** community, Karen, commercial farming, protected area

### I Introduction

In Thailand, community-based development, and the “strengthening community strategy” have long been promoted for development programs by both non-governmental and government agencies. While there are various ideas about the community-based development approach, there are two polar ideas regarding the trajectory of rural communities entering globalization.

On the one hand, globalization is seen as establishing “an age of individualism,” where people and institutions are more independent and self-reliant [Hopper 2003]. This thesis states that increasing individualism and privatization in the era of globalization deteriorates rural communities or leads to *Chum Chon Lom Salai* (the collapse of “community”). Natural resources such as common property are privatized, commoditized, and taken over by states, capitalists, and transnational corporations transferring ownership away from local communities [Attachak 2005]. The loss of common property causes the loss of strong bonds within a

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\* This paper was presented in Southeast Asia Council Conference: “*Beyond Intellectual and Political Boundaries: Southeast Asian Studies in the 21st Century*,” October 19-21, 2007, Québec City, QC. Organized by Canadian Council of Southeast Asian Studies (CCSEAS).

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“community.” Moreover, economic pressures force people to concentrate on earning money and pay less attention to communality.

On the other hand, the Community Culture School argues that rural communities can overcome the fierce forces of capitalism and globalization through forming subsistence economies. Research conducted by Chattip Nartsupa on the economy of Thai village communities found that 75% of people in rural communities are “small independent producers” who work the land with small financial capital. In some cases, they sell surplus produce for supplemental income rather than selling it all for the maximum amount of profit. This economic system is based on a strong sense of community in which people help one another in the spirit of common humanity and are regulated by a community culture [Chattip 2005]. This idea implies that a strong bond of community does not exist in a highly commercialized community. Thus, this suggests moving from the market mechanisms of a capitalist economy to subsistence agriculture will ensure “community making.”

The simplistic representation of rural communities as being autonomous, having a “community culture” and “self-sufficiency economy,” isolated from the state and market and the rest of the world tends to romanticize people’s culture and livelihood, and dichotomizes traditional and commercial production. Katherine Bowie [Bowie 1992] points out that the idealized subsistence economy of the past in Northern Thailand can only be a myth. Such an idea is idealistic and problematic [Anan 2001], particularly in the context of globalization which is imagined in terms of “unbounded free space” [Massey 1999]. Nowadays, the state and market are integrated in the community in many forms [Agrawal and Gibson 2001; Li 2001; 2005]. Some studies even point out that local people have attempted to integrate themselves to become part of state and market systems.

This paper demonstrates the (re) making of community which involves collective actions of community members in relation to political and economic conditions. In the context that a local community is interrelated to the state and market, a strong bond of community does not necessarily deteriorate, but is continually remade. Drawn from many thinkers, [e.g. Agrawal and Gibson 2001; Fink 1994; Long 2001; and Vandergeest 2006] I use “community” in a loose sense to mean collective actors with the feeling of commonality, as people who share common goals, interests, or values. “Community making” is a result of a dialectical process between individuals and “community,” and between internal and external interactions of a community [Fink 1994]. Through these interactions, people’s ideas of “community” and their social relations have been reshaped.

The article is divided into five sections. The next section provides background on the research community and research methodology. The third section examines the strengthening of local communities by government agencies, and the strategic engagement of local people in such programs. The fourth section elaborates on “community making” of the community through examining how agricultural practices in the community are intensively connected to state and market. The last section concludes that a strong bond of community does not necessarily exist only in an autonomous and subsistence community. In fact, the

connectedness of state and market can be a motivating factor in "community making."

## II Research Community and Methodology

Research was conducted in Pa Bon (anonymous name), a Pga K'nyau<sup>1)</sup> community in upland Chiang Mai, northern Thailand. This community is quite small; 229 people in 39 households (August, 2007). The community is located approximately 100 kilometers from Chiang Mai city which is not too far to be considered connected by state, capitalist, and social movement agencies. Since 1989, the land area of the community has overlapped with the Sri Lanna National Park. As a result, community members and their land use has been constrained by government officials. Due to pressures from state control, the community joined the Northern Farmer Network (NFN), a popular organization in northern Thailand which consists of over 100 forest communities. The NFN advocates for the reform of state conservation policies through the decentralization of natural resources management, and the implementation of community-based resources management.

This article particularly aims to illustrate the viewpoint that Pa Bon people are active agents through examining their strategic interactions with other social actors. I concentrate on the peoples' everyday practices, emphasizing agricultural productions in order to explore the villagers' conception of "community" in changing economic and political contexts. My interest in this topic comes from my work experience as a former NGO activist involved in social movements working on land, forests, and ethnic minority issues over the past 10 years. Particularly, I worked for an organization, which supported the NFN from 1997-2002 and conducted research in this community from 2003 to the present.

My main research method was participant observation and informal interviews done through simple conversations with the Pa Bon villagers during the time I stayed in the village and worked on their farm over a period of seven months. I also collected quantitative data with the assistance of villagers through household surveys, questionnaires, and mapping. For other sources of data, such as NGOs and government officials, I collected secondary documents, formal and informal interviews, and conducted participant observation.

## III State Agencies Role in Strengthening Local Communities

Strengthening local communities is a concept increasingly applied in the Thai government's and non-governmental organizations' policies and projects which claim to achieve decentralization and people participation. This section will demonstrate two example case studies of how such an approach is implemented on the ground in the research community, its effects, and how the villagers strategically engage in these programs.

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1) Karen, an ethnic minority, call themselves *Pga K'nyau*, meaning human being.

### III-1 *Aid Program*

In 2000 the Thai government established “the Community Organization Development Institute” (CODI) as an independent department working to strengthen community organizations. Many staff members of the CODI were former NGO activists. Thus, the CODI adopted much of the NGOs’ language, such as “participatory development,” “strengthening community organizations,” “self-reliance,” and so on. For example, one of the CODI’s projects is named “The Recovering Local Communities” and cooperates with NGOs and local communities. The project’s name and objectives reflect assumptions that communities have been deteriorating and that traditional communities can be recovered.

Besides the development programs, the CODI contributes emergency aid for local communities impacted by natural disasters. In late September 2005, a severe flood damaged agricultural areas, houses, assets, and killed many people in Northern Thailand. The Pa Bon community was flooded by water, mud, and sand from the many small streams branching from the Ping River. The paddy fields in which rice was growing to be harvested in the following two months were destroyed. The water level increased for only 1-2 days, but mud and sand remained in the fields after the water subsided.

Ying (anonymous name), a mid 30-year-old man from Ban In (anonymous name) community, from a different district, sought out aid for his community which was flooded. He wrote a proposal requesting funding allocation from the CODI to restore the paddy fields. As an active leader of the NFN, he added the names of other flooded communities in the upper-Ping watershed, a sub-network of the NFN in the proposal, stating in the proposal that “we are from the same network.” Through personal relationships,<sup>2)</sup> a CODI staff tried hard to negotiate with his/her colleagues in order to approve Ying’s proposal. However, many villagers who received monetary assistance did not know that they had received it because of Ying and the name “NFN.”

The representatives of flooded communities set up committees for distributing the funds. The committee of the Pa Bon community agreed that the paddy field owners should contribute 20% of the whole cost of paddy restoration, so that the remaining budget could be used for communal benefit, including for the people who had no paddy fields. However, some villagers were dissatisfied and did not clearly understand the reasons for having to pay 20% of the restoration costs. Some villagers thought that the quoted cost of renting a tractor proposed by the sub-district leader or *Kamnan*<sup>3)</sup> was too high. Some villagers suspected that the committee members might be corrupt. These were merely rumors, and nobody asked for an inspection. Nevertheless, the rumors about corruption were widespread. Many NGOs and NFN staff also heard these rumors.

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2) Some northern CODI staff know Ying and the NFN well, as they worked together in the past. Also a CODI staff is a former NGO worker who used to work for the NFN.

3) *Kamnan* is the official position of a sub-district leader. In Thailand context, many *Kamnan* are influential persons, who have broad political and economic networks. They often have hidden interests and are involved in the concession of local construction projects to their business partners.

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Two years after the flood, I visited Pa Bon. A housewife asked me about the rumor, "I heard that Ying had to go away from his community because he was accused of corruption. Is this true?" According to our personal conversations, an NGO activist and a CODI staff explained to me that Ying was not involved in the administration of the funds. He sent the proposal for the project to the CODI and then had to leave his community due to his marriage. One NGO activist said that the rumors were actually a result of personal conflicts between Ying and villagers in Ban In.

From my perspective as a former NGO activist, if the CODI had not been there, the NFN probably would have created an activity raising funds and assistance from network members and allies. Helping each other in overcoming a natural disaster could have made the villagers feel self-reliant and create a stronger bond within the network by re-enforcing a sense of belonging to the same "community." Moreover, the villagers would have been encouraged to establish a transparent system of money administration, and it would not simply be a case of throwing a large amount of money into communities without oversight. For example, in 1999 a large area of rice fields in upland communities were damaged by widespread insect infestation. The Community Forest Support Group (CFSG)<sup>4</sup> and its allies initiated a Buddhist fundraising activity (*Papa*) for gathering money and rice donations from allies and people living in the city to help the upland farmers in six communities. "It was not much money, but we could give them spiritual support by inviting many farmers and people from the city to visit them," an NGO activist said.

According to informal interviews, some NGO activists think that CODI, as a source, and as a provider of money was not the key cause of the conflicts among community members, but it was rather the method of money administration. The provision of money was necessary, because it would have been impossible for NGOs alone to get enough money that was required to urgently help villagers within a limited amount of time. Moreover, an NGO member revealed, "we cannot be sure if without CODI, NGOs and the NFN could have helped the flooded communities as there were many conditions making us not work as closely with local villagers as before." One condition was that some NGOs claimed that many communities had already been strengthened and they no longer needed NGOs' support. Another significant condition was that many NGOs faced budget shortages. Many foreign funders, the key supporters of Thai NGOs, have changed their targets away from Thailand to neighboring countries. As a result, CODI and domestic funders, especially government agencies, have become the main sources of NGOs' funding. However, the government agencies prefer giving funds directly to local communities rather than through the NGOs.

Apart from the CODI aid, currently there are increasingly more grants, loans, and technical assistance projects provided by additional government agencies directly to local communities. According to personal communication with many NGO staff and community leaders around

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4) The CFSG is a NGO which supports grassroots networks of community forestry practitioners in their efforts to increase local participation in public policy decision-making processes affecting their communities.

Chiang Mai, local people have to follow a strict project administrative system determined by funders in order to receive the funding. Many community leaders are now busy the entire year with writing proposals, processing, and project reporting for several projects in the name of “local empowerment,” “decentralizing power,” “creating local solidarity and happiness,” “local arts and culture conservation,” and so on. Consequently, they do not have enough time to participate in social movements which now receive less funding support.

Many NGO activists<sup>5)</sup> note that the direct provisioning of money to local communities originated during the Thaksin government administration (2000–06). It was the state’s strategy to draw local people away from social movements and NGOs, which empower local people to have self-determination, and defend and negotiate for their rights. In other words, it is a strategy to weaken local communities and social movements which negotiate with state authorities. Moreover, the CODI has been organizing new peoples’ organizations but ignoring the already existing peoples’ organizations. These organizations are instructed by the state and not interested in social movements, collective actions, or negotiating with the state. They only propose a project, ask for funding from CODI, and wait for assistance from state agencies. Hence, they no longer aim for self-reliance but are under the patronage system of the state.

Among the debates of how to work for/with local communities, the funding debate is one that is significant for NGOs, government agencies, and also local people who are involved in community-based work. This raises the question of how NGOs and government agencies understand the concepts of “strengthening community” and “self-reliance” in the context that they are intervening in local communities through providing funding. Further, what are the local people’s conceptions of and responses to such community-based projects?

### III-2 *Sufficiency Economy*

In 2006–07, the Thai government led by General Surayud Chulanont launched the “sufficiency economy” policy, polarizing the market orientated policy of the previous government headed by Thaksin Chinawartra. The Prime Minister Surayud claimed that this policy would strengthen Thailand in entering the age of globalization. Accordingly, “strengthening community” is included as a strategy in the 10th Thailand Social and Economic Development Plan based on the sufficiency economy philosophy.

November 24th, 2006, the then Prime Minister Surayud gave a speech at the conference on “The Thailand Development by the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy.” He stated that the sufficiency economy policy would be implemented for 1) balancing development of urban and rural societies; 2) balancing self-dependence and competitive ability in the world market; and 3) creating a secure system of families and communities and reducing luxurious livelihoods [Buriram Provincial Office 2006]. According to such policy, the farmers in rural areas are encouraged to practice subsistence agriculture on the basis of encouraging sustainable agriculture and sustainable development.

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5) Interviews of NGOs’ staff and the leaders of people organizations in the National Land Reform Network.

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In June–July 2007, the Prao district officials in collaboration with other government agencies conducted a series of one-day training programs, called "the Aids Program for the Poor: Sufficiency Economy."<sup>6</sup> In Pa Bon, the community headman selected 12 villagers to participate in the training. One training participant told me that he was given 100 baht per diem, three cans of vegetable seeds, a plastic bag of morning glory seeds, and a book.<sup>7</sup> Some villagers were also given rice and instant noodle packages and a few fish cans. A few months after the training, some villagers were given nets and some other varieties of seeds because they requested these items from the trainers.

I talked to many participants some weeks after the training. What they could remember from the training, and their responses to it, were:

"They said that we should save some income and we should have a sufficiency economy."

"They told us to increase our income and reduce expenses, but I don't know how to do this."

"They asked us to record daily income and expenses for three months, but I forgot to do it regularly."

"Why did they give us only this amount of seeds? How can we get benefits from just a few seeds? They should have given us up to one kilogram of each."

"I won't waste my time growing these seeds."

"We haven't decided yet if we will plant them. If we have time, we may plant them."

This indicates that the villagers did not understand much about the government's "sufficiency economy." However, the terms and ideas have now been introduced to them. A 60-year-old man asked me every time I visited the community, "How do I reduce expenses and increase income?" He also tried to dig a pond to raise fish as an economic alternative for sufficiency economy, while his children grew rice for subsistence and sold feed corn for earning income. Normally, the villagers do not have experience farming fish. Rather, they catch small fish from streams. However, this man thought that the wild fish were rapidly decreasing, and he had seen his neighbors raising fish successfully. Unfortunately, his pond could not contain water due to the soil quality, so his project for earning income failed.

Apart from the training course, the term "sufficiency economy" was introduced by government agencies to local villagers through many other methods. One night in Pa Bon, I observed a meeting of village leaders, who were having a serious discussion on how to write a sufficiency economy project proposal to request 200,000 baht from the government. In 2005–06, the same amount of funding was provided to the community by the Thaksin

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6) In 2003 the Thaksin government launched a popular policy of "poverty solution." Accordingly, the people were asked to register their names and problems, such as debt, no land to farm and so on, so that the government would have concrete solutions for them.

7) "The document for promoting learning process for the poor households according to the sufficiency economy philosophy, for increasing income, Chiang Mai Province" published by the Community Development Office of Chiang Mai.



government through the SML project<sup>8)</sup> under a popular policy. The Pa Bon community had used the money to develop a road in front of the community. The Surayud government continued to provide the same amount of funding with the condition that the community needed to implement a project for developing a sufficiency economy. The following are some of the village leaders' comments during the discussion.

"I have no idea what kind of sufficiency economy project we should propose. Can you please suggest something to us," one village headman asked me.

A village leader said, "What about a community fund for buying chemical herbicides? Our villagers have to buy expensive chemicals from middlemen on credit. This year villagers had to buy chemicals from a big entrepreneur totaling more than 200,000 baht through credit. In addition, some farmers bought chemicals with cash and through credit with the other middlemen."

Although that proposal is based on one of the most critical problems of the villagers, the village headman disagreed with it. He explained that "according to 'sufficiency economy,' I don't think the state will approve the project for chemicals usage. We should write a proposal for sustainable agriculture."

A member of the sub-district administrative organization suggested that, "why don't we ask for money to buy tree sprouts, such as mango trees, bamboo, jackfruit, and so on? It is sustainable agriculture and it's good for our long term future. And we can claim we are practicing conservation to solve our problems of being evicted from the forest."

The discussion continued until late at night without reaching a finalized agreement. Besides the sufficiency economy project proposal, the leaders discussed the registration of the village fund according to the Village Fund and Urban Community Act 2004.<sup>9)</sup> According to the government's document, the registration will systematize the fund administration and enhance participation among community members. Although the leaders were not clear about the reasons for this and found it difficult to register, they tried hard to work to register their village fund. A community leader explained to me that, "if we don't register the village fund, the government will merge our fund with other villages' funds, which would result in us losing some money."

The village leaders had a multitude of ideas and they found it difficult to reconcile the needs of the government and the real situation of the community. Although the village leaders tried

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8) SML stands for Small, Middle, and Large. This project allocated money to local villages in three different funding amounts depending on the size of village, determined by the number of population.

9) In 2004, the government passed the Village Fund and Urban Community Act which allowed the government to provide a million baht loan for each rural or urban village. The loan is circulated within a village, so that villagers can access financial capital to improve their occupations. The village members who borrow money must return the loan with interest in the next year so that the returned loan and interest will be re-distributed to other village members. The village fund committee selected by village members is responsible for the administration of this fund. According to the Act, within the year 2007, the village fund committee must register their fund and the committee with the authorities which are appointed by the National Village and Community Fund Office.

to follow the government's agenda, their main objective was to extract financial resources from the government. Hence, they attempted to say what they thought it was that the government wanted to hear. Talking of and for community was a regular way to write the project proposal. However, the village leaders are only one group of people. Their ideas may not reflect the actual needs of all villagers, even though they are selected to speak for the community. Moreover, it is unclear how much their created projects will "strengthen the community" and solve the most serious problems of the villagers.

Ideally, strengthening local communities is needed for promoting a sufficiency economy and vice versa. However, in practice the sufficiency economy policy of the government was implemented in local communities through only a training course, funds, and some resource distributions. This practical implementation reflects that the government views "community" as a unit of people, which is regulated through resources allocation. In so doing, it is hard to determine how the government will achieve the ambitious aim of making the villagers self-reliant in the age of globalization.

#### IV Community Making through Farming Practices

In Thai, there is no absolute meaning for the word "community," and the term is subject to debate. Likewise, *Chum Chon* (community in Thai) is understood in a variety of ways among the Pga K'nyau people. Pa Bon villagers use many words, such as "*Ker-Rer*" or "*Ser-Woa*" or "*Pka-Zee-Poe*," for *Chum Chon* in Pga K'nyau language.

*Ker-Rer* means the area, which includes people, trees, forests, farms, land, livestock, and all natural resources. The area of *Ker-Rer* is wider than *Zee* (village in Pga K'nyau language), which is only a residential area consisting of houses, livestock, and people, with no farms or forest.

*Chum Chon* is closer to the meaning of *Ser-Woa* or *Pka-Zee-Poe* because *Ker-Rer* is still restricted to the residential area and farms but does not yet include community forests.

Apart from these terms, this section explores the different perceptions that Pa Bon villagers have of their understanding of "community" and their community making through agricultural practices. As a general notion, subsistence production is based on a strong bond of community, while market-based production deteriorates community relations. For Pa Bon villagers, however, a sense of commonality is not dependent on the mode of production, but rather the common problems that the villagers are facing together. Therefore, community relations can be constructed through both subsistence and commercial farming.

##### IV-1 *Making Community through Subsistence Productions*

Pa Bon is a small Pga K'nyau community established by people who came from many different

areas, with several periods of immigration and emigration. The majority of community members are the descendants of those who came from Mae Sa-reang District of Mae Hong Son province in 1950s. However, some elder people said that the age of their community was over 150 years old, since there had been three Pga K'nyau families residing in this area before the immigration of people from Mae Hong Son province. By the Thai state, however, the Karen history in Thailand is confused and lumped together as one of the hill tribes migrating from somewhere else outside of "Thailand" not so long ago [Fink 1994].

At present, the villagers cultivate wet rice and dry rice for domestic consumption. In some years some households have little surplus rice to sell. The villagers mainly earn income from cash cropping, mostly in their upland farms. The main cash crop is feed corn which is grown by almost all households. Other cash crops are peanuts, ginger, beans, cabbages, and so on. Besides cash cropping, the villagers earn income from various livelihood strategies. Some households raise livestock and sell cow and buffalo dung in the dry season, or sell livestock when they need a large sum of money. Many households sell non-timber forest products and handicrafts. Some household members are seasonal wage laborers and contribute small earnings to their families.

Agricultural production has been an important factor contributing to uniting people collectively. In Pa Bon, the household is an important production unit, which is linked to broader cooperation amongst community members. For example, hunting and gathering is based on individual household labor, but villagers may go deep into the forest as a group. Hunting big animals in the past was usually done as a group of 6-7 people who shared hunted animals amongst themselves. Many studies found that traditional rotational cultivation needed the cooperation of many households based on reciprocity, and even needed the cooperation of a whole community because workers within one household were insufficient for many activities, such as burning the fields, planting, weeding, and so on. Controlling forest fires was another responsibility of every community member in order to maintain fallows for expected periods, otherwise villagers would not achieve high productivity when cultivating those plots [Atchara 2000].

Meanwhile the founders of the Pa Bon community practiced hunting and gathering, and rotational cultivation. The newcomers in the late 1970s began wet rice farming and built *Muang-Fai*, traditional irrigation systems for diverting water to wet rice farms. The wet rice farming brought new kinds of social relations and landscapes to this community. As it is difficult to develop wet rice farms and *Muang-Fai*, and wet rice lands are used continually every year, farmers had to occupy land through individual ownership or amongst people who shared the labor required for developing the water irrigation system. This is different from upland farming where land use was shared among community members based on usufruct rights. Wet rice farming also tied villagers to a certain location and fixed territory of a community. The farmers would not leave their wet rice farms and no longer moved their residences far away, even if they kept moving their upland rotational plots.

For labor management, the development of wet rice farming and irrigation systems led to

the cooperation of certain groups in the long-term, particularly groups of farmers who used the same *Muang-Fai* who would share responsibilities in maintenance and management of their irrigation system. In annual production, wet rice farming tends to use more intensive labor than rotational cultivation and provides higher rice production per area. More labor is usually drawn from kinship so that they can share harvests among them easily. The formation of this community was done on the physical space as place-based community, i.e. developing the wet rice farm, and also on the feeling of commonality, i.e. the cooperation of production. However, "commonality" does not necessarily apply to the whole community, but can be commonality among kinship or descent groups. In this sense, multiple commonalities overlap within this place-based community.

Although each household is a production unit, livelihood security of each household is not independent from kinship. At present, Pa Bon community consists of five kin groups. The households of different kinships are also closely interdependent socially and economically through varied modes of production. Some families produce rice and share products based on the traditional system of *o-bue-toe-pho-kho* (eating from the same barn). Each year, the rice harvest is kept in the same barn so that each household can gradually take as much rice as is needed for consumption. Some families share labor required for cow and buffalo raising and commercial farming. The earned income is shared depending on their previous agreement. Often, labor and output sharing among the co-producers is not based on input/output ratio but the ability and need of each family. This system is different from the labor exchange or co-production among neighbors that have a normalized basis of sharing. Those who did not have a paddy field might share their labor working in their relatives' paddies so that they could have rice for consumption and practice commercial farming in their upland farms. Some households do not share labor as such but borrow rice or money from relatives or neighbors when they face rice shortages.

As a general notion, subsistence production relies on reciprocity among community members. However, in Pa Bon community, community members have increasingly begun practicing commercial farming which is assumed to be the cause of declining community relations.

#### IV-2 *Commercial Farming for Claiming Community Land*

The establishment of the Pa Bon community was officially documented a long time ago. However, the people have illegally resided in the state's national forest because they do not have land documentation. Since the establishment of Sri-Lanna National Park in 1989, the villagers have been constrained by government officials to decrease their land use. Particularly, the villagers have been forced to abandon traditional rotational cultivation. According to government policy, land use is allowed for two main purposes, conservation and economic development. Rotational farming, however, is not fit for both purposes because it is subsistence-based production and its slash and burn practice is seen as a cause of deforestation.

Due to the state's pressure, the villagers began practicing new ways of land use. They

demarcated the community territory and each household's land. Since government officials normally claim the state's rights over land when it is not utilized for more than three years as state forest, the villagers have cleared land annually or once every two years. Shortening fallow periods resulted in the growth of dense weeds and low productivity. Consequently, the farmers have transformed their subsistence-oriented rotational farming into cash cropping, such as feed corn, peanut, ginger, and flowers, so that they can have income for buying herbicide. Another factor for switching to cash cropping was a convenient road built in the last five years, connecting the community to the other districts. Middlemen, who now use this road to access the community, have promoted feed corn farming and other commercial production through contract farming. Nowadays, most farmers use CP888 seeds bought from and sold to the Crop Integration Business of Chareon Phokapand Group—the largest agro-industrial company in Asia.

Despite the policy push, market pull, and being subordinated by powerful actors in the commodity chain, commercial farming opens negotiating spaces for the farmers in claiming their land rights. In other words, practicing commercial farming is a strategy in claiming community territory. The villagers realize that the state wants to preserve forest land cover, so they attempt to make their land have no forest cover by using it every year instead of leaving fields fallow. Many farmers even clear land though they do not plan to cultivate it that year.

Due to the lack of official land documentation, it was not possible to collect accurate information on the number and size of farming plots, or on land ownership in the community. I made a sketch map to indicate the locations of all farming plots in the community. However, the number of used plots was not fixed because the villagers often merge some plots or split them for several reasons. Normally, a plot of land would not be used to grow only one crop. Moreover, it was typical that the land users were not the land owners, but the relatives or neighbors of the owners.

The farmers did not plan cultivation based on the size of the land, but instead on the amount of seeds. As such, they could estimate the financial and labor investment and the yields and projected income. If the lands owned were not sufficient in a certain year, the farmers would simply ask permission from relatives or neighbors to cultivate on their lands. Every year many farmlands are not used and are available for borrowing. I compared land use patterns among many years and found that it is highly variable in terms of the land users, the kinds of plants grown, the amount of seeds used, and so on.

According to my survey, in 2006, from a total of 262 plots, 29 plots (11% of the total plots) were cleared but were not cultivated. Growing trees in terms of agro-forestry seemed to be a good idea for compromising agricultural and conservation objectives. The age of trees can be used as evidence for long-term land use for claiming land rights. Learning from people in the neighbouring villages, 23 plots of land (9% of total) have been used to grow Lychee, and 11 plots (4%) to grow Longan. Simultaneously with the making of land claims, the farmers also expected to sell the fruits. Unfortunately, nobody has ever received income from the trees that were planted over 10 years ago. The fruit trees are unproductive since the farmers do not use

hormones or other chemicals for stimulating production. The tree planting also makes the farmers lose other benefits of land use. They cannot grow vegetables or cash crops on these lands due to the shade of the trees. They also cannot gather other natural products for eating and selling, such asalang, rattan, and small eggplants. Some villagers have thought about growing bamboo, so that they may earn some money from selling bamboo shoots. However, they are afraid that the bamboo areas will be considered forest and thus be taken by the state. In this regard, some farmers prefer banana tress as the banana tree areas are considered orchards. Moreover, the banana trees can be planted and cut down easily when the farmers want to use the land for other benefits. However, the farmers can earn very little money or none at all from banana trees. Recently, some farmers have cut down the fruit trees and started using the land for other crops, such as dry rice, feed corn, and peanuts. Many remaining fruit orchards belong to people who do not live in the community, have many other plots of land, or do not have adequate labor for cash cropping.

Unlike with the fruit trees, farmers can claim land rights and earn income from cash cropping. They can adopt cash cropping easily through contract farming despite the limitation of financial capital, labor, and skills required in new forms of agriculture. They can borrow seeds and chemicals from the agents who would deduct the amount borrowed from their income on the sale. Only the few people with savings buy the seeds and other materials with cash. Further, the land for dry rice production can be easily transformed to cash cropping, and like upland rice farming, upland cash cropping does not require irrigation. At harvest time, the farmers can be sure that the products will be sold. The agents will come with the milling machine, mill, weights, sack, and pay cash to them.

In contract farming, farmers have to pay a higher price for inputs and get lower prices for products they sell compared to the non-contract farming system. However, they can seek out spaces to take advantage of this system. Some villagers mixed their own seed with the seed provided by the enterprise agents to reduce production costs even though they realized that the yield will be less. In many cases, the villagers did not use chemical fertilizers provided by contract farming agents for the contracted farms, but bought fertilizers from other places. Moreover, they did not sell some or the whole harvest to the contracted agent, but to others who would give 0.10–0.20 bath/kilogram higher price.

In 2007, Hear Roat (anonymous name), the largest feed corn entrepreneur in Prao District, was angry with his agent who was a villager in the Pa Bon community because the agent could not buy feed corn from the villagers, even though he provided seeds and chemicals on credit. Hear Roat established a new rule that he would provide materials to reliable villagers only. Consequently, the agent did not work for Hear Roat any more since he would have less contracted farmers resulting in less earned commission. However, some villagers were contracted through another agent of Hear Roat from the next community.

Not merely a political negotiation, commercial farming also provides an opportunity for the farmers to access financial capital from the government and NGOs. Previously, although there were some available sources of loans the farmers dared not incur debt as they could not afford

to pay it back. Since cash cropping has been adopted the farmers can estimate their annual earned income. They borrow money from several sources for improving the standard of living of their life and community, by building wooden houses, pioneering paddy fields, buying agricultural machines, living facilities, and so on. A 50-year-old woman said that she would reduce dry rice cropping but increase feed corn cropping in order to get money to pay back a loan she took out for fixing her house. Many villagers spend borrowed money for their children's education with the hope that their children will have a better life and income in the future. More or less, cash cropping supports the sustainability of the community by improving the quality of life for those living in the community.

Nevertheless, certain commercial farming is not always a good economic alternative. Many people have sought out other cash cropping options instead of the present ones with which they have experienced failures many times. For example, a family which was the first family producing feed corn in the community began cultivating peanuts instead of only feed corn farming this year. "The increasing costs of hybrid seeds and herbicide have burdened us more than our capacity. We have learned from my father-in-law who lives in the other community that growing peanuts uses less investment—we can reproduce seeds ourselves, and use less herbicide," the wife explained.

Another family came back from working in urban areas for two years. In 2007 they decided to quit farming and live by earning income by gathering natural products, such as bamboo shoots, bamboo worms, mushroom, and so on. The husband said, "Whatever I grew, it made me incur a loss. Therefore, I am trying not to grow anything, but earning money from other sources, or working in exchange for rice." His farming land had been rented by a farmer from a neighboring villager for two years. A few months ago he sold that land to another community member. Although this family does not have farming land and does not practice farming, it does not mean that land and "community" have less meaning for them. Instead, life security for this family is much more dependent on the community territory and the living and farming of other community members. They need to make sure that they can gather natural products from the community forest, and their neighbors will have plenty of rice yields to share with them in exchange for their money or labor. Otherwise, they need to go to work in urban areas, but they have already learned that this is not a good option for their family.

The findings in this section illustrate the complicated conditions within which the farmers engage in commercial farming. Although commercial farming is the farmers' strategy for making land right claims, the community members have made this choice within a certain context and not with the absolute power to choose.

#### IV-3 *Making of Community through Commercial Farming*

No matter what the government means by "community," in the previous section I illustrated that the operation of government agencies on the ground in promoting a sufficiency economy does not reflect a "strengthening community" strategy as the government has claimed. However, from local people's point of view, commercial farming could enhance a strong sense of



community even more so than subsistence farming, which is promoted by the government. Community making is clearly apparent when the villagers are involved in collective actions, helping each other, overcoming difficulties, and so on while undertaking commercial farming. The key point, however, in strengthening a community is neither dependence on subsistence farming nor commercial farming. Rather, community making involves collective actions in relations to political and economic conditions.

### 1) *Land Borrowing*

In the past, land borrowing was a traditional practice for rotational cultivation. The rights of upland farms were based on usufruct rights. The first farmers who cleared bush or forest for farmland were acknowledged by community members as the land owners. However, neighbors could be permitted to use the land in the year that the land was should be used—after being left as fallow for 5-7 years if the owner did not use it during this period. If the land had been left for a long time and nobody claimed it, others could eventually occupy that land. The usufruct rights are explained by some scholars as moral wisdom—to distribute land as a crucial means of production equally among community members. In this way, the poor would be able to gain access to resources for improving their lives [Anan *et al.* 2005].

Claiming land rights and negotiating conservation policy, the farmers marked the household's land clearly in order to convince state authorities that the farmers will not extend their farmlands encroaching on forestland. Another factor of individual land demarcation was that the villagers were increasingly concerned with the market value of land as a result of the widespread land commoditization and the increment of commercial farming in the community.

However, the villagers set a community rule that they would not extend their farmland and sell land to community outsiders. Some elders were afraid that the commoditization of land would bring in "the others," especially, people of other ethnicities, who might not respect their common rules and traditions. This rule results in the control of the market value of land in the community and the land loss of community members.

The land demarcation and the making of community rule were suggested by the NFN as a strategy for forest people to negotiate with the state's conservation policy. The NFN has demanded that the government allocate forest people the rights to land and give up the policy which aimed to relocate forest people from protected areas.<sup>10)</sup> By community rule, forest people assert that they can maintain sustainable livelihoods living in the forest and also conserve natural resources.

Despite demarcation and community rule, there were many conflicts among the villagers in regard to demarcation. Some people could not agree on the boundary between their lands. Some people claimed that this was a trick to impose new confinement over others' lands or community forest. In many cases, the people arguing were very close relatives and there was no concrete solution at a community level. Some villagers were ashamed of having conflict

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10) In 2006 and 2007, each household land ownership was surveyed through Global Positioning System and documentations of the Sri-Lanna National Park official.



with kin; the problems thus were not raised with the public.

According to this condition, land seemed to become privatized and no longer based on usufruct rights as before. Additionally, the villagers seemed to be more concerned about their own benefits and less generous. Is the strong bond of “community” disappearing? And is this due to land privatization, a capitalist economy, and commercial farming?

Despite commercial farming and clear boundaries between the plots of land, usufruct rights have been applied by community members. As the villagers try to defend their land rights from the state, they have attempted to use the land annually. Some farmers allow their neighbors to use their farming land without payment, either for subsistence or commercial production. In 2007, 13 plots of farming land were used by people who are not the land owners. Some people borrowing land may need to pay if they are not considered community members by the owner. Some people borrowing land have to pay rent if they use land after the owner has finished clearing the land for that cultivation season. In addition, there must be a good relationship between the land owner and the land borrower. In most cases, the lender and borrower are relatives as well.

However, the land borrowing as such is not based on usufruct rights as before. Rather, it is a strategy of the villagers to defend land rights within some limitations. In fact, many farmers want to benefit from their land through commercial farming or leasing land. However, they have labor shortages and lack financial capital. Some villagers were afraid that the land tenants, especially those who were community outsiders, might degrade the land by using intensive chemicals or unsuitable agricultural techniques. They thus only allow their reliable neighbors to use their land. By lending to people they know, the land owner can make conditions for the land use, such as not allowing the use of chemical fertilizers and ensuring that the neighbors will use his/her land carefully. In this regard, social relations and the identification of “insider” and “outsider” are significant to the distribution of land use within the community.

## 2) *Exchange Labor*

In the Pa Bon community, labor exchange has been a major production strategy for both subsistence production and commercial production. Some villagers said that the farmers did not help others as much as before because they were busy on their own farms due to more intensive commercial production. However, according to my observations, the number of exchanged labor per day per farm<sup>11)</sup> is still 3-20 people, depending on the kind of job and the requirement of each farm owner. Many villagers said that due to labor shortages and a lack of financial capital, the exchange labor is a better option than hiring labor.

Exchange labor is necessary for many households who have less labor, for example a husband and wife who live alone while their children go to school or work outside the community. Some households are even worse, when the housewife has to look after a baby at

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11) A farm may include many plots of land.

home, or the wife or husband gets sick. The labor exchange helps them to overcome these difficulties. Even if a family does not have a man for particular jobs, the work can be done by neighboring men.

For some production processes, men and women have different roles, e.g. men usually dig land while women drop seeds. However, a labor exchange for an adult man can be a woman or a young boy or girl (9–15 years old). In the intensive production season children may skip school for some days or work on the farm on the weekend as exchange labor instead of their parents.

Most families did not invest their entire labor in growing rice for subsistence only, even though food security was a priority. They produced 50–70% of the rice for the whole year's consumption so that they could spend the rest of their labor for commercial production. The remaining 30–50% of rice still required could be obtained from neighbors who had plenty of rice yields, in exchange for labors (one day for one and a half tubs<sup>12)</sup> of unhusked rice). Besides this arrangement, some villagers borrowed rice from the community rice fund, from relatives, or neighbors, or bought rice with money procured from wage labor, loans, or the sale of animals, and so on.

Labor can be exchanged for money, or other things, such as seeds and rice with the same value. The labor rate, on average, is 120 baht per day, or one and a half tubs of rice, a tub of peanuts with shells, or other things of the same value, depending on the agreement between both sides. For spraying herbicide, the cost is two times more than for normal jobs. A housewife said, "Because it is a dangerous job and uses more energy," both spraying manually or by machine.<sup>13)</sup> The laborer for this job is normally a male. If the return labor does not work spraying herbicide, s/he must work for two days, or pay 240 baht.

Normally, the villagers have a strong commitment to returning labor. Without a written list of names, they never forget any of the neighbors who helped them farm even though it takes a long time to returning all of the labor. A farm owner does not have to ask or remind them. In the early morning before going to the farm the return labors usually come to his/her house offering their help.

Apart from economic reasons, there are other reasons for performing labor exchange. For instance, a housewife said, "We chat, eat, and work together. Even though we get less work done, it's more fun. And some plots of land are very far. I'm not happy to walk there alone." In Thailand, it was widespread news that many children were being kidnapped to become forced laborers. In addition to that news, the villagers heard that an old woman in the next district was kidnapped by a group of people who came by in a van. This news made the villagers more afraid to walk to their farms alone.

However, the villagers have also been harassed by forestry officials many years before they heard about the kidnappers. In 2004, two farmers were arrested by 10 forestry officials while they were having lunch after farming. The farmers thought that they did not do anything

12) One tub is approximately 10 liters.

13) The farmers have to draw the spraying string for a long length from a machine to the farming area.

illegal. However, they were sued in court as forest destroyers. For almost three years the two men and community members faced many difficulties during the trial in court. The villagers have learned that it is worth nothing to explain or negotiate with government officials. The best strategy for them is, “do not talk to them, but run away.” The farmers feel safer farming together. “We will help each other by looking out for the forestry officials. If anybody sees them s/he will shout in Pga K’nyau language *Pka Se Pka Hae...Jee!*<sup>14)</sup> (forestry officials! Come, run!). In this sense, farming together can also mean together.”

### 3) Rest

Despite there being a fixed rate for labor exchange, the relationship among the villagers is not rigid, but based on friendship. The land owner must be generous to the neighbors who work for him/her. The owner provides good food for lunch and invites them to rest properly. A housewife said, “If we (a couple) work by ourselves, we will work seriously even without taking a rest. But if we have neighbors helping us, we should give them enough resting time, otherwise, they will complain about us.”

I worked for several days on a farm with the villagers and noticed that they normally rested for a long time and very often, even though they kept saying “It’s a busy season. We are in a hurry. We cannot do other business, only farming.” During resting time, I saw some villagers gathering natural products around their neighbors’ farm where they did not usually go, and some villagers looked around nearby the farms. A housewife used resting time to grow some banana trees at her own farm. “These banana trees will hide me from the forestry officials,” she explained. Three men walked to the deep forest to shoot birds. Two housewives gathered feed vegetable for pigs and some natural products for their dinner. Some farmers took a nap.

Besides those activities, the farmers used much of their resting time chatting with neighbors, and sharing many new ideas. During the past years, farming has not been an easy job for them. There have been many hardships, especially being threatened by government officials and market risks. A housewife said, “We practice farming blindly. We don’t know the market conditions in advance, whether the price will be high or low, whether our produces can be sold or not.” However, the farmers often exchange information and knowledge while farming. Some villagers learnt new agricultural methods and techniques while working on their neighbors’ farms. Several stories are shared, from simple stories related to life—e.g. health, food, price of agricultural products—to the political issues in the community, district, province, nation, and issues at a global level. Villagers who do not go to the farm may lose a chance for news, as a 30-year-widow said, “I have to look after my baby, and so cannot go to the farm. I don’t know any news about villagers or about other people.”

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14) Normally, the villagers call forestry officials in Thai language, *Pa-Mai*. But if they want to call them but do not want the forestry officials know, they will use the word, *Pka Se Pka*. This word is known among the community members, but I found that many *Pga K’nyau* in other communities do not understand this word.

A. RAKYUTIDHARM: “Making of Community” in a Commercialized Community in Northern Thailand

For several days I worked on farms with many families. The schedule of each working day was similar.

One day schedule of work at my host family

6:00 Wake up, cook, feed children and send them to school  
7:30 Breakfast, prepare cooked rice, some lunch and gather agricultural tools  
15-30 minutes sipping tea and chatting with neighbors  
8:00 Go to farm (walking or by motorcycle)  
9:00 Reach the farm, rest at the hut for 30 minutes, (some) smoke, chew areca, and just sit  
The farm owners and some neighbors prepare the tools, seeds, and so on  
9:30 Work  
10:30 Rest for 30 minutes  
11:00 Work  
12:00 Lunch for 1-2 hours, smoke, chew areca, take a nap, gather natural products, etc  
14:00 Work  
15:00 Rest for 30-45 minutes  
16:00 Work  
17:00 Go back home  
18:00 Rest, prepare food, bathe, and feed animals  
19:00 Dinner  
20:00 Rest, sip tea and chat with neighbors, watch TV  
22:00 Go to bed

Within an economic perspective such a work schedule could be seen as unproductive. However, for the villagers, resting time is not a wasted, but valuable period of time. It is significant for their health, social life, and knowledge. Although they want to earn more money from production, they do not exchange it with their resting time. Commodity relations cannot dominate their way of life entirely, even though the people are working on commercial production.

Many villagers have experiences being hired as labor for northern Thai farmers. They told me that, “It is really hard work. They do not allow us to take a rest properly. Some fields have no shade for us.” Some villagers were hired labors for other jobs in the cities, such as housekeepers, security guards, sellers, and so on. Although they were satisfied with the salary they came back home for farming after working for 3-4 years. Most reasons are: “It’s not fun being there.” “I have no freedom.” “I have to work for the others, not for myself.” “Working on my own farm I can take rest any time I want.” Some villagers in their mid-thirties told me that nobody wanted to live in the urban areas forever. Going out for some years is just the way to earn money and experience the world. They want to make sure that they have a community—home, farming land, family, neighbors, forest, and so on—to come back to at any

time, though initially they live some years away from the community. Despite many positive feelings, I also heard many villagers complain about “poverty” and the “tough life” of farming and living in the community. They wanted to have more money or to be “richer.” Many young people in their late teens to early twenties go to town more often to make money, but they cannot see themselves living there in the long term.

Land borrowing, labor exchange, and resting time as examples of agricultural practices of the farmers in my research community reflect the making of social relations through the process of commercial production. The general notion is that subsistence production is usually based on reciprocity, whereas commodity relations have greatly influenced commercial production, causing a loss of community relations. However, I argue that ideas such as reciprocity have been a major production strategy for Pa Bon community even in commercial production. On the one hand, the villagers practice commercial farming as a strategy for making land right claims. On the other hand, they are struggling for their survival in a capitalist economy. Commercial farming, however, brings them food insecurity and economic pressure. Community members, thus, appropriate reciprocity as a collective action to help them in overcoming these difficulties and in having more power to determine their lives.

## V Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated multiple aspects of “community” interpreted by different actors. For the Thai state, “community” is likely understood as an administrative unit, a group of people living within a bounded space, regardless of social relations among community members. Based on this problematic assumption, the implementation of government policy for strengthening local communities has hardly had any effect in practice.

Although Pa bon villagers, like many local people, do not have a definite term and definition of “community,” their everyday practices reflect that the matter of their “community” is based on social relations; collective norms, ideas, or actions. The villagers’ perception of community cannot be simply understood through the translation of the words, for example *Zee* (village), or other terms which implies only a spatial boundary. Instead, community must be considered through social spaces related to connectedness and contrast to “other places.” It is not merely about place or distance, but a space of belonging, binding, and having power to determine their lives. These senses are reflected by the Pga K’nyau term “*mue*” (happy) which villagers usually replied with when asked the reasons for living in the community and returning from the town. In this regard, community relations are likely related to spatial territory, which their ancestors and kin group have long resided in and have a sense of belonging to.

I have illustrated that Pa Bon people strengthened their community by making land claims, so that the villagers can continue living there and have sustainable lives in their community. The matter of community relations is not dependent on the mode of production, but the common problems that the villagers are facing, which brings about a sense of commonality. In this regard, the making of community is not necessary to be a strategy to escape the fierce

capitalist economy as the Community Culture School would argue. Rather, the community bond can be strategically made through a system of reciprocity in the context that the villagers are struggling with the state conservation policy and entering commercial production.

Despite some conflicts among them, the Pa Bon villagers made collective actions, either through subsistence or commercial modes of production, in order to struggle with their common political and economic pressures. In this regard, "community" is not restricted to a group of people who live in the same physical boundary or the administrative unit of a state regime. As local community is neither homogenous nor isolated from the rest of the world, making "community" is neither done inside the community nor imposed by outside actors. Rather, community making is a result of dialectical processes within a community and between a community and the outside world. In this regard, "community" should be understood through the exploration of local people's everyday practices which reflect dialectical processes in the grounded reality of their interactions with others.

#### Acknowledgement

This paper is a part of my dissertation, and is based on my fieldwork. I thank ChATSEA project for supporting this fieldwork, Deepa Rajkumar and Alisa Loveman for editing my paper.

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