

The Existence of Field Corn Networks on the Thailand-Burma Border under the Patron-Client Contract Farming System

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Abstract—This study aimed to investigate the existence of field corn networks on the Thailand-Burma border under the patron-client contract farming system. The data of this qualitative study were collected through in-depth interviews with nine key informants.

The results of the study revealed that the existence of the field corn networks was associated with the relationship where farmers had to share their crops with protectors in the areas under the influence of the KNU (Karen National Union) and the DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army) or Burmese soldiers. A Mae Liang, the person who starts a network has a connection with a Thaokae, Luk Rai Hua Chai or the head of a group of farmers, and farmers. They are under the patron-client system with trust and loyalty that enable the head of the group and the farmers in the Burma border side to remain under the same Mae Liang even though the business has been passed down to later generations.

Keywords—Existence, field-corn networks, patron-client system, contract farming.

I. INTRODUCTION

CONTRACT farming is agricultural cooperation between Thailand and Burma that results in people moving from Burma and some of them migrate to Thailand. Contract farming has been conducted according to strategic cooperation of ACMECS (Aeyawadee-Chaopraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation) to move the investment base for planting target crops from Thailand to Burma consisting of 10 important economic crops including corn. This is because Thailand's crop production cannot meet the demand in the country while a great deal of labor is needed for harvesting crops. The need for corn corresponds with the needs of the private sector to use it as a factor of production to produce value-added products [1].

Contract farming takes place when farmers do business with a company and bring in the factor of production, and the company buys the crops back. However, it is found that at the end of the production process, farmers are found with debts

A part from research entitled "Flowers of the Dawn": Negotiated Space of Transnational Laborers and the Economic of the Thai-Burmese Borderland.

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after deduction of the costs of production [2]. In this relationship, farmers are usually the underdogs, and the government sector does not check whether the agreement signed between the farmers and the company is fair or not. Moreover, the government plays no role to give farmers negotiation power or to make alterations in the agreement to make it fair to the farmers [3].

While the agriculture sector in the Mae Sot border area is found to have field corn planted after rice is harvested, field corn farming is done as contract farming [4]. However, going out to the field to collect data, we found that the field corn networking is not as described in the general information of Mae Sot District. Instead, the networking has long existed and the networks offer mutual benefits under the patron-client system with the Mae Liang and the Luk Rai Hua Chai or the head of the farmer group in Thailand, and the farmers in Burma. This phenomenon prompted the researchers with a question about the existence of the field corn networks under the patron-client contract farming system. In addition, the researchers desired to obtain data to use as a guideline for strengthening the networks so that farmers will not be exploited because of contract farming. Moreover, the data can be used as a guideline for related organizations to play a role and take action in altering the agreement to make it fair for cross-national workers.

A. Aims

Investigate the existence of the field corn network under the patron-client contract farming system.

II. METHODOLOGY

The data for this quality research were collected from in-depth interviews with nine key informants, namely, Thaokae, Mae Liang, Luk Rai Hua Chai or heads of groups of farmers, and farmers who were cross-national workers. The data were classified into categories according to the objectives, put in the order of their relationships, and the order of data connections. Then the data were analyzed, interpreted, concluded, and presented using the analytical description method.

III. FINDINGS

The existence of the field corn networks under the patron-client contract farming system was divided into two aspects:

A. The Existence of the Field Corn Networks

1. The Existence of the Field Corn Networks is Amidst

Areas under Influence of Protectors.

During 1989-1990, the agricultural areas for field corn plantations were expanded from Thailand to Burma making the business in corn plantations in Burma more intensive as it was during the time that “the situation was still good as there were only two groups of protectors: The Burmese soldiers, and the KNU (Karen National Union)”. No Pho who turned herself to be a Mae Liang said that she bought a piece of land in Burma adjacent to Umphang District of Thailand from villagers who had farmed corn there at 60,000 Baht per Rai (this plot of land was with an area of approximately 80 Rai). That area is in a zone protected by KNU but people can buy land in the area and use it to make their living [5]. Actually it can be bought by anyone of any nationality “as long as they have money”. When buying it, they receive a paper of land ownership for making a living and the paper is called “a certificate for making a living”, not to possess and not to pass down as heritage. [6] However, this land is seized by Burmese soldiers or the DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army). The owner of land can sell it to villagers who are acquaintances with the group of new protectors to use for their living [7].

2. The Existence Amidst Relationships with Mutual Benefit

In field corn farming, Mae Liang contacts Thaokae who is a capitalist that takes the factor of production and capital to heads of groups of farmers in Burma and in Thailand (see Fig. 1). There are many groups of farmers. The most popular variety of corn is called Breed 95 because it takes only 115 days from germination of corn plant to harvest. Ears of corn are harvested and sold as whole; kernels are kept on the cob. Thus, there are no needs for storage buildings. Nevertheless, selection of seeds for growing in each area depends on the political situation and the weather in the respective year. After harvesting, the heads of the groups gather the crops produced by farmers in their groups and send them to Mae Liangs in Thailand. After the costs are deducted, the money is taken back to farmers in Burma. The steps are: 1) gathering the crop from each farmer and counting the number of Po or Pip, a rectangular can with a capacity of 20 liters used for measuring the crop. The number of cans is related with the money the farmer gets and “the tax” that the farmer has to pay “the protector”. 2) In paying “the tax”, Mae Liang provides money for the head of the group according to the number of cans to take to the farmers at the rate of 1-5 Baht per can depending on the location of the plantation. This depends on the number of protectors in the area. For example, they pay one part to the DKBA, one part to the KNU, one part to the Burmese soldiers, and one part to the head of the group because “the head of the group is the village headman in Burma who has no monthly salary.” In the case that payment has to be made to many parties, the head of the group has to tell the protector that the yield is not very good otherwise there will be no cost effectiveness and no profit at all [8]-[10].

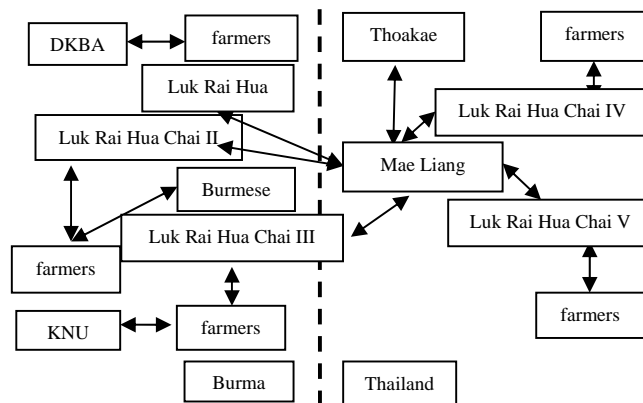


Fig. 1 Field Corn Networks on the Thailand-Burma Border

B. The Patron-Client Contract Farming System in Mae Sot Area of the Thailand-Burma Border Has Two Important Features

1. The Patron-Client Contract Farming System of the “Heart Agreement”

The patron-client system under the “Heart Agreement” relationship is a system that involves an agreement between Thaokae who is the capitalist and Mae Liang, and between Mae Liang and Luk Rai Hua Chai or the head of the group of farmers, and farmers. It is a “Heart Agreement” with mutual benefits and it is not exploitation of workers. Good relationships between Mae Liang and the head of the group of farmers and farmers can become better and it will benefit Thaokae in terms of high yields of crops with consistency. There are many Thaokaes who buy corn in Mae Sot such as Srirungrueng family and Thaokae Thong. After the head of the group of farmers sells the crop, he can change to another Thaokae as there is no obligation. However, in practice, no one does it because they feel courteous to the Thaokae and they have known each other for a long time [5], [11].

2. The Patron-Client System is Passed down from Generation to Generation under Loyalty

When Mae Liang dies, her children or grandchildren continue doing the business as capitalists for the same groups of heads of the groups and farmers that have worked together for a long time. If some farmers do not have enough yield, they can postpone paying the debt until next year or until they have enough money to pay as long as they stay in the network. The reason is Mae Liangs also depend on farmers for production. Thus, it can be found that many farmers take shelter in Mae Liangs’ houses when there is an unrest situation. Some farmers even build their own houses in the name of their Mae Liang. As can be seen, the border economic system consists of trust, loyalty, and dependence on each other between Mae Liangs and heads of groups of farmers [12].

IV. DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed that the field corn networks in the Thailand-Burma border area can remain in existence in the areas under influence of the protectors, namely, the KNU, the DKBA, and the Burmese. This is

because they have mutual benefits from the crops that are proportionately distributed among them, and therefore, there is no conflict. As a result, the networks have been in existence for a long time. Even when farmers do not produce enough to cover their debts, they can postpone their payment to next year. Thus, the existence of the field corn networks under the patron-client system is called the “Heart Agreement” that depends on trust from all parties concerned. This is in congruence with a study by Suwan-atchariya in which importance is given to economic networks, and with social networking of [13], [14]. The network begins from a small element or a Mae Liang on the Thai border side who acts as a middle person for contacting Thaokae to get the factor of production and capital to the head of group of farmers who has farmers or cross-national workers under him. The practice has become contract farming among groups of people who care for each other. This contract farming is different from contract farming in other areas, and it corresponds with a study by that states that networks of relatives and friends can help find a job for workers so that they can survive and exist [15].

V. CONCLUSION

The study on the field corn networks on the Thailand-Burma border illustrates good relationships between people living on the two sides of the Thailand-Burma border under the “Heart Agreement” between them. Their relationships indicate that they are not worthless humans that are only objects to others. Being cross-national workers in the agriculture sector who grow field corn for Luk Rai Hua Chai or heads of farmer groups and Mae Liangs instead of being employed in any other way does not mean that these farmers are victims of capitalism. Instead, it is “the choice” they make to exist and to make use of capitalism amidst the surrounding pressure.

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