Trip Report 1 – Mae Chaem District, Chiang Mai Province
November 11-12, 1998

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November 11

Hoet - We left Chiang Mai in the morning around 8:30am. Drove first to Amphoe Hoet
and stopped at the market. We asked market ladies about their produce and where it
came from. They were helpful and answered all our questions. Many of the vegetables
came from Chiang Mai and so they didn’t know the original production points for
everything. However, they mentioned that some cabbages, carrots and radishes came
from Mae Chaem. Some red onions came from Mae La Noi. Many of the green
vegetables and other basics are grown locally in Hoet. Also, some of the vegetables
(some cabbages and potatoes) came from Doi Kham along with flowers being sold by
Hmong women outside the market. Thorn thought that Doi Kham referred to a Royal
Project in the area but we couldn’t get a good description of where this was actually
located. The Hmong women said that it was about 17 kilometers from Hoet. After
checking the detailed map again I found an actual place named Doi Kham so I’m not
certain if it is just a high producing area or does indeed have a royal project ongoing
there. It was fun to be back talking with market women. If you catch them when they’re
not busy they can be a wonderful source of information. I had trouble understanding one
of the most talkative women and later Thorn said that she was a hilltribe woman (not sure
which group).

Ban Long Pong - From Hoet we drove toward Mae Chaem and went through Oop Luang
national park following the Mae Chaem River for awhile. The next stop was Ban Long
Pong that David Thomas had suggested we check out. It’s on a sort of plateau. We
climbed to get there but then seemed to be in a valley with fields starting near the road
level and moving about halfway up the hills. Many field crops were planted but we saw
mostly corn. David said that this is an area where they have intensified production with
rotating corn and soybeans. But unlike in the other area north of there where
intensification has lead to permanent fields and less expansion – fields around Ban Long
Pong seem to be expanding. This may possibly be to take advantage of the huge
marketing operation going on there. Other crops we saw in the fields were sunflowers,
chilis, and the remnants of already harvested cabbages. Large trucks were being loaded
from a warehouse type structure with what we thought at the time was corn. However,
continuing on from there into Mae Chaem we counted over 25 pickup trucks full of
cabbages. We asked where they were headed and they said to Ban Long Pong and
coming from Ban Pui. One driver said that about 15 pickups and 20 ten wheelers make
this trek daily. He also said something about 90 loads but I’m not sure if that meant
vehicles or tons. After stopping in Mae Chaem we continued on to Ban Pui and counted
another 7 or so trucks making the total count around 32.

Mae Chaem – In Mae Chaem we had lunch and checked into the hotel there – 120 Bt.
Also stopped to see a strange newly opened resort that was far too expensive (700Bt).
After lunch we stopped in at the Care office and had a very helpful conversation with Mr. Thumrong and Mr. ?? . Thumrong has worked in Mae Chaem for 14 years and was very knowledgeable about land use and changes. He has seen the increase in commercial production over the last ten years and the change from extensive long fallow systems to greater intensity. He described families having four times as much land just ten years ago. Now, they work about 10 rai whereas before it was 30-40. He described a mixture when asked about migration. He doesn’t see many hilltribe people migrating out. But does describe labor constraints in production. In discussing out migration from Mae Chaem in general he said that younger people do leave to look for jobs in places like Chiang Mai. A few have come back, but not many. Care runs an integrated natural resources management project in Mae Chaem and seems to have large coverage in the lower (southern) part of the watershed. But they didn’t know much about land use north of the amphoe (like Mae Najon or Wat Chan). He suggested we go see Ban Pui and also make a loop to the east and southeast of the amphoe which would be the area north of Ban Long Pong. We didn’t get to make that loop, but he said that there they have greatly intensified their production on permanent fields. He also pointed out the progression of cabbage production from south of Mae Chaem then to the east and now with Ban Pui west of the amphoe as the center of cabbage production. We spent the afternoon driving to Ban Pui.

Ban Pui – Drove to Ban Pui which is about 40 kilometers from Mae Chaem, but it took us about 2 hours with some photo stops along the way. The road was mixed brick, paved and dirt with some steep climbing along the way. We saw a couple of pockets of crops on steep slopes and some areas that looked to be fallow. But most of these seemed to be isolated patches (at least to untrained eye) when looking North from the ridge. Once we got close to Ban Pui, however, this changed to intensive cropping, mostly of cabbages but also rice. Gravity fed irrigation systems were in place using PCV pipes and we saw more of these on trucks going into the village. There were also yellow flowers blooming around the fields, possibly with a soil conservation purpose. We went to the Hmong village of Ban Pui that appears very wealthy. We saw at least four satellite dishes among the 30 or so houses. Most houses had new aluminum roofs and many had two or three pickup trucks parked there. There is also a school and a Thai public phone. We saw electricity lines when leaving the village but had not seen them coming up from the mountain and so we’re not sure what the source of electricity is there. There is another village across the valley that we assume is the other Ban Pui which is a Karen village. In the middle of the fields around Ban Pui there was one huge crevice from erosion – this was just below a new section of the road.

Mae Chaem – We stayed at the hotel in town which was fine. Ate at the Lai Hin guesthouse out of town which had nice food and a great view. Watched a sport competition festival at the amphoe office.
November 12

Mae Najon – The next day we waited a bit for the mist to clear and then headed north to Mae Najon. The road again was a mix of dirt and pavement to Ban Sop Wak which is one of our sample villages. They are planting a lot of marigolds around this village and someone comes from Mae Chaem to buy them. We continued on to Mae Najon which is the tambon center and a large village. We picked up a passenger (Khun Nawm) who works at the post office in Mae Chaem but took the day off to help harvest rice. She was heading to Mae A and we took her part of the way there. The road was steep in places and rough – more like a path through the fields of Mae Najon. We went about 10 kilometers on that road before turning around. Nawm answered many of our questions about Mae Najon. There are about 2,000 people living there. She was born there. Many people work outside of the tambon and come back only for holiday celebrations etc. Women often leave if they have problems at home (too much drinking, gambling etc.) and many go into prostitution. Some people have returned. If they have been able to save enough money they come back permanently to stay with their children. When they return they still have land from before and help work that land. Often they have rented the land or let relatives use it in their absence. When they return they increase the number of crops per year and make up lost fertility by using fertilizer. She said there have not been many problems with people returning and working together on the same land. She said that problems are over water, because people in the highlands are using more water to grow cabbages and that’s where the conflict is. This year has been bad overall for crops because there was so little rain. She herself is in debt to the cooperative in Mae Chaem. Many farmers received loans 5 years ago that they have not been able to pay. Five years was the repayment time limit and she’s not sure how she will fix this problem or what will happen. People rent tractors from the amphoe to plow the land. No one uses buffalo to plow – in fact she says they never did. Before the tractors they used a hand hoe. The price of plowing has increased – the plow owners say because fuel costs have increased. Labor is still shared, she said there is not much wage labor in agriculture.

Ban Sop Wak – We stopped at a small shop in Sop Wak on the way back and talked with the shopkeeper. She said that many people leave to find work in Chiang Mai or other places. They go to be housekeepers (women) or construction workers/driver (men). It is mostly old people and children left in the village. Most people are still going to find work outside and have been able to find the work. A few have lost their jobs and come back but not many. If they do lose their jobs they still stay to find others instead of coming back permanently to the village. People plant mostly sticky rice to eat and corn to sell (animal feed). The price for corn now is 2 Bt. Per kilo. We also saw coal trucks passing. There is a mine nearby. The schoolteacher said that there are 200-300 people living in Sop Wak and there are about 50 children in the elementary school.

Ban Mae Wak – Mae Wak is a few kilometers east of Sop Wak. We drove through the village which is very nice and seems quite well off. There are nice paddy fields with lots of water. There were fewer homes than in the other villages but they all seemed very nice – a few brick homes and a very nice and new looking Wat. We also saw a couple
satellite dishes in this village that backs up to Doi Inthanon National Park. We drove into the park and stopped to talk to someone at the forestry station. He told us that there is a Hmong village up that road and a Karen village as well. The Hmong village has a couple pick up trucks and they bring produce (mostly cabbages down that road).

Doi Inthanon – We drove back through Mae Chaem and then took the road over Doi Inthanon back to Chiang Mai. We stopped at the temples on the mountain and then a waterfall on the way down (Vachirathan Falls).

Sampling – From what we saw there seem to be two quite distinct production/marketing systems at work in the watershed. If we want to incorporate both systems then we have to increase our sample to include higher altitude villages (i.e. Cabbage central). There also may be a third group in the uplands that is less commercialized and still practicing swidden rotations but with decreasing fallow lengths. However, this may be too ambitious for this single study. Another option would be to focus on the lowland production systems and analyze the effects of structural changes in the economy on land use and agricultural intensification with field crops and rice. If the links could be made between the broader economy and the lowland production systems of Northern Thai then perhaps another study could compare the effects with the highlands. The villages selected in the sample from TDRI all seem to be northern Thai – field crop producing areas. As much of the project work in the watershed is done with hilltribe (upland/highland) people then perhaps there is a niche to studying the lowland systems of the watershed in order to get a fuller picture of land use in the watershed and base of conflicts. Also, the TDRI study of highland systems mentioned an interesting point that deforestation rates are actually higher in areas where fewer hilltribe people live. This could provide justification for studying the lowland production systems and their pressure on the forests by creeping up the hills.

The population density was lower than we expected in the watershed. We were expecting much more extensive cropping of the land in the hills. It will be interesting now to compare to the environment in Mae Taeng watershed.