Eat Until You're Full: The Pursuit of Autonomy and Health through the Adoption of Organic Agriculture in Mae Ta, Thailand

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“Eat Until You’re Full”: The pursuit of autonomy and health through the adoption of organic agriculture in Mae Ta, Thailand

by Erin Plews-Ogan

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of Independent Study Thesis
Senior Thesis

Supervised by: Matthew Mariola
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
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Finally, and most importantly, I dedicate this work to the community of Mae Ta. Thank you for trusting me enough to tell your stories, for caring for me like your own daughter, and for teaching me more than you could ever know.
Abstract

This research explores the role that farmers’ concerns about health and community autonomy play in the emergence of an organic agriculture movement in the village of Mae Ta in northern Thailand. In the midst of the push for export-oriented and urban-centered development, many rural people have migrated to urban areas for work or adopted contract farming of chemical-intensive cash crops. Yet farmers in Mae Ta chose a unique alternative: sufficiency-based organic polyculture. Why take on such a risk without solid policy and market support for organic agriculture in Thailand? I investigated these questions through six weeks of participant observation and 19 interviews with organic and conventional farmers and community members. I found that health concerns were among the most significant proximate causes of farmers’ transitions to organic farming, but these concerns were not isolated to physiological effects of chemical application: they were tied to issues of food sovereignty and stress due to constrained autonomy. This research draws on Paul Farmer’s theory of structural violence and health, as well as current debates revisiting and redefining the peasantry. Mae Ta farmers’ decisions to convert to organic polyculture can be seen as a response to the impact of economic restructuring on the health of rural communities.
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Chapter One: Introduction

My parents were quite sure we were lost. I wasn’t so confident we weren’t. I sat on the edge of the back seat of the rental car and leaned forward over the center consol to look for familiar signs of the village where I had spent two weeks with my study abroad program. We had been driving for over an hour, winding down narrow paved roads away from the city of Chiang Mai—the urban heart of northern Thailand. As we skirted the edge of a low valley between two gentle ridges, we caught intermittent views of rice fields in brilliant green patchworks stretching to the forested mountains on the other side of the valley. We drove right past the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative at the center of the village before the sight of a familiar temple alerted me that we had gone too far. The handmade sign for the cooperative is small and inconspicuous, barely visible from the road. It is a simple campus composed of a sheltered open-air meeting area and a small two-story building, with a kitchen and bathroom behind. One could very easily pass through this village, entirely unaware that its members are presently engaged in a remarkable endeavor to redefine development.

Mae Ta is a sub-district at the intersection of three provinces: Chiang Mai, Lamphun, and Lampang. It is composed of a cluster of seven villages laid out along the Mae Ta River that floods surrounding rice paddy fields every September. The 108 square kilometers of land encompassed within the Mae Ta sub-district include four zones: 5.9 square
kilometers for housing, 22.2 square kilometers of agricultural land, 28.7 square kilometers of community forest, and 55.7 square kilometers of conserved forest. The average land holding in Mae Ta is 2.72 acres (Green Net 2010). *Figure 1.2* illustrates one community member’s depiction of these zones. The colors correspond to those in the photograph of the three-dimensional map above (*Figure 1.1*), which was on display at the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative during my fieldwork.

*Figure 1.2: One community member’s depiction of land use zones in Mae Ta*

According to a report released by the Mae Ta sub-district government that details goals for the period of 2010-2013, the primary source of livelihood for 80 percent of the Mae Ta community is agriculture, namely the cultivation of baby corn (for export), vegetables, fruit trees, dairy cows, and preserved foods. Fifteen percent of community members are engaged in day labor in the industrial sector in the city of Lamphun, approximately 45 minutes away by bus. The remaining five percent of the population work as vendors in the community or as employees of the local government. The average income in Mae Ta is
37,943 baht, or about 1,275 dollars, per year. Nearly every family cultivates rice for their own consumption.

Logging concessions since the early 1900s opened land for cultivation of cash crops, namely tobacco, peanuts, and garlic. By 1967, tobacco became the most important crop, and farmers were contracted by companies to grow it on their own land. During my fieldwork I witnessed one of the 21 local tobacco-processing factories, now overgrown and empty after baby corn eclipsed tobacco as the primary crop in 1981. Of the 1,495 households (4,824 people) in Mae Ta sub-district, 563 people are currently members of the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative, which was founded in 2000 and officially registered by the government as a cooperative in 2001 (Green Net 2010).

The cooperative emerged out of an agricultural network in Mae Ta initiated in 1989 by a local non-governmental organization (NGO), the “Community Organization Development Project” (CODP), along with savings groups, a rice bank, and other initiatives. This network encouraged a reduction in chemical use—an initiative intended to support and expand the efforts of a small group of farmers who had already abandoned the use of chemical inputs when the NGO began working with the Mae Ta community. The network ineffectively attempted to unite over 20 agricultural and financial groups within Mae Ta. When CODP phased out of Mae Ta, farmers decided to adopt a cooperative structure with the intention of improving organization, eliminating corruption, and creating a financially and socially sustainable institution owned collectively by all members (Green Net 2010).

The cooperative sells compost and manure produced within the community, as well as fertilizer, seed, and pig and dairy cow feed purchased in bulk and offered to villagers at reduced prices in an effort to alleviate the critical situations of debt in which many contract
farmers are entrenched. This debt is largely a result of the elevated costs of inputs sold by agricultural companies through middlemen. Additionally, the cooperative provides economic services to members regardless of their production practices. Organic farmers, conventional farmers, and non-farmers alike may borrow money from the cooperative at low interest rates, or deposit money for savings. Every cooperative member owns a limited number of shares in the cooperative and, through this investment, receives a portion of the cooperative’s annual profits.

Among the six distinct groups within the cooperative is the organic “Network” with a membership of 97 households. This organic network includes organic polyculture farmers as well as those who grow organic baby corn and longan fruit, which are sold through the cooperative to “Green Net,” a Thai NGO that pools and markets organic products for export. In addition to partnering with Green Net, the organic network within the cooperative has worked with NGOs to establish organic markets in Chiang Mai and provides transportation to vendors from Mae Ta to sell their organic vegetables at various markets nearly every day of the week. Although the cooperative sells chemical fertilizer, it gently pushes farmers in Mae Ta toward sustainable agriculture by distributing manure and compost produced within the community, limiting the amount of chemical inputs available for purchase, and requiring that members receive training in organic polyculture techniques.

Based on the Mae Ta cooperative’s level of engagement in facilitating organic agriculture, it may appear that this sort of organic network is commonplace in rural Thailand, but the opposite is true. In fact, Rattanasuteerakul and Thapa (2010) found that as of 2005 organic made up only 0.1 percent of the total cultivated land in the country. Despite NGO and (at least nominal) government support in recent years, organic has not taken a strong
This research project seeks to understand the uniqueness of Mae Ta’s efforts by investigating individual stories of transitions to organic polyculture and their relationship with the larger narrative behind this community movement.

Three major questions have driven this research: (1) What were the most significant motivations for individuals’ transitions to organic polyculture? (2) What additional lessons can be learned from conventional farmers’ testimonies of their decisions not to adopt organic and the initial worries of those who did transition? and (3) To what extent did the switch to organic allow farmers to achieve the goals motivating them to make the transition?

I begin this paper by providing an overview of the historical context of agriculture and development in Thailand that sets the stage for the study of organic agriculture in Mae Ta. This brief chapter is followed by a discussion of existing literature on responses of rural residents in northern Thailand to these shifting economic forces, studies of farmers’ motivations for converting to organic in New Zealand and Canada, and a series of case studies of community-level adoption of organic agriculture in Mexico, Spain, and the Netherlands. Chapter Four engages in an analysis of the work of four theorists and the construction of a theoretical framework, which I apply in the analysis of my data. I first draw on Paul Farmer’s discussion of “structural violence” to understand the effect of constrained agency on individual health. James Scott’s concept of the moral economy of the peasantry then lays the foundation for current theoretical debates in agrarian studies in which Philip McMichael and Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg are engaged. McMichael and Van der Ploeg work to redefine the peasantry in the context of current global structures and emphasize the peasant struggle for autonomy in pursuit of an alternative modernity. Chapter Five explains the ethnographic methods employed in this research, and Chapter Six applies
insights and frameworks from existing literature and theory to the data collected through this fieldwork. The final chapter draws together the major findings of this research and seeks to position the organic movement in Mae Ta within the larger narrative of social change in this community.

This research joins the critical dialogue of development studies that seeks to understand the impact of globalization and integration into capitalist market systems on small farmers in low-income countries. Economic and political policies of influential countries such as the U.S., as well as international political bodies, must be informed by a diversity of investigations in this field, including in-depth ethnographic studies that uncover the nuances of small farmers’ experiences and engagement with these larger forces. Yet this research also seeks to bridge the fields of agrarian studies and the anthropology of development with that of global health. By discussing the link between constrained agency and experiences of poor health in Mae Ta, I argue that the study of peasant struggles for autonomy must not be divorced from public and community health assessments or interventions. I intend to highlight the potential of a “positive deviance” approach to health intervention (Singhal et al. 2010) and agricultural development, which demands that one seek to identify and promote the existing creative potential of individuals and communities by recognizing particular positive practices within communities and cultivating their spread in culturally appropriate and sustainable ways.
Chapter Two:
Historical Context of agriculture and development in Thailand since the 1960s

On December 5, 1997, with the country in the grips of economic crisis, His Majesty the King Bhumibol Adulyadej addressed the Thai people, calling them to return to agriculture as a means of realizing economic stability and reconnecting with this most fundamental source of Thai values (Bello et al. 1998). His Majesty promoted setaket pawpiang, or “sufficiency economy,” a philosophy that teaches one to follow a “middle path” of moderation, reason, and sustainability through an agricultural lifestyle oriented around self-sufficiency (Dayley 2008). Yet decades of export-oriented agricultural policies and an urban-centered development agenda had profoundly transformed the agricultural economy in Thailand, perhaps rendering unrealizable the vision of a shift back to rural society (Bello et al. 1998; Gaeo 1987). How have rural lives been transformed by this tension between the push for Western-oriented development and the conviction that Thai identity is inextricably linked to traditional agriculture? Has industrialization undermined the country’s authentic “Thainess” (Delcore 2003:62)? How has agriculture changed since the 1960s, and what impact has this had on rural livelihoods and communities? A brief narrative of these changes will establish the context in which farmers in Mae Ta are leaving behind conventional commodity production and adopting a diversified organic farming system in its place.

The 1960s mark the beginning of the subsidization of industrial development and the squeezing of agriculture in Thailand. While agriculture made up 25 to 40 percent of Thailand’s gross domestic product and employed 60 to 82 percent of the workforce in the 1960s and 70s, only 7 to 13 percent of the national budget was dedicated to supporting
agriculture (Bello et al. 1998:136). Any funds that were spent in this sector focused on commercialization and export-oriented production rather than support for small farmers or rural incomes. The depressed price of rice combined with increasing integration of northern Thai farmers into the national and international economies led to the rising production of non-rice cash crops such as tobacco, soybeans, garlic, and “winter” vegetables native to more temperate climates (Bello et al. 1998).

The Green Revolution trickled into Thailand, boosting rice production and encouraging the cultivation of hybrid varieties (Gaeo 1987; Dayley 2008). By 1977, 95 percent of farmers utilized modern varieties of rice. Hybridization was accompanied by a 15 percent annual increase in fertilizer use between 1962 and 1975, greater utilization of farm machinery, and a 360 percent jump in herbicide use between 1973 and 1980 (Gaeo 1987:12-13). The government spurred growth-oriented agricultural development by waiving taxes on imported fertilizers and subsidizing credit for the purchase of commercial fertilizers and machinery (Kasem and Thapa 2012), policies that heavily favored agro-industries over small farmers. Nevertheless, the price ratio per kilogram of chemical inputs to rice in 1971 was still 7 to 1 in Thailand, which was significantly higher than the 3 to 1 or less ratio in other Asian countries and pinched farmers’ incomes (Gaeo 1987:14). Kasem and Thapa (2012) discuss deforestation, soil depletion and chemical contamination, overgrazing, and the exploitation and contamination of water sources that accompanied the rise of industrial agriculture in Thailand. Bello et al. (1998) argue that the rural development efforts that promoted the rice and commercial crop boom through the 1970s led to expansion of production into forested areas, increasing social conflict over water resources and land, and widening social gaps as farmers fell into debt.
A drop in export prices of rice, maize, rubber, and sugar—crops that occupied nearly 70 percent of Thailand’s farmland—combined with increasing competition in the world market and pushed farmers to switch to the production of ‘higher-value-added’ commodities such as temperate vegetables, cut flowers, processed food, shrimp, and broiler chickens (Bello et al. 1998). Trends of mechanization, hired labor, year-round cultivation, and externally sourced inputs accompanied the transition to these cash crops (Gaeo 1987).

Anxiety about the instability of export markets drove the emergence of the now widespread system of contract farming, which was facilitated by the 4th, 6th, 7th, and 9th National Economic and Social Development Plans (Sriboonchitta and Wiboonpoongse 2008). In a contract farming system, multinational or domestic corporations contract small producers to grow or raise a particular high-value commodity for export. A middleman deals directly with farmers, providing them with seed and chemical inputs and deducting this cost from the price they offer farmers for their products. This system guarantees a market with a set price in exchange for the farmer’s commitment to cultivating that particular crop, following the company’s guidelines, and selling the product back to that company alone (Motiram and Vakulabharanam 2007).

Emerging first in Chiang Mai Province, the contract farming system in Thailand was arguably the most developed in Asia by the 1990s (Sriboonchitta and Wiboonpoongse 2008). Sriboonchitta and Wiboonpoongse (2008) discuss the mixed impact and attitudes toward contract farming in Thailand. On the one hand, such as system provides small farmers with market access, guarantees price stability, and fronts the cost of inputs. On the other hand, middlemen often manipulate prices through quality regulations, and some farmers complain of unfair prices or strict cultivation quotas and guidelines (Sriboonchitta and Wiboonpoongse 2008).
2008). Nevertheless, contract production has grown quickly since the 1990s, and has been particularly successful with baby corn, soybeans, sweet corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and eggplant (Sriboonchitta and Wiboonpoongse 2008). We will further investigate various perspectives on this system in discussing existing literature in the following chapter, as well as in the analysis of original data in the Chapter Six.

The shift toward export-oriented agriculture demanded continuous technological innovation to remain competitive, which Bello et al. (1998) argue the Thai government was ill equipped to facilitate. Many of those previously employed in traditional cash crop production were often not those able or most likely to switch to more promising commodities. “For these farmers,” a World Bank report argues, “relevant alternatives would be to engage in off-farm activities or migrate” (Bello et al. 1998:163). And many did. The intensification of industrialization with the influx of Japanese investment and industrial operations in 1987 caused a surge in rural to urban migration (Bello et al. 1998; Motiram and Vakulabharanam 2007). Thailand hurtled along this trajectory until the economic crisis of the mid 1990s. It was at this point that the King of Thailand stood up to suggest a shift in the country’s vision for development. His Majesty the King Bhumibol Adulyadej brought attention back to agriculture with the alternative perspective of “sufficiency economy” (Kasem and Thapa 2012).

The economic crisis of 1997 was a turning point in agricultural policy as it marked the first time sustainable agriculture made its way into the national agenda (Kasem and Thapa 2012). As organic began to emerge in the 1980s, a small body of sociological studies noted the positive environmental, social, and economic impacts of decreased food expense, improved health, increased family-oriented labor and strengthened communities (Kawasaki
and Fujimoto 2009). Using a socio-environmental index, Kawasaki and Fujimoto (2009) found that organic production demonstrated significantly lower negative impact scores than conventional production. With the 9th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2002-2006) the Thai government set an agenda to promote sustainable agriculture through three broad strategies: (1) the “strengthening of farmers” through policy encouraging crop diversification, reduced use of chemical inputs, and sustainable management of soil and water, (2) the “strengthening of communities” with the “One Tambon, One Product” program to support farmers’ groups and community businesses, and (3) enhancing the “competitiveness of the agricultural sector in the world market” by encouraging the production of high-value agricultural products for international markets (Kasem and Thapa 2012:104).

Yet this reorientation toward sustainability has done almost nothing to alter the structure of conventional agriculture in Thailand or reinvent the course of development (Kasem and Thapa 2012). In their analysis of sustainable agriculture policies, Kasem and Thapa (2012) find that since this agenda was announced, crop diversification in Thailand has been insignificant, the use of imported chemical inputs has steadily increased, toxic pesticides—even those legally banned—are still being freely traded within Thailand, and organic agriculture currently accounts for only 0.103 percent of the total land under cultivation. They argue: “In the absence of meaningful outcomes, the policies adopted have become merely rhetoric while the structure of conventional agriculture remains largely intact” (Kasem and Thapa 2012:111).

Why have we not seen a shift in farming practices? The most important factor is arguably “the double edged government policy of promoting sustainable agriculture while
continuing with the traditional policy of rendering support to conventional agriculture” (Kasem and Thapa 2012:111). The government continues to subsidize the importation of chemical fertilizers, the expansion of irrigation systems, and credit distribution to agro-industries, while failing to raise consumer consciousness about organic products or cultivate a domestic market for alternative agriculture. The globalized economy and American and Japanese policies of subsidizing agricultural products also discouraged the cultivation of alternative agriculture within Thailand (Kasem and Thapa 2012). “The government seems to have been entangled in a practical and moral dilemma of economic versus social and environmental, and short-term versus long-term, benefits of agricultural development” (Kasem and Thapa 2012:111).

As the Thai state has continued to promote conventional growth-driven agriculture, many farmers feel that organic farming is not economically viable. Where the practice has emerged it has largely been undertaken by agribusiness rather than by small holders (Kasem and Thapa 2012). Taotawin (2008) argues that unclear government policies have led to a “contradictory place for organic in Thailand” (2008:6). Originally a form of opposition to the Green Revolution and intimately connected with the vision of “sufficiency economy,” organic agriculture in Thailand, to the extent that it has emerged, has largely become commercialized and has not fundamentally challenged the modernization narrative of development (Taotawin 2008). But what happens when an organic movement emerges from the ground up as it has in the village of Mae Ta? How is context of agricultural change and development manifested in individual farmers’ experiences, and in what ways is the organic movement in Mae Ta a response to these forces?
Chapter Three:  
Literature Review

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the context of a globalizing economy and policies that privilege agribusiness and squeeze the agricultural sector in the push for economic development, how are rural residents and communities in northern Thailand responding to these dynamics? In this literature review, I begin with the work of de Almeida (2006) and Walker (2009), whose explorations of farmers’ adaptations to the shifting agricultural context in northern Thailand emphasize the desire of rural communities not to oppose these changes, but to embrace them on their own terms. Given their findings, Mae Ta farmers’ decisions to adopt organic cultivation seem quite extraordinary. I then consider studies by Fairweather (1999) and Cranfield, Henson and Holliday (2010) on farmers’ conversions to organic. Finally, I turn to case studies of sustainable agriculture movements in Mexico (Getz 2008), Spain (Leutchford and Pratt 2011), and the Netherlands (Van der Ploeg 2008) to understand the social dynamics of the driving forces and success factors of these movements. They explore the ways in which communities negotiate interactions with the global economy and reinvent modernity by creating their own markets and networks based on a strong set of shared values.

3.2 DIVERSITY OF RURAL RESPONSES TO CHANGE IN NORTHERN THAILAND

Studies of rural communities’ responses to economic integration and the commercialization of agriculture offered by de Almeida (2006) and Walker (2009) sketch the context in which Mae Ta farmers have begun to adopt organic farming. Frederico Fonseca de Almeida (2006) emphasizes the adoption of alternative sources of livelihood, yet he calls
for the need to re-examine “the concept of peasantry” (de Almeida 2006:Abstract) and challenges the moral economy approach to understanding rural Thailand today, an approach we will return to discuss in Chapter Four. He analyzes the impact of export-oriented commercialization of agriculture on villages in Northern Thailand, pointing to the diversity of responses including labor migration, subcontracting industries, contract farming, and diversification of income-generating activities. De Almeida also analyzes rural social movements in response to these changes.

De Almeida (2006) conducted fieldwork over seven trips to seven different villages in Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces, one visit to Lamphun Provincial Court, participation in a demonstration, and observation at two conferences. He conducted six semi-structured interviews of two Northern Farmers Alliance leaders, two activists with non-governmental organizations (NGO), and two university professors, in addition to informal conversational interviews. De Almeida also collected data from a group interview with twelve farmers from Baan Pong Village in Chiang Mai Province and three NGO activists. Document analysis of academic literature, government policies and acts and NGO internal documents makes up the final dimension of de Almeida’s methodology. While most of the data discussed in this thesis is not original, de Almeida uses fieldwork to (1) test the findings of previous literature and the validity of theoretical approaches to peasant studies and social movements, and (2) to analyze a specific social movement: the Northern Farmers Association (NFA), which will be discussed later in this chapter (de Almeida 2006). He gained access to communities, conferences, and documents through an internship with the international NGO “Focus on the Global South” in Bangkok and the assistance of an interpreter with close ties to the NFA.
leadership. The advantages of this access must be balanced with the potential for bias with 
this connection, but the triangulation of methodologies supports the value of this study.

De Almeida’s (2006) analysis outlines the diversity of rural communities’ responses 
to the rise of export-oriented agriculture in Thailand and the impact of this transformation on 
the concept of the northern Thai village. Labor migration to work in the industrial, service 
and construction sectors in cities has led to the transformation of the village from a center of 
economic activity in the 1970s to what Singheatra-Renard (1999) calls a “dormitory area” 
(de Almeida 2006:78). Labor migration has been accompanied by new farming and non- 
farming activities. Subcontracting industries, such as sewing fishnets at home and selling 
them to middlemen, provide women with crucial supplementary income. Needlework and 
unskilled factory labor, particularly in areas of food processing and electronics are especially 
common in northern Lamphun Province. Farmers express that this diversification of income-
generating activities is a coping mechanism necessary to make up for increasing debt. Some 
communities, such as Tambon Thun Sadok north of Chiang Mai, have adopted contract 
farming systems, welcomed as a stable market in the midst of uncertainty (de Almeida 2006).

Andrew Walker (2009) analyzes the emergence of contract farming in greater depth 
and argues that it serves as a critical source of security for small-scale farmers amidst the 
instabilities of the global market. In his case study of the rapid adoption of contract farming 
of sweet corn and tobacco in Baan Tiam, a lowland village an hour from Chiang Mai, Walker 
discusses the ways in which farmers have “participated in and responded to this agricultural 
transformation” (Walker 2009:61). Contract farming in Baan Tiam emerged and rapidly 
expanded in the context of “environmental and economic uncertainty” as falling yields and 
low prices of garlic cultivated for sale to traders in an open market left farmers with debt and
degraded land (Walker 2009:61). At the same time, the cost of inputs, including a yearly supply of seed and increasing amounts of fertilizer to replenish the loss of nutrients in the soil, rose exponentially.

Walker’s (2009) ethnographic fieldwork and five household surveys undertaken between 2003 and 2006 focus on 50 of the village’s 126 households. He observed a situation of rotating debt in which farmers shuffled money between agriculture cooperatives, banks, and private moneylenders. In the midst of this uncertainty, contract farming offered a low-risk alternative, by providing a secure market, accessible credit and technical advice, and insurance against the risk of crop failure (Walker 2009). If a farmer’s crop fails, that individual is not required to pay for the inputs already provided by the company, and thus the company bears this risk. One farmer explains, “We are growing for the company because at least they are willing to invest the capital, we don’t have to hurt ourselves with debt, we don’t have to get stressed or tired. Investing labour is not as stressful as investing money” (Walker 2009:68). This economic security has attracted farmers to contract farming as an alternative to non-contractual production.

Yet farmers’ endorsement and adoption of this system has not been unconditional (Walker 2009). Some academics note the debt often incurred by contract farmers as the rising costs of inputs are deducted from the price they receive for their yield, and others cite the eucalyptus frenzy of the 1980s resulting from the rise of contract farming of eucalyptus trees as evidence of the negative environmental impacts of this system (Bello et al. 1998; Motiram and Vakulabharanam 2007). In dealing with these negative effects, Walker (2009) argues that farmers in Baan Tiam have employed “‘subtle transcripts’ of resistance” (Walker 2009:61) in their relationship with companies, through a process he calls “keeping good
company” (Walker 2009:69). Diversification of rural livelihoods also indirectly gives farmers more leverage over agricultural companies, as companies are aware that farming is not the sole or even the primary source of income, and farmers have a choice not to enter into such a contractual relationship (Walker 2009). Thus, companies “have to be careful to fit within the locally valued systems of economy and sociality” (Walker 2009:69).

Farmers in Baan Tiam clearly articulate their grievances with the contract farming system. Through subtle forms of resistance and adaptation, they complain about late payments, gossip about brokers and companies, harvest crops early in the morning to increase weight, tweak production schedules, and maintain a clear separation between commercial production in the dry season and subsistence production in the rainy season (Walker 2009). Walker (2009) makes the key point that even within the contract farming system, peasants’ “moral economy” denotes expectations of the relationship between farmers and companies. He explains that this moral economy,

[…] ideologically regulates transactions in agriculture. […] Rural people are not merely impacted upon by wider economic or political forces but have moral orientations which provide a broad framework—not a straitjacket—for evaluating and regulating the personal interactions that characterize those forces at the local level. [Walker 2009:76]

In this way, farmers evaluate the agricultural systems and maintain some autonomy by expecting companies to relate to the local community in accordance with their moral economy.

Walker (2009) explains that there are some intersections between the types of ‘everyday resistance’ employed by farmers in Baan Tiam and those that James Scott (1985) highlights in his seminal analysis of farmers in the Malaysian village ‘Sedaka’ to support his theory of moral economy, which we will analyze further in the following theory chapter.
Yet, rather than opposing the “penetration” of commercial agriculture or defending a
traditional way of life, Walker (2009) argues that farmers use their moral economy to
critique, evaluate, and work with the companies to fashion relations that are reciprocal and
most beneficial to the farmers. There is no attempt to return to an idealized past way of life;
“there are other points of reference” (Walker 2009:77), as farmers look for opportunities to
improve their livelihoods through contract farming. In this sense, farmers’ response to the
commercialization of agriculture, trade liberalization, and urban-centered development is not
necessarily oppositional. *Instead, they are experimenting with options for engaging with
these changes in ways that are beneficial rather than exploitative.*

In the latter part of his thesis, de Almeida (2006) analyzes a more oppositional
response among farmers in northern Thailand through his discussion of the Northern Farmers
Alliance (NFA), a regional organization of mostly lowland small-scale commercial farmers
founded in 1998 in the wake of the 1997 economic crisis. The objectives and strategies of
this organization resonate with those of the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative.
The NFA aims at solving problems of debt, access to land, low commodity prices, poor
environmental management, and poorly planned development projects. It maintains
independence from political parties, illuminates the political and structural roots of farmers’
challenges, facilitates the exchange of information, and collaborates with NGOs and
government officials. Yet, unlike the Mae Ta cooperative, the NFA concerns itself primarily
with issues of access to land, and the tactics employed by participants in this movement are
directly political, characterized by demonstrations and meetings in Bangkok and the
Lamphun Provincial Hall (de Almeida 2006). Indeed, most of the agrarian movements in
Thailand given academic attention have centered on land tenure issues, direct action
responses to dam construction, or conflicts with upland ethnic minorities (Caouette and Turner 2009). Additionally, de Almeida defines the NFA as a moderate localist, arguing: “the alliance does not seek to walk backwards and re-establish a self-reliant rural village where production aims only for household consumption. They propose modifications in the present market economy from which they can also benefit from the national economic growth and from the country’s wealth” (de Almeida 2006:104).

Mae Ta presents a puzzling case in which these same markers of contract farming, increasing labor migration, and diversification of income-generating activities are all present, but the response at the village level is distinct and quite different. Many farmers in Mae Ta are in fact rejecting contract farming and transitioning to sufficiency-based organic cultivation. Neither is the movement as politically oriented as NFA due to differences in scope and focus. Farmers in Mae Ta are adopting an alternative form of agriculture in response to changing agricultural and socio-economic contexts. Is it the choice of organic that makes their response unique? According to Rattanasuteerakul and Thapa (2012), the market climate and economic structures of Thailand render organic agriculture financially unviable. Pattanapant and Shivakoti’s 2009 study of the outcomes of organic agriculture in northern Thailand found that when farmers switched to organic cultivation, yields dropped, total “costs” (including both cash and non-cash costs) increased, and on-farm labor increased (Pattanapant and Shivakoti 2009). Why, then, would farmers be motivated to make such a switch? I now turn to a separate strain of literature on decisions to convert to organic cultivation to help shed light on this unique response.
3.3 STUDIES OF MOTIVATIONS FOR CONVERSION TO ORGANIC FARMING

Research on farmers’ motivations to adopt organic agriculture has been undertaken primarily in developed countries. Bellon and Lamine (2009) reflect on the discourse of agronomy and sociology literature on conversion to organic since the 1970s, emphasizing the recent focus on the commercialization of organic agriculture. While a relatively small body of literature uses case studies to understand the nuances of individual biographies and conceptualizations of organic, most sociological research has sought to quantitatively assess farmers’ attitudes and trace decision-making processes. A majority of these emphasize economic motivations as most prominent (Bellon and Lamine 2009). Studies through the 1990s in Europe emphasize environmental concerns among organic farmers in Denmark and Sweden, but highlight economic incentives as the main motivating factor for farmers in East Germany (Fairweather 1999). Literature based on research in the U.S. identifies a push for healthy families, food, and livestock (Fairweather 1999). Recognizing the tendency of existing research to emphasize only one or a few motivations and the lack of attention to the perspectives of conventional farmers, John Fairweather (1999) uses mental mapping of farmers’ decision-making processes to get a better sense of the variety of motivations guiding the decisions of both organic and commercial farmers in New Zealand.

Fairweather (1999) draws on data from two case studies of a variety of farmers in the Canterbury region and kiwifruit growers in the Bay of Plenty region of New Zealand to map out decision trees of farmers’ choices. Decision trees were based on interviews with 43 farmers (16 organic and 27 conventional) in Canterbury, representing a variety of farm types, and 40 farmers (12 organic and 28 Kiwigreen farmers using a combination of organic techniques and chemical insecticides) in the Bay of Plenty region. In unstructured
interviews, farmers were asked to give a sketch of their farm operations and practices and to explain their situation and approach in their own terms. Fairweather (1999) then used this data to construct a decision tree for each case study that “highlights the reasons that lie behind farmers’ choices of either organic or conventional production” and “must combine criteria for all farmers in a logical way. The tree thus tells why a particular outcome is achieved for each farmer because the outcome is preceded by a subset of criteria relevant to particular farmers” (Fairweather 1999:53). Decision trees are not intended to be predictive, but rather descriptive illustrations of the diversity of factors and paths toward organic or conventional production.

Fairweather (1999) identifies four types of organic farmers. “Organic hopefuls” have not yet found an organic product or are still developing techniques, while “frustrated organic” farmers do not grow organic due to family commitments or mortgage. “Pragmatic organic” growers farm organically, but admit that if premiums decrease in the future they would switch to conventional production. Finally “committed organic” farmers express that they would not give up organic farming even if premiums took a dive. Fairweather (1999) points out a variety of motivations for growing organic, notably: organic philosophy, concern about chemicals in food, adverse environmental effects of conventional production, and personal health (though the majority who expressed health effects of chemicals still placed priority on profit concerns). Others were motivated by premiums, still others by experiences of problems with conventional farming, concern for the soil, or antipathy to chemicals. Some sought a low-input strategy. Conventional farmers, on the other hand, did not grow organic because either they were satisfied with conventional, or they saw organic as not technically or economically viable, or simply not preferable (Fairweather 1999).
While Fairweather (1999) uses qualitative interviews to construct mental maps, his results do not reveal why that specific concern or motivation was important to that farmer in their particular context. For example, we see that 66 farmers were not well satisfied with the present farming system, yet it is not clear what aspects of the system they found most frustrating or why they were dissatisfied. While the purpose of the decision tree is to display the diversity of motivations and constraints that may be at play, the structure of the decision tree still seems to suggest that farmers move down a checklist of criteria, and as soon as they affirmatively answer one qualifying question they automatically switch to organic production. As it intends, the decision tree model lays out the diversity of motives that may contribute to the decision to adopt or reject organic agriculture, but it does not illustrate the complex ways in which multiple motives and constraints may be at play. Fairweather (1999) also makes it clear that this study makes no attempt to draw conclusions about the relative importance of different motivations, given that the purpose was to develop an in-depth understanding of the decision-making processes of each farmer.

Over a decade later, Cranfield, Henson, and Holliday (2010) revisit this question of the relative significance of various motives for adopting organic practices so as to understand how best to facilitate the transition to organic in Canada. Cranfield et al. (2010) used semi-structured interviews of seven organic dairy farmers, four organic vegetable farmers, three in-transition dairy farmers, and one in-transition vegetable farmer in Ontario to inform a nation-wide postal survey. Interviews, conducted between February and December of 2004, investigated farmers’ motivations for producing organically and their experiences of changes in cost structure, challenges, and benefits with the conversion to organic. Building off of the themes gathered from interviews, a qualitative survey was designed to validate the findings
of the interviews and gather a wider pool of data. Their sample frame invited nearly all registered organic dairy farmers and half of all organic vegetable growers in Canada to participate in the survey and selected participants in proportion to the distribution of types of organic farmers throughout Canada. Respondents were asked to rank their level of agreement or disagreement with statements about motives, costs, problems, and benefits of conversion to organic and explain their attitudes toward certain markets. The researchers used principle component analysis to identify themes of producers’ perceptions of motivations, challenges, and benefits associated with their conversion to organic.

Cranfield, Henson, and Holliday (2010) argue that in contrast to existing literature, which emphasizes economic motives, the farmers in their study placed greater emphasis on environmental and health/safety concerns and benefits. In the broader survey, the most important motivational factors included hopes “to address concerns about the environment,” “to address concerns about the danger of working with chemicals,” and “to address concerns about your family’s health” (Cranfield et al. 2010:296-297). Following the prominence of environmental and health and safety concerns were motives of social needs and aspirations (“harmony with nature” or “the need to learn new farming techniques”), the need to change one’s lifestyle to “better fit with ideological beliefs,” profitability, and economic survival (Cranfield et al. 2010:297-298). Religion, financial problems as a conventional farmer, and the possibility of a more secure market or enhanced profitability ranked lowest in importance. The most significant problems experienced after converting to organic were external and due mainly to lack of policy support, followed by negative pressure from other farmers and lack of physical and financial capital. Agronomic issues were of little concern. Positive impacts on health dominated perceived benefits of organic. Reduced direct
exposure to chemicals, less chemical contamination of food and soil, better overall health of
the producer, and reduced exposure of the producer’s employees to chemicals were ranked in
order as most the significant benefits of conversion to organic (Cranfield et al. 2010).
Economic impacts, “more freedom for employees,” and “more freedom for producers”
ranked lowest in importance (Cranfield et al. 2010:302).

These responses emphasize non-monetary motivations and benefits, though the fact
that lack of government and institutional support for organic was farmers’ most significant
challenge raises questions about how farmers’ goals in converting may shift under different
economic and structural circumstances. This lack of support suggests that such a transition
involved significant economic risk, yet environmental and health concerns with conventional
farming outweighed these challenges. Cranfield et al. (2010) recognize that their study does
not investigate non-organic producers’ perspectives or former organic producers’ motives
and experiences of the benefits and challenges of organic. Such an investigation would
provide a more thorough understanding of the push/pull forces at work in the context of
Canada’s agricultural and economic systems.

It is important to note that both Fairweather (1999) and Cranfield et al. (2010) study
conversions to organic among certified export-oriented farmers in developed countries.
Literature on conversions to organic in the developing world is lacking, and where it does
exist it tends to focus on successes or failures of externally initiated development projects
Previous studies illustrate how motivations and constraints vary in different countries and
contexts, and as such these findings may have limited applicability to organic in Thailand.
Even the construction of categories of motives employed by Cranfield et al. (2010) may not
be applicable in other cultures and contexts. For example, their definition of social needs and aspirations as “harmony with nature” or “the need to learn new farming techniques” (Cranfield et al. 2010:298) may not resonate with farmers in other parts of the world or may exclude important social aspirations for some farmers.

One critical arena of motivations emphasized by literature on conversions to organic is the concern for health. To relate this back to the research at hand, a 2003 study by the Chiang Mai Provincial Health Office found dangerous levels of chemicals in blood samples taken from consumers in Chiang Mai (Pattanapant and Shivakoti 2009). This evidence dovetails with early impressions from my fieldwork, when health concerns emerged as a common proximate cause for farmers’ decision to join the organic network within the cooperative—an observation I will explore in greater detail later. Yet there is still something distinct about the movement in Mae Ta that sets it apart from other cases of farmers adopting organic practices out of concern for the health implications of chemical use. There seemed to be a more overarching cause of poor health at play: stress.

A multitude of studies have revealed the physiological impact of stress, since prolonged elevated cortisol and epinephrine levels suppress immune function and increase the risk of heart disease and strokes (Heinz et al. 2003; Wiley and Allen 2009). Most striking, however, are the connections drawn between health, stress, and autonomy. Social inequality is strongly correlated to poor health, even when researchers control for confounding behavioral factors (Wiley and Allen 2009). This is due to the prolonged stress caused by a lack of control over one’s life. “Having the perception that you cannot control or improve your situation, or fearing a loss of status, having few social resources to draw on, or living in a society rife with divisions all contribute to stress and stress-related disease”
Might the health concerns of farmers in Mae Ta stem from a broader discontent with their way of life? What do they see as the critical components of good health for an individual? How does this relate to their understanding of a healthy community?

Literature on motivations for conversion to organic focuses almost exclusively on individuals. Fairweather (1999) makes it clear that decision trees speak only to motivations and decision-making paths of individuals. Yet in a context in which farmers are making the transition as a group or community, a more ethnographic approach is needed to understand the potentially interconnected sets of constraints, motivations, and responses of farmers in specific contexts and how individual farmers’ transitions are connected to others’. In cases of community-level organic movements, are we dealing with a distinct set of driving and constraining forces? I turn now to studies of organic cooperatives and agrarian movements for further insights into farmers’ motivations and the ways in which their goals are linked to the movement’s success on a larger scale.

3.4 SOCIAL CAPITAL AND LOCAL LIVELIHOOD SECURITY: A CASE STUDY FROM MEXICO

Through a comparative case study of El Pozo and San Cristobal, two communities in Mexico’s Baja Peninsula that are a part of the organic producers’ cooperative del Cabo, Christy Getz (2008) points to the values that give the cooperative cohesion and strength at the local level and provide extra-local linkages with consumers on a broader scale. She uses the framework of social capital to analyze these values and the networks built on them. Getz (2008) examines the interacting implications of local-level social capital and extra-local
market linkages on sustainable livelihood security. Her research builds off of Snyder’s 1997 study of communities’ responses to neoliberal reform in Mexico’s coffee sector which suggested that exposure to markets and neoliberal policies in Mexico actually “generated grassroots activity aimed at reinventing markets in a new light” (Getz 2008:557). Different studies have come to contrasting conclusions about the impact of high village-level social capital on inequality within the local community, suggesting the need for further investigation. While research on social capital is well established in development literature, few ethnographic studies have undertaken questions of the relationship between market linkages and local social capital (Getz 2008). Getz presents her 2008 study in Mexico as the “first sociological analysis of community-level dynamics and institutions as they intersect with market forms” (Getz 2008:562). While Getz focuses on the community level, these values and social structures are inextricably linked to, and in fact share a feedback relationship with, individual farmers’ motivations for adopting organic agriculture.

Getz (2008) conducted interviews with over 40 farmers in the two communities of El Pozo and San Cristobal, as well as interviews with extension agents, leaders of ejidos (local institutions that oversee communal grazing land and individual farmland), and other key actors. These case studies were part of a larger project involving 150 farmers from all of del Cabos’s 15 production zones. In addition to interviews, Getz also assessed sustainable livelihood security through analysis of income data in records from del Cabo’s administrative office. Getz operationalized “sustainable livelihood security” as: (1) increased income, (2) stability of income, and (3) equitable distribution of income within the community (Getz 2008:562). Social capital was operationalized with a focus on structural social capital, or “the composition and functioning of formal and informal institutions,” and was measured by
analyzing types and frequency of meetings within the community, levels of familiarity and interaction between neighbors, participation in social organizations, and the extent of informal networks (Getz 2008:263).

Getz (2008) discusses the ways in which market integration through linkages to Jacobs Farm in Northern California through the del Cabo producers’ cooperative led to very different outcomes for the two communities studied due to differences in community cohesion and social equality. In El Pozo, a community characterized by strong equitable social structures, market linkages “protected and promoted positive pre-existing social capital”, thus increasing livelihood security and sustainability, but in San Cristobal these linkages only “exacerbated negative social capital” (Getz 2008:577). Getz explains, “market linkages intersect with pre-existing social capital to reinforce the direction of development and inequality outcomes” (2008:577). Thus local social structures and values mediate the effect of market linkages on community-level sustainable livelihood security, which Getz defines as ecologically sustainable production that does not increase inequality or expose farmers to unacceptable economic risk (Getz 2008:555-556). What, then, was the cause of such disparate forms of social capital in the two communities?

Getz argues, “The nature of a community’s social fabric is often a result of long-standing historical legacies” (2008:574). As Mexico adopted a neoliberal approach to rural development in the 1990s, peasant farmers were exposed to global competition, which encouraged diversification and the production of non-traditional crops for export markets (Getz 2008), similar to the processes of change in northern Thailand. Yet the effect of this involvement in global markets on farmers’ livelihoods differed greatly in San Cristobal and
El Pozo, largely due to the distinct histories and politics of ejidos in each community as they interact with the structural changes in agriculture (Getz 2008).

The community of San Cristobal is located on the outskirts of San Jose del Cabo. Since the influx of tourism in the 1970s, work in hotels, restaurants, and transportation has largely replaced cattle ranching and subsistence farming as primary sources of livelihood. Still, in most households, at least one person is a member of the large and politically-oriented Ejido San Jose. This ejido has 272 members, or ejidatarios, and strong ties to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Members are financially rewarded due to this political affiliation, and the ejido in San Cristobal is characterized by an entrenched hierarchy. In contrast, El Pozo is located 30 miles north of San Jose del Cabo, and is the most isolated production zone involved in the del Cabo cooperative. Agriculture and cattle ranching remain the primary source of livelihood in the community. The ejido in El Pozo was formed in the early 1900s at the same time as much of the land was first brought under cultivation, and it is thoroughly embedded in the community. Getz explains, “The ejido was clearly the backbone of this small community, the source of great pride and collective accomplishment. […] People identified first and foremost as ejidatarios, not as socios (members of the cooperative)” (2008:568). In contrast to the unequal patron-client relationships within San Cristobal’s ejido, leadership of the ejido in El Pozo is rotated and all community members attend meetings. Positive social capital in the form of a strong equitable ejido in El Pozo allowed market linkages provided by the del Cabo cooperative to have a positive impact on sustainable livelihood security, while in San Cristobal inequality increased as members with greater political influence benefited unevenly from the cooperative’s profits (Getz 2008).
Getz emphasizes that the feedback relationship between social capital and inequality can create either “virtuous circles or vicious cycles” (2008: 576) depending on the nature of the social capital. Social capital has the potential to buffer the instability and inequality that often results from market integration: “While vertical relationships can be valuable in accessing resources and markets, strong local-level, horizontal relationships are often an important prerequisite to ensure that vertical ties do not devolve into patron-client relationships” (Getz 2008:569). She notes that differences in management of water resources in the two communities are determined by the structure of social organization, sense of community, cooperation, and infrastructure. Shared values within the del Cabo cooperative became the underlying key to success of the cooperative, and community cohesion in El Pozo translated this success into increased sustainable livelihood security and stronger positive social capital at the local level. The founders of del Cabo capitalized on existing social structures by organizing production into residential zones and established linkages with these communities by meeting with ejidos leaders. In this way the cooperative provides isolated communities with the opportunity to build regional social capital and thus participate in the growing organic market (Getz 2008).

While competition between farmers in San Cristobal limited the positive impact of these linkages on local livelihoods and led to greater stratification,

El Pozo community members’ participation in del Cabo reinvigorated agriculture such that it provided a common ground for people to connect and reconnect, thus strengthening social capital. And social capital was the fabric from which sprung a number of community-led initiatives that furthered the community members’ ability to achieve sustainable livelihood security. [Getz 2008:575]

This positive impact spilled over to the community as a whole. Farmers were not criticized for selling to other brokers, and both members and non-members engaged in informal
economies of exchanging excess produce to benefit mutually from each other’s markets (Getz 2008). In these ways organic production in El Pozo is part of a larger community-level movement for social sustainability. As we will see in Mae Ta, the del Cabo cooperative seems to be centered more fundamentally on the value of a sustainable and strong community rather than organic principles per se.

Getz’s definition of sustainable livelihood security hinges solely on income. Yet might there be other sources or indicators of sustainable livelihoods such as food production or diversification of livelihood activities? Additionally, as Getz’s study is focused on structural social capital, it lacks an in-depth discussion of the values that give this structure strength. What is the source of strong local social capital, and how is this related to individuals’ motivations? How exactly is this social capital, or the values underlying it, critical in the formation of market linkages?

3.5 VALUES AND MARKET LINKAGES: A CASE STUDY FROM ANDALUSIA, SPAIN

Peter Luetchford and Jeff Pratt take up these questions in their 2011 study of a cooperative in Spain and emphasize the critical role of peasant values in linking farmers to markets. In the case of the organic farming cooperative, Pueblos Blancos, in Andalusia, Spain, shared values and social cohesion stemming from the political and cultural roots of the cooperative are key factors in the sustainability and feasibility of organic production in this region; these shared values link farmers to consumers, as well as to intellectual and political support networks. Pueblos Blancos is a cooperative of small farmers in southern Andalusia that distributes organic fruit and vegetables. Interested in the goals of those involved in the
cooperative, the roots of these values, and how they function as a driving force of this cooperative’s market success, Leutchford and Pratt (2011) undertook an ethnographic study of this cooperative. “Our starting point,” they clarify, “is not the process of capitalist appropriation, but how people create a different kind of food network and modulate their encounter with the market” (Leutchford and Pratt 2011:90). Just as Getz (2008) discusses the ways in which social capital can mediate the impact of market integration, Leutchford and Pratt (2011) investigate how producers negotiate with a capitalist economic system and reinvent modernity by creating their own markets and networks based on a strong set of shared values.

First introduced to Pueblos Blancos through an urban food cooperative in Seville, La Ortiga that buys products from these farmers, Leutchford and Pratt (2011) conducted research over multiple long-term visits to the community between April 2008 and April 2009. During these research trips, they worked with farmers in the fields, attended cooperative meetings, engaged in informal discussions, participated in farm visits, and recorded in-depth interviews with farmers, retailers, and consumers. Though the numbers of field visits and total interviews are not specified in their publication, the researchers did explain that information on the history of Pueblos Blancos was gathered from interviews with members of the La Verde—a sub-unit of the cooperative—and the manager of the cooperative. Researchers also interviewed 30 women of different ages and backgrounds in one village about their consumption practices. Finally, participant observation of ten workshops organized by local activists to promote organic food to women’s groups and parent-teacher associations provided insights into the ideology that links consumers to producers.
Leutchford and Pratt (2011) come to understand that Pueblos Blancos is driven and maintained by both economic and non-commercial values. The economic driving force behind the organic cooperative is the need for a production strategy and market that can provide an acceptable livelihood. The authors argue that while Pueblos Blancos is unable to compete with the large-scale export-oriented organic sector, they have developed a niche with the capacity to generate sustainable livelihoods. Cooperative producers receive 200 Euros per month, which is a modest sum, but when paired with the multiplicity of income-generating activities within households and the consumption of their own produce, farmers have secure and sustainable livelihoods, especially compared to the 25 percent of residents in the region who are unemployed (Leutchford and Pratt 2011). While Getz (2008) limited her definition of sustainable livelihood security to income levels and distribution, Leutchford and Pratt (2011) point to the buffer and security afforded by production for self-consumption. Additionally, Leutchford and Pratt (2011) point out that farmers in Pueblos Blancos have spare land and labor time and could increase production if they desired higher incomes, and they collectively agree on their own wages. Even though Pueblos Blancos producers are unable to compete with specialized export-oriented organic producers, most did not view this competition as a threat to their livelihoods. “To understand the reasons for this,” Leutchford and Pratt explain, “we need to describe the networks Pueblos Blancos is involved in, the political values that sustain them, and the specific markets in which they can effectively and efficiently compete” (2011:94; emphasis added).

Non-commercial values of local autonomy and short food chains link farmers to members of the urban-dwelling radical left who support family farmers in Andalusia by providing a market and political support. Intellectuals, public officials, activists and wage
laborers frustrated with capitalism seek to “*revalorize traditional peasant-campesino ways of life*” (Leutchford and Pratt 2011:90) by supporting family farmers in towns and villages that “have long understood and idealized themselves as economically autonomous, especially in the production and distribution of food” (Leutchford and Pratt 2011:89). These shared values create a network critical to the ability of Pueblos Blancos to provide a sustainable source of livelihood for farmers (Leutchford and Pratt 2011).

As the urban-dwelling radical left extends peasant values and forms of production into a larger political agenda, the concept of the *pueblo* becomes a “political tool for empowerment” (Leutchford and Pratt 2011:90). Pueblo autonomy and self-sufficiency has been one of the key starting points for the emergence of organic farming in the region. The “peasant-campesino model of economy” (Leutchford and Pratt 2011:96) is one in which “local, morally construed exchanges underpin social relations and the social imaginary” (Leutchford and Pratt 2011:95). This allows for the formation of positive social capital, both in the form of local and extra-local relations and structures, which both Getz (2008) and Leutchford and Pratt (2011) emphasize as critical to the ability of such market arrangements to improve sustainable livelihood security.

As producers with Pueblos Blancos engage in direct sale of their produce they enter a dialogue about the role of organic certification in communicating certain values, a debate occurring among Mae Ta cooperative members as well. Though organic certification embodies specific environmental values and allows for marketing on those terms, it is problematic because it permits commercial producers to dominate the market while small farmers struggle through bureaucracy and certification costs (Leutchford and Pratt 2011). Leutchford and Pratt argue that certification allows for and legitimizes the separation
between consumers and producers, commercializing organic and “making it amenable to a capitalist market regime” to which the political culture of organics in Andalusia is reacting (2011:100). For these reasons, Pueblos Blancos farmers do not sell under the organic label, but instead use the name of the cooperative, distinguishing themselves by flagging the unique social relations and alternative forms of production in which they are engaged (Leutchford and Pratt 2011). They depend on the social capital and personal relations that stem from a shared vision to create market linkages.

Leutchford and Pratt (2011) also argue that Pueblos Blancos provides a counter-example to the neoliberal analysis of organic movements which holds that organic “movements” are not movements at all and do not effectively challenge the neoliberal regime. In contrast to Walker (2008), Leutchford and Pratt (2011) criticize the dichotomy between “alternative” and “oppositional” politics. They explain:

Reimagining and reconfiguring the present in terms of the past, organics is not an invention; it is a reinvention, or better, a continuation of a deeply rooted historical experience and social imaginary that says the best foods are grown and prepared close to home (Sutton, 2011). To a degree, this is about the qualities of products: freshness, taste and purity were frequently mentioned. But it also encompasses political-economic arguments about independence, self-sufficiency and an alternative economy, an idealized social space run by and for the family and the pueblo. [2011:95; emphasis added]

Thus the cooperative provides an alternative to capitalism. Yet “this merges into the oppositional strand in which the direct links between producer and consumer as a social relation eliminates the role of intermediaries and so precludes capitalism and profit-seeking” (Leutchford and Pratt 2011:95). Pueblos Blancos opposes the industrialization of agriculture and the ramifications it has for the rural environment and peasant communities. This vision of creating a food chain that values autonomy and prevents capitalist enterprises from extracting profit from producers underlies both local level social capital and extra-local
linkages (Leutchford and Pratt 2011). It allows organic production to be simultaneously an alternative and opposition to industrial agriculture while providing economic and social sustainability.

3.6 ADVOCATING FOR AUTONOMY ON A REGIONAL SCALE: A CASE STUDY FROM THE NETHERLANDS

Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg (2008) further investigates the ways in which the struggle for autonomy plays out on a larger scale with a territorial cooperative in the Netherlands in which farmers actually cultivate shared values and recruit external support through innovation and novelty production. Van der Ploeg (2008) discusses territorial cooperatives as an effective mechanism for “repeasantization” through a case study of the North Frisian Woodlands (NFW) in the Netherlands, a cooperative that covers an area of 50,000 ha within which 80 percent of farmers are a part of the NFW (2008:181). Van der Ploeg does not explicitly discuss the methodology for this research except to briefly mention a study involving 37 dairy farmers that compares the financial margins achieved per kilogram of milk by farmers with a well-established closed loop production process to those achieved by farmers with conventional high-input strategies. This analysis is based on both original research in this community and previous research conducted in this region.

The formation of the NFW was sparked by environmental regulatory packages implemented by the government in the early 1990s that declared the hedgerows—a characteristic landscape feature of the province of Friesland—vulnerable to acid rain, effectively prohibiting the expansion of agricultural activities in this region. Farmers were frustrated by these regulations and claimed that they created and have always cared for this
unique landscape. The government agreed not to label all hedges as acid-sensitive if farmers promised to protect the hedges, alder rows, sandy roads, and water in the area by changing their farming practices. Out of this agreement six associations and cooperatives emerged and came together to form the NFW cooperative. Over the past 15 years since NWF’s creation, the cooperative has grown to more than 900 members (including both farmers and non-agrarian members), become a major field laboratory, and at times swayed agrarian policy in the Netherlands (Van der Ploeg 2008).

As Van der Poeg (2008) explains, the cooperative initiated programs to protect hedgerows and encourage the production of novelties, most significantly “good manure.” Farmers began to transform slurry from animal husbandry into composted manure to replace chemical fertilizer and reduce nitrogen runoff. Van der Ploeg defines novelties as “deviations from the rule, which might have been deliberately created or are simply the unexpected outcome of the messiness of life (Richards, 1985; Remmers, 1998; Wiskerke and Ploeg, 2004; Flora, 2005). Thus, novelties can be new practices, new artifacts or simply changed definitions of a particular situation or task” (Van der Ploeg 2008:192). Novelties differ from innovation because they are not incremental, but instead “rupture” existing conventions (Van der Ploeg 2008:192). Van der Ploeg explains that the use of manure instead of commercial fertilizer, now more widely recognized and scientifically supported, was a radical step initially taken by a small group of dairy farmers that took years to develop. “As a whole, this process of change centres on the reactivation of ecological capital, the grounding of farming upon it, and the simultaneous strengthening of the local as the self-organizing space” (Van der Ploeg 2008:195). Organizational novelties accompanied
technical innovation, as the cooperative created a survey commission, organized session days to exchange knowledge, and developed flexible field guide systems (Van der Ploeg 2008).

The chain of interconnected novelties extends beyond the physical boundaries of NFW. “It branches off into agrarian policy-making, into science, […] and into changed soil biology ‘beneath’ the area, modified value flows in the regional economy and an enlarged ‘goodwill’ for farming” (Van der Ploeg 2008:198). Van der Ploeg (2008) emphasizes the importance of external support for sustainable practices and local management systems, yet he argues that communities can cultivate this support as farmers’ innovation and novelty production attract the attention of researchers and academics and connect them through shared principles. Academics and local farmers joined together in a research program in Friesland to record managed area and protected environmental elements. This interest and support creates “new levers and mechanisms for further development of self-regulation” (Van der Ploeg 2008:188). Importantly, Van der Ploeg (2008) points out that external support, organizational strength, and changes in farming practices are fundamentally rooted in a shared set of values.

The mission statement of the North Frisian Woodlands outlines ten common fundamental values that represent the history of the area and the cooperative and the “emancipatory ambitions” of its members (Van der Ploeg 2008:189). Among these statements, the centrality of community identity and strength is clearly evident. The first stated value is that of community, specifically a shared pride in their proven ability to rise from poverty and manage their own conflicts and challenges, an ability that they expect others to respect. Another declaration also demands the right to manage the area of their forefathers. In a statement that resonates with observations made by both Getz (2008) and
Leutchford and Pratt (2011), the document emphasizes the importance of working with politicians, conservationists, scientists, and water management and farmers’ lobby groups, and points out that the NFW has already built, and will continue to maintain, coalitions at the local, regional, and national level (Van der Ploeg 2008:190-191).

Also among the declarations in the NWF mission statement is a commitment to sustainability which states, “In these times of globalization we stand up for the future and put the future first—the future of the area and its future inhabitants (tinke oan’e takomst). Thus, future generations can also continue to nurture the area, be proud to live and work in it, and enjoy it together with others” (Van der Ploeg 2008:191). *Again, social sustainability emerges as a core value, deeper perhaps than an organic philosophy, yet inextricably linked to both environmental and economic sustainability.* Van der Ploeg points out that these values laid out in the NWF mission statement serve as the foundation for the success of the cooperative through community cohesion and the cultivation of external support. “Taken together, they represent the strong social capital that has been forged in the 15 years of successfully expanding the NFW from its first vulnerable nuclei to a now solid and well-rooted territorial cooperative. […] From an analytical point of view, these commonly shared values might be interpreted as constituting a moral economy” (Van der Ploeg 2008:191).

Each study of an agrarian movement examined here recognizes the role of some form of moral economy—founded in peasant values—in negotiating engagement with the global economy. This emphasis on social sustainability that appears to be fundamental in studies of community movements is lacking in literature that considers individual motivations for adoption of organic. Nevertheless, a number of researchers criticize the moral economy approach to understanding rural change northern Thailand. Dayley (2011) calls the
sufficiency economy ethic “obsolete” (2011:342). He contends that this philosophy is disconnected from the reality that farmers’ sights are set beyond an “agrarian myth” trapped in Buddhist fundamentalism and promoted by detached elites (Dayley 2011:342). Both de Almeida (2006) and Walker (2009) argue that while a set of values mediates farmers’ relationships with corporations and engagement in political action over land tenure, these negotiations are not fundamentally in opposition to the commercialization of agriculture or the transformation of the village. Rather, they intend to engage with these changes and negotiate ways to maximize their own benefit from the agricultural and economic restructuring.

Yet there is something distinct about Mae Ta farmers’ response that sets them apart from those discussed by Fonseca de Almeida (2006), Walker (2009), or the literature on individuals’ conversions to organic. Case studies of community movements in Mexico, Spain, and the Netherlands point to fundamental community-oriented values centered on social sustainability that strengthen the cooperative horizontally and connect it vertically to external support networks. Is such a moral economy a driving force of the organic movement in Mae Ta? How do farmers in Mae Ta explain their decisions to adopt organic cultivation, and what can these motivations tell us about the context in which they are acting, the issues of greatest concern, and the interplay between these motivations and the effects of organic agriculture on the community?
Chapter Four:  
Theory

When we come to you  
Our rags are torn off us  
And you listen all over our naked body.  
As to the cause of our illness  
One glance at our rags would  
Tell you more. It is the same cause that wears out  
Our bodies and our clothes.  

The pain in our shoulder comes  
You say, from the damp; and this is also the reason  
For the stain on the wall of our flat.  
So tell us:  
Where does that damp come from?

Bertolt Brecht, “A Worker’s Speech to a Doctor”

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this study I investigate the driving forces behind the emergence of organic agriculture in Mae Ta, and more specifically the role that health concerns and economic and social conditions played in motivating this collective action. In considering these questions it is critical to discuss theoretical frameworks that may draw arrows between the context in which farmers are acting, their grievances, and the emergence of these unique farming practices. In this chapter I draw on the work of four theorists: Paul Farmer, James Scott, Philip McMichael, and Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg.

Paul Farmer’s theory of “structural violence” and social determinants of health explains the impact of constrained agency on individual health. That is, how might agency be constrained among farmers in Mae Ta and to what extent has this driven resistance? Questions of agency and community health then lead us to a dialogue in the social sciences.
currently revisiting and redefining the peasantry in efforts to understand interactions between rural communities and an increasingly globalized economy. I consider James Scott’s argument that larger economic and political forces undermine autonomy and violate the “moral economy” of peasants in Southeast Asia. Peasants’ sense of injustice along with the goal-oriented vision of the “peasant principle” (Van der Ploeg 2008) drives collective action. Philip McMichael argues that the modern peasantry is “mobilized precisely because it cannot do just as it pleases” (McMichael 2008:218-219). Is it possible, then, that organic cultivation is not the ultimate goal of the changes occurring in Mae Ta, but rather a means of pursuing social sustainability and community health?

4.2 HEALTH, AUTONOMY AND THE PEASANTRY: PAUL FARMER’S FRAMEWORK OF “STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE”

Paul Farmer’s theory of “structural violence” provides a framework for analyzing the relationship between social, economic, and political circumstances and human health. In his 2005 book, Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor, Farmer explores “how various social processes and events come to be translated into personal distress and disease. By what mechanisms, precisely, do social forces ranging from poverty to racism become embodied as human experience?” (2005:30). Farmer uses the concept of “structural violence” to frame his discussion of suffering and social and economic rights. “Suffering,” he argues, “is ‘structured’ by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire […] to constrain agency” (Farmer 2005:40). When people lose control over their livelihoods and life conditions, they are at greater risk for poor health, ranging from malnutrition to tuberculosis. Inequality and power dynamics that have accompanied growth-driven development and globalization of economies have a
direct impact on health. In what ways might farmers in Mae Ta have been victims of the “violence” of neoliberal economic policies and the control of contract farming companies over their work, daily routines, family relationships, and diets? To what extent has an awareness of this structural violence driven the transition to organic agriculture in Mae Ta?

Farmer (2005) details individual stories of suffering and death of individuals from both AIDS and political violence, revealing the ways in which larger social forces and economic or political conditions impact physical well-being by driving victims into behaviors deleterious to health, limiting their opportunities to seek support and health care, and, most broadly, constraining their control over their own lives. He then goes further, emphasizing that our efforts to understand the causes of poor health must transcend individual accounts of suffering. He explains, “Case studies of individuals reveal suffering, they tell us what happens to one or many people; but to explain suffering, one must embed individual biography in the larger matrix of culture, history, and political economy. In short, it is one thing to make sense of extreme suffering—a universal activity, surely—and quite another to explain it” (Farmer 2005:31). How does one explain women’s disproportionate risk of contracting HIV in Haiti, or the thousands of prisoners in Russia who die of tuberculosis without ever receiving treatment, or the food insecurity and heart disease experienced by those who produce food for the rest of the world?

Farmer (2005) argues that analysis of health situations must be both geographically broad and historically deep. As the world becomes more interconnected, extreme suffering “is seldom divorced from the actions of the powerful” (Farmer 2005:42), and these power dynamics operate on a global as well as local level. At the same time, a historically deep perspective traces the origins and development of these power structures and economic
forces. In the case of Mae Ta farmers, this perspective implies that the historically
determined global power structures in which Thailand is embedded have shaped the export-
oriented agricultural policies of the Thai government and development initiatives driven
largely by the Western model of “civilization.” These forces become embodied in the
experiences of individual farmers and the transformation of rural communities.

Farmer focuses on the ways in which neoliberalism, or “the dominance of a
competition-driven market model” (2005:5), has led to structural violence. “Within this
doctrine, individuals in a society are viewed, if viewed at all, as autonomous, rational
producers and consumers whose decisions are motivated primarily by economic or material
concerns. But this ideology has little to say about the social and economic inequalities that
distort real economies” (Farmer 2005:5). Thus the word “liberal” has contradictory
meanings: it is declared as the only societal structure that can guarantee freedom, yet
freedom is only ever gained, in Wallterstein’s (1995) words, by a “minority perpetually en
route to becoming everyone” (Farmer 2005:6). Farmer argues that while real “development
requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom” (2005:8), the economic and social
structures that are constructed through the process of growth-oriented development lead to
exploitation and injustice, justified by law and the narrative of modernization.

Farmer (2005) emphasizes the need to recognize the ways in which individual health
conditions are manifestations of the impacts of neocolonialism and transnational inequalities.
He writes:

One is reminded of the old joke: What is the definition of a liberal? Someone who
believes that all the bad things that happen in the world stem from accidents. Human
rights violations are not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect.
Rights violations are, rather, symptoms of deeper pathologies of power and are linked
intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and
who will be shielded from harm. [Farmer 2005:7; emphasis added]
Farmer (2005) argues that health is greatly impacted by socio-economic forces, and as health is a fundamental human right, so too are social and economic freedom. Thailand occupies a fascinating space, since, unlike its neighbors, the country has never been colonized, and Thai people with whom I spoke take great pride in this fact. At the same time, entrance into the global economy and the push to be a part of the world stage and be respected as a “developed” country by Western standards mean that Thailand has not been immune to neocolonialism. This dialectic continues to underlie tension between a western development model and pride in a distinct and autonomous Thai identity.

Farmer uses a case study of Chiapas, Mexico to illustrate the impact of neoliberalism and political and economic restructuring on peasant livelihoods and health. Chiapas emerged as an autonomous state in 1994 as a result of Mexico’s first uprising that occurred the same day that the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed. Farmer (2005) argues that while “scholarly observers tended to frame the rebellion as an ethnic uprising” (2005:15), people in Chiapas emphasized issues of health, food, land, and social services (Farmer 2005). A historically deep perspective on the situation in Chiapas reveals a continuity of forces that kept people in poverty and have given Chiapas the highest death rate in the country: Spanish rule, local elites, the ruling party of independent Mexico, and wealthy indígenas. Farmer (2005) explains, “As Mexico was integrated into the modern world economy, a substantial segment of its population was excluded from the benefits of development, while they continued to pay development’s price—not only through taxes and labor but also through an erosion of their own cultures” (2005:103). Referring to the experience of working for local landlords on coffee farms or large ranches that replaced colonial haciendas, one man in Moisés Gandhi said: “They treated us like animals. But since 1994, we have refused to work
like that. We are still suffering, but we will no longer be treated like animals” (Farmer 2005:97). The people of Chiapas responded to the constraints on their lives by organizing their communities and protesting against the government. Experiences of poor health due to poverty and lack of agency bound them together and drove them to take collective action. Farmer (2005) notes a “persistent and hopeful resistance” of peasants in Chiapas in their ongoing struggle to demand that human rights to food, shelter, education, and health care be respected (2005:111). We will see a similar set of grievances and vision for autonomy at play in the emergence of organic in Mae Ta.

Critical to Farmer’s theory is the central issue of agency. Farmer (2005) explains, “Amartya Sen reminds us of the need to move beyond ‘the cold and often inarticulate statistics of low incomes’ to look at the various ways in which agency—what he terms the ‘capabilities of each person’—is constrained” (2005:43). Under economic stress, people are pressured into income-generating activities or decisions that negatively impact their health. Security of income provides agency in managing one’s own life. At the 1995 Innocenti lecture of UNICEF, Amartya Sen emphasized this reality:

> We have to shift our attention from an exclusive concentration on incomes and commodities (often used in economic analyses) to things that people have reason to value intrinsically. Incomes and commodities are valued mainly as ‘instruments’—as means to other ends. We desire them for what we can do with them; possessing commodities or income is not valuable in itself. Indeed we seek income primarily for the help it might provide in leading a good life—a life we have reason to value. [Farmer 2005:91]

As they are constrained by increasing debt and lacking access to other markets, we will see that farmers in Mae Ta feel caught in contract farming systems in which companies dictate their production of crops that they feel they do not own. Meanwhile, degrading soil quality and rising costs of inputs increasingly lock farmers into this system. Lacking control over
their livelihoods, the poor find themselves unable to avoid situations harmful to health or engage in health-seeking behavior, such as accessing health care and pursing healthy consumption habits and lifestyles.

Farmer (2005) explains that there exist three main trends in approaches to alleviating suffering: charity, development, and social justice. Charity often perpetuates inequality, while a development approach erases the historical roots of poverty and assumes that development is a linear process that can be dictated as a series of steps (Farmer 2005:155). Only the social justice model recognizes:

In this increasingly interconnected world […] we must understand that what happens to poor people is never divorced form the actions of the powerful. Certainly, people who define themselves as poor may control their own destinies to some extent. But control of lives is related to control of land, systems of production, and the formal political and legal structures in which lives are enmeshed. [Farmer 2005:158; emphasis added]

Those who are marginalized must be allowed agency. Agency opens the door for empowerment, health-seeking behavior, and improved quality of life. A recognition of social and economic freedom as a human right inextricably linked to the fundamental right to health is critical to deconstructing these unjust structures and may drive collective action of the oppressed.

4.3 THE NORM OF RECPROCITY AND THE RIGHT TO SUBSISTENCE: JAMES SCOTT’S THEORY OF THE MORAL ECONOMY OF THE PEASANTRY

Farmer (2005) writes of “structural violence” as the impact of societal forces on human health, but he emphasizes that this injustice can only be truly understood from the point of view of the poor. He explains, “When we look at and listen to those whose rights are being trampled, we see how political rights are intertwined with social and economic
rights, or, rather, how the absence of social and economic power empltes political rights of their substance” (Farmer 2005:16-17; emphasis added). To explain the structural violence experienced by small farmers, and to begin address this suffering, we must first understand their definition of justice. What life conditions does this particular community consider to be fundamental rights, and on what cultural foundation is this “moral economy” based?

James C. Scott’s 1976 work, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, hinges on an assertion, similar to Paul Farmer’s, that justice must be defined by the oppressed. As an anthropologist whose theoretical work on the peasantry serves as a cornerstone for the field of peasant studies, Scott (1976) presents a framework that merits analysis in this discussion. Scott (1976) analyzes peasant uprisings in historically colonized areas of Southeast Asia. He argues that rather than simply viewing the peasantry as “inevitable victims” or instigators of spontaneous and futile uprisings, “if we understand the indignation and rage which prompted them to risk everything, we can grasp what I have chosen to call their moral economy: their notion of economic justice and their working definition of exploitation” (Scott 1976:3). The goal of subsistence security is certainly a function of the peasant’s life situation,

But to stop here is to miss the critical social context of peasant action. It is to miss the central fact that the peasant is born into a society and culture that provide him with a fund of moral values, a set of concrete social relationships, a pattern of expectations about the behavior of others, and a sense of how those in his culture have proceeded to similar goals in the past. [Scott 1976:166]

Peasants act with the understanding that others around them share a moral universe or a common conceptualization of what is just. What, then, is the peasant definition of justice? Scott (1976) focuses on the norm of reciprocity and the right to subsistence as the two key principles in this moral economy.
Reciprocity underlies daily life in many rural communities. Labor and resources are exchanged in a way that offers a buffer in times of stress. Well-off members of the community evade social pressures of gossip and estrangement through generosity and respecting the terms of reciprocity (Scott 1976). This expectation of reciprocity is inseparable from a second critical dimension to the moral economy of the peasant: the principle of “subsistence as the fundamental social right” (Scott 1976:176). Scott explains, “The operating assumption of the ‘right to subsistence’ is that all members of a community have a presumptive right to a living so far as local resources will allow. […] This right is surely the minimal claim that an individual makes on his society and it is perhaps for this reason that it has such moral force” (1976:176-177). This principle is evident in the social pressures on relatively well-off members of the community to enable poorer members to meet their subsistence needs, including the ability to celebrate critical rituals or care for elderly family members (Scott 1976).

This two-part definition of justice is intertwined with the approach to organizing peasant society and production that Scott (1976) terms the “subsistence ethic.” Traditions of local seed varieties, planting techniques, moral codes of reciprocity, communal land, and social structures all serve the purpose of fostering security and avoiding food shortages. Scott argues that the peasantry is fundamentally risk-averse and their economies and social arrangements are guided by a “safety-first” principle (1976:5). According to this principle, a farmer “prefers to minimize the probability of having a disaster rather than maximizing his average return” (Scott 1976:18). Scott (1976) argues that the high risk associated with changes in traditional agriculture causes peasants to be reluctant to adopt new practices, even with the potential for increased profit. Yet he clarifies that the subsistence ethic “does not
imply that peasants are creatures of custom who never take risks they can avoid. When innovations […] offer clear and substantial gains at little or no risk to subsistence security, one is likely to find peasants plunging ahead,” but there is a “defensive perimeter around subsistence routines within which risks are avoided” (Scott 1976:24).

Peasants make conscious choices based on the logic of this ethic, such as an aversion to non-edible cash crops and a preference for land tenure systems in which the landlord assumes greater risk—and profit—than the cultivator (Scott 1976). We will see that risk aversion motivated farmers in Mae Ta to enter contract farming systems in response to the uncertainty of open markets; yet this same “safety-first” ethic later pushed many farmers out of this system and toward production for consumption in the face of increasing debt and diminishing soil fertility.

Beyond cultivation practices and tenure arrangements, there is another critical dimension to the subsistence ethic: the social structures and relationships that act as “shock absorbers” during economic crises (Scott 1976:27). These relationships between relatives, friends, patrons, clients, and even the state are governed by the expectation of reciprocity. If this social structure is strong, actors are “a part of the intimate world of the peasantry where shared values and social controls combine to reinforce mutual assistance” (Scott 1976:27). Thus the moral economy of the peasant is composed of the interwoven principles of risk aversion and a definition of justice grounded in the values of reciprocity and the right to subsistence.

Traditional norms of exchange are privileged not simply because of their antiquity, but because they have proven effective at maintaining the community (Scott 1976). The commercialization of agriculture so often negatively impacts peasants that they resist these
changes in defense of traditional understandings of rights and obligations. As rural communities have been pulled into the global economy, peasants’ claim to the “right to subsistence” [...] became increasingly self-conscious as it was increasingly threatened” (Scott 1976:33). This claim of a moral right to subsistence is critically linked to the value of reciprocity since “it is the right to subsistence that defines the key reciprocal duty of elites, the minimal obligation that they owe to those from whom they claim labor and grain” (Scott 1976:182). Bringing Scott’s theory into the language of the present day peasant scholarship, this conviction in the right to subsistence is fundamentally a demand for autonomy at the most basic level.

Interestingly, more recent agrarian theorists draw on Scott’s seminal argument, yet in a sense invert it. They argue that the “new peasancies” (Van der Ploeg 2008) strive for agency on a broader level. Sufficiency-oriented or alternative production is more than just a basic human right; it is a means of gaining agency with larger ramifications for improved quality of life and social sustainability.

4.4 RE-FOCUSING PEASANT THEORY: RECENT INSIGHTS FROM AGRARIAN STUDIES

Over thirty years after James Scott published The Moral Economy of the Peasant, Philip McMichael (2008) and Jan Douwe Van der Ploeg (2008) revisit this debate in an effort to understand interactions between rural communities and the globalizing economy. While Scott presents two possible responses of the peasantry to oppression—rebellion or adaptation—McMichael and Van der Ploeg acknowledge other forms of peasant resistance and collective action that call into question the framework with which the peasantry has historically been viewed.
To the extent that scholarly literature focuses on the peasantry, it is most often considered to be a dying class. Narratives of de-peasantization and views of the peasantry as a “receding baseline of development” (McMichael 2008:205) have historically dominated agrarian studies, not to mention the conventional perspective of global economic development. Bernstein and Byres (2001) reveal how analyses of the impact of colonialism, transitions to capitalism, and political struggles over land tenure have dominated in the academic literature on the peasantry. Studies of peasant responses to these power differentials have typically fallen under two categories: “peasant wars” in which peasants engage in directly oppositional and often violent action, or “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott 1976) which alleviate suffering but do not challenge oppressive systems (Bernstein and Byres 2001). Bernstein and Byres call for further investigation of technological changes and farming activities of the peasantry and the impact of the “‘globalization’ of the capitalist world economy” (2001:37).

Both McMichael (2008) and Van der Ploeg (2008) criticize the inadequacies of classical social and peasant theories in explaining the peasantry today and note the lack of theoretical representation for modern peasant ways of farming. Van der Ploeg (2008) points out, “at the level of theory, we have the modernization approach (that focuses on entrepreneurship) and the tradition of peasant studies that hardly provides a place of for peasants in the modern world” (Van der Ploeg 2008:18). Without theoretical representation of their practices, peasants cannot be properly understood and thus it is generally concluded that they do not exist, or where their existence is recognized, they are seen as a “hindrance to change” (Van der Ploeg 2008:19). McMichael and Van der Ploeg emphasize the need to reconsider the concept of agency in understanding the peasantry and to illuminate the ways in
which peasants are redefining themselves and re-valuing agriculture as a means for realizing modernity on their own terms.

Both theorists begin by tackling the ways in which modern peasants are misrepresented. Van der Ploeg (2008) points out that peasants are thought to be the opposite of entrepreneurial farmers. “Peasant studies have generally been weak in acknowledging agency, which evidently is an unintended consequence of their epistemological stance. Thus peasants often figure as ‘passive victims’” (Van der Ploeg 2008:21). The tradition of peasant studies has separated the world into the developed center and the underdeveloped periphery, positing that there can be no peasants among the prosperous (Van der Ploeg 2008). But modern peasants, McMichael (2008) argues, are not a culturally frozen or disappearing group. On the contrary, they are constantly adapting to societal forces. Similar to Farmer (2005) and Scott (1976), McMichael (2008) and Van der Ploeg (2008) emphasize that neoliberalism and globalization have introduced a new set of forces that are dramatically impacting the peasant identity and way of life. McMichael (2008) quotes Food First director Eric Lohlt Giménez’s observation in 2006 that today’s campesinos in Central America “are constantly adapting to global, regional, and local forces… A story of unflagging resistance to ‘development’ that sought to eliminate peasants from the countryside and, more recently, to neoliberal economic policies that prioritize corporate profit margins over environment, food security, and rural livelihoods” (McMichael 2008:206).

Van der Ploeg (2008) points out that the impact of modernization on peasants and rural communities has rendered the traditional dualism between peasants and capitalist farmers no longer adequate for understanding the situation in rural areas. McMichael (2008) notes three key issues with the conventional lens of modern social theory and its
inappropriateness for examining the new peasant question. “First, peasant trajectories are conditioned by world, rather than national, history. Second, as an instrument of legitimacy, the development narrative’s enabling of an intensified peasant dispossession under a virulent neoliberal regime has become the focal point of a contemporary peasant mobilization” (McMichael 2008:206). Finally, “conventional (liberal and Marxist) attempts to schematize modern history in developmentalist terms” fall short because they are staged in a national rather than global context (McMichael 2008:206).

4.4.1 Re-centering the agrarian question on food and agency: Philip McMichael’s theory of food sovereignty

In his examination of the modern peasantry, McMichael (2008) emphasizes the need to consider the agrarian question not in terms of national histories or state policies but in terms of “world historical relations” that create a “food regime” in which food prices are controlled by international trade relations that squeeze out small farmers (McMichael 2008:208). This has accompanied a shift from states as “the organizing principle of political economy” in the late 19th and 20th centuries, to capital as the organizing principle of societies today (McMichael 2008:205). As the “neoliberal project, colloquially known as ‘globalization,’ has replaced the period of economic nationalism, de-peasantization in the global South has intensified” (McMichael 2008:209). With the boom in export-oriented agriculture, trade liberalization, “food dumping” of exports from the global North, and even the “food security” project that increases dependence on imports (McMichael 2008:210), many peasants are dispossessed of their land, livelihood, traditional crops, and agency. It is to the struggle for this autonomy—centered on food—that the dialogue of peasant studies must turn its attention.
Building on Scott’s (1976) concept of the right to subsistence, McMichael (2008) argues that the agrarian question must be re-centered on food and agriculture. He explains,

In the classical version [of the agrarian question], food registered only through the impact of its price on class identity and/or accumulation patterns. In the current agrarian question posed by the food sovereignty movement, food embodies a broader set of relations, becoming a window on the social, demographic and ecological catastrophe of neoliberalism. [McMichael 2008: 211].

“Food sovereignty,” or the right of people to define their own food and agriculture systems, rather than be subject to the regime of international market forces, becomes central to the discussion of peasant movements (McMichael 2008). The ontology of the food sovereignty movement is “grounded in a process of revaluing agriculture, rurality, and food as essential to general social and ecological sustainability, beginning with a recharged peasantry” (McMichael 2008:213). Peasants re-center agriculture within a political vision and “larger struggle to change the dominant neoliberal model” (McMichael 2008:215).

McMichael (2008) argues that modern peasant resistance is not a reactionary impulse but something entirely different: “Peasant mobilization, as examined here, reaches beyond the daily round of survival on the land to linking that struggle to a reframing of what is possible on the land in contradistinction to what is being done to the land and its inhabitants by the neoliberal regime” (2008:207). Peasants fight for the right to manage their own resources and produce their own societies. The food sovereignty movement “‘rediscover’ society through a substantive, rather than formal, set of rights, to be exercised as a means to the end of social reproduction rather than an end in themselves” (McMichael 2008:217). There is not one particular peasant mode of production, but rather a diversity of practices suited to particular locales and cultures, as well as that community’s understanding of what the right to food means to them. Thus particular agricultural practices such as certified
McMichael emphasizes the agency of peasants and argues, “rather than play a conservative back-up role in class politics of capitalist modernity, the peasant movement is transforming the terms of the question. It is no longer about agrarian transition via path dependence of a theory of accumulation privileging capital” (2008:210). Rather it is about peasant movements against the accumulation economy through the “strengthening of cultural practices committed to transcending the subordination of food and agriculture to price form” (McMichael 2008:215). By reframing the discourse and the meaning of terms such as agrarian reform, rights, and sovereignty, peasants engage in developing an “alternative modernity” (McMichael 2008:220). McMichael clarifies:

Rather than raising questions about the trajectory of the given narrative, the food sovereignty movement questions the narrative itself. In a sense, a mobilized peasantry is making its own history. It is ‘mobilized’ precisely because it cannot do just as it pleases—its political intervention is conditioned by the historical political-economic conjuncture through which it is emboldened to act. [2008:218-219]

Emboldened by constrained agency, peasants strive for greater autonomy and pursue an alternative modernity.

4.4.2 A “new kind of resistance”: Van der Ploeg’s theorization of the modern peasantry

While McMichael (2008) emphasizes the need for a renewed focus on food sovereignty and the autonomy it offers, Van der Ploeg (2008) takes on the larger task of wholly reconstructing a definition of the modern peasantry in his work *The New Peasancies: Struggles for Autonomy and Sustainability in an Era of Empire and Globalization*. He
argues that agriculture has been significantly shaped by processes of modernization. A theoretical representation of the peasantry must capture the multiple dimensions and actors that make up current peasant realities and must be based on positive and meaningful definitions so that peasants are not simply defined by what they are not (Van der Ploeg 2008). Van der Ploeg constructs a comprehensive definition of the peasant condition and what he calls the “peasant principle”—both in a constant dialectic with one another and continuously shaped by global and local forces. Scott argues:

We must attempt a re-theorization of the peasantry in terms of the ‘peasant condition’ that places the peasantry firmly in its present-day context, while simultaneously acknowledging the agency contained within it—not as an additional attribute, but as the central characteristic… Central to the peasant condition, then, is the struggle for autonomy that takes place in a context characterized by dependency relations, marginalization and deprivation. [2008:23]

As with McMichael (2008), agency is central to understanding the peasantry. This struggle for autonomy takes the form of five adjustments in approaches to production:

1. The development of a self-managed resource base,
2. The co-production of humans and nature,
3. Pluriactivity,
4. The patterning of connections to the outside world that allow for maximum autonomy and flexibility, and
5. Cooperation.

Through adjustments in cultivation practices, perspectives on production, and social structures, peasants can generate new forms of autonomy (Van der Ploeg 2008).

Contrary to perceptions of peasant agriculture as stagnant and backwards, Van der Ploeg (2008) argues:

In and through agricultural production, progress can be wrought. By slowly improving the quality and productivity of the key resources […] and by means of a meticulous fine-tuning of the process of production and a continuous re-patterning of relations with the outside world, peasants strive for and eventually obtain the means of enlarging their autonomy and improving the resource base of their farm units. [2008:25]
A self-controlled resource base is critical because it “allows for a degree of freedom from economic exchange” (Van der Ploeg 2008:25). The labor process, often hinged on the norm of reciprocity, is critical in constructing progress and defending autonomy. The peasant mode of agriculture is thus distinct from the entrepreneurial and capitalist modes of farming which encourage the take-over of others’ resources and the production of surplus, often accompanied by diminished value. At the same time, scarcity of resources often leads to technical efficiency and intensive, labor-centered production. Social struggle takes place not only in the streets with speeches and demonstrations, but through small adaptations and striving to develop available resources so as to improve wellbeing and income (Van der Ploeg 2008:26).

Relationships with the market, political authorities, and other external structures must be “constructed, maintained and changed according to local cultural repertoires (or moral economies) that centre on the issue of distrust and consequently translate into the construction of autonomy” (Van der Ploeg 2008:27). This occurs in part through the distantiatiation of farming from markets. Van der Ploeg clarifies, “Distantiatiation has not been there since Genesis—it is the outcome of a complex historical process through which the peasantry has constituted (and reconstituted) itself” (Van der Ploeg 2008:49). Van der Ploeg also underlines the role of cooperation in pursuing autonomy at local and broader levels. These approaches create a positive feedback effect on the resource base and contribute to the reduction of dependency, the core struggle of the peasantry.

Van der Ploeg (2008) refers to the “peasant condition” in current globalizing economies as increasingly unequal terms of trade due to decreasing prices, rising input costs,
disintegrating conditions of sale, rising costs of living, and increasing regulation. He
explains:

Due to the mechanics of the general process of capital accumulation, dependency
relations and associated levels of deprivation are constantly (re)introduced into the
peasant condition. This is not immanent to that condition; it is due to its embedding in
globalizing capitalist economies. […] Confronting dependency and deprivation is
thus not a one-step process, nor situated only at the beginning of the journey through
time called farm development. It is repeated endlessly. [Van der Ploeg 2008:31]

Thus the peasantry is constantly striving for autonomy, which includes freedom from
exploitation and submission, as well as freedom to act in such a way that best serves its own
interests and visions (Van der Ploeg 2008).

Peasant resistance is expressed not only through explicit struggles such as
occupations and road blocks, nor only through everyday acts of insubordination (what Scott
(1985) calls “weapons of the weak”), but exists in a variety of interconnected and unique
practices through which the peasantry distinguishes itself (Van der Ploeg 2008). “As a
matter of fact, what we are witnessing now is a completely new kind of resistance” (Van der

Resistance is no longer a form of reaction but a form of production and action. … Resistance is no longer one of factory workers; it is a completely new resistance based on innovativeness … and on autonomous co-operation between producing [and consuming] subjects. It is the capacity to develop new, constitutive potentialities that go beyond reigning forms of domination. [Van der Ploeg 2008: 271-272; emphasis added].

The process of “modernization” constrains autonomy and spurs distrust of the state and
regulatory schemes, and thus “makes autonomy an overarching need that is explicitly
articulated by the new peasantries” (Van der Ploeg 2008:272). The conceptualization of the
peasantry that Van der Ploeg offers is critical in recognizing “its presence at the heart of the
current global system” and “makes it possible to slot elements such as peasant struggles,
agency and culture into the analysis” (Van der Ploeg 2008:34). Van der Ploeg (2008) emphasizes that the peasant condition is a dynamic process with a variety of forms of production, but it fundamentally involves the continuous and active reconstruction of autonomy.

4.5 THE PEASANT PRINCIPLE: UNDERLYING VALUES AND DRIVING VISION

Van der Ploeg (2008) presents the “peasant principle” as the vision and set of values that “is rooted in the peasant condition, but […] goes beyond this. It contains hope that progress can be brought about through hard work, co-operation, joint actions and/or overt struggles” (Van der Ploeg 2008:274). The peasant principle offers a vision for the future that fuels peasant resistance by linking the past, present and future and giving holistic meaning to various activities and relationships. “In short, the peasant principle carves pathways into the future… It is only through active and goal-oriented involvement that the peasant condition will progressively unfold” (Van der Ploeg 2008:274; emphasis added). This goal-oriented action requires and demands agency as well as a shared set of values and worldviews rooted in cultural history. It functions as a “positive indication of what farming might be” (Van der Ploeg 2008:276) and as a link between this promise of improvement and the construction of new autonomy.

This vision is based on a shared understanding of justice grounded in peasant values. Perhaps it is here, then, that James Scott’s theory of the moral economy of the peasant is most valuable to the current dialogue of peasant studies. Scott (1976) argues that explanations of peasant movements based on individual goals or objective comparisons of
standards of living fall short because they do not recognize the social context in which farmers act (Scott 1976). A deeper and broader perspective

…confers on [the peasant], as we confer on elite political actors as a matter of course, a history, a political consciousness, and a perception of the moral structure of his society. It implies that his sense of what is just allows him to judge others as morally responsible for his predicament and allows him to act, not just to restore his subsistence, but to claim his rights. [Scott 1976:189]

This understanding of justice is centered on the norm of reciprocity and the right to subsistence. A subsistence ethic, grounded in a shared cultural history and experience of the “peasant condition” (Van der Ploeg 2008) embodies both a shared understanding of fundamental rights and a collective vision for the future that has immense moral force with the potential to drive resistance despite substantial risks (Scott 1976). When integrated into modern conceptualizations of the peasant condition and larger agenda of autonomy, Scott’s theoretical work provides a way of understanding the underlying values that drive this collective action.

As capitalism, the commercialization of agriculture, and a centralizing state transform the context in which rural communities operate, peasants enter into relationships with actors outside of the social checks and balances of the peasant’s moral economy, and, as a result, subsistence customs and traditional social structures are undermined (Scott 1976). It is frustration with this condition, driven by deteriorating health outcomes and what Van der Ploeg (2008) terms the “peasant principle,” that occasionally leads today’s peasants to strive for greater autonomy through collective action. By creating alternatives to the export-oriented cash crop economy, small farmers recover control over their own production and consumption systems and their way of life. By (re)claiming agency, health may improve with reduced stress, open doors to health-seeking behavior, and a sense of social and cultural
wellbeing within the community. In this way the creation of an organic cooperative may not be an ultimate goal in itself, but a source of autonomy that functions towards the greater end: that of social sustainability.
Chapter Five: Methodology

In seeking to understand the nature of the organic movement in Mae Ta, the forces driving its emergence, and the broader context of change with which it is engaged, I employed a range of ethnographic methods in my fieldwork. Rather than approaching this research with hypotheses, I entered the field with three areas of open-ended and interconnected inquiry: (1) What motivated farmers in Mae Ta to adopt organic polyculture? (2) What further insights can be learned about the transition from the testimonies of contract farmers who have not transitioned to organic? and (3) In what ways has organic agriculture allowed farmers to achieve the goals that motivated them to make the transition? In investigating the last question, I was particularly interested in the perspectives of young adults and the effect of organic on their decisions to return to Mae Ta. This research demanded the use of qualitative methods to draw out emic perspectives on the emergence of organic in Mae Ta and the social context within which farmers are acting. Through extensive participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews, themes emerged inductively and guided further focused investigation.

Qualitative research is time-intensive and thus necessarily limited in scope. I was able to conduct participant observation while living with four families in Mae Ta, and I formally interviewed 19 collaborators. In-depth interviews and participant observation focused on understanding the lives and stories of a select number of collaborators. As a result, the sample size of this research is too small and narrowly distributed to allow the conclusions to be generalizable. Nevertheless, generalizability is not the goal of this
research. Rather, it demands an in-depth understanding of farmers’ experiences and perspectives on the changes in which they are engaged.

This approach is dependent on relationships of trust between the researcher and collaborator, not only in encouraging in-depth and honest responses to inquiries, but in negotiating access to the community and individual collaborators. I was fortunate to be able to build off of trust forged during my two-week stay in Mae Ta the year prior to my fieldwork, as well as strong relationships between this community and the program with which I studied in 2011, the International Sustainable Development Studies Institute (ISDSI). Once in the field, I stayed first with a highly respected community member and a leader of the organic movement, and met with the coordinator of the Mae Ta’s overarching Institute for Resource Development and Sustainable Agriculture with whom my interpreter communicated prior to my arrival. She and my first host father are gatekeepers to the community and facilitated access to the population of farmers from whom I sought to gain insights. The institute coordinator, ISDSI professors, and the ISDSI field instructor who translated for me during interviews also served as cultural informants as I sought to respectfully gain access, navigate cultural expectations, and build trust with collaborators.

5.1 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation, conducted over the course of six weeks between June 6th and July 12th 2012, was most critical to strengthening relationships with potential collaborators and moving respectfully within the community. During this time I lived with four different organic farming families in Mae Ta for a total of 30 days, returning to Chiang Mai twice to communicate with professors, transcribe interviews, and consult with staff at ISDSI. In Mae
Ta, I participated in daily household activities and farm work in vegetable gardens, orchards, and rice paddy fields; attended and recorded one community meeting, two Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative meetings, and one extension event in Lamphun; and participated in a cultural event in which youth were taught traditional skills and culture by elders in the community. During the last week of my fieldwork, I worked with a group of young adults to pack weekly boxes to be delivered to Chiang Mai to members of Mae Ta’s experimental Community Supported Agriculture program. My host families introduced me to friends and neighbors and allowed me to visit the cooperative center as well as the hospital, schools, temple, and water purification center within Mae Ta. I also assisted my host families with preparations for market and conducted observations of two of the markets in Chiang Mai where women from Mae Ta sell their vegetables. I observed these markets on three occasions for periods of three to five hours, during which time I was able to take detailed fieldnotes.

Every moment I was in the field I had a small notebook in my pocket on which I took jottings in both English and Thai, or a larger notebook in which I wrote more thorough notes on informal interviews and observations. Each day, I converted these notes into complete fieldnotes and highlighted and compiled lists of lingering questions or areas needing clarification, taking particular care to note any areas of potential misinterpretation due to language barriers. Ampika Ananta (Am), the field instructor who interpreted for me, lived with me in Mae Ta intermittently for a total of 14 days during which we conducted all of the in-depth interviews. I took advantage of her presence during these periods to ask for clarification or elaboration on certain topics encountered during my participant observation.
She also assisted me by translating recordings of some of the meetings and events I had attended.

It is important to note the limited reliability of participant observation given that the data gathered was affected by what I, as an observer, noticed or failed to notice, as well as my limited proficiency in Thai. The people with whom I interacted and the conversations in which I engaged or observed inherently make my data unique. Nevertheless, while observing I took note of as many objective details as possible and distinguished them in my fieldnotes from reflection and analysis of my observations. While language barriers and limited reliability demand caution in drawing conclusions exclusively from participant observation, this data provides an important complement to data from interviews. Most critically, participant observation informed and strengthened interviews by providing foundational information about the community, cooperative, and organic practices; inspiring further questions and re-directing other areas of inquiry; and facilitating access to collaborators by building trust.

5.2 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I used in-depth semi-structured interviews to gather testimonies of collaborators’ experiences with contract farming and organic agriculture and to understand emic perspectives on the changes occurring in Mae Ta. I interviewed 19 community members throughout my fieldwork, with three main population samples including organic farmers, contract farmers, and young adults living in Mae Ta whose parents are organic farmers. I also interviewed one middle-aged woman who works at the local hospital in addition to tending to an organic orchard. Table 5.1 below organizes the individuals interviewed and the
populations from which they were sampled. Pseudonyms for each collaborator are presented in italics. In this chart, and throughout the results and analysis I refer to adult female farmers as *Mae__* and adult male farmers as *Paw__*, while young adults are given the title *Pi__*, pronouns of respect I used in the field.

**Table 5.1: Chart of collaborators and sample populations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exclusively Organic Polyculture Farmers (Eight collaborators)</th>
<th>Conventional Farmers (Four collaborators)</th>
<th>Young Adults under age 33 (Six collaborators)</th>
<th>Hospital Staff (One collaborator)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four farmers who transitioned to organic over 10 years ago (<em>Paw A, Paw B, Mae C, and Paw D</em>)</td>
<td>Two farmers who grow both organic and conventional crops (<em>Paw I and Paw J</em>)</td>
<td>Two contract farmers who grow only baby corn for market (<em>Mae K and Paw L</em>)</td>
<td>Institute Coordinator (<em>Pi A</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four recently (past 3 years) transitioned organic farmers (<em>Mae E, Mae F, Mae G, Paw H</em>)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Institute Coordinator (<em>Pi A</em>)</td>
<td>NGO employee (<em>Pi B</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Two contract farmers who grow only baby corn for market (<em>Mae K and Paw L</em>)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Employee of sub-district government (<em>Pi D</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>CSA project leader (<em>Pi E</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Youth group and CSA project leader (<em>Pi F</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Former industry worker (<em>Pi G</em>)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A combination of informant selection, snowball sampling, and purposive sampling was used in selecting collaborators. The institute coordinator served as a gatekeeper who communicated with host families prior to my arrival and assisted me in identifying and contacting individuals within each sample population. I also used snowball sampling and was connected with many collaborators through suggestions and introductions of other collaborators and host families. Through participant observation I was able to develop relationships with community members and ask them personally if they were interested in participating in my research. I sought to balance the number of male and female participants and interviewed organic farmers who have farmed organically for varying lengths of time.
ranging from two years to over 18 years. Overall I interviewed seven adult males, six adult
females, three young adult males, and three young adult females.

There are drawbacks to this sampling strategy. The samples are not representative of
the populations from which they were drawn because most of the collaborators are either
family members or acquaintances, and all of them reside within two of the seven villages in
Mae Ta sub-district. Some collaborators were purposefully selected because they are in
leadership positions or have particular experiences that would allow them to provide critical
insights in certain areas. This non-random sampling does not allow findings to be
generalized to all farmers within Mae Ta, or even all members of particular sample
populations. Nevertheless, the aim of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of
the experiences of a limited number of people without the intention of achieving
generalizable findings. Ethnographic methods seek to gather data that is as exhaustive and
thorough as possible using a range of methods necessarily focused on a smaller population.
Snowball sampling allowed me to move respectfully within the community while
maintaining and strengthening relationships of trust. Limited time, as well as language and
 technological barriers to long-distance communication with community members in Mae Ta,
made random sampling infeasible.

Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and three hours and were conducted at the
collaborator’s home or their “garden house” located at the site of their agricultural fields,
with the exception of the institute coordinator who I interviewed at the cooperative center.
These settings were informal, and collaborators laid out glasses of water and often bowls of
fruit during the interviews. Interviews with most organic farmers and young adults were
conducted in the morning or afternoon, but I had to interview conventional farmers later in
the evenings because they did not have enough time during the day. The presence of other family members during interviews with Paw D, Mae F, Paw H, Mae K, and Paw L concerned me with the potential for bias, but I was careful to note instances when other family members responded and these occasional inputs proved to be a valuable source of data. As I interviewed older members of the community with limited formal education and no experience of being interviewed, there were occasional situations in which the collaborator was entirely at a loss as to how to answer certain open-ended questions, and Am or I found it necessary to prompt him or her in ways that were potentially leading. I was careful to keep track of these instances, however, to minimize the negative impact of this on the validity of the data.

The most significant limitation to the validity of this research, however, was the presence of other collaborators during interviews with Mae E, Mae K, and Paw L. In these situations, my host family (organic polyculture farmers) introduced me to these collaborators with whom they had very strong relationships. During interviews with these collaborators I was either initially unaware of my host parents’ presence or felt that it would be too disrespectful to ask them to leave. I was especially concerned about the impact of these organic farmers’ presence on the responses of conventional farmers with regard to their views of organic agriculture. Nevertheless, the conventional farmers were not noticeably stressed by their presence, and I found that in interviews with the other conventional farmers, in which I ensured that others were not present, their reasons for farming conventionally and their attitudes toward organic were very similar to those interviewed in the presence of an organic farmer. Still, it is impossible to ensure that Mae E, Mae K, and Paw L were not influenced by the presence of their neighbors, and this is important to consider in analyzing
the data from these interviews. Nevertheless, the purpose of these interviews was not to conclusively construct the story of conventional farmers in full, but rather to sample other perspectives and gain a sense of the forces acting against the adoption of organic. While the data would be more valid had all interviews been conducted in isolation, the presence of others and the resulting dialogue between collaborators in these cases provided unique insights that contributed to the research in other ways.

The structure and focus of each interview with each sample population varied but all shared a core set of questions and employed open-ended questions structured so as to draw out the collaborators’ own stories and perspectives. Interviews with organic farmers began with the question, “How long ago did you begin farming organically?” followed by “Can you tell me about what led to that decision?” Collaborators’ responses to these initial questions revealed the most significant factors in their decision prior to detailed inquiry into any specific issue. In seeking emic conceptualizations of health, every collaborator was asked to define a healthy person, family, and community. Interviews with collaborators in every sample population inquired into their perspectives on the effect of organic on Mae Ta and their hopes for their community. These interviews also investigated collaborators’ experiences with contract farming, the story of their transition to organic, and the effect of organic on themselves and the community. Interviews with conventional farmers focused on their experiences with conventional agriculture, their decisions not to adopt organic, and their perspectives on the effect of organic agriculture on Mae Ta. Finally, interviews with young adults inquired into their experiences of studying and working outside of Mae Ta, their decisions to return to live in Mae Ta, and their shifting views of farming. Detailed interview guides can be referenced in Appendix D.
5.3 WORKING WITH AN INTERPRETER

Working with an interpreter in some ways compromised reliability and limited this study, but in others was a significant asset. When conducting interviews I asked questions in English, which Am, my interpreter, translated into Thai, and collaborators responded in Thai, pausing for Am to translate their responses into English. In this way I was able to ask follow-up questions throughout the interview. Still, I was unable to fully understand the depth of collaborators’ responses in Thai and was dependent on Am’s translation, which was to some extent necessarily a paraphrase of their response. Every effort was made to respectfully ask collaborators to pause intermittently to facilitate the most accurate translations possible. Am was also careful to inform me when she was explaining something from her own perspective, rather than translating collaborators responses. Beyond her assistance as an interpreter, Am was a cultural informant and helped me to adjust my interview questions to avoid misunderstandings or disrespect. My conversations with Am outside of interviews also provided key insights into the issues I was studying.

I was unable to transcribe all of the interviews while in the field, but I did listen to the recordings in order to take note of areas that required follow-up with the interviewee or clarification with Am. I listened to the Thai as well as the English to identify and clarify occasions when the translation did not seem to fully capture the collaborator’s response. In transcribing the interviews, however, I wrote only questions I asked in English and the translations of collaborators’ responses, though I noted instances when Am worded a question differently or asked a follow-up question. Thus all of the quotations provided in this thesis are Am’s English translation of the collaborators’ words.
5.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of interviews and fieldnotes was done using HyperResearch 3.5.1, which allowed me to organize, compare, and rearrange coded data. I first coded data from interview transcripts using very specific descriptive codes and then grouped these codes into themes, building the codebook as I went so as to minimize researcher bias. After coding interviews, I applied and expanded the same codebook in the process of coding fieldnotes. While I was attentive to indicators of collaborators’ concern about autonomy, health, and sustainability, I allowed themes to emerge from the data rather than approaching the analysis deductively. After coding every interview and revisiting fieldnotes, I fine-tuned the organization of the 255 codes, noted the frequency with which each was emphasized, and pieced together broad outlines of various types of motivations for adopting organic, concerns about transitioning to organic, effects of organic, and statements that spoke to collaborators’ vision for the future of Mae Ta. I used HyperResearch to create reports compiling and organizing all coded data for a select group of codes or collaborators. These reports allowed me to explore the nuances and relative significance of themes as I constructed conclusions from this data.

5.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to conducting fieldwork I was granted approval by the Human Subjects Review Committee at the College of Wooster on May 20th, 2012. All formal interviews were tape recorded with informed consent. Based on the advice of ISDSI faculty experienced with research in rural Thailand as well as my experience of studying in Mae Ta, I decided to
explain and record consent orally rather than require collaborators to sign a consent form, because doing so would jeopardize their trust. Experienced researchers at ISDSI explained that many people in rural Thailand do not trust written consent because it has been used against villagers in the past and would lead to suspicion rather than instill trust. Additionally, my experience in this particular community with asking community members to respond to a written questionnaire on seed saving practices indicated that written Thai is often not well understood. Thus formal written consent forms were not inappropriate for this study. Instead, I clearly, honestly, and simply explained who I am and the purpose of my research, ensured collaborators that interviews would be confidential and their identity would not be shared with anyone outside of myself and the interpreter. An English translation of the informed consent process with which I began every interview is presented in Appendix C. I also achieved oral consent to record any meetings or events. I have taken every precaution to ensure confidentiality for all collaborators by not revealing their names or other identifying information in any stage of this research, and I have not revealed any information that might put collaborators at risk.
6.1 INTRODUCTION

Farmers in Mae Ta have chosen to adopt a method of farming that challenges the export-oriented and urban-centered development agenda of their country. They are responding to the same economic and social forces that have fueled the urban migration, subcontracting industries, and contract farming to which de Almeida (2006) and Walker (2009) bear witness in their studies of northern Thailand. Yet while Mae Ta is clearly immersed in this tide of change, the community’s deliberate endorsement of organic self-sufficient polyculture as an alternative livelihood is unique and puzzling, particularly given the lack of structural support for organic agriculture in Thailand (Rattanasuteerakul and Thapa 2012).

In an effort to explore the unique set of motivations at play in community-oriented transitions to organic agriculture, I discussed literature analyzing the success factors of organic movements. Case studies of organic cooperatives in Mexico, Spain, and the Netherlands emphasize the key role of strong social capital (Getz 2008), social networks strengthened by shared values (Leutchford and Pratt 2011), and the pursuit of community-level autonomy (Van Der Ploeg 2008) in the success of these cooperatives. These case studies point to the importance of what Scott conceptualizes as a moral economy of the peasant, but is this framework applicable in northern Thailand where research on farmers’ adaptations to economic transformation emphasizes moderation of, rather than opposition to, their integration into a global economy?

Using a framework that integrates the centrality of agency in theories offered by
I now turn to a discussion of data from my fieldwork in Mae Ta. I approach this analysis with three driving questions:

1) What were the most important concerns or goals motivating farmers’ transitions to organic farming?
2) Can additional lessons be learned from conventional farmers’ testimonies of their decisions not to transition to organic farming, and the initial worries of those who did transition?
3) Did the switch to organic farming allow farmers to achieve the goals motivating them to make the transition?

Drawing on the motivations, challenges, and impacts of organic agriculture emphasized by collaborators I will seek to understand the place of organic in their vision for the future of their community.

6.2 MOTIVATIONS FOR TRANSITIONING TO ORGANIC

What do Mae Ta farmers express as the most important motivations for their adoption of organic practices? How do organic and conventional farmers describe their experiences with contract farming, and what can be learned from the way organic farmers tell the story of their transition? This inquiry was the starting point of interviews with organic farmers and will lay the groundwork of my analysis.

While I later probed specific motivations and complaints about conventional crop production, collaborators’ initial responses to the first open-ended question, “What led to your decision to start growing organically?”, provide important insights into the weight of various motivations. Of the ten adult organic farmers (including two farmers who continue to grow conventional baby corn on part of their land) and one young woman whose family farms organically that I interviewed, four expressed a desire for security, four emphasized health concerns, and three stated concerns about both health and livelihood security in their
first statement of motivations. But what is it about contract farming that led to these concerns, and why did farmers view organic as a solution?

### 6.2.1 Economic grievances

When asked to explain what it was (or is) like to work for a company as a contract farmer, the economic squeeze resulting from the rising cost of agricultural inputs and the immovable price at which the middleman will buy their product was the first concern expressed by nearly every farmer interviewed. Three collaborators emphasized their point by explaining that while the cost of chemical fertilizer has increased from 200 baht\(^1\) to over 1000 baht since 1984, and the cost of seed has jumped from 20 baht to 110 baht, the price of 20 baht per kilo at which the middleman will buy the baby corn product has not budged in nearly thirty years. Since the company deducts the price of the inputs they supply to the farmers from their profit, many collaborators felt that their profit was very small, and at times not enough to support their families. Three current contract farmers admitted that the income they receive from the baby corn is not enough to feed their families.

While most explained that they did get some profit back from the company, if only a small amount, some testified to actually losing money through the production of baby corn. Paw I\(^2\), a male farmer who—in addition to farming organically on some of his land—still grows conventional baby corn on six rai (about 2.5 acres) of paddy field land rented from a neighbor, explained that two or three years ago he “began to do less monocrop because of the expensive chemical inputs. And the last time I invested about 20,000 baht, and then I got

\(^1\) One US dollar is approximately 30 Thai baht.
\(^2\) I will use pseudonyms for collaborators interviewed in this study. “Mae” is used as a title to refer to women over 40 years old, while “Paw” refers to adult men. The title “Pi” is for young adults (both male and female) under 33 years old. The sample population to which each collaborator belongs is displayed in a chart available in Chapter 5 and in Appendix A.
back like 8,000 baht, so I lost money.” Three of the four conventional farmers interviewed are currently in debt to the agricultural bank in Thailand, having borrowed money to pay for food, take care of their family, or construct a house. Five organic farmers raised the issue of being in debt to relatives when they grew conventional baby corn. Pi E, a young man who recently returned to Mae Ta to help his parents on their organic farm, explained the cycle of debt in this way:

Another problem is the higher expense because we had to pay for the chemical inputs, we had to pay for the hospital and for food because at that time we grew it to sell so we didn’t grow anything for the family. And when we got the money from selling the products they deduct [the cost of the inputs] […] and then we have a small amount of money for the food, and for the next time we don’t have the money, right?, to invest so that’s why we had to loan the money from somewhere else to start the new crops. And it will become like a circle. […] There are many families with the same problem—the debt problem. And many people think when you become the farmer you will be poor because you have to work hard, the product is a low price and you have to pay for many inputs so finally you get nothing back.

As a nutrient-hungry crop grown in tropical soil, baby corn is especially demanding of chemical inputs. Mae F grows both organic polyculture vegetables and organic baby corn, which she sells to Green Net, a Thai NGO collaborating with the Mae Ta cooperative. She explained that she began growing organic baby corn instead of conventional “because it’s safer money. You don’t have to invest a lot for the chemical inputs.” Market integration through contract farming has in some ways threatened the sustainable livelihood security of farmers in Mae Ta in a similar way as Getz (2008) observed in Mexico. But the desire for “safer money” fails to explain why many who join the organic network in the cooperative, particularly those in the villages in which I conducted fieldwork, choose not to grow baby corn at all, but instead adopt sufficiency-based polyculture. Among those who replaced conventional with organic baby corn production many have either transitioned fully to
polyculture or maintain an organic vegetable garden in addition. Why *polyculture*? Further examination of farmers’ motivations to grow organic and grievances about contract farming reveal the importance of autonomy in driving these changes in farming practices.

### 6.2.2 Lack of Autonomy

Frustration with lack of control over the price of their products in a contract farming system parallels farmers’ concerns about the economic squeeze they experienced as a result of this depressed price. Mae G, a woman who transitioned from conventional baby corn to organic polyculture a few years ago, explained, “When I worked for the middleman, I could not control the price. If the middleman said this price, I had to agree with him. But for the organic farm, I can set my own price.” Paw B, a male farmer among the first to adopt organic farming, discussed his frustration that the middleman has the sole power to control this price and may lower it if the product does not meet certain quality standards. Before purchasing the baby corn the middleman will grade it, offering 20 baht ($0.67) per kg for the baby corn of highest quality, and only 3 baht per kilo of “low-grade” product. Through this process, Paw B explained, “the villager cannot deny—they cannot say ‘no it’s the good one’ or something like that. They have to accept everything that the middleman says.” Occasionally, however, the middleman will claim that a farmer’s baby corn is low-grade and pay him only three baht, but will then sell the product to the company at full price. Only one farmer explained this type of corruption, but many expressed anger at the strict quality regulations imposed by the middlemen. When asked how she felt that the contract company treats farmers in Mae Ta, Mae E, an organic farmer, explained,

The middleman also wants the profit and for me it’s like… nah, it’s not really fair how they treat the farmer. And when they buy the baby corn from the farmer there is
the size that—how long they want the baby corn to be. So it’s like this long [finger-sized]. If it’s shorter or longer they don’t buy it.

These regulations force farmers to begin harvesting at four o’clock in the morning for the ten-day harvesting period so that they are able to finish before the rapidly growing corn becomes too large. Sometimes, Mae F explained, the company would refuse to buy all of what they harvested and their product would rot. Frustration with this grading process drove Paw I, who grows both conventional and organic baby corn, to seek a contract with a cooperative in a neighboring sub-district, since they will buy his conventional baby corn by the kilogram and do not grade the product or try to depress the price. He explained, “Because the middleman works for the coop in Lamphun, he doesn’t take a lot of advantage of me. The middleman will get only 50 satang (two cents) per one kilogram of profit after he buys from me.”

Several other collaborators used the phrase “take advantage” to describe the way they and their community have been treated by the companies. When asked how he felt the contract companies treat people in Mae Ta, Paw D, an organic farmer among the first to transition to organic, said with a harsh laugh, “It’s been 20 baht since a long time ago. And then the seed and fertilizer is more expensive every year. So do you think they take advantage or not?” Current conventional farmers used similar language to describe the way they are treated. Paw J told a story that demonstrated his lack of trust in the companies and the sense that they are exploiting the farmers. He laughed as he explained:

There are about ten middlemen who work in Mae Ta. I asked the company how much they can pay us if we want to sell the baby corn to them and the company said we have to ask the middleman—like they didn’t tell the price. And then all the middlemen, they kind of like work together and then they set up the price. So I think that the money that the middleman gets from the company must be more than 20 baht. It might be more than 30 baht or some price that is higher than the villager gets from the middleman. And then they just cut the price and it’s always 20 baht.
He explained that the middlemen do not have a positive relationship with the villagers. Another conventional farmer, Paw L, argued that the middlemen “talk really nicely,” but they keep the price low and “just try to convince the villager to do whatever they want.” This treatment violates villagers’ sense of justice, which Scott (1976) would argue is grounded in the norm of reciprocity, a cultural value apparent in many aspects of social relations in Mae Ta.

Much more pervasive than the sense of being exploited, however, was the conviction—particularly among conventional farmers—that they were trapped in the contract farming system and had no options but to grow what the middleman was willing to buy. For over twenty years, baby corn has been the only option. When I asked the two collaborators who sell only conventionally grown baby corn what they see as the benefits of working with the company, they laughed and said there is no benefit. Paw L’s daughter, a mother herself who sews clothing for a middleman in Lamphun, echoed this sentiment and added, “but we have to do it.” Paw L explained,

We feel like we have to do it. We don’t have a choice. If no one will come to the village and help us—like give us advice on what we can grow…because the middlemen, when they come to the village they also find the market. They buy the baby corn from the villager, but if the villager wants to grow something else it will be hard for them to find a market.

As Walker (2009) explains, the contract farming system gives small farmers access to a guaranteed market and fronts the expense of inputs for the farmer, attracting many farmers seeking security as they were enveloped in a competitive global economy. Yet collaborators’ frustration with their lack of autonomy in this arrangement is clear. Later on in the same interview, Paw L’s daughter repeated: “We feel like we don’t have a choice. Even though the seed is more expensive every day and also the fertilizer, we don’t have a choice because
that is the only thing the middleman offers. And we have to spend money every day so we need to do it.” We will see later that this “need to spend money,” indicative of a dependency relationship, is the primary reason given for conventional farmers’ decisions not to transition to organic agriculture, yet it ironically mirrors organic farmers’ expressed motivations for abandoning contract farming.

Contract companies generally expect farmers to buy all of the inputs—including seed, fertilizer, and, in some cases, pesticide—directly from them. Paw B, an organic farmer among the first to transition away from contract farming, argued that the middleman makes a profit from selling the inputs to the villager at an elevated price. Speaking of the middlemen, he expressed, “They try to control and manage it so the villagers have to buy everything from them. So if I buy the seed from somewhere else, they don’t want to buy my product. You have to buy everything from the middleman or they won’t buy your products.” Yet other farmers who transitioned to organic farming more recently or currently farm conventionally explained that the companies they work with do not require that the farmers take inputs from them. Still, farmers’ options are limited, and nearly everyone accepts the seed and fertilizer from the company. Only one farmer said that she occasionally buys fertilizer from the women’s group in Mae Ta.

Beyond the expectation that they will purchase inputs from the company, farmers are required to follow a specific cultivation schedule that multiple collaborators found constraining. Language suggesting loss of autonomy is especially clear in one male conventional farmer’s explanation:

Paw J: For the monocrops, I have to follow the schedule. Like I have to add the chemical fertilizer in this certain date. And if I didn’t the baby corn would not be healthy and would be ugly.

Researcher: What is most frustrating to you about having to follow that schedule?
Paw J: I have to do it. I feel like I have to do it.
Translator: Do you like it, or dislike it? How do you feel about that?
Paw J: I just have to do it.

Every farmer with whom I spoke explained to me the same process of preparing the soil for baby corn, applying a certain amount of fertilizer in particular ways at specific time intervals, removing the flowers from the corn plants, and then harvesting over a specified time frame.

One man who previously grew tobacco as a contract farmer also noted that the company would dictate how many tobacco plants he was allowed to grow and limit the amount of fertilizer he could apply per rai of land. This lack of control over the schedule or method with which they grew their products was a significant frustration for some farmers.

Though not a grievance explicitly stated by other farmers, Mae C, an organic farmer who grew tobacco and baby corn before transitioning to organic 18 years ago interestingly expressed a lack of ownership of her crops as a source of distress. She explained,

And one day [my husband] told me that he wanted to change. He said he doesn’t want to grow the tobacco anymore because if we keep growing the tobacco that means we have to keep going to see them, get their seedling, and it’s—it’s like—it’s not our crop it’s their crop. Because we cannot eat the tobacco, so we have to sell it to the company. Why don’t we grow our own food? We wanted to start to do our own crops and be ourselves, not just borrow, because we borrow their money to invest in our crops. And after that we have to return it and it doesn’t belong to us. […] The crop is not really for you. Because you have to sell to the company and then they get everything and then you get just only a tiny bit of money. [emphasis added]

The promise of greater autonomy and ownership of one’s own livelihood attracted this farmer and her husband to sufficiency-based organic agriculture.
In discussing their motivations for transitioning to organic, four collaborators also emphasized a philosophy of “setaket paw piang,” or “sufficiency economy,” a set of values that Scott (1976) would argue functions as a moral economy. Paw D, an organic farmer, explained, “I didn’t think ‘I want to be rich.’ I just wanted to live a simply and delight in what I get.” Speaking of his parents’ decision to switch to organic polyculture, a young man (Pi D) argued, “Everybody has different meanings for the word ‘sufficiency economy.’ For my family it is good—it is enough that we stay together as a family, we have lots of time to spend together, and we work in our garden, and then we have our own food.”

The king’s mantra of setaket paw piang resonates with and emboldens organic farmers’ convictions in the value of living simply and sustainably by producing what they need on their own land and within their own community. Paw A, an organic farmer among the first to abandon contract farming, explained setaket paw piang in this way:

The most important thing is the moral. You can get rich—you can be rich, but you must not take advantage of other people. You don’t have to destroy the environment and you can be rich as well. […] So that means you have to plan what direction you want to go. To be the millionaire it doesn’t mean that you have lots of money. But it means that you know—you understand yourself, you understand your family, you know what is enough for you, you know how to share it with people.
In a talk to a group of 55 contract farmers of longan fruit in a district an hour from Mae Ta, Paw A emphasized that sufficiency economy is grounded in the wisdom of their ancestors who were not dependent on contract companies. Not only does this moral economy unite organic farmers within Mae Ta, but it potentially underlies cultural links between farmers and their customers, as was critical in the success of *Pueblos Blancos* (Leutchford and Pratt 2011). A desire to produce one’s own food—a central dimension of sufficiency economy and a critical source of autonomy—was clearly expressed by five farmers as a major factor in motivating their transition to organic. This desire for greater self-sufficiency and an escape from the constraints and exploitation of contract farming was one set of forces that has driven the adoption of organic.

### 6.2.3 Health complaints

While frustration with a lack of autonomy as contract farmers seems to have accumulated gradually, health concerns—arguably the more acute manifestation of this constrained agency (Farmer 2005)—were the most prominent catalyst for transitions to organic agriculture. Mae C, whose family was among the first to switch to organic, began her story in this way: “[We used to] grow tobacco, long beans, and peanuts. At that time we used a lot of chemicals and we went to the hospital very often. So we kept putting the chemicals in our crops until our health was very bad and so [my husband] and I thought that we could change.” When asked about their experiences as contract farmers or probed more specifically to explain the health impacts of their work, both organic and conventional farmers spoke of fever, dizziness, headaches, rashes, stomach ulcers, fatigue, and hospital visits that they believed were directly related to their work as contract farmers. Paw J
continues to grow conventional baby corn but began planting organic vegetables in addition “because I felt that I was getting old and thought that the organic farm is not dangerous like monoculture.” But in what ways, exactly, is monoculture dangerous?

6.2.3.1 Chemical exposure

One might assume that chemical exposure from spraying fertilizer and pesticide is the cause of health concerns that have driven farmers toward organic, but the story is much more nuanced. Five collaborators did complain of skin irritation, numb hands, or weakness from the inhalation of the sprayed chemicals as a result of fertilizer application. For example, Pi E, whose family grew peanuts, baby corn, tobacco, green mustard, long beans, and tomatoes as contract farmers prior to converting to organic, explained that his parents visited the hospital often for cuts that became irritated and infected when they came into contact with the chemical fertilizer. Another male organic farmer, Paw B, attributed the numbness of his wife’s hands—and consequential hospital visits every few months—to the chemical fertilizer she mixed with her hands. He explained, “We didn’t know how badly the chemicals affect your health. So we weren’t really concerned about that.” Only one farmer I interviewed was taught how to protect herself from chemical exposure; everyone else explained they simply learned by reading the label on the packaging or by experiencing negative health effects. While most use gloves, particularly when they mix the fertilizer, some abandoned the use of masks or coats in the stifling heat. Two conventional farmers explained that they do not use any protection because they do not think the fertilizer is dangerous in the way that pesticides and herbicides are. This speaks to a significant point raised by both conventional and organic farmers that chemical exposure is not the most significant source of health concerns with baby corn production.
While corn demands large amounts of fertilizer, it grows quickly and herbicide is not crucial; thus, very few farmers in Mae Ta use pesticide or herbicide on their baby corn crops. Since nearly everyone in the Mae Ta sub-district now grows baby corn rather than tobacco or other herbicide-intensive crops, chemical exposure has become a diminishing concern. Three collaborators who grow baby corn explained that if they wear gloves, they experience no health effects from the use of chemical fertilizer. Concern associated with herbicides and pesticides as opposed to fertilizer is much greater and is evident in this baby corn farmer’s explanation of why he gave up using chemical pesticide over thirty years ago:

I had an experience with the herbicide. One day I sprayed the herbicide and then the wind blew so all the herbicide was on my face, and then I threw up a lot and when I went back home I was still throwing up. So that’s why I stopped using the herbicide and pesticide.

Four of the five farmers that spoke of negative health effects from chemical exposure emphasized experiences with pesticide use rather than fertilizer application for baby corn. Even in the example of numb hands quoted above, the fertilizer Paw B’s wife was mixing was for tobacco rather than baby corn.

Paw B also explained that because they harvested the tobacco early in the morning only five days after the last fertilizer spray, the chemical-laden dew on the leaves left their hands and arms covered in rashes. These risks associated with harvesting tobacco were also described by Paw D, a collaborator among the first to transition to organic. He attributed his decision to abandon monoculture directly to the insomnia and debilitating joint pain that rendered him unable to walk for nearly a month as a result of exposure to herbicide used in growing tobacco. A doctor explained that his pain was due to dangerous levels of chemicals in his blood. While he believed that inhaling the chemicals sprayed over his crops was the main cause of his exposure, he also wondered if he ingested some of the chemicals by eating
the mustard greens he grew around the tobacco plots for self-consumption. Closer analysis of these testimonies reveals that exposure to chemicals was primarily associated with tobacco production and was a less significant concern for current baby corn farmers or organic farmers who grew baby corn without pesticide inputs prior to converting to organic in recent years.

6.2.3.2 Contaminated food

Interestingly, the most significant concerns related to chemical inputs were not due to farmers’ own use of the chemicals, but a fear that vegetables sold in the markets are dangerously contaminated with chemicals. This was mentioned thirteen times by seven different collaborators as a major motivation for adopting organic polyculture that would allow them to produce their own food free of chemicals. One female organic farmer, Mae C, attributed experiences of fever and fatigue to contaminated food. She explained:

Because the chemicals are in the food, right? And then when we eat it we feel weak and tired. I think—I know that the chemicals that we put on the crops are bad for our health, so when we eat the crops of course we will get the effects from that.

Mae E who grew her own organic vegetables long before she joined the cooperative or gave up contract farming repeatedly expressed a concern that conventionally grown food is dangerous to consume. She gave the example of dizziness she experienced as a result of eating bean sprouts grown conventionally and treated to appear white. With a tight voice she said that talking about the food in the markets made her think of her son studying in a Chonburi province to whom she wished she could send safe food. During a casual lunch at Paw A’s house, two young women talked with each other about the results of a blood test one of them had recently received at the local hospital that indicated a dangerous level of
chemicals in her blood, likely from eating food purchased at the market. They were curious to know whether this was a concern in the U.S.

In addition to chemical residue, two collaborators noted the high blood pressure and heart disease caused by consumption of processed food with additives, seasoning, and MSG. Paw B explained:

If you grow chemical baby corn, you cannot eat baby corn every day; you have to buy food from somewhere else because you didn’t grow food for your family right? So the food outside—they will put the seasoning powder or MSG in it, and that causes high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, or heart disease.

Growing and cooking one’s own food provides an alternative to the consumption of dangerous food from “outside.” This emphasis on safe food rather than simply a concern about exposure through chemical application begins to explain why many members of the organic network in the Mae Ta cooperative cultivate polyculture rather than organic baby corn, and why many current conventional farmers also grow organic vegetables for their own consumption, a point to which we will return in section 6.3.

6.2.3.3 Physical work and schedule

Complaints about the physical work or exhausting schedule demanded by baby corn production also contribute to a better understanding of the emphasis on polyculture. When asked about the most significant health issues in Mae Ta, Mae M, a hospital staff member, stated, “The main patients, they have a problem—like they work too much.” She explained that they have back pain and want to be given medication rather than loosen their muscles by stretching. Mae M added that health issues result from “carrying heavy things and doing as much as they can as fast as they can. And when they hurt they just keep doing it. […] Most of the people who have aches work with the baby corn crops because they have to carry the big sacks of baby corn. But for organic farmers, they have small bags,” she laughed. When I
asked Paw L, a conventional baby corn farmer, if there is any way that his work on the farm affects his health or his family’s health, he and his daughter both responded at once: “There is the effect for our health as well, but it’s not about the chemical fertilizer, but because when we harvest we have to work very hard.” They explained that they sometimes work from eight in the morning until midnight. This period of harvesting, which occurs three times each year, takes ten days and often requires hired help. In his speech to the group of longan fruit growers in a nearby district, one organic farmer told the emotional story of harvesting baby corn and watching his wife sink to the ground with fatigue and illness, crying as she ate raw baby corn. This was the final straw.

Five farmers emphasized other health ramifications such as fever, stomach ulcers, and fatigue due to the irregular distribution of workload throughout the year and the strict schedule of baby corn production. Mae F hypothesized that the fevers she experienced as a contract farmer were due to lack of rest. Multiple collaborators explained that they suffered from stomach ulcers as a result of skipping meals during periods of high-intensity labor. This not only resulted in an empty stomach but likely caused stress as well, given the cultural importance of sitting down to a meal with others. Paw B, an organic farmer, described the physical effects of the stress he felt as a result of the hard work and rigid schedule of growing baby corn:

I had lower back pain and ulcers because of I had to work hard and also I had to make it in time. There was the schedule that I had of how much I could grow in one rai and how many the middleman wanted. So if I was slow I could not make it—that meant I would get less money. That’s why I had to hurry and had to be on time. So I didn’t have time… It’s different from the organic crops that I can do whenever I want and eat anytime. So I have freedom and I’m very happy to choose this way.
Once again, these physical symptoms of fatigue, stomach ulcers, and back pain are manifestations of constrained autonomy and a more acute source of discontent with contract farming among both current conventional and organic farmers.

6.2.3.4 Financial Stress

As is evident in the previous example, the stress of a rigid and hurried schedule is intertwined with the financial stress of debt and instability. Paw B went on to explain,

The debt is another reason for the health problem. When I was stressed sometimes I could not sleep. So when you have debt, you are stressed and you have to think about it. But now I don’t have to think about this and I can help my relatives or anyone so it’s like I do some merit as well. Because before when I was in debt I borrowed the money from the bank and also my relatives. But now it’s different—it’s opposite. They need my help.

Four other collaborators raised similar testimonies of financial stress. Paw I, who still grows conventional baby corn in addition to organic crops, responded to a question about the health effects of using chemical fertilizer for baby corn crops with the clear argument:

I don’t have any effects from the chemical fertilizer because I wear gloves. But for the emotion, yes, I have effects, because I am stressed a lot because I have to pay for the chemical fertilizer and then I’m not sure when I sell the products whether I am going to get a profit.

Stress becomes the link between economic vulnerability or lack of autonomy in contract farming and the physical symptoms of poor health experienced by individuals, a link Paul Farmer (2005) draws in discussing the health ramifications of structural violence. In Mae Ta, these health issues functioned as acute motivations for many farmers in their decision to adopt organic polyculture.

No collaborators discussed exclusively economic grievances or health issues as the only motivation for adopting organic. Interestingly, three farmers cited concerns about health and economic security in almost the same breath. When I tried to encourage Paw B to rank the two, he challenged me, explaining that both were important factors in his decision.
They are inseparable, he argued, because debt causes stress, and health issues lead to added expenses. Economic stress, constrained autonomy, and poor health have thus functioned as interconnected sources of discontent and driving forces for farmers’ decisions to abandon contract farming.

6.3 CONCERNS ABOUT TRANSITIONING TO ORGANIC FARMING

Even current contract farmers expressed significant grievances with contract farming that echo the motivating factors shared by organic farmers. Why, then, have nearly 90 percent of farmers in Mae Ta decided not to abandon contract farming at this point? Both organic and current contract farmers explained that those who have decided not to adopt organic do not reject organic practices as undesirable. Rather, they doubt the economic feasibility of such a change. How could economic concerns be simultaneously a motivating and inhibiting force for transitioning to organic practices? What lessons can we learn from conventional decisions not to transition to organic farming?

Organic farmers explained that it is difficult to convince their neighbors to take what they see as an enormous economic risk in abandoning contract farming. When the movement first began, many doubted that it was possible to make a living without working for the middlemen. When asked how his neighbors reacted when he first stopped growing baby corn, Paw A explained, “Many people thought that I was crazy and I was foolish—like why do I do such strange stuff?” His wife expressed that her relationship with her neighbors was not hostile, but a lack of understanding separated them from her: “People started to think, ‘is it enough to feed your family? We grow lots of tobacco, we work very hard, but it’s not enough for our family. And how can you feed your family? You don’t do anything
much.” The perspective that chemical inputs are beneficial and necessary for healthy crops dominates academic and political spheres and ripples out to rural farmers. Given the nutrient demands of baby corn, it seems impossible to give up the use of chemical fertilizer.

Nevertheless, the organic farmers I interviewed emphasized that about four years after the first farmers began transitioning to organic agriculture, others in the community started to change their perspectives on organic as a result of training sessions and other efforts organized by the Mae Ta cooperative. Most, they argue, now see it as beneficial to their health and support organic agriculture in Mae Ta. Yet this increase in understanding about the benefits of organic practices has not translated into a rapid swell in transitions to organic farming. Why not?

Five organic farmers discuss the need, or perceived need, for what they call “ngun gohn,” or “money first.” Mae G, an organic farmer, explained the term in this way:

Ngun gohn is like a salary, or like big money that you get one time—like every month I get 30,000 or 40,000 baht. But if you plant and sell small amounts of vegetables or little bits of stuff, so you cannot get big money like that in one time because you will sell little bit by little bit.

From the perspective of one organic farmer, Paw A, his neighbors do not understand why—if he says he can save more money now—he is not rich despite the media attention he receives regarding the organic movement in Mae Ta.

Most of the people they think chui chui [luke warm]. Some people, they don’t understand why many media or many people visit me at the house and then I didn’t get rich. Like I am on television, I’m in the newspaper, but I don’t have a car to drive. And so they’re just confused about why I am doing like this. Like why doesn’t he take money—he can be rich from that but he’s not. They think that I’m crazy. They think that…na, chui chui. It’s ok now, but sometimes they still think like that. Some people they don’t see what I do. They just see ok this person has a car or not, this person has a big house or not, but they don’t know what I do for others.
Yet conventional farmers themselves spoke of more fundamental economic concerns about their ability to provide for their families in the absence of “ngun gohn” that prevent them from transitioning to organic farming.

Current conventional farmers interviewed in this study expressed positive views of organic practices and the effect of the organic movement on the community as a whole, but felt that they were “not ready” to stop growing baby corn. When asked what he thought of the fact that some people in Mae Ta have started growing organically, Paw L, a conventional farmer, said, “It’s a good change for Mae Ta, and I think in the future I might do the organic agriculture […] because I am worried about my own health and my family’s health.” Yet he went on to say, “Now I have some things to take care of, like this house and also some debt. So I think if in the future I do the organic farm, that means I already solved these problems, and I can be more relaxed. I will not have to work hard because I won’t have any burden.”

While organic cultivation is associated with diminished burden, this relationship does not seem causal from this collaborator’s perspective. Rather than a cure for economic ills, organic farming is seen almost as a reward—an ideal that cannot be reached until one is free from the need for significant cash. This collaborator expressed that his main expense is food for his family, yet debt from the construction of their house hangs over these daily needs for cash. Mae K, the neighbor of an organic farmer, has been growing conventional baby corn for 28 years. She has three children, two of whom have very young children of their own and live together with her and her husband. Her son’s income from construction work in Mae Ta and one daughter-in-law’s wage as a commuting factory worker in Lamphun supplement the income from baby corn to provide for the family. When asked about her view of organic
agriculture, Mae K said, “I want to join the coop as well, but now I cannot do it [laughs].

Maybe in the future. […] I’m not ready.” Her husband then explained,

If I want to farm the organic crops I need to leave the land two to three years until the
chemicals in the soil are less, and then we have limited land. So if we leave that land
for two or three years, so we cannot wait because we need to feed our family, we
need to work. So we do not have enough land to do anything else.

One organic farmer, Mae F, discussed her worries about this transition period and their
current struggles with this challenge, as they only recently gained organic certification. The
need for cash income led them to transition first to organic baby corn in addition to organic
vegetables for self-consumption until they were able to transition fully to organic polyculture
three years ago.

Three other organic farmers expressed worries about “ngun gohn” that created
tension as they began to transition to organic farming. Mae C, who was among first to adopt
organic polyculture, laughed as she told us that for a period of time she was so angry at her
husband for giving up baby corn and not providing money for the family that she refused to
make him lunch to take to the orchards of organic fruit trees still too young to sell. Pi D, a
young man who pushed his parents to farm organically, explained their resistance in this
way: “So my parents were kind of mad and disagreed: like ‘Why do you talk about this every
day? You know our family is not ready for that because [your brother] is still in school and
we need money to support him.’ So they brought up many reasons to stop my idea.” While
Pi D’s family (which includes Mae G and Paw H) did eventually decide to farm organically
even though his brother is still in school, and they have gained—rather than lost—economic
security, this concern about the loss of “ngun gohn” worries conventional farmers enough to
prevent them from transitioning to organic agriculture. Although the collaborators who grow
exclusively conventional baby corn as their source of livelihood all laughed when I asked
about the benefits of contract farming, they expressed that they have to do it because they need the money. Mae K, the grandmother of two toddlers who feels she is not ready to farm organically, explained, “Because I have many children, baby corn is the best choice for me to grow because I can get the good price—like I cannot do the organic farm because they get less money…in the short term. […] If I stop growing baby corn I won’t have enough money to pay back the debt, and I pay it every year.”

While three conventional farmers explicitly felt they had no choice but to grow conventional baby corn, most conventional farmers in Mae Ta have pursued autonomy and sustainability in small but significant ways without abandoning contract farming. None of the farmers with whom I spoke use chemical pesticides, and two explained that while they use chemical fertilizer, they feel that they use less than farmers in other communities because they apply manure to their land as well. While three farmers accept chemical fertilizer from the middlemen, one of them, Mae K, said that she occasionally buys her fertilizer from a women’s group in Mae Ta as well, and another, Paw I, purchases his inputs from a cooperative in Lamphun. Most significant and surprising, however, was the realization that each of the contract farmers I interviewed grows organic vegetables in addition to conventional baby corn. Depending on the season, most of these farmers are able to produce a majority of the vegetables they consume, though they rarely have enough time to produce enough to meet the needs of their families. Paw J has grown organic vegetables for self-consumption for almost 20 years, while others have been encouraged by the Mae Ta cooperative to develop these kitchen gardens as a means of gaining greater self-sufficiency. Walker (2009) might argue that these farmers are employing a moral economy to adapt to and adjust the impact of integration into export markets. Yet, to a certain extent, these
strategies of gaining self-sufficiency suggest that perhaps even conventional farmers are engaged in a form of resistance that seeks to oppose dependence on cash income (Scott 1976; Van der Ploeg 2008). Organic farmers also emphasize that these adaptations in pursuit of autonomy and sustainability occurring even among contract farmers are signs of success and positive change in Mae Ta, suggesting that perhaps there is a larger vision shared by both conventional and organic farmers in Mae Ta that underlies and reaches beyond the spread of organic agriculture.

6.4 EFFECTS OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE

If hopes for economic security, autonomy, and health have motivated many farmers to abandon contract farming, to what extent has organic polyculture allowed them to achieve these goals? By analyzing the benefits and effects of organic emphasized in interviews and informal interactions, I will assess what aspects of organic farming are most important to collaborators and what role organic agriculture plays within the community. Nearly every collaborator emphasized the benefits of improved health with a change in diet and economic security due to lower investment. Increased autonomy was also noted in eight farmers’ testimonies of more flexible work schedules and a lighter workload. In responses to inquiries into the effects of organic agriculture on the community as a whole, both organic and conventional collaborators noted improved community health, a strengthened community, and major shifts in outsiders’ views of Mae Ta and farming. Finally, the effect of this organic movement on the out-migration of youth and their attitudes toward their community is a nuanced story that reveals both the transformative power of this movement and the overwhelming social forces opposing it.
6.4.1 Benefits of organic for individuals and families

6.4.1.1 Improved Health

When asked about the impact of their transition to organic on their family, fifteen collaborators emphasized improved health. Mae E abandoned baby corn production two years ago. She testified: “After I started the organic farm I feel that I am healthier. I don’t go to the hospital often and I feel: ah! sabay [healthy or relaxed] and strong, healthy!” Similarly, others joked that they do not even know the new doctor at the small community hospital in Mae Ta. Organic farmers primarily attributed this improved health to changes in consumption. Mae F explained, “I really like the organic crops because I think it is safe for my life: so I can grow and then pick them and eat them. And I don’t have to worry if it contains chemicals.” As we were working in her garden, Mae G handed me a cucumber to eat and told me not to worry because it is organic. Seven other collaborators similarly emphasized greater access to high-quality food as organic farmers, and Paw B connected health issues of high blood pressure and diabetes to the diets of monoculture farmers. Mae C explained the quality difference between her produce and conventionally produced crops: “The taste and the smell is different. So the food before I could smell the chemicals that the people put in it and then the taste is like—tasteless. […] My stuff is sweet and crunchy!” she said laughing.

All of the collaborators who farm exclusively organic explained that they grow all of the vegetables their families consume—a significant contrast to the necessity of purchasing vegetables, meat, and processed foods as contract farmers. Mae F explained, “[Before switching to organic] sometimes we bought the food that was already cooked and we just
bought it for 10 or 20 baht and then we took it home, because we didn’t have time. Most of our time we spent on the baby corn crops.” Most organic collaborators explained that they now buy only shrimp paste, seasoning, and occasionally meat or fermented fish at the market. At the end of one day at Mae G’s garden, we harvested 12 different vegetables and herbs for that evening’s meal before heading home.

The cultivation of organic polyculture has shaped collaborators’ diets—and the diets of those to whom they sell their produce—in significant ways with both physiological and cultural ramifications. With more time and a greater focus on production for consumption, many organic farmers gather frogs, fish, crabs, and snails from waterlogged rice paddies, and collect mushrooms and bamboo shoots from the outskirts of their upper gardens. With these alternative sources of meat and wild foods, the consumption of pork or chicken was less common among these families. Additionally, a subtle but culturally significant shift in the types of vegetables they—and their customers—consume also seems to have accompanied the rise of organic polyculture. While organic farmers grow exotic varieties of “winter vegetables” native to more temperate regions in the dry season to meet the demands of customers in Chiang Mai, they consume and sell mostly local varieties of produce in the rainy season. This cultivation of local vegetables, driven by the optimal adaptations of these varieties and farmers’ desires to save seeds and preserve local culture, has been accompanied by education initiatives to train consumers how to cook these vegetables. In many cases the cooperative also found it necessary to train farmers how to grow the vegetables native to their own region. The cultivation and consumption of local food not only impacts individual health but may also contribute to a strengthened cultural and community identity as efforts
are made to educate youth about local food, an initiative we will return to discuss in the conclusion.

6.4.1.2 Economic Security

A focus on production for consumption has significant economic ramifications as well. Six collaborators specifically noted that with little need to purchase food, their families’ expenses plummeted. Many also explain that lower monetary investment in their crops allowed for greater net incomes and economic stability. Mae C, who was among the first to adopt organic, explained, “When you do the organic farm it’s like you put in lower investment, and then when you have the income you get everything, and you hardly have to pay for any inputs.” Her husband, Paw A, noted that while he had to pay 940 baht (30 dollars) for a bag of urea fertilizer that he could apply one time to one rai of land, he now pays 1,000 baht for a supply of manure that will maintain the fertility of his land for three years.

Every organic farmer or young adult I interviewed felt that his or her family’s economic situation has improved since adopting organic. Seven organic collaborators explained that they now have “enough money” and most emphasized that they are able to save money in contrast to living payment to payment when they grew baby corn. Nevertheless, in addition to lower input costs and reduced food expenses, three collaborators also noted that with their children’s completion of school, the absence of these major expenses has contributed to their families’ improved economic security. Yet when probed to explain whether the lack of these expenses or the switch to organic was the primary cause of greater economic security, two of these farmers argued that organic production was the most important reason. Still these comments and the observation that only two of the exclusively
organic farming families I interviewed have school-aged children (and they were the newest members of the organic network), suggest that the story of economic benefits of organic production is complicated by the evolving economic circumstances of each family. Overall, each organic farmer testified that the debt that burdened him or her as a contract farmer has either been eliminated or improved through the adoption of organic production. Even two collaborators who joined the cooperative just two or three years ago have lowered their debt from 100,000 baht (3,375 dollars) to 50,000 and 15,000 baht. By regularly putting money in a piggy bank, the first family to abandon contract farming was able to save 40,000 baht in the first year of growing organic crops to begin to pay back the 200,000 baht (about 6,700 dollars) of debt.

6.4.1.3 **Claiming Autonomy**

Four collaborators expressed pride in their escape from dependence on a company and their ability to financially assist relatives or invest in their own farms. Three organic farmers have purchased more of their own land since transitioning to organic. Pi E made a telling distinction between his family’s current debt and the debt that burdened them as contract farmers:

> Before my family had debt from [the agricultural investment bank], but that debt is different from the debt that we have now. Because with the debt before, we could not really pay for it because we didn’t have enough money. Every time we planted the vegetables, we would have debt every time after we sold the products and we wanted to start again. But now we still have a debt with the bank and also with the cooperative but that debt is easier to manage, and I think it’s fine for us because that debt is for development. Like we loaned the money to buy more land and then invest the money in our land and grow more vegetables, and I think that is fine.

The autonomy to “develop” his land and to define what that development would look like was made possible by his family’s conversion to organic. Pi E has the agency to re-imagine
what is possible on his land (McMichael 2008), and in doing so is engaged in a “new kind of resistance” through production and action rather than resistance (Van der Ploeg 2008).

Other signs of the importance of increased autonomy are apparent in discussions of the benefits of polyculture. One organic farmer, Mae C, noted the benefit of options afforded by the variety of crops she is able to grow. She explained,

Before I thought that working on tropical plantations, or growing peanuts or long beans, were the only way that people can—like the only crops that we can do—the only way we can feed our family. But now it’s different: we can do lots of stuff. We can grow many things and we have many methods or many ways of how to grow and make our plants healthy.

Two other women noted that they appreciate that they are able to do all of the work associated with polyculture since they do not have to ask their husbands to carry the bags of baby corn or hire neighbors to help them harvest their vegetables. Each female farmer I asked said that she and her husband work together on the farm, but the fact that these women did not need to ask their husbands to do something they were incapable of doing themselves was important to them.

Most common, however, were testimonies of a more manageable workload and relaxed schedule with organic polyculture, and the sense of autonomy this afforded. Eight organic farmers emphasized this benefit, though Paw D, who was among the first to adopt organic, felt that organic crops require careful attention, and with his relatively large amount of land and busy children, his workload as an organic farmer is not significantly less than he remembered having as a contract farmer. As I helped Mae C—who rises before 5:30 each morning—weed her organic beds, she commented that the work is never done. Most organic farmers, however, felt that the difference in work was significant. During my six weeks of participant observation I was struck by the slow and flexible rhythm of life with my host
families. Every day that I spent working in the gardens or rice fields was broken up with breaks, a large shared lunch, and occasional naps. Each time I asked about the plans for the day or what time I should be awake the following morning, they would laugh and tell me they do not follow a schedule.

As I lived only with organic farmers, interviews speak more reliably to the relative workload of organic and conventional production. Paw J, who grows both organic vegetables and baby corn depending on the season explained,

When I farm the organic crops I feel like I have freedom. I can take a rest any time I want; I can go to work any time I want to. But for the monocrops I have to follow the schedule. You have to add the fertilizer—the chemical fertilizer—on this certain date. And if you don’t, so the baby corn will not be healthy and will look ugly.

The terms “freedom” and “relaxed” were frequently used by collaborators to describe their work with organic polyculture. Paw B expressed, with organic crops “I have freedom and I am happy to choose this way.” He has control over his livelihood and emphasized that he chooses this way of life rather than being forced to cultivate a particular crop in a specific way.

6.4.1.4 Growing Pride

Accompanying this sense of greater autonomy, expressions of pride—in their product, family, way of life, and community—were shared by most of the organic farmers I interviewed. Four expressed pride in the quality of the vegetables they sell. Mae F, who personally sells her vegetables at a market in Chiang Mai each week, said, “I like to sell my vegetables because I want to tell the people who buy my vegetables that they are safe—no chemicals and no chemical fertilizer—and that it’s good for their health.” Mae C, who was among the first to transition, is proud, not only of her products, but of her way of life—one that is generally looked down upon as undeveloped. Mae C told us that after she and her
husband gave up contract farming, “as things were getting better and I saw that when I do this my life is better. I can get more income for my family. And then people start to follow me and my husband to do the same way. So I think that I feel good—that I am a good example for people.” Along the same vein, many collaborators expressed increased pride in their community. An analysis of these shifting attitudes carries us into a discussion of the effects of changing farming practices on Mae Ta as a whole and the role of organic agriculture in the changes occurring in this community.

### 6.4.2 Effects of Organic on the Community of Mae Ta

Speaking about the effect of organic agriculture on their community as a whole, collaborators discussed improved community health, environmental benefits, and a strengthened community. In addition to noting personal health benefits, five collaborators emphasized improved health on a community level, not only among organic farmers, but also among conventional farmers who grow their own vegetables for consumption or buy organic produce from their neighbors. Pi D argued, “The organic agriculture makes people know more about how to eat—how to consume; and they know more about their health if they grow their own food. And if they put some chemical fertilizer that means they will hurt themselves.” Mae M, who works at the local hospital, echoed this observation. Two collaborators also linked organic production to improved air quality, reduced accumulation of pig manure, and increased ability to cope with climate shocks due to reforestation of land previously cultivated for baby corn. Another male organic farmer, Paw B, draws the connection between environmental and social sustainability as he argued, “[These changes in farming practices] help for the economics and also the food security. And there is an
increasing biodiversity, because before lots of people farmed the conventional crops. And now there are also plans for growing teak [trees].” Paw B notes the various ways in which the rise of organic agriculture is contributing to the sustainability of the community.

Also emphasizing the importance of social sustainability, six collaborators discussed the effect of organic farming on the social capital of Mae Ta. Multiple farmers noted the exchange of ideas facilitated by the cooperative through workshops or simply inspired by the emergence of organic production. Mae E, an organic farmer, explained that since the organic network was created in the cooperative, “people are more—they often see each other. And then they help each other, they have more meetings, and then they exchange the ideas—like if these people can grow this kind of vegetables, and that can make them healthy, how do they do it? So they can learn from each other.” She went on to say that most of this exchange occurs informally as neighbors and family members visit each other’s farms. Multiple farmers felt that cooperation within the community has increased since people began to adopt organic practices, and two noted increased harmony and understanding within Mae Ta. Getz (2008) observed a feedback relationship between market integration and community-level social capital that was either positive or negative depending on the nature of the social capital. Strong equitable social structures and shared values allowed farmers in El Pozo to mediate market forces and reinvent their engagement with them in such a way that benefited the whole community. Rather than split the community, the organic movement in Mae Ta seems to have strengthened its cohesion. Perhaps this is due to the cooperative’s efforts to educate farmers about organic practices without alienating conventional farmers, as well as the broader community-oriented vision of those who have been a part of this
movement. We will return to this discussion of the place of organic within a variety of efforts to improve social sustainability in the conclusion.

The most commonly emphasized impact of organic agriculture, however, was the growth of outside interest in organic practices and shifting views of Mae Ta. Mae Ta, many said, is becoming famous. Both Getz (2008) and Leutchford and Pratt (2011) emphasize the importance of extra-local market linkages and political support in the success of the cooperatives they studied. Collaborators seemed to view this external recognition and support as a critical measure of the success of organic farming in Mae Ta. Paw L, a contract farmer who grows conventional baby corn, expressed that while the organic practices of his neighbors have no effect on him personally, “The organic farming is good for Mae Ta community, and it makes people know more about Mae Ta. And more people come here to get the training—and to see what is happening, what we grow and what is happening.”

When I first arrived in Mae Ta, Paw A, a farmer among the first to adopt organic, was speaking at the cooperative to a group of about 70 farmers from a nearby district. On average, the cooperative hosts these trainings for visitors twice every month and has trained 200 people in the past year. Paw A also travels to neighboring communities multiple times each month and has visited communities in seven countries throughout Asia to tell Mae Ta’s story and encourage others to adopt organic. Three times throughout my fieldwork I observed small media crews interviewing him for television series or radio programs. One organic farmer, Mae G, emphasized the impact this publicity has had and the extent to which Mae Ta has captured the public’s attention when she told this story about the shift in outsiders’ views:

I think it’s different than before, what people think about Mae Ta. One person died in the village and then his son worked in the south so he came back for his father’s
funeral. And so he told the villager, ‘Oh now I heard that Mae Ta is famous and well
known.’ He read the newspaper or the internet, and saw on the internet that many
people talk about Mae Ta so he wants to know more about Mae Ta—what’s happen
now to his community. So when the villager talked about the cooperative and the
organic crops so he said that ok if he gets bored of working in the south he wants to
come back to Mae Ta and do the same thing.

Six collaborators, both organic and conventional farmers, explained with pride that more
people have come to know about Mae Ta and want to learn from their example.

Paw B’s wife informed me that in a given year they sometimes host as many as five
students from Japan, Vietnam, Burma or other countries who learn about Mae Ta on the
internet and stay with them for a few days. Over the past year, four young adults from Laos
and Bhutan have stayed for months at a time with another collaborator’s family to learn
about sustainable agriculture through an exchange program that connected these volunteers
to Mae Ta. My stay in Mae Ta overlapped with those of two of these exchange volunteers. I
encountered three sets of Thai university students conducting research on sustainable
agriculture or community management in Mae Ta. I also spoke with a group of professors
from Chiang Mai University interested in funding a pilot project for community-supported
agriculture (CSA) in Mae Ta, a market strategy recently initiated by young community
members and inspired by one young adult’s experiences in Arkansas through the
Multinational Exchange for Sustainable Agriculture (MESA). These observations are
striking, given the emphasis that researchers and universities have placed on monoculture
cash crop production in the experiences of all of the collaborators in this study.

Interest in organic produce has also grown steadily among Chiang Mai residents. At
five AM on a Wednesday, Mae Ta vendors unload a truck piled high with crates of their
vegetables at the small outdoor market tucked away on a back road off the highway that
skirts the city. At five-thirty AM, middle-aged women and men begin filtering in. A few
wear aprons and load crate after crate of vegetables into the backs of trucks, headed to stock hip vegetarian or organic restaurants, riding the interest of foreigners and young locals. By six AM the tiny market is a beehive. Mae C, who sells her vegetables in Chiang Mai once every week, explained,

Now people in the city accept Mae Ta more and more people understand about organic farming, and they want to have—they want to consume healthy food. So more people come to the market and buy our stuff. And some people want to buy the products and then give it to their relatives in Bangkok.

Some customers have asked Mae Ta vendors to set up more markets, and even Mae Rim and Lamphun hospitals have expressed interest in buying their vegetables. Might vendors be linked to customers and NGOs through a shared set of values hinging on the valorization of small-scale production of healthy food? In this way, perhaps the concept of the agricultural village serves a “political tool for empowerment” (Leutchford and Pratt 2011:90).

Beyond market expansion, however, outsiders’ emerging interest in Mae Ta has kindled a shift in collaborators’ views of their own community. Paw I, who grows both conventional and organic baby corn, shared, “Before when I went somewhere else and people asked where I come from, I was pretty shy to tell them that I come from Mae Ta, because at that time people really insulted the people who came from this area. No one liked us or was interested. But now it’s different.” He went on to explain that even the Chiang Mai provincial and district governments—which, according to another farmer, have always “ignored this community”—have begun to focus on Mae Ta and send sub-district leaders to their community to learn how to facilitate youth programs and other initiatives. From collaborators’ perspectives, Mae Ta is emerging as a positive example for neighboring communities and even for the rest of Thailand, and they explain these shifts with evident pride.
6.4.2.1 Young Adults’ Interest in Mae Ta

Young adults interviewed in this study shared strikingly similar testimonies of shifts in their own attitudes about Mae Ta and agriculture. To what extent has the rise of organic agriculture contributed to this shift? Two young men—28 and 30 years old—whose parents transitioned to organic agriculture since they left for school in the city used to be embarrassed to tell their peers that they were from Mae Ta. One of them, Pi E, explained,

Many people think when you become the farmer you will be poor because you have to work hard, the product has a low price, and you have to pay for many inputs so finally you get nothing back. So many people insult us, because we’re poor. That’s why the young people they think that they want to escape from this and so they want to work somewhere else, to go somewhere else. And before I thought the same.

Pi E explained that throughout secondary and vocational school he knew very little about his community and was uninterested in Mae Ta. Urban-dwellers often insult those from rural areas as “hillbillies” or as “hill tribes”—upland minority groups, many of whom lack Thai citizenship.

Throughout their schooling, young collaborators felt that they were encouraged by both teachers and peers to pursue industrial sector jobs in urban areas, work they described as “popular” because of the steady cash income it afforded. Expanding industrial centers, efforts by companies to provide daily transportation to and from nearby rural villages, and increased pursuit of secondary education make up a few of the factors driving the exodus of youth from farming. Many collaborators expressed concern about this abandonment of farming, referred to by Paw A as the “crisis of agriculture in Thailand.” A few community members attended a meeting of NGOs across Thailand focused on this issue during the first week of my research. Pi B explained that in the past two years, 20 young men have left Mae Ta to work in industries in Korea and Taiwan on three-year contracts before returning to Mae
Comparing her parents’ generation to her own, Pi G, who recently returned to Mae Ta after working in a computer industry, said that more people are working outside of Mae Ta than in the past. Two collaborators argued that most youth in Mae Ta continue to prefer to work in urban areas, following the dominant processes of social and economic change throughout northern Thailand (de Almeida 2006).

At the same time, however, Pi B, a thirty-two-year-old collaborator involved in the expansion of organic agriculture, argued that more young adults are in fact coming back to Mae Ta. When I asked about the decision of youth to work in Mae Ta since the cooperative was created, she explained, “There are more people who come back to Mae Ta and work in Mae Ta. Before it was like eleven [people] and now it’s more than twenty.” In the context of the conversation, she seems to be sharing a change she has observed since she returned to Mae Ta after completing school. These seemingly contradictory observations make sense in perspective. Pi B is noting a very small increase in the number of people from her generation who chose to work in Mae Ta, yet she considers this increase significant. Given the overwhelming exodus of younger generations from farming and rural communities across Thailand and the new opportunity to utilize provided transportation to work in industries less than an hour away, the fact that any young adults are deciding to return to farm is indeed remarkable. Thus while the retention of youth in Mae Ta may not be quantitatively significant, young adults’ testimonies of their decisions to return are qualitatively quite valuable.

Some of the young collaborators did follow the “trend” of urban wage employment but found life in the city to be expensive and factory labor too constraining. Pi F, a young man who chose not to work in a factory after witnessing friends’ experiences, argued:
Many people say like ‘ok I want to learn this, and then when I graduate I want to work for that company or this company,’ but I think that life is not that beautiful like you think. […] You don’t know that when you want to get good money, lots of money, how much you have to trade with that.

He went on to explain one works “like a robot” in the industrial zone doing the same tasks every day. “And it’s not equal. Sometimes people just use you too much, and it’s not equal between people. There is no freedom.” Pi F currently works in Mae Ta on his parents’ organic farm and helps the cooperative with trainings and meetings. He emphasizes the autonomy this provides:

When I work for the community and the organization I have freedom. This kind of job helps me to think more and then create things within the job. There is not the same structure—you don’t have to do this every day or every hour. […] If I can take care of myself I don’t have to ask my mother or my parents for money, so I think that it’s good enough.

This collaborator values the agency to actively construct his work, exemplifying a “new kind of resistance” that Van der Ploeg (2008) argues takes the form of alternative and creative production driven by particular goals and values. Mae G worked for years in a tobacco processing plant in Mae Ta that has since been shut down after baby corn eclipsed tobacco. She argued that the only time you own when you are a factory worker is when you go to the bathroom. This sense of exploitation and frustration with lack of autonomy echoes the grievances with contract farming that adults expressed as motivating them to adopt organic. Four out of six young adults complained of this lack of autonomy in industrial work in discussing their decisions to return to Mae Ta. This constraint of agency “mobilized” them to pursue an alternative in opposition to the tide of urban-centered development (McMichael 2008).

Was this discontent alone enough to draw young people back to the rural village with which they were embarrassed to identify when they were in school? One young adult
explained that he would not have returned to help his parents farm had they continued with monoculture. He felt that the entrapment, debt, and health issues many contract farmers’ children witness as they are growing up contribute to young people’s view of farming as a demoralizing way of life. Four of the six young adults interviewed in this study returned to Mae Ta to farm or to work for the agriculture cooperative. Yet a young women who recently returned explained that she would have come back to live at home and take care of her brother’s children even if her parents had not adopted organic agriculture. Two others who did return to farm noted that some young people come back even when their parents grow baby corn, and while more youth have begun to come back since the organic network was created, not all of those who return do so to work for the cooperative. How then can we make sense of these nuanced changes?

Young collaborators explained that their views of Mae Ta began to shift on a deeper level as they both experienced life in the city and watched their community change. Pi F, a young man who studied at a university in Chiang Mai, explained,

> It’s good to go to the city and learn about [technology and diversity] because it’s a big world, and then you can learn—like the way to learn is not limit—you can keep learning more and more. And even though I choose to live in Mae Ta in the simple way of life, there is something more for me to learn. So I think that ok it’s good that ok we go to the city and we know the same as the people in the city and we also know about the life here.

Initially ashamed of being from Mae Ta, Pi F now emphasizes that there is just as much to learn from life in Mae Ta as in the city. He speaks eagerly about equality and about knowing one’s culture and community. Pi D expressed a similar change in his view of Mae Ta and explained that this shift was a result of both personal growth through his experiences in Lamphun and because “Mae Ta is getting more developed.” But what did he mean by “more
developed”? Is organic simply one thread of a larger story of social change occurring in Mae Ta that is drawing youth back and shifting perspectives on farming and development?

This young adult returned to Mae Ta to volunteer with the sub-district government’s efforts to bring youth from different villages within Mae Ta together and reduce animosity between gangs of youth from different villages. He moved back home before his family converted to organic, and it was his persistent urging and promise of support that finally convinced them to abandon contract farming. All but one of the young adults interviewed are involved in leading the cooperative or local government projects, or coordinating events for the recently-created umbrella institute for sustainable development in Mae Ta. They are currently engaged in the development of Mae Ta, each clearly aware and proud of their role in redefining the future of their community.

6.5 ENVISIONING AN ALTERNATIVE MODERNITY

Agency involves the capacity to act according to one’s own will and to pursue a self-defined future. What is the vision Mae Ta farmers have for their future, and how does organic fit into their understanding of what is necessary for a healthy community? When asked to define a healthy community, five organic farmers felt that consumption of good food is most critical. While two collaborators expressed that an ideal healthy community would be one in which everyone farms organically, most pointed out that not everyone will or can become organic farmers. Paw B, an organic farmer, explained his understanding of a healthy community as an ideal toward which organic has begun to move the community:

Now the villagers eat good food and the villager who is successful with the organic crops teaches or maybe exchanges ideas with another villager. So many people turn to farm the organic crops, and then even though it’s not everyone but some people (conventional farmers) still grow the organic vegetables and consume in their family.
Of greater concern than the number of organic farmers—and a more significant measure of success—are access of both conventional and organic farmers to safe and healthy food, reduced chemical use among all farmers, a clean environment, and a strong community.

Interestingly the most commonly expressed definition of a healthy community was one in which members treated each other as family and worked together, characteristics that were also overwhelmingly dominant in collaborators’ discussions of what distinguishes Mae Ta from other villages. Their emphasis on the importance of depending on one another exemplifies a community-oriented conceptualization of self-sufficiency and autonomy that seems to have similarly driven the organic movements studied by Getz (2008), Leutchford and Pratt (2011), and Van der Ploeg (2008). Pi F argued, “Everybody doesn’t have to farm the organic crops, but everybody should help each other.” He explained that those who own dairy cows can provide manure to organic farmers, and, in fact, without any dairy farms, organic farmers would have to buy inputs from “outside.” Farmers can grow baby corn and still get safe vegetables within Mae Ta. “So for me it is about the sustainable agriculture or the community that’s like—everything runs in the community; we don’t have to depend outside. […] If everybody in Mae Ta is happy, so that is good enough for the community that they are happy—that they don’t harm anyone.” This emphasis on mutual dependency and community autonomy reflects Scott’s (1976) concepts of the norm of reciprocity and right to subsistence that serve as cornerstones of the peasant moral economy.

Paw I—who grows both organic and conventional baby corn—expressed that in a healthy community, “People in the community should be in harmony, love each other, and help each other. And they should try to cooperate and help the community to be better—to develop the community. They should see the importance of the community and not be
selfish.” The term “development” was used by a number of other collaborators in discussing their vision for the future of Mae Ta. But what exactly do they mean by this term? What role does organic play in the development of Mae Ta? Interestingly, agriculture was at the center of most collaborators’ definitions of development, and many recognized that conception this runs counter to the hegemonic narrative of an urban- and industry-centered modernity. Paw A explained:

Many people might think that when they live in the city they have a better life because it’s developed, but that is not true because in the city you have to… you worry about many things: like, Do you have money today? Do you have food for your family? Or if you live in the city, is it safe for your family? […] But here it’s safe and you have everything.

For Paw A, while life in the city is considered “developed,” he associates it with stress and insecurity. Speaking to contract farmers at an event in a nearby district, one collaborator argued:

The strong thing about Thai people is culture and tradition. When foreigners came to Thailand they saw Thai people as lazy and thought they threw up blood [because they chewed beetle-nuts]. They thought their country could not be developed—could not have prosperity. If Thailand wanted to be developed, they needed the developed plants. The government stimulated people to change the way they farm and they have to grow what the government says.

He pointed to the U.S., Japan, and the Philippines and asked his audience if they really want a community in which their children eat poorly, lack knowledge of local food, depend on money, and put their parents in nursing homes. He challenged his audience to flip the development narrative and recognize the importance of food and the value of a sufficiency economy way of life, one that embodies the wisdom of their ancestors and the heart of Thai culture. This collaborator was invoking a moral economy grounded in the cultural and historical traditions of their community and their norms of social rights (Scott 1976).
Pi F, who studied art at a university in Chiang Mai before returning to Mae Ta to help his parents on their organic farm, discussed the issue of development. He argued,

[Young people] don’t have to farm the same way as their parents do. We don’t have to do everything the same as our parents, but we can apply and adapt what can benefit us or our community, right? […] Now everything is changing, and maybe in the future Mae Ta will have a 7/11 or maybe—who knows, […] because now the world changes, right? And we cannot stop it, but we have to learn and study, and with our community try to save the good things in our community and make it balanced with the things that will come in the community [from outside].

He shared a vision for greater equality between all people, regardless of their education level or occupation, and for recognition that every person is an expert in their own trade, none more valuable or developed than any other. Many collaborators noted that with the changes in agriculture in Mae Ta, more people are coming to value their community and take pride in their way of life as a positive example of alternative development. Both organic and conventional farmers expressed hopes that Mae Ta will continue to be a leader for positive development.

Organic cultivation provides the opportunity to re-center sufficiency-based agriculture in the development of their community. In fact, when asked to explain their definition of organic many collaborators placed emphasis not on chemical use, but on self-sufficiency. Paw B, an organic farmer among the first to transition, explained:

Organic means that you can use any material or anything in the local area applied in the crops or agriculture. And it’s also related to food security—it’s the food security that’s important to the family. It’s not only the economics, but it means that you have food for yourself and your family, and you don’t have to buy because you grow everything by yourself, and you have freedom because you don’t have to work for anyone. No one puts pressure on you and you don’t have to follow any middleman’s schedule.

Organic is defined not as a set of regulations or as an end in itself, but as a means of gaining autonomy. Paw B began his definition of organic with the criterion that inputs are sourced
from the local community. He later went on to say, “It’s good for the community as well because they can help each other. They can buy the manure from the dairy farm, and then the dairy farm can buy the vegetables from them. So it’s kind of like helping and depending on each other in the community.” Paw B emphasized not only individual autonomy, but also increased cooperation and self-sufficiency as a community, both critical components of social sustainability.

Another organic farmer, Paw H, argued that organic agriculture provides safe food not only to those who produce it, but all who consume it as well, illustrating the community-oriented perspective of organic farmers. He explained, “I think organic means good food and it’s safe for everyone who consumes it. And there is a variety of vegetables that people can grow.” Here this collaborator links food, health, and the autonomy and security provided by polyculture. Others also define organic based on its health benefits for individuals, emphasizing the importance of “good food” and a clean environment. Inquiries into farmers’ conceptions of health also revealed a relationship between autonomy and health. Paw L, a conventional baby corn farmer, explained that a healthy person is one who is “happy and not stressed—one who lives without debt and is not stressed.” Thus stress and food link autonomy to individuals’ physiological health, which is inextricably tied to the wellbeing of the community.
Chapter Seven:
Conclusion

After I left Mae Ta in October 2011 having studying there for two weeks with ISDSI, a set of memories kept floating to the front of my mind and sweeping me with nostalgia and unanswered questions. They were not memories of landscapes or architecture or farm visits, but of meals. I remember arriving at the simple shelter at the site of one my host families’ vegetable gardens after planting teak tree saplings on sloped land they had formerly devoted to baby corn. My host mother pulls a bunch of bananas from a wood crate under the shelter, places it in a bowl, and tells me to sit and take a break. She turns on the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative’s radio station that plays traditional Thai music. Switching to sandals, she plucks a few hot peppers and the young shoots of a type of squash I had never seen before. She shows me how to prepare the shoots by stripping off the stringy fibers around the stem. She pounds the peppers in a mortar and adds them with the squash shoots and a small amount of pork to a pot of boiling water on the round clay grill on the ground. I cut up a pineapple from their upland fields. My host father is here now, and we sit down to eat. The food is simple and delicious. My host mother smiles as she comments on the freshness of the food; “we can just pick it and eat it right then,” she says. I ask if they have to teach customers in Chiang Mai how to cook these vegetables. She says that khon muang (Northern Thai people) know the vegetables, but other customers are khon Thai (Thai people) and have to ask what the vegetables are. She’ll tell them and say they are from Mae Ta, they are organic, and they can cook them in this or that way. Both she and my host father finish eating, but tell me to keep eating if the food is good. “Gin im,” they say, over and over. “Gin im.”
There is a slogan in Mae Ta composed of four concepts that capture community members’ vision for their community. The saying goes: “Gin im (eat until you are full), non un (sleep warm), huun dee (good health), ni mod (out of debt).” Paw A, an organic farmer and active leader of the movement, defined these concepts beyond the literal translation:

“‘Gin im’ means that you eat the food that is without chemicals. You have good food and you have good security.” He defines “non un” as a safe community free from crime. “‘Huun dee’ means that you have a good environment, good air quality, and good health.” Finally if one is “ni mod,” one is free from debt, the key to which he argues lies in farming in a simple way without chemical inputs or machines. Community members coined this mission statement at the conception of Mae Ta’s umbrella Institute for Resource Development and Sustainable Agriculture. I heard it referenced on several occasions throughout my interviews, and it caught my attention again at the conclusion of a day-long community meeting in which the sub-district headman who—after presenting a report on the status of various initiatives within the community—said:

We want to contribute to waste management, renewable energy, city planning design, natural disaster protection, community principles, morals, and transparency as well. We hope that all leaders will help Mae Ta people’s dream come true and make Mae Ta to be a better place like our slogan.

This vision seems to be driving and integrating a whole range of projects and efforts within the community, emboldened by a conviction in a set of fundamental rights grounded in traditional culture—the moral economy of a peasant community (Scott 1976).

Eager to understand the driving forces behind the emergence of organic agriculture in Mae Ta, I approached this research with a primary inquiry into individuals’ expressed motivations for adopting organic practices. Yet this community fascinated me precisely because its full story could not be captured by a list of cost-benefit calculations focused on
the individual. If farmers who adopted organic were concerned exclusively with their own family’s well being, why does every organic farmer with whom I spoke devote significant time to assisting with training and extension efforts through the cooperative? If this movement is intrinsically and fundamentally about organic, why does the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative sell chemical fertilizer and animal feed? Why do those most invested in the organic movement seem to measure its success, not by the number of certified organic farmers, but by reduced chemical use among all farmers, the self-sufficiency of Mae Ta, and shifting perceptions of their community both within and outside of Mae Ta?

Collaborators’ observations on organic agriculture reveal a community focus at the core of the movement. They discuss the impact of organic practices on cooperation and self-sufficiency of the community. The adoption of organic polyculture is not simply about individual escape from the constraints of contract farming, but also liberating the community of Mae Ta to define and pursue an alternative modernity, a goal McMichael (2008) argues is at the core of peasant mobilization for food sovereignty. Polyculture provides an alternative to export-oriented and industrialized agriculture in Thailand—a “new kind of resistance” to agribusiness characterized by goal-oriented action and alternative production (Van der Ploeg 2008).

Recall that Farmer (2005) posits that inequalities in economic, political, and social structures commit structural violence against individuals by constraining their agency. These larger forces shape individuals’ lives and are manifested in experiences of poor health. McMichael’s theoretical work on food sovereignty focuses on a different form of violence—that of the global neoliberal “food regime” against modern peasants. This right to define one’s own food and agricultural system is central to the peasantry’s current struggle for
autonomy and becomes a means for pursuing a larger political vision that challenges the neoliberal global structure (McMichael 2008). In this sense the adoption of certified organic production in Mae Ta is a means of gaining autonomy in pursuit of the right to food and to health. Farmers in Mae Ta have been “mobilized precisely because” their agency was constrained under contract farming (McMicheal 2008:219). Van der Ploeg (2008) proposes that the struggle for autonomy takes the form of changes in production practices that allow for self-management of resources, environmental sustainability, diversity, a restructuring of market relationships to maximize autonomy, and increased cooperation, all cornerstones of the organic polyculture system adopted by farmers in Mae Ta.

It is important to remember that the organic “Agriculture Network” is nested within the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative, which provides a variety of other forms of agricultural support as well as investment and loan opportunities under the mission statement: “Growing economy, cooperating for community development, and believing in sustainable agriculture.” The cooperative itself is nested within the Institute for Resource Development and Sustainable Agriculture, created a few years ago to improve coordination and communication between all community organizations, from women’s groups to the local hospital and schools. Figure 7.1 below is a rendition of a diagram included in a report from the sub-district government and sponsored by a Thai NGO that details the history of Mae Ta and current efforts in sustainable development. A scanned copy of the original diagram in Thai can be viewed in Appendix B. This diagram illustrates the structure of various institutions and organizations in Mae Ta. This institutional organization places organic polyculture within a larger agenda for community development, discussed in community meetings held every two months by the institute.
Figure 7.1: Diagram of community structure in Mae Ta as it was depicted in a local report. The organic network exists within the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative.
Sixty-five community members gathered in the Buddhist temple at the center of Mae Ta during the first week of my fieldwork. For seven hours they listened and responded to reports from leaders and representatives from various groups ranging from the organic network and health outreach volunteers to representatives from the local schools and the resource management group pushing for community land titles from the Forestry Department. Among many other projects discussed, a representative of the youth group reported on their efforts to bring together youth from different villages and a recent commitment to pass on an appreciation for Mae Ta’s history and ancestral wisdom. This curriculum has also been integrated into instruction in local schools in the last two years.

Weeks after the community meeting, I participated in a cultural event in which elders taught young adults to prepare local foods and make traditional handicrafts—the first event of what the institute intends will be a permanent program. This sample of the multitude of efforts occurring in Mae Ta suggests that organic agriculture is one—albeit significant—dimension of a much larger movement towards environmental, economic, and social sustainability.

This research has only just begun to make sense of the complexity of social change occurring in Mae Ta, and further investigation at both the macro and micro levels is needed. A broader analysis of the intricate structure of social institutions in Mae Ta would assist in more reliably placing organic agriculture within this larger narrative. Such research, as well as a scaled-up investigation of farmers’ motivations for adopting organic that would allow for improved reliability and generalizability, would require a significant expansion of the number of participants and period of fieldwork. Since my research was geographically limited to two villages within the Mae Ta sub-district, the inclusion of collaborators from all seven villages would also be an important endeavor of further research. A stronger ability to
read Thai would allow one to better utilize the wealth of information available in reports, brochures and publications produced by the local government, cooperative, and institute, as well as a stronger literature review that includes studies published in Thai.

Opportunities for further investigation exist at on a deeper micro-level as well. For example, time constraints and the scope of this study did not allow me to fully understand the health concerns of collaborators. What exactly did collaborators mean when they spoke of the presence of chemicals in their blood? How do the de-toxifying remedies prescribed by ancestors, neighbors, and doctors function biologically and culturally? What are the physiological mechanisms and cultural understandings of the health issues they describe? These lingering questions, along with many others, merit further study.

Of all of the reasons driving the rise of organic agriculture, none is more pervasive than control over the food one consumes, produces, and shares with others. Food is at the center of health, family, community, and the sharing and teaching of local culture, all critical components of social sustainability. “Gin im” is the first concept of the institute’s mission statement, and it is the phrase I heard more than any other throughout my time in Mae Ta. Villagers greet each other with the question, “Have you eaten yet?” followed closely by: “What did you eat?” Nearly every time I met a community member, the first question I was asked was whether I could eat nam prick, a spicy northern Thai dish made of crushed chili peppers and often tadpoles or tiny crabs gathered from the paddy fields. Each day in Mae Ta began with a large morning meal, and work in the field was always interrupted for a lunch shared by all of the neighbors and family members present. Everyone gathered around the food on the floor and reached over each other with each bite to dip sticky rice into various dishes. What pulled me to Mae Ta was fascination with the pride in my host parents’ and
siblings’ voices as they explained that everything we were eating had been harvested from their garden or gathered from the forest and flooded rice paddies. “Gin im,” they said over and over. “Gin im.”
Appendix A—Collaborator cohorts

Table 5.1: Chart of collaborators and sample populations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exclusively Organic Polyculture Farmers (Eight collaborators)</th>
<th>Conventional Farmers (Four collaborators)</th>
<th>Young Adults under 33 years old (Six collaborators)</th>
<th>Hospital Staff (One Collaborator)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Four farmers who transitioned to organic over 10 years ago (Paw A, Paw B, Mae C, and Paw D)</td>
<td>Four recently (past 3 years) transitioned organic farmers (Mae E, Mae F, Mae G, Paw H)</td>
<td>Two farmers who grow both organic and conventional crops (Paw I and Paw J)</td>
<td>Institute Coordinator (Pi A)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Two contract farmers who grow only baby corn for market (Mae K and Paw L)</td>
<td>NGO employee (Pi B)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Employee of sub-district government (Pi D)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>CSA project leader (Pi E)</td>
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<td>Youth group and CSA project leader (Pi F)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Former industry worker (Pi G)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(Mae M)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B—Copy of the original diagram illustrating the structural social capital of Mae Ta from a local community report in Thai
Appendix C—Transcript of Oral Consent

Each formal interview began with the following explanation:

I am a student from the College of Wooster in the U.S. I am in Mae Ta to do research about community members’ motivations for adopting organic agriculture and the impact of organic on the community. This research will be used to write my senior thesis for my university. I will speak in English and Pi Am will translate so that I can understand what you say.

If it is ok, I would like to record the interview so that I do not have to write down everything Pi Am says right now. No one besides Pi Am and myself will hear this recording and your name will not be associated with the information that you give. I will not use your name or share anything that could be used to identify you in any way. Would it be ok if I record this interview?

If you do not want to answer a question you do not have to; and if you have any questions for me feel free to ask anytime. When you answer questions I would appreciate it if you could pause frequently so that Pi Am can translate. You can then continue and I will wait to ask the next question until you are finished answering. Is this all ok? Do you have any questions at this point?

(For collaborator I was not certain I would encounter frequently, I gave them my phone number in an envelope after the interview and told them to call if they had any questions or anything else they wanted to tell me)
Appendix D—Interview Guides

INTERVIEWS WITH ORGANIC FARMERS

Story of transition
- I understand that you are a member of the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative. How long ago did you join the cooperative? How long have you been farming organically?
- Can you tell me about what led to your decision to farm organically?
  - What did you grow before that? Why?
  - What company did you work for?
  - Can you tell me about what it was like to work for that company/work with the middleman?
  - What price did you get for the _____?
  - Where did you get your seed, fertilizer, or other inputs?
    - How did you pay for these? Did you have any issues with debt when you grew _____?
    - Did you use any pesticides or herbicides as well?
- Now that you are a member of the cooperative, how are your farming practices different?
  - What do you grow now and why do you grow those crops?
  - Of the plants you grow, which ones are organic, where are they grown, and for what purpose? (Only in the garden?, Is your rice organic?, Are cash crops organic or just vegetables for your own consumption?)
  - Where do you get your seed? Why?
  - What do you do to keep your plants healthy and free from disease and insects?
  - (If they use any chemicals or natural pesticides or fertilizers or animal traps), what are they specifically and where do you get them?
  - How do you pay for these inputs (compost, pesticide, etc)? Any issues with debt?
- How did you first learn about organic agriculture?
- How did you feel when you first decided to make the transition?
  - Were you worried about anything?
- What did others think of your decision to farm organically? Has this changed at all over time?
- Can you explain what “insee” (organic) means to you?
- What do you think of the changes/new practices?
- What do you like about the co-op? What would you like to change about the co-op?

Health and self-determination
- How would you define a healthy person?
- Could you describe what you think a healthy family is? What contributes to a healthy family?
- I know you mentioned _____ as a major reason for making the changes in the way you farmed. To what extent (how much and in what ways) was health a factor in motivating you to start farming organically?
- You’ve talked about _____ but are there any other ways that farming monocrops affected your health or your family’s health?
• Has your family’s health changed at all since you started farming organically? In what ways?
  (build off of what they emphasize here… the order of the following sections will depend on how they respond to this question)

Section A: chemicals
Exposure to toxic agrochemicals:
• Did you use many chemicals when you grew _____? Can you tell me about that?
• What chemicals did you use?
• From whom did you learn about the benefits of the chemicals?
• From whom did you learn how to use them/how to protect yourself?
• What affect did using the chemicals have on you?
  o (If they talk about getting sick…) What do you mean by “sick”?
  o What symptoms? How long did they last? What did you do about it? (What are the most accessible health care options?)
  o How do you know this was caused by the chemicals?
• What affect has the use of chemicals on farms had on your community?
  o Have you had environmental problems with chemicals? How has this affected your community’s health?
  o Any financial problems?

Section B: family security
Food security:
• Are the foods you eat now different from what you used to eat before you started farming organically? In what ways? Where do these foods come from? How is this different from before you started farming organically?
  o Have these changes affected your family’s health in any way?
• How does the amount of money you have now compare to when you grew (baby corn)?
  o Why is that? (Are you getting larger yields? Are you able to sell the crops at a higher price? Is it because of whom you are able to sell your vegetables to? Do you not have to pay as much for inputs?)
• Have you ever worried about not having enough food?
• What is your main source of income now?
• What are your main expenses now and how are they different from before? Do you have enough money to pay for them?
• Do you own the land that you farm on? Do you share it with anyone? How much land do you own? What kind of land titles do you have? Have you ever worried about losing your land?

Section C: Community health and identity
• What does it mean to have a healthy community?
  (if they start talking about water quality or community economic stability, etc. pursue that thread and then transition to community cohesion and identity)
• What is your religion? Does this have any affect on the way you farm? Is this religious identity strong in your community? Has this changed at all over time?
• What language(s) do you speak? When/where did you learn these languages and when do you use them?
• To what ethnic group does your family/did your ancestors belong?
• How do you think your community and your culture are different from other villages in Northern Thailand? What are the advantages and disadvantages of residing in this community?
• What is your community’s relationship with the government like?
• How do you feel you were treated by (the company)?
  o What were the benefits?
  o What was unfair about it?
• Are you involved in any other groups in Mae Ta?
• How do you think Mae Ta has changed over the course of your life? Why?
• How do you think this organic movement has affected your community?
  o How have relationships between people in the village changed since the cooperative was created?
    ▪ Are there still tensions between organic and conventional farmers?
    ▪ How much and in what ways do you interact with others in your village? Has this changed since the coop was created?
    ▪ In what ways do people share ideas or knowledge about farming? Has this changed since the Co-op was created?
• Do many young people leave the village? Why? Has this changed at all since people started farming organically? Why do you think this is?
• How have these changes in agriculture affected the way you feel about your community? (Do you feel more or less proud of your community since the co-op was created?)
• Do you think that the way people in the city view your community has changed at all because of this movement? What about the way the government views your community?
• What do you hope for your community in the future?
INTERVIEWS WITH CONVENTIONAL FARMERS

• Can you tell me a little bit about your farm?
  o What do you grow? Why do you grow those crops?
    ▪ How many types of plants do you grow?
    ▪ How do you grow these crops? (all monoculture? Relay cropping? Plant together?)
    ▪ How long have you been growing these crops?
  o To whom do you sell your crops? What is it like to work for this company?
    ▪ What price does the company offer? Are you happy with this price?

• Do you own the land you farm? What kind of land title do you have? Is any of the land you farm on owned by the community or the state? Do you share your land with anyone else? How long has your family owned or farmed this land? Have you ever worried about losing this land?

• Where do you get your seed?

• Do you have to use fertilizers and pesticides? Why?

• Where do you get these inputs?
  o How do you pay for them? Any problems with debt?
  o Who taught you how to use them and how to protect yourself? Do you follow these instructions? Why/why not?
  o How does using these chemicals affect you?
    ▪ (If they talk about sickness…) What do you mean by “sick”?
    ▪ How do you know it was caused by the chemicals?
    ▪ What about environmental impacts? Do these affect the health of your community?

• Where do you get most of the food your family eats? How much of it do you grow on your farm?

• What are your family’s main expenses?

• Do you feel that you make enough money to support your family?
  o What is the main expense that you have to pay? (do you have enough money to pay for this?)

• Do you worry about having enough food?

• A number of people (in this village) have changed the way they farm and adopted organic farming. What are your thoughts about that?

• Are you a member of the cooperative?

• Why did you decide not to switch to growing organic vegetables?
  o (if they are happy with the way they farm now…) What are the benefits of growing (baby corn) for (the company)?
  o Is there anything you do not like about being a contract farmer for this company? What? What is most challenging about farming conventionally (gan gaset pua usahagam- commercial/industrial?"
  o (If they say that they would like to switch but feel that they can’t…) Why would you like to grow organic vegetables if you could?
  o What are the obstacles to making a transition to farming organically?
  o How do you think making such a transition would affect your family’s security? (cash, food, health, family cohesion)

• Describe what you think a healthy family is.
• Has growing (baby corn) for (the company) had any impact on your health or your family’s health?
• What does it mean to have a healthy community?
  (if they start talking about water quality or community economic stability, etc. pursue that thread and then transition to community cohesion and identity)
• What is your religion? Does this have any affect on the way you farm? Is this religion important in your community? In what way? Has this changed at all over time?
• What language(s) do you speak? What tribe are your ancestors from?
• Where did you go to school? To what grade?
• Do you think Mae Ta is different from other communities? What are the advantages or disadvantages of living in this community?
• How do you feel that Mae Ta is treated by the baby corn companies?
• Has Mae Ta changed over the course of your life?
• How do you think the fact that some farmers have transitioned to growing organic crops has affected you?
• How do you think it has affected your community as a whole?
  o Do many young people leave (this village)? Why? Has this changed at all over time (pre-contract farming vs. contract farming; pre-co-op vs. co-op)? Why do you think this is?
  o Have these changes in agriculture affected the way you feel about your community?
• What do you hope for your community in the future?
INTERVIEWS WITH YOUNG ADULTS

• How old are you?
• Can you tell me about the work that you do now?
• Do you or your family grow organic vegetables? What changes have you made in the way farm? Were you involved in this decision at all? Why did you or your family feel that this was important?
• To what grade did you study in school?
  o Where did you go to school?
  o When you went to school in Mae Ta what did they encourage students to want to do with their lives?
  o What did you like about the schools in Mae Ta? Is there anything you wish were different?
  o Was the school free or did you pay tuition? How much? Were there other expenses (room and board, uniforms, books, food, etc)? How did you/your family pay for it?
  o Why did you/your parents feel it was important to go to school? What are the benefits of going to school?
  o How do you think going to this school has affected the way you view your community and culture? Has it affected your decision about your work?
• Have you worked outside of (the village)? Tell me about that.
  o Why or why not?
  o What was it like to work there?
  o Did you send any money back home?
  o Did many of your peers leave Mae Ta for work or school? Why? Has this changed at all over time?
• (If they did worked or went to school in the city but came back to Mae Ta), why did you decide to come back to (the village)?
• Has your view of Mae Ta changed since you were growing up? Why? Have these changes in farming practices affected your view of Mae Ta?
• Do you think they have affected the way people in the city or the government views your community?
• What other groups or projects are you involved with in Mae Ta? Are you involved with the cooperative at all?
  o How did you first get involved?
• What do you think a healthy family is?
• What does it mean to have healthy community?
• What do you hope for your community in the future?
• What do you plan to do in the future?
INTERVIEW WITH HOSPITAL STAFF MEMBER

• What is your job at the hospital?
• How long have you worked there?
• Can you tell me a bit about the history of the hospital? How long has it been a hospital? What was it before that?
• What services does it offer?
• Are there always doctors there? Where are the doctors and nurses from?
• Why did you decide to work at the hospital?
• Do you have other work as well?
• From your experience, what are the biggest health issues in Mae Ta?
• Have you seen any difference between the health effects of work on a monocrop farm vs. an organic farm?
• Is there any education or training about using chemicals or eating vegetables that were grown conventionally?
• Are there any other types of trainings?
• Can you explain the health volunteers program?
• Have you or has anyone at the hospital been involved with the cooperative or with the organic movement?
• Has the hospital been involved in any of the activities or trainings that the cooperative does?
• Do you think the fact that some people have switched to organic has had any impact on the health of the community? Why?
• Could you tell me what your definition or your understanding of a healthy person is?
• And what about a healthy community?
• Is there any way that you feel that Mae Ta is different from other communities in the area?
• What do you hope for Mae Ta in the future?
• Do you think that the cooperative has had any impact on whether young people come back to Mae Ta? Why?
• Can you tell me a little bit about your farm and what inputs you use?
Appendix E—Selected Photographs from Fieldwork in Mae Ta

View of rice fields from the road less than a mile from the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative

A stalk of baby corn silhouetted against the ridges surrounding Mae Ta
One collaborator's polyculture garden. (Photograph taken by Dr. Matt Mariola)

Organic vegetable beds in full sun and under shade cloth on land without individual permanent land title
Squash plants growing across an arched terrace over chili peppers and insect-repelling flowers

An example of a “garden house” constructed at collaborators’ gardens where I occasionally conducted interviews
An early morning at JJ Market, an organic market where many Mae Ta farmers sell their vegetables.

Vegetables (most of them native to northern Thailand) and prepared foods laid out over banana leaves on a table at JJ Market.
The photograph above of green mustard wrapped in banana leaves and tied with bamboo illustrates the care with which my host mother prepared her vegetables for market, treating them as a form of art.

The main building of the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture Cooperative
Meeting area at the Mae Ta Sustainable Agriculture cooperative

A community meeting organized by the Institute for Resource Development and Sustainable Agriculture a Buddhist temple in Mae Ta
Reception area at the small hospital in Mae Ta

Examination room at the hospital in Mae Ta
A cultural event in which I participated during my fieldwork. Elders in the community taught youth to cook local food and make local handicrafts displayed below. This event was part of a new initiative to teach young people in the community about local history and culture.
Women in Mae Ta planting rice seedlings in paddy fields during the last week of my fieldwork.

Dinner in Mae Ta: gathered on the floor around homegrown or gathered food laid out on a woven mat.
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