

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## The Transformation from Opium Poppy to Arabica Coffee Bean growing in Northern Thailand – a triumph for Public Policy, Entrepreneurship or Market Forces?

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers the transformation from opium poppy cash cropping in Northern Thailand to sustainable Arabica coffee bean farming. It reports on an empirical study of Akha ethnic farmers from the Chiang Rai area of the infamous Golden Triangle. The study's research questions asked of individual farmer's motivations to transition to Arabica and why they continue with Arabica production? Maybe that question is simply answered by enhanced income. Parts of Northern Thailand have excellent terroir for production of quality Arabica bean. However, factors have been involved that were neither commercial nor natural in origin. These were political factors. A God-King championed movement away from opium poppy cultivation. A philosophy of the Sufficiency Economy was developed and mobilised, giving a general development path for Thailand and one consistent with its Buddhist majority religion which could undergird planning and planting specifics. A political, military and judicial apparatus was operationalised to the same end, sometimes violently with forced resettlement of tribal minority peoples, and opium poppy cultivation was made illegal. In this mix it became reasonable to consider what part entrepreneurship has played in the rise of Northern Thai Arabica production. Ultimately the research pointed to straightforward market forces being the preponderant element in farmers' moves toward Arabica production and why they have stayed with Arabica production. However, farmers have not only considered current income but also longer-term sustainability of the business and, thereby, their ability to remain at their present location. Strong repudiation of the traditional Akha semi-nomadic lifestyle was an important finding of this study. Self-help, community action, has begun to find a role in the sustainability of a static lifestyle

**Keywords:** Akha, Arabica, coffee, community action, minority peoples, Northern Thailand, sufficiency economy, Thailand

## Introduction

Both main types of coffee bean are grown in Thailand, Arabica and Robusta. Arabica growing is associated with high elevations in Northern Thailand, where the terrain is often mountainous, climate cool and crop values high. Robusta growing occurs in the less temperate South of Thailand. Robusta is a low value crop concentrated in the provinces of Chumphon, Ranong, Surat Thani, Phang

Na, Krabi and Nakhon Si Thammarat. Figure 1 below is, a map of the Thai provinces. This study considers Chiang Rai province, but other arabica producing provinces in the North of Thailand include Chiang Mai, Mae Hong Son, Lamphun, Lampang, Phayao, Nan and Tak.

Historically the mountain areas of Northern Thailand were associated with opium poppy growing as the local cash crop. This meant slash and burn agricultural



Figure 1. Map of the Provinces of Thailand.  
Source: [d-maps.com](http://d-maps.com) (permitted use)

practice, swiddening. Unfortunately, swiddening is both environmentally harmful and of relatively low economic value against more sustainable agricultural practices in agroforestry (Rahman et al., 2017). Forest clearing is environmentally detrimental in many ways. A prime example is that tropical forests, through deforestation and forest degradation, are now a net carbon source

rather than carbon sink (Baccini et al., 2017). Soil erosion and landslides is another major issue. ("Soil Erosion and Its Effects", 2012). Nutrient depletion also occurs (e.g., Schuck et al., 2002).

Agriculture constantly debates how to persuade farmers away from slash and burn toward sustainable agricultural

practice, including in forest environments (e.g., Faminow & Klein, 2010). That may not only involve change in agricultural practice but even socio-cultural practices and structures, especially where the change implies moving away from semi-nomadic lives. The Akha in Thailand have achieved the last and this research showed them embedded with staying put, increased income the likely attraction and provider of the new stability. Farmer family migration has, mostly, been out of need to pursue increased family income (Kussumo et al., 2023).

Among early concerns of a solidifying Thai State was transitioning away from opium poppy growing. The Royal Project was born in 1969. King Rama IX offered effectively a mission statement at Chiang Mai University Faculty of Agriculture that year. It covered:

1. Humanitarianism in that people in remote areas should become self-supporting and prosperous.
2. That the problem of heroin would be tackled.
3. That the issue of slash and burn agriculture would be tackled.

In fact, much was achieved in practical terms speedily, particularly in agricultural transition training which began to be offered from 1970. The project gained pace through the 1970s and early 1980s. Between 1985 and 2015 opium poppy cultivation in Thailand fell by 97% (Gongsakdi, n.d.). Successes for development projects led the Royal Projects to spawn the Highland Research and Development Institute and a much geographically expanded programme with extended issues remit within Thailand. The Institute is publicly funded.

Looking specifically at transition to Arabica coffee bean production that was as an outcome of King Rama IX visiting Ban Nong Lom, Doi Ithanon in Chiang Mai Province in 1974. The King was shown coffee plants and given coffee beans. These plants showed that coffee plants could survive in this terroir (essentially climate, altitude and soil conditions) so cultivation might be possible. The Royal Project Foundation became involved, tested and started by distributing seed to ten Karen tribe villages on Doi Ithanon (Jaryasombat, 2017). How the plants were in the forest remains a mystery, but the project expanded from that, perhaps distribution of small plants becoming more usual.

## **Literature Review**

Reviewing literature for this study, was to build understanding for the study's empirical work. It was

largely historical to understand the position highland farmers, and their minority groups, now find themselves in.

King Rama IX championed transformation to self-reliant, sustainable farming and away from slash and burn agricultural practice from the 1950s. By the 1970s he had come close to developing a full Philosophy of the Sufficiency Economy. Basic propositions of the Philosophy were presented publicly at Kasetsart University in 1974. In 1994, the King presented The New Theory ("The New Theory") a very detailed development of the Sufficiency Economy, a road map to implementing the Sufficiency Economy on farm and in village, down to specific land use ratios. In the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997 King Rama IX spoke again to remind of the basic tenets of the Sufficiency Economy, which seemed to have been set aside in recent years. Even the Supreme Council of Theravada Buddhism had "raised concerns about the growing materialism of the working class" (Von Feigenblatt et al., 2021).

Basic tenets of the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy are only threefold, Moderation, Reasonableness and Self-Immunity. Moderation simply involves avoiding excess, getting the balance right, maybe neither consuming nor producing too much ("Philosophy of Self Sufficiency Economy"). Reasonableness extols careful decision-making, with a full appreciation of outcomes. The implication is developing knowledge and applying it. Self-Immunity is often taken to mean resilience. At the time of the Asian financial crisis King Rama IX argued that "shocks" are inevitable, and you must take responsibly, preparing to cope with challenges. The Sufficiency Economy Philosophy is infused with Theravada Buddhist concepts such as "moderation" and the "middle way" assert Von Feigenblatt et al., (2021). Song (2020) argues similarly, offering that a central concern of Buddhist Dharma is taking a middle path between the extremes on a spectrum.

Perhaps even more important is the Von Feigenblatt et al., (2021) contention that Theravada Buddhism is at the core of Thailand's national identity. Truthfully, this is along with the Monarchy. Both have high levels of authority in Thailand.

Jory (2017) holds that the Monarchy is built on Theravada Buddhist foundations. It has been argued that a cult of personality was built around King Rama IX (Connors, 2007). De Rooij (2015) spoke of Rama IX as a revered man and, holding considerable power and influence among the people.

The relevance here lies in the general proposition about Thai behaviour as submissive to superiors (Komin, 2007) and generally unassertive as a strong cultural value (e.g., Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1997). Would the farmers simply do as they were told, uncritical of what they were being told to do, rather than being active and participative stakeholders? Here though it must be remembered (Tungittiplakorn, 1995) that many Thai highlanders are not Buddhist which could have meant indifference to the Sufficiency Economy Philosophy or hostility to it as a product of lowland Thai Buddhism.

In fact, it has been suggested that farmers' involvement in agricultural transition projects was not always whole-hearted, with them tactically offering impressions of involvement (Gilligly, 2008). Rossi (2012) quotes extensively from a personal communication from Mr A, in Santisuk district who spoke of farmers joining projects while funds were available but were otherwise at best indifferent but often resentful of experts from Bangkok telling them what to do. Both urban administrators and NGO workers could be regarded as unwelcome in the villages (Rossi, 2012).

It appears that there were failures in engaging local society, the system very much "top-down". Recently local action and capacity building has been more locally owned, local organisations, stakeholders, coming together around such issues as farmer training, including attracting newcomers to Arabica production. An example in Chiang Rai Province is the involvement of such organisations as Ethnic Community Coffee Institute, Life Centre Foundation and Doi Chang Agricultural Agency. Firdaus, et al., (2021) see stakeholder agency as critical as a driver in community capacity building.

Setting aside these negatives, increases in farm income with the move to Arabica are a simple objective indicator. Unfortunately, precise figures are hard to come upon, mountain farmers not the best for recording data or even having the equipment to record data. However, Meesaeng (n.d.) has reported for a Chiang Rai village, Pangkhon, covering average annual farming household incomes. In 2002 these were THB5,000 (US\$160.17), in 2012 THB167,046 (US\$5,351.12) and in 2020 THB280,000 (US\$8,967.47). These figures must be treated with caution in that it is not known what might have been earned from non-farming activity or what of farming income is attributable to Arabica. Nonetheless the figures are indicative. Indications from farmers on rising farm incomes with Arabica in this study were quite staggering. Figures for Vietnam reported by Azavedo (2021) are similarly remarkable.

That is important, but similarly pressure to conform to monarchical desires and to effective tenets of the Buddhist religion. While Rossi (2012) and Gilligly (2008) offer detail negatives, arguably the larger point lies in overall attitude of the farmers, whether they were passionate about coffee production and moving to it, passion often taken as a prime indicator of entrepreneurial character and entrepreneurship, with the elements of creativity and innovation following on. Many farmer attitudes and behaviours seem unaligned with notions of entrepreneurship as a story of passion, energy, drive and spirit (e.g., Cardon et al., 2005 and Bird, 1989). It could be that lethargic acceptance was often the most active emotion and resentment was also in the mix. Worth remembering is that there has been historic enmity between Highlands and Lowlands in Thailand and flash points have been water resources and agricultural practice. This point has been covered by Tungittiplakorn (1995). Moving on, creativity has to be questioned if creativity derives from passion (e.g., Pringle, 2019).

A more balanced approach considers personal character traits of the individual but also other individual factors and considers externalities. Historically the concentration has been on personal character traits of the creative. For instance, Nakano and Wechsler (2018) suggest a number of possibilities, including tolerance toward different ideas, curiosity, autonomy, self-confidence, imagination, motivation and persistence. However, for example EstradaCruz et al., (2019) see the entrepreneur's social identity and cultural factors as particularly important.

In considering farmers in the two villages surveyed for this study the concentration was on individual characteristics of the farmers but inevitably externalities came into play, especially given that the survey locations are small closely-knit and somewhat isolated village communities, farmers advising and supporting each other in developing their businesses.

Amabile (1988) described creativity as the most important determining factor in innovation. Observation in this study would monitor for the Hasi and Rekonen (2018) range of characteristics of innovative people. One farmer was strong on continuous reflection and unattached exploration. Interestingly though he is very new to the agricultural industry.

## Methodology

The research questions in this study were:

1. Why did some small farmers in the Chiang Rai area enter Arabica coffee production?
2. Why do those farmers continue in Arabica coffee production?

In explanation please note the generalised approach of the author informing this study. Following Dewey (Riga, 2020) the author is concerned with solving lived problems, albeit both lived now and in the recent, so contributory, past. If mobilising lived experience was a cornerstone focus then hermeneutic phenomenology (Ramsook, 2018) guided in all aspects of the qualitative data capture and analysis.

The research design for this study, outlining methods of data collection and analysis, is in table 1 below:

**Table 1.** Research Design

Data Collection	Data Analysis
Informal Discussion	Thematic Content Analysis
Formal semi-structured interviews	
Observation	

Selection of participants was particularly guided by their having relevant life experience, albeit to varying degrees. They were instrumental in offering rich case study detail “bottom” up (Braun et al., 2018). For the formal interviews a translator was available to help record and relay that detail. Researcher intention was reporting descriptions as faithfully as possible to the raw data, including much direct quotation, letting the farmers speak for themselves as best practicable. No hypotheses were offered by the researcher. Plenty of time was offered for the farmers to speak their mind, perhaps even diverge from the question somewhat. It would be wrong, though, to overly concentrate on the formal interviews. Observation and informal discussion, about the villages, was aided by the researcher staying in the villages engaging with the local people, for instance through evening socialising in lengthy sessions over coffee. These informalities particularly aided understanding around sustainability and community action, lively topics of debate in the communities.

Participants were Arabica coffee farmers mostly from two small Arabica coffee villages in Chiang Rai Province, both villages Akha minority villages. Two participants were from other close by Chiang Rai Arabica-producing villages. All villages in the area are Akha minority villages and all participants were Akha people. There was a high degree of homogeneity in the sample through their specific ethnic minority heritage, but there were other

elements too, such as similar gender and age. However, to avoid an overly homogenous sample care was taken that participants were at different stages in their Arabica farming from one who had not yet had a commercial harvest to one who transitioned direct from heroin poppy to Arabica many years ago.

There was also a small amount of quantitative data captured from the farmers and subsequently analysed, albeit only descriptive statistics. This data was purely demographic and, importantly, only gathered from those who were formally interviewed. There were ten farmer participants, nine men and one woman, in the formal interviews. For the two-thirds of participants who gave age range was 33-64, mean age 49.67 and median age 48.5. These were not young people but were still moving between different cropping and even different agriculture types or having just entered agriculture. They sought best solutions, agriculturally and economically, for their home area. These were family people, not footloose young entrepreneurs, even the new recruits to agriculture.

## Analysis

### Formal Interview

The method now used to report the interactions with farmers in formal interview is to take the basic structure of the interviews and present in questionnaire format. It must be noted that this is purely a presentational device for this paper. The farmers were involved in semi-structured qualitative interviews with translator (Akhanese, Thai and English) present throughout. Farmers responses are presented, including in direct speech report, and analysed for the reader. Pertinent background information is also offered to aid understanding. In some cases, questions actually asked have been combined for brevity.

Questioning throughout was open-ended with little exception, following the ethnographic approach and aimed to spur on wide thought and contribution from life experience to suggest themes that would be noted and elaborated through thematic content analysis.

The participant farmers are listed in table 2 below overleaf and short biography of each provided:

#### 1) What did you farm before now?

There were three outliers here in those two farmers had not previously been involved in agriculture, having

**Table 2.** Farmer participants in formal qualitative interviews (Song Ksue & Mae Can Luang)

Farmer	Gender	Age	Biography
A	Male	49	His family converted land directly from opium poppy to Arabica. Now he has a strong sense of marketing and wishes to market outside of Thailand. Is very aware of alternative income streams to Arabica, for instance high-earning macadamia cropping
B	Male	-	Started in the area planting peach and cherry. He talked of bear survival before Arabica and is now talking about diversifying risk through tea growing as well. Tea is another high-value crop.
C	Male	42	Is new to farming. He left a well-paid city job and reckons to earn 20% of his previous income. In Arabica his interest is to pursue quality improvement for higher income. He is a leader in his village (Song Ksue) and in the coffee industry of the wider area.
D	Male	33	He is the second generation of the family farm. Unusually for the area his growing previously included rice.
E	Male	48	He is new to Arabica growing and has not had a commercial harvest yet. He is very focused on learning, especially learning from experienced Arabica farmers in the locality.
F	Male	64	Unusually for the area he has been involved in raising cattle for meat and has recently transitioned to Arabica growing.
G	Male	-	Was involved in peach and cherry growing but has transitioned to Arabica growing. Interestingly he tried Robusta coffee varietal growing but it was a failure because of the high altitude and attendant cold climate. Very concerned about the future of his family.
H	Male	-	Was involved in peach, cherry and corn growing but has transitioned to Arabica growing. He is now interested in co-operative action and involved in co-operative marketing of Arabica bean. Interested in strong improvement in his Arabica to enable marketing internationally.
I	Male	-	Was involved in peach and cherry growing but has transitioned to Arabica growing. He is interested in multi-cropping to extend the seasons in the year.
J	Female	62	A newcomer to farming. She has started with Arabica production very much in interaction with the local Government Agent.

recently come to farming and one had been involved in raising cattle for meat. Otherwise, the farmers had been involved in fruit-growing (that was mostly a succession crop to heroin). Important here is that in recent years cherries had become essentially valueless so a push factor in transitioning to Arabica bean growing. One farmer mentioned cutting down peach and cherry to grow Arabica (farmer H), but residual cherry trees can represent good shading for growth of Arabica.

**2) Why do you farm Arabica coffee bean?**

There were two main themes in participants’ answers, income-related and concerning the terroir (the complete natural environment in the producing area, including factors such as the soil, topography, and climate). Soil, altitude and climate make Northern Thailand a wonderful Arabica-growing environment: “Arabica is good for that area” (farmer A), “Altitude good. Soil good too – black” (farmer G), “Altitude, soil, Doi Chang as a successful model” (farmer H), “Altitude, and soil connected to price” (farmer I).

The last comment reaches to the core issue, that good terroir produces coffee beans saleable for a good price: “I saw other people planting and making good money” (farmer E), “To increase income and have a better life” (farmer B).

One farmer mentioned that cherries are now unsaleable and another mentioned poor fruiting from peach and cherry trees. These were both push factors as opposed to the pull factors mentioned so far.

There were also some outliers, one mentioning the taste notes and texture of Arabica, another saying “cows are hard work” (farmer F). Finally, came an outlier that the researcher regards as honest and important: “Government suggested so I bought 6000 plants” (farmer J).

**3) Has farming Arabica coffee bean improved your income?** (Combined with question)

**4) Any idea of what % increase in your income?**

Six of the ten participants reported increased income, substantially increased income. Two of the farmers reported income increased by 80%. Another reported a 60% increase but stressed that his life was much easier than before, previously survival eating and worrying about school fees for his children. Of those not reporting increased income one had only just entered farming from a well-paid city job and another had only recently transitioned to Arabica and had not had a commercially saleable crop. One participant said that her plants were “still not yielding” (farmer J). She was selling, but little

and of low quality as yet. Finally, one participant withheld comment. Worthy of note is that the very high figures are borne out by another research study covering transition to Arabica growing in Chiang Rai Province (Meesaeng, 2022).

### **5) Do you plant other crops?**

All farmer participants plant other crops as well as Arabica. Examples were cherry, mango, lemongrass, limes, pineapple, banana, macadamia, avocado, and durian. It is difficult to comment as motives are often mixed. In some cases, the presence will be mainly for income, others mainly for shade. Cherry is highly likely to be a residual presence for shade. Macadamia is excellent for both shade and high income. One farmer also mentioned he pursues macadamia because it is a very good fit with a brand he is developing (farmer A), so a personal motive. Some plants mentioned simply do not contribute to shade, but nevertheless contribute to biodiversity as well as income.

### **6) Do you interplant some other crops with coffee?** (Combined with question)

### **7) If you interplant, what are the other crops?**

Six participant farmers reported that they interplant, four reporting that they do not interplant. Crops mentioned by those who do interplant were mango, pineapple, durian, banana, avocado and tea. As can be seen from the crops this was often not true inter-planting but variants such as row-end planting, yet biodiversity is still increased and there can be biological control functions against parasites and weeds (van Driesche et al., 2008).

### **8) Do you plant the coffee plants under shade?**

Nine of the ten farmer participants reported growing under shade, the tenth having removed his cherry trees. Interestingly, two farmers reported growing in the shade of the mountain rather than the usual tree shading. One farmer reported having edge-planted bamboo to help the mountain in its shading task.

Advantages of shade growing are exemplified by Bote and Struik (2011), Muschler (2001) and Alemu (2015). In summary shaded growing protects against high soil temperatures and low relative humidity. There is improved photosynthesis and increased leaf area index. Shade grown plants produce larger and heavier fruits of better bean quality (Muschler, 2001). Muschler (2001) shows that while large beans (diameter > 6.7

mm) accounted for 43% of the coffee from unshaded Catimor varietal plants this increased to 72% under dense permanent shade. Also growing under shade may allow the farmer other sources of income. The farmers in this study, for example, reported macadamia and avocado.

The shaded coffee plantation is more biodiverse than non-shaded, contributing to biodiversity and sustainability of the local environment (Alemu, 2015). Shaded plantations shelter a range of birds and other wildlife, often predators of pests. Longer-term maintenance of coffee yields is aided as is the longevity of the coffee plants. The latter simply die back more slowly.

Overall shade planting has enabled higher weight yields of higher quality beans so higher income to the farmer than from direct sunlight planting. The farmers are doing well in keeping informed of and actioning latest agricultural practice to generate higher income. An additional benefit is for all in that, in emulating a natural forest environment, a biodiverse, sustainable, habitat rich in wildlife is created.

### **9) How do you sell your Arabica coffee beans?**

Answers were varied, but a pattern seems to be emerging around collective farmer action involving 50% of the farmer participants. Types of groups varied but in essence these were mostly informal social enterprises. The alternative seemed to be the farmer extending his or her business along the supply chain. One participant roasts, sells online and at coffee events (farmer A). Another participant roasts and sells, mainly as beverages, in his own coffee shop (farmer C).

At its simplest maximum commercial benefit is skewed toward the consumer end of the value chain, so roasters and retailers (MacGregor et al., 2017).

### **10) Do you sell only green coffee beans or do you add value by for instance roasting and selling roasted beans/?**

This refers to incrementally moving along the supply chain but often the problem is access to finance to add elements to the business ("RISK AND FINANCE", 2015 and Gyllensten, 2022). A farmer might start roasting and that could ultimately be farmer, roaster and coffee shop owner. One farmer in the study covers all three elements (farmer C).

Another covers roasting and selling personally, such as at coffee events. Yet another farmer roasts and sells at

events and online (farmer A). This farmer also sells non-coffee items, such as macadamia, thereby making further use of his roasting equipment. A final farmer sells green bean and roasted bean but also sells un-processed coffee cherries (farmer H). Six of the participant farmers supply only as green bean.

### 11) What are your plans for the future for the farm?

There were quite a few different answers, but one major theme showed, mentioned by three participant farmers, which was to improve quality. "Greater care so the beans sell – move to quality" (farmer J). "Growing coffee bean to a higher standard, because high quality means good price" (farmer C). "To raise bean quality to go international, to increase income" (farmer H).

The quality turn (Goodman, 2003) has many potential meanings in reference to alternative agro-food networks. Goodman (2003) offers a simple set of indicators of the turn to quality concerning movement away from mass production of heavily standardised product to a less "industrialised world" less concerned with the highly processed and uniform and more concerned for locality, localised availabilities and localised traditions embedded in small scale of operation, perhaps focused in hand crafting. Artisanal speciality coffee is an example.

The Speciality Coffee Association introduced cupping scores. These range from 0 to 100, and only coffees scoring 80 points or above receive the "specialty coffee" epithet. Commercial-grade coffee scores anywhere from 60 to 80. A number of variables are covered, for instance flavour, aroma, taste, after-taste, acidity, body and balance. These attributes determine the value of the bean, along with mainly country of origin. Price determination is complex (Traore et al., 2018). Farmers manipulate the variables to get a high price.

One farmer wished to process and roast his beans, then open a coffee shop (farmer D), so gain incremental earnings at more points along the supply chain. Another farmer wished to introduce multi-cropping to multiply his cropping seasons (farmer I), and so raise income. One farmer was thinking of selling through franchising, selling at upscale locations and exporting (farmer A). He was particularly interested in exporting to Singapore, where sales would be high value. He was looking to increase per customer spend.

The researcher was surprised that only one farmer said "grow more and learn from others" (farmer E). Learning from others had often been mentioned in informal

discussion in the village and could be seen through observation. Another farmer wished to diversify by adding tea-growing (farmer B) to be less dependent on only the Arabica as a high-earning crop.

There were two outliers. One farmer simply said "I don't think about the future" (farmer F). The other became emotional and was difficult to understand. He would do whatever it takes to support his children staying on the farm (farmer G). That said he realised that educated people could help to grow a farm and that they can come back because of family. He was very openly running through his insecurities.

### *Informal Discussion*

The researcher was staying in one of the two research villages, Mae Can Luang. Informal discussion was mostly there, though also happened limitedly in Song Ksue by day. The Mae Can Luang discussion was over dinner and, more particularly over prolonged coffee-taking into the night. These late discussions were serious and focused on two issues, business development and sustainability. The atmosphere was socially amicable but also purposeful, advising each other and taking decisions either as a group or as ones and twos. Simple coffee tasting also had a role, meaning tasting the produce of different farmers. Spoken language was Thai and a translator was available to help the researcher understand where necessary, though many in the village spoke English and were happy to help. Topics might be such issues as water use and conservation. Group size was always around eight people, sometimes larger as people came and went. The group was male, the women retiring to another room (as is the Akha way), where their discussion was more sociable. Nonetheless on occasion a woman would join the men.

### *Observation*

Observation took place in both Song Ksue and Mae Can Luang, perhaps more Song Ksue in the daylight hours. The purpose of observation was largely to see social dynamics, the interactions about the village, their nature and content, but not content detail. What was apparent was that villagers were living co-operatively not competitively. Villagers clearly got on well but there was relatively little informal or humorous interaction. Interaction seemed to be very much task-orientated, specifically coffee-related. Farmers were helping each other with information and advice and also in physical labour, the latter in maybe ones and twos. There will, no

doubt, be group action, including physical labour say at harvest time, but not when the researcher was about the villages.

### **Thematic Content Analysis**

Thematic Content Analysis was now undertaken using data gathered through all of the techniques mentioned, that is formal semi-structured qualitative interviews, informal discussion and observation about the two villages, Song Ksue and Mae Can Luang. As an approach thematic analysis seeks to cut across data searching for patterns and themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The researcher regards thematic content analysis as a superior analytic tool in that it considers both latent and manifest content in data, in plain English digs deeper in locating the expression of their lived experience articulated by participants, is less superficial and is less captivated by simple regard for frequency. The researcher would argue that Thematic Analysis, in finding deeper truths, is particularly true to the phenomenological proposition of elevating participants' expression of their life experience. This was easily seen in the current study an example being that whereas participants elevated maximising income it transpired they had a rider to that in that no relocation was to be involved. In Thailand that is particularly interesting in that so many do internally migrate, for instance from Isaan to Bangkok, to maximise income. The researcher found Akha participants very unkeen on their children making movements that are completely normalised elsewhere.

The Discussion section below expands upon the study's findings through Thematic Content Analysis as a main basis of discussion. A thematic flow is developed.

### **Discussion**

When farmer participants were interviewed there were straightforward questions such as around income and longer-term commitment to Arabica growing. Other questions, particularly on farming technique, were looking for agricultural understanding, actions and plans that would be enablers of longer-term sustainability. The researcher was not satisfied with simple yes/no type answers on commitment to the business and its sustainability.

Coincidentally these plans would sustain the local forest environment beyond individual farms. The implication here is that subsequently when the thematic content

analysis was undertaken a number of themes would arise directly out of the questions asked at interview, for instance around income and sustainability. However, throughout the farmers themselves were suggesting new themes or at least sub-themes. Farmers brought up the collapse of the fruit industry and a trading theme developed, covering not just Arabica but the crops that went before its post-heroin poppy

Undertaking Thematic Content Analysis of data gathered it came as no surprise that income is a main theme. However, an element that came out of interviewing is that there is conditionality to maximising income. The participants only maximise income within the context of being static at their current location, an important discovery relative to recently semi-nomadic tribespeople.

The locational theme feeds into a sustainability theme. If the farmers are committed to the area this is the opposite of semi-nomadic swidden farming of slash, burn, crop and move-on. There comes a commitment to longer term sustainability, its crops and agricultural techniques. To the extent that the Thai authorities, Governmental and Monarchical, have been concerned with agricultural sustainability and broader sustainability of rural life since the 1950s inevitably there is a political theme:

### **Income**

Inevitably the very high-income increases reported in this and other studies (e.g., Meesaeng, n.d.) with the transition to Arabica growing capture the eye. However, some farmers were as eager to talk about the demise of the fruit, particularly cherry, industry that immediately preceded Arabica.

### **Location**

If location of family home and of family members have become fixed that represents a substantial limiting factor on family income of the farming families. Note here that there was worry about children moving away even for short periods and contributing to family income from afar. Static location seems, at this juncture, to have become a cultural given, semi-nomadic living something of the past. All this said Akha rights in Thailand can still be limited, including that those children of stateless workers who were born in Thailand often remain stateless themselves, limiting work and travel options, and ability to buy land. Access to education and welfare benefits will also be limited (e.g., Chandran, 2020).

### **Trading Conditions**

Whatever the farmer grows his/her income is the outcome of the traded value on the day of trade and that is changeable. Cherries have become effectively worthless. Arabica coffee prices are buoyant. The question arises of what of the future and what, thereby, of new planting? There may be several seasons of fallow before commercial crop yields are produced. Unproductive land is a drag on income. Farmers seem to pay ever more attention to the income yield from shade planting. Macadamia is trading well and can add very substantially to farm income. Similarly, avocado is lucrative shade planting. Some farmers simply want to diversify, not be over-dependent on Arabica. One participant in this study mentioned moving to some tea.

### **Sustainability**

Sustainability has multiple reference points. It can mean sustainability of the Arabica-producing environment of a farm. It can mean sustainability of the local environment in a general sense. It can mean sustainability of the farmer's business as distinct from only sustainability of his farm. There are, of course, touch points between all of these.

Farmer's agricultural practice has been a major focus. Examples are numerous. For instance, does farm practice minimise soil depletion and maximise the ongoing nutrient status of the soil? (e.g., Cruz et al., 1999, Amponsah-Doku et al., 2022). The example of shade growing was indicated in the interview questions. Another simple example is water conservation. If the bean is wet processed huge amounts of water are used, which is wasteful but additionally untreated effluents create pollution of local watercourses. For the Bolaven Plateau of Laos ("Sustainable participatory water") it is mentioned that 23 million litres of effluents are involved per year. For Vietnam Nguyen and Sarker (2018) report decreasing coffee bean quality amid growing sustainability issues of soil erosion and insufficient water supply.

Ultimately the aim is to produce a high-quality crop for maximum sales price, but not just for today but also going forward. Perhaps what has gone under-reported is farmer attitude. Attitude toward good agricultural practice is only part of that and similarly farmer environmental commitment but what of the farmers' attitude toward excellence? Bermeo-Andrade et al., (2022) see that very much in terms of farmer attitude toward their integration

into the international supply chain of high value-added speciality coffees (Bermeo-Andrade et al., 2022).

In terms of the general local environment positive adoption of contemporary agricultural practices will cause the local environment to improve, displaying and through increased biodiversity. Essentially, the diverse forest environment of complementary flora and fauna is being recreated (Udawatta et al., 2019).

Separating the family business from the farm, sustainability of the business can be easily considered, especially its contribution to the overall family enterprise. Farmers and farming families often seemed adept at monitoring this. Typical thoughts are of moving along the coffee supply chain to roasting, coffee shop ownership, supplying other coffee shops, selling bean online, etc.

### **Political Environment**

The Akha were the last migrant tribal people to arrive in Thailand, in their case from Yunnan in South-Western China, though often after time spent in Burma. The Akha arrived stateless, which had little meaning at that time. Thailand in the 1950s was an easy-going place and specifically a place where migratory peoples could deliberately choose "disconnectedness" (Heering, 2013) from the then loose Thai State. Remote, unreachable, mountain environments became their home, as at other points in their journey from South-Western China. Specifically, forests were their home and swidden agriculture their means to a living, with the latter focused in heroin poppy cultivation. The position of the hill-tribes was physically on Siamese soil but neither as subjects of the King nor treated as though actually present (Shu, 2013).

This position started to change toward greater interventionism. Solid policy development began in the early 1960s, but particularly from 1969. Concern for conditions among the hill-tribes was now an issue, but whether welfarist or politically inclined is the question in that the Communist Party of Thailand was gaining traction among the hill-tribes, the "Red Meo Rebellion" of 1967 a major focus (Yangcheepsutjarit, 2019). The Royal Project began in 1969.

Policy developed to the point that in 1976 the Thai Government introduced the aim to integrate hill tribes within the Thai nation, this in a land of deepest prejudice unaddressed (Baffie, 1989) and with an extreme love of bureaucracy. Heering (2013) judged intentions in

assimilation a failure, that there was no gain, socially or economically through assimilation policy. Clearly the Thai Government disagreed or conveniently publicised virtues not difficult truths still regularly encountered by Akha and other tribespeople. Buadeng (2006) outlines how Government saw the hill-tribe problem by 2002 as solved, the hill tribes well-integrated, given the problems defined as opium poppy production and susceptibility to the communist message. If there were further problems these were seen as social welfare, seemingly in the generalised sense resultant from poverty and marginalisation, hence placement with the Ministry for Labour and Social Welfare thenceforward.

The problem appears to be that was never true. There are still issues for instance for Akha, in integrating with a lowland-dominated Thai State, most clearly shown (for culturally is another matter) by bureaucratic difficulties, on-the-day difficulties of simply not having the documents that bureaucracy demands. For example, Akha parents often lack documents to prove their child was born in Thailand, so the child is left stateless. Many Akha remain stateless, their freedom of movement, their job prospects and ability to own land title curtailed (e.g., Chandran, 2020). It might even be suggested that many Akha, as other highland people, may have converted to Christianity as an act of protest against the Thai State (Salemink, 2009).

As late as 2022 it was argued that the stateless population living in Thailand, especially along the border of Thailand and Myanmar, are treated as invisible (Kitchanapaibul et al., 2022). The authors' writing was particularly concerned with access to healthcare but participant comments also covered access to education and jobs and a general feeling of worthlessness. Effectively they argued that without a Thai ID card they had no future. Relating to business these stateless people cannot buy land in Thailand or register a business.

The question becomes in a still relatively difficult environment how much individual Akha people are poisoned in their relationship with the State of Thailand, protest it, suffer it, comply or work flexibly to navigate it as best possible. McKinnon talks of highlanders finding new ways to fit with the hegemony of the nation-state, discovering navigability (Mc Kinnon, 2005). Akha seem to exhibit remarkable flexibility, if, likely, age-dependent. Wu (2022) speaks of a young Akha participant in her primary research who felt her Akhanness derived from blood and all else was situationally dependent. Tooker (2004) very much talks about conceptual space and lived reality, whereby compartmentalisation is perfectly

acceptable between everyday life on the one hand and an "ethnic" component for special occasions and some social situations. Kammerer (1989) argues that flexibility is critical to Akha group survival.

## **Conclusions**

For understanding business development in the villages, the researcher's informal observation was highly important, for instance accentuating something that came over only very limitedly in formal interview, farmers relying on each other for advice.

Small talk, more formal talk with each other and the formal interviews converged at the point of income. It was by far the most important variable in the farmers' minds. However, at no point across any of those did a sense of grabbing come over, more sufficiency economy rather than naked capitalism or passionate entrepreneurship. Whether the sufficiency economy philosophy or Tharavada Buddhism was being bought into in some way is a moot point. Moderation seemed a key, yet these are overwhelmingly Christian villages. Maybe the point was something made clear earlier in this article, that all business efforts are bounded by and find their *raison d'être* in farmers and their families staying put at their current location. If this is entrepreneurialism, even in the grandest projects, for instance touristic enterprises, it is an entrepreneurialism aimed at staying still sustainably. Moving away is simply unthinkable, whatever bounty that might bring.

Future researchers should consider whether Western notions of entrepreneurialism, based on the individual, conceived in highly atomised societies, are simply inapplicable. The researcher felt that some of the developmental aspects of entrepreneurial activity were held as community wisdom, wisdom of the village, not considered as individual property of a particular "entrepreneur".

This research project was highly targeted, focused on two small villages at the heart of the Chiang Rai Arabica planting area. The results must not be generalised or considered transferable. Future researchers might consider other villages or village clusters in Chiang Rai Province, might research in other relevant provinces such as Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son and perhaps above all work with different tribal groups that might prove attitudinally different from Akha people or simply have different growing or other experiences, for instance with Thai bureaucracy.

An aspect that future research must consider as fixed is timing of data-gathering. The Arabica growing and harvesting year is much the same across all Northern Thai Arabica growing areas and there is also not much year-to-year variation. This study was designed to fit into a lull in the farmers' yearly cycle. Weather is characterised by rain storms and flooding. Those must be anticipated in planning.

The aim of this study was to confirm:

1. Why did some small farmers in the Chiang Rai area enter Arabica coffee production?
2. Why do those farmers continue in Arabica coffee production?

The answers this study found were that farmers entered Arabica coffee production to enhance income and that they continue in Arabica for its high income, but those positions have an eye to sustainability. That would normally be taken to simply mean sustainability of the business, but the participants in this research had a further view that would mean sustainability at their present location. They are not passionate, footloose entrepreneurs wishing to chase maximum returns. These conclusions equally applied to the absolute newcomers to farming. State bureaucracy was essentially irrelevant, though free plants, etc along the way were most acceptable. However, the driving force behind this lengthy transition away from opium poppy and to Arabica coffee production was market forces. Fruit prices had collapsed, especially cherry, and Arabica prices were buoyant. A newer element, which the farmers were clearly attracted to, is farming community self-help organisation.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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