

Patterns of Work Organisation In a Situation of Agricultural Transition

Robert G. Cooper

PATTERNS OF WORK ORGANIZATION IN A SITUATION OF AGRICULTURAL TRANSITION

Their Implications for Development Plans in Hmong Opium
Producing Villages in Northern Thailand

ROBERT G. COOPER

INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 0511
Republic of Singapore

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The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies

Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Pasir Panjang
Singapore 0511. Republic of Singapore

Tel: 7758111
Cable: ISEAS

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AGRICULTURAL TRANSITION

PREFACE

Through a typological analysis of work organization among the Hmong, this paper examines the social relations engendered, reinforced, and transformed through changing processes of agricultural production. The analysis advances the work on Hmong economy carried out earlier by Geddes and leads to a critique of the idea of a "hill tribe peasant economy" put forward by Edward Van Roy in his study *Economic Systems of Northern Thailand*. The paper concludes by considering the implications of the author's analysis to development plans in the area.

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Robert G. Cooper

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INTRODUCTION¹

At the time and place of fieldwork undertaken by Geddes (principally 1964-65 in Meto Village, Chiang Mai Province), upon which his book *Migrants of the Mountains*² is based, wage-labouring, irrigated rice, and large-scale cash crops other than opium were virtually unknown among the Hmong.³ It was, therefore, perfectly reasonable for Geddes to present a picture of a Hmong swidden economy geared to the production of two crops: opium and rice, with opium being dominant. Ten years after Geddes' main period of research, and in a different location⁴, I found a more complex economic situation among the Hmong. Activities relating to a shifting (swidden) economy co-existed with those relating to a "permanent" economy of irrigated rice terraces and alternative (to opium) cash crops. These work activities often involved the co-ordination of nonkin and, sometimes, non-Hmong.

The Hmong villages studied did not line up neatly into "shifting" and "fixed" socio-economies. Instead, these fundamental distinctions were often found to co-exist within a village and even within a single family. In order to analyze these distinctions in the economic base of Hmong society, this paper takes as its starting point the actually existing forms of work organization. Against the structural functionalism of these forms, I consider the different techniques of production found in the research area. I also consider to what extent a determinate technique lends itself to a specific relationship between producers and to what extent these relations of production correspond to the sets of social relations ascribed by the kinship structure.

1 I wish to thank John McKinnon for the helpful comments he made on a draft of this paper.

2 W.R. Geddes, *Migrants of the Mountains: The Cultural Ecology of the Blue Miao (Hmong Njua) of Thailand* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

3 In most of the literature, the Hmong are referred to by use of the Thai and Chinese term "Meo" or "Miao". Many Hmong now object to the use of this term which could have pejorative origins although it is not necessarily used pejoratively by non-Hmong. Respecting the wishes of those Hmong of Northern Thailand with whom I lived between Autumn 1973 and Spring 1975, I have used their real name. Where the term "Meo" or "Miao" occurs in direct quotations, it has been retained.

4 The research area consisted of four unrelated villages: Pha Nok Kok, Pha Pu Chom and Huai Menao in Chiang Mai Province, and Khuu Sa in Mae Hong Son Province. Information on work organization acquired through in-depth study in these villages was further checked through interviews carried out on a random basis in four more Hmong villages: Mae Sa Mai, Nong Hoi, Doi Phu and Hua Kayo, all in Chiang Mai Province.

2 PATTERNS OF WORK ORGANIZATION

Five basic forms of work organization were distinguished which, for the purpose of analysis, are conceptualized as:

1. co-operation
2. direct paid labour
3. indirect paid labour
4. commercial labour
5. labour exchange

Each of these will now be discussed in detail.

CO-OPERATION

The term co-operation, in this study, is characterized by indirect reciprocity in labour contribution and/or consumption of the product of labour. No calculation of profit and loss is made and no direct (person-to-person) reciprocity is expected.

The voluntary aspect that characterizes work activities of the co-operation type among the Hmong is largely illusory. Command is replaced by social obligation supported by a Hmong ideology (that is, sets of norms, values and attitudes) that is learnt in childhood and is ultimately sanctioned by the authority of public opinion and the threat of ostracism. It would be impossible for any other system to ensure the correct implementation of indirect reciprocity. If A helps out at B's funeral, B cannot help out at A's. Internalization of Hmong ideology and, if necessary, the pressures of public opinion would have ensured that B attends, and helps out at, several funerals before his death.

Where co-operation does exist, it is rational. It would be impossible, or extremely wasteful of effort, for a man to calculate how much time and effort he spends clearing forest paths in order to ensure equality of labour input (assuming honesty on the part of contributors and the existence of some kind of centralized labour redistribution mechanism). Such co-operative acts as these need not be carried out by more than one person at any one time. Co-operation can, therefore, be the action of an individual in private. As such, it touches deep at the heart of Hmong personality. A man will cut down a branch of a tree crossing the path, rather than duck under it and leave the job for the next man, not because anybody will know if he does so but simply because he is Hmong.

Co-operation is evident in Hmong society at three levels:

- i. the village
 - ii. the family
 - iii. the lineage and clan
- i. Village level co-operation is limited to work that is the obvious province of no single family and where every family in the village is likely

to benefit from the work of all others. Such jobs are often regular daily routine tasks such as the clearing of paths, the cutting or reshaping of steps on steep ways, and the reparation of water conduits.⁵

Village level co-operation can also require the organization of all the village men to form a work force. This is an irregular and infrequent occurrence traditionally limited to help at funerals, the *Tzor Klang* (village protection) ceremony,⁶ and sometimes, the initial construction of paths and water conduits. (These are most likely to be constructed little by little, branches from the main paths and water conduit[s] being added by those who directly benefit from them.)

At Pha Nok Kok, I was able to witness two other examples of village level co-operation. One was the construction of a village rice store which would be initially stocked by the United Nations Programme for Drug Abuse Control (UNPDAC) and from which Hmong would borrow rice, through the headman, in time of need and to which (theoretically) they would repay the following year. This rice store had to be rebuilt since the first version had doors which were too small for the rice sacks, an unloading platform on the side that was unapproachable by a vehicle and a bamboo roof which the U.N. wished to have replaced by metal. The Hmong worked half-heartedly at this project, which hung around for days, since no one was really sure of its value. Another U.N. scheme to construct terraces near the village on which to grow alternative cash crops to opium as an example to the Hmong, received no interest at all until the villagers were each offered fourteen baht⁷ a day to do the work. On the other hand, a scheme to supply a system of regular piped water into the village was enthusiastically received and all the men turned out to lay permanent pipes from the stream to the village and each family contributed to the cost of the metal pipes. Except for funerals (which are directed by a clan member of the deceased), work tasks requiring co-operation of all, or a large section of a village are organized by the village headmen. *There is no village level co-operation in any agricultural process.*

ii. Co-operation is far more evident at the household level. Under the charge of the household head, all of the rice in the household store is

5 Many villages are served by a system of aquaducts made from large bamboos split lengthwise in half and laid end to end in a gutter fashion, the end nearest the water source simply overlapping the next section, thereby avoiding the necessity for joints. The system runs from a stream above the village and is propped up on poles four to five feet above the ground to allow men and animals to pass underneath. The channels require regular repair and unblocking and this is done by anybody who happens to be passing.

6 This ceremony is described in R.G. Cooper, "Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response: A Study of Settlement and Economy in Northern Thailand", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hull, 1976, pp. 83-84.

7 US\$1 is equivalent to 22.7 baht.

produced and consumed in co-operation by all kinsmen living within the house. Kinship is the ideal mechanism for ensuring eventual indirect reciprocity and no attempt is made to adjust redistribution of the product to conform to labour input. The ideal producer/consumer pattern of Hmong rice economy is characterized by the Marxist dictum of "from each according to his ability, to each according to need." Such an ideology ensures that the old are cared for by the young and provides a system of assurance against sickness of a participant. This framework of "primitive communism" does not extend beyond the household. With the establishment of his own *jay* (house/household), a son no longer participates in his father's rice production unit (although he may help out his aging parents).

Family-level indirect reciprocity is also evident in certain aspects of opium production. Almost every Hmong male will acquire an independent opium field soon after he is married. Whether he continues to live in his father's house or not, he and his wife will join the father's unmarried children of working age (above twelve to fourteen years old) to help work the father's opium fields. The father does not work for his son in return. Indirect reciprocity is assured in part by the division of the father's opium fields and silver collection after his death, but mainly by the fact that sons will one day have their own sons to work for them (assuming the continued production of opium). The agents of this indirect reciprocity are all men. (The position of women in the process of opium production is discussed below.) Where residence is patriuxorilocal,⁸ a man will usually work for his *yao jua* (wife's father) or send his wife to do this work. The social effect of co-operation between father and son is to provide a pension for the aged: a reward to look forward to, but which is only certain if a man has been diligent in life, has a large family, and has treated its members well.

iii. At a wider level, clan co-operation is exemplified by the norm of intervillage hospitality between clansmen. (This clan level hospitality can be extended to two households of different clans by implementation of the *yao jua* relationship formed through marriage.) This is indirect reciprocity in the consumption of the product of labour rather than work co-operation in the production process. A local clan (that is, clan members living within a single village) may help in a newcomer's house construction and, if absolutely necessary, the clearing of fields (the latter was not observed during

8 In the study area, 5 out of 87 households contained examples of this residence pattern. See R.G. Cooper, "The Yao Jua Relationship: Patterns of Affinal Alliance and Residence Among the Hmong of Northern Thailand," *Ethnology*, Vol. XVII, No. 2, April 1979, pp. 173-181.

the fieldwork period). It appears to be far more frequent, however, that such co-operative activity, when it does occur, is limited to lineage relations.⁹

It is necessary to point out here that the social structure of the Hmong village is not consistent in time and space. Thus, Yang Dao writes of the Hmong in Laos:

Hmong villages are made up entirely of houses whose inhabitants are often members of a single ancestral line or, at least, of a single clan . . .¹⁰

This village-lineage pattern of settlement does not exist in Thailand, although it probably did in the past. Having stated the above definition of a village, Yang Dao continues:

[T]he complete population of the village normally participates in the building of each new house destined for one of its members.¹¹

Thus it would appear that, in the past in Thailand and more recently in at least some areas of Laos, lineage co-operation and village co-operation were the same thing.

DIRECT PAID LABOUR

Paid labour exists in Hmong society to a greater or lesser extent in most, if not all, techniques of production. By direct paid labour is meant a system by which one man pays another man (or woman) an agreed sum of cash or opium in return for an output of labour measured in either time or quantity. It possesses the advantage of enlarging the available work unit for as long as desirable but no longer. This is necessary because periods of labour intensity vary throughout the agricultural year. The temporary use of additional labour during intensive periods (particularly for the clearing of swiddens and preparation of the soil before opium planting) ensures that

9 The kinship boundaries of major Hmong social categories are defined and analyzed in R.G. Cooper, "Unity and Division in Hmong Social Categories in Thailand," in Peter S.J. Chen and Hans Dieter Evers, eds., *Studies in ASEAN Sociology* (Singapore: Chopmen, 1978), pp. 297-320. For a more extensive coverage of White Hmong kinship, see the forthcoming work by Gary Yia Lee, *White Hmong Kinship Terminology and Structure*.

10 Yang Dao, *Les Hmong du Laos Face au Developpement* (Vientiane: Edition Siaosavath, 1975), p. 43.

11 Ibid., p. 45.

increased production will not be outweighed by increased consumption. It is dependent on the availability of wage labourers but there is little problem of labour supply at the moment. Paid labour can be seen as a solution to an unemployment problem for the many (mostly non-Hmong) landless peasants who roam the hills of Northern Thailand.

The employer-employee relationship characteristic of the paid labour system of work organization is closely associated with the opium sector of Hmong economy. Opium was the first Hmong cash crop and it is difficult to see by what means and for what reason labour could have been employed before the large-scale introduction of cash crop opium cultivation (which I would place at least fifty years in the past).¹² Opium cultivation involves many long and laborious processes of production — clearing fields, fine preparation of the ground with hoes, planting, harvesting and transportation of the maize that is grown with opium in the same swiddens, weeding — which are suitable jobs for day labourers since it is possible to establish clearly the amount of work undertaken and there is nothing to steal. Casual labour is rarely employed on the opium harvest because of the difficulty of discerning theft of the tapped opium.

Direct paid labour may be further classified into five main types:

- i. a convenience relationship between equals
- ii. Karen and Khon Muang (Northern Thai) "nowhere-men"
- iii. poor Hmong partially dependent on wealthy Hmong
- iv. Hmong employed outside of Hmong society
- v. specialist labour within Hmong society

These will now be considered in turn.

i. The employer-employee relationship can be temporary and semi-reciprocal in nature. One Hmong with free time may work for another in exchange for money without his existence depending on that money; roles may be reversed. This is an example of cash relations of production replacing indirect reciprocity in work areas which would normally be considered under *co-operation*. It is rare and I observed only one clear case. This was in Pha Nok Kok, where one man who had left the annual repairing of his roof later than most people was suddenly alarmed by gathering rain clouds. He paid a nonclansman fourteen baht for a day's work to help his family repair the roof. A few weeks later, the former "employee" decided to move his house a distance of twenty metres in spite of the possibility of rain (he moved because bad spirits had installed themselves in his house, causing the deaths of several chickens and two pigs). He employed his

12 I have reconstructed Hmong economic history in Part Two of R.G. Cooper, "Dynamic Tension: Symbiosis and Contradiction in Hmong Social Relations," in J. Clammer, ed., *The New Economic Anthropology* (London: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 138-175.

former "employer" for two days at fourteen baht a day to help in levelling the new site and moving some house timbers. At the same time, the house mover's brother and his brother's son assisted free of charge.

The significant fact in this example is that both "employers" stepped outside of the established mechanism for providing additional labour in an emergency situation. Both men had fellow clansmen in the village and could, presumably, have called on them to do the work for nothing. The indirect reciprocity ideal of co-operation is replaced in this instance by cash relations between nonkin. Payment is made because direct or indirect reciprocity is uncertain when nonkin are party to the agreement. The relationship existing between both parties to the transaction could be said to contain a large element of semi-reciprocity because both parties benefit and payment from an employer is not made with the intention of obtaining profit but to compensate for time that could be otherwise employed.

ii. The "nowhere-men"¹³ are to the hills of Northern Thailand what the wandering cowboys were to the ranchers and settlers of the early American West: landless itinerant labourers displaced from their own society by the system of land tenure and initial capital costs of entrepreneurial activity, travelling from place to place in search of work, living from day to day, possessing literally only the ragged clothes they stand up in, a long knife, sometimes an ancient flintlock musket, and, inevitably, an opium set. Nowhere-men are a necessary part of a system that has caused their ruin and maintains them in poverty. They make it possible for a household-entrepreneur to temporarily increase the size of his labour unit at peak labour periods, thereby maintaining a scale of activity that keeps his family in constant employment throughout the year and provides the opportunity for the production of surplus wealth.

The majority of nowhere-men are ethnic Karen, a lesser number are Khon Muang and very few are Hmong. These relative proportions are, in part, simply a reflection of the fact that the Karen form the largest tribal group in Northern Thailand. However, there are specifically economic reasons for the poverty and alienation of a section of the Karen tribe that are directly relevant to the study of social change among the Hmong.

The problem of resource scarcity affects Karen society at least as much as it does Hmong society. The initial Hmong response to this scarcity seems to have been to increase production of their opium cash crop in order to compensate for decreasing rice yields; the Karen response was to make more efficient use of land resources by irrigating rice fields, which usually meant constructing terraces. The majority of Karen villages in Thailand

13 This nomenclature was inspired by my assistant, Supote Chailanggar, under the influence of a pop song current at the time.

have long been producing irrigated rice but have little in the way of cash crops. There is a maximum population support limit in a permanent rice-growing economy just as there is in a shifting swidden economy. Karen society is experiencing this limit.

Landed/landless categories have long been present among the Karen. The categories have not resolved into full class divisions, probably because of the lack of cash crops which reduces the opportunity for the development of employer/employee relations of production. However, many Karen work for other Karen on a part-time basis to supplement their own rice crops. Those Karen without any farmland have usually had to look outside of Karen society for alternative means of subsistence.

The town of Mae Sariang has an urban population of 20,000 Karen out of a total population of 44,000. Karen also form a large proportion of the residents of Mae Hong Son. (This should not necessarily be regarded as a movement from the hills to the plains; many Karen villages have been situated in the lowlands since the villagers' arrival from Burma.) Some Karen look for work in Chiang Mai or even Bangkok. Others find employment in tea plantations, market gardens mines and Thai Government enterprises (road construction, etc.) in Northern Thailand. There are, therefore, a number of Karen who depend entirely on nonagricultural pursuits for their livelihood and maintain little, if any, social contact in Karen villages. *Working for the Hmong represents only one, comparatively small, source of income to the itinerant Karen.* Some Karen regard work away from their village as a temporary state of affairs and manage to return home once or twice a year, but the majority of those who work for the Hmong are confirmed drug addicts and nowhere-men in the full sense of the term — vagabonds of the hills for whom marriage or family life is impossible and who know there is no one to care for them when they are old or sick.

Every nowhere-man — Karen or Khon Muang — whom I met in Hmong villages smoked opium regularly. Most are paid in opium and received, on average, enough for two days' supply of opium in return for a full day's work. The addict prefers to be paid in opium, but Hmong employers often preferred to pay in cash (in 1974-75). This is because the price of opium is constantly increasing and it is difficult to cut wages paid in opium to correspond to market price. Following the opium harvest in January-February, when labourers are employed in clearing new swiddens, it is normal for payment to be in opium. By the period of the rice harvest in October-November, the price of opium will have risen greatly and payment is often in Thai baht.

When paid in cash, nowhere-men are sometimes paid less than Hmong workers. The average wage for a nowhere-man was seven to eight baht a day (see Table 1). Comparison between rates of pay for Hmong and non-

Table 1: Wages Paid for Work Done (1974-75)

Village	Ethnic identity of worker	Type of work	Wage/unit
Huai Menao	Karen	preparing opium fields	8 baht/day (b/d)
	Karen/Hmong	jobs in village	4 b/d
Pha Nok Kok	Hmong	preparing opium fields	14 b/d
	Karen	preparing opium fields	10 b/d
	Karen/Khon		
	Muang/Hmong	jobs in village	7 b/d
Khun Sa	Karen	rice harvest + "other work"	200 b/45 d
	Karen/Hmong	preparing opium fields	10 b/d
	Karen (one)	"general work" (semipermanent)	6 b/d
	Karen/Hmong	"general work"	7-8 b/d
	Hmong	transplanting	10 b/d
	Hmong	making terraces	7-8 b/d
	Hmong/Karen	ploughing	7 b/d
	Hmong	jobs in village	5 b/d
Pha Pu Chom	Hmong working for Thai	picking tea	12 b/d

Hmong is difficult since they are rarely employed on the same job at the same time. The difference is probably accounted for by the fact that non-Hmong usually live and eat with their employers. Hmong employers often say they prefer a piece-work system of payment because addicts vary in working capabilities, but in almost all of the cases witnessed, workers were paid on a day-to-day basis.

Karen and Khon Muang nowhere-men have been referred to in some of the literature on Northern Thailand as "opium slaves"; Keen describes them as "These hopeless individuals, 'opium slaves' as they are called, perform any menial task for the Meo, who hold them in contempt."¹⁴ They are characterized by Van Roy in the following way:

14 F.G.B. Keen, "The Meo of North-West Thailand: A Problem of Integration," M.A. dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington, 1966, p. 104.

In their search for the drug, addicts in the hills leave no stone unturned. Murder is not unknown. More frequently they resort to the sale of children and wives. When other avenues have been closed, addicts become attached on an occasional or permanent basis to wealthy households willing to use their labour in return for daily payment of a few pipefuls of the drug. In this manner, some wealthy households in remote districts gain command over a sizeable "unfree" labour force.¹⁵

It is true that nowhere-men may be slaves to opium but it is not true that the Hmong have any interest in creating addicts and maintaining slaves. The process of opium addiction can take years and would therefore be a very costly, and unnecessary, "investment". The advantage of paid labour to the Hmong employer lies in its temporary nature. This advantage would disappear if it were necessary to feed and provide with opium a slave throughout the year. Few Karen become in any way permanently attached to any one Hmong family; most make irregular circuits of several Hmong villages. Nobody forces itinerant labourers to work for the Hmong and, as we have seen, the majority work outside of Hmong society.¹⁶

Many Karen and Khon Muang opium addicts who work for cash outside of Hmong society buy opium on a regular basis from a Hmong supplier. Even in Chiang Mai town, opium is not difficult to obtain, although it is double the price. The many addicts that I met, walked with for days in remote forest regions and slept alongside at night, never exhibited the murderous desperation described by Van Roy above. On the contrary, they were, for the most part, gentle, quiet, kindly people. Without the employment opportunities provided by the Hmong, it is possible that a few may not have become addicts but it is far more likely that the majority would simply be driven into an environment where opium, or its far more dangerous derivative heroin (which is more frequently for sale in towns), is more expensive and where crime is more necessary to finance the drug habit.

I met only one addict — a Khon Muang who lived with his family at Pha Nok Kok — who was openly treated with contempt. This was certainly not because of his addiction or because he needed to work for

15 E. Van Roy, *Economic Systems of Northern Thailand: Structure and Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1971), p. 66.

16 In a survey conducted by Marlowe of 1,700 Karen families, 30% reported some wage labour. Of this 30%, 70% worked for other Karen, 38% worked for Thai and only 28% worked for Hmong. (Figures add up to more than 100% because some worked for employers from more than one ethnic group.) D.H. Marlowe, "Upland-Lowland Relationships: The case of the S'kaw Karen of Central Upland Western Chiang Mai," in P. Hinton, ed., *Tribesmen and Peasants* (Chiang Mai: Tribal Research Centre, 1969), p. 57. (Since Marlowe surveyed *families*, his figures may not accurately represent the proportion of Karen working for Hmong. If his survey was conducted only within Karen villages, it would include only those Karen retaining ties and probably some land, in those villages.)