



Tropentag, September 17-19, 2018, Ghent

“Global food security and food safety:
The role of universities”

Compromises, Risks and Obligations: Perception of Agrochemicals, Ideology and Health in Huai Phrom, Thailand

INGRID HØGH RASMUSSEN¹, MIGUEL RAMIREZ LOPEZ², HELENE FRIIS JOHANSEN², JEPPE
ALBREKTSSEN², Wafa BARTAWI²

¹*University of Copenhagen, Dept. of Anthropology, Denmark*

²*University of Copenhagen, Dept. of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, Denmark*

Abstract

Along with the Green Revolution in the 1960's, technological development and agrochemicals became key elements in the agricultural sector of Thailand. In the light of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, promotion of agrochemicals was replaced with the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej's ideas of Sufficiency Economy and New Theory Farming. Often described as ideological approaches to agriculture, these ideas built upon Buddhist principles such as self-restraint and balanced consumption, aiming at making Thailand's farmers self-sufficient and resilient towards market fluctuations and potential crises.

The aim of this research is to assess the underlying rationales of the agricultural practices in Huai Phrom, a small village located in the northeastern region of Thailand. Promoted as the sub-district's frontrunner village for practicing sufficiency economy, the dominant agricultural practice in Huai Phrom is characterised by home gardens used for subsistence agriculture, and fields used for cultivating cash crops. The use of agrochemicals constitutes the cardinal distinction between home garden and field, as villagers refrain from using them for their home gardens, while relying on them for the cultivation of fields. This dichotomous agricultural practice was found to derive from a coexisting dependency and dissociation from agrochemicals: Dependency on generating an income, and dissociation deriving from embedded narratives on their negative effects on soil and health. Consequently, circles of debt and economic realities are found to be the underlying rationale behind the willingness to risk health over income.

The research further finds that the monks and officials that are affiliated with Huai Phrom view the small-scale farmers as being morally obligated to contribute to the national economy and society, thus elevating their agricultural practice to having a higher purpose. Hence, the dichotomous agricultural practice is surrounded by an intricate web of contradictory ideas, narratives and discourses, which ultimately urges the villagers to orient their agricultural practice towards concern of society and individual livelihoods simultaneously. The villagers' concern of health, agrochemicals and notions on food safety is ultimately found to be a product of historical shifts in national policy-making, deriving from increasing international pressure to regard food security as a regional and global issue.

Keywords: Agrochemicals, cash crops, food safety, health, home garden, livelihoods, new theory farming, self-sufficiency, subsistence agriculture, sufficiency economy, Thailand