

**Opening the Green Box:  
How Organic became the standard for alternative agriculture in Thailand<sup>1</sup>**

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This discussion paper explores how a conceptual framework drawing on political ecology and science studies might contribute to understanding trends and tensions in alternative agriculture in Thailand, and by extension, other global south sites. The paper is drawn from a collaborative writing project on alternative agriculture, organic food, and agrofood standards in Southeast Asia, which is in turn part of a larger project on agrarian transitions in Southeast Asia.

Much of the current literature on alternative agriculture has been oriented around agriculture and food in North America, Europe, Australia, or New Zealand. Reframing it as sustainable agriculture, however, brings into view how alternative agriculture participates in a larger field that includes the activities of development organizations in the global south under an array of acronyms: IPM (Integrated Pest Management), SRI (System of Rice Intensification), LEISA (Low External Input and Sustainable Agriculture), and more. Although there may not be agreement about whether the sustainable agriculture movement will fundamentally reshape industrial agriculture, it has enlisted enough support to justify calling it a New Green Revolution.

Within this broader field, Thailand has become one of the global hotspots. Activists and NGOs in Thailand have worked under the term alternative agriculture since the mid-1980s. Within the broader field, it is organic agriculture and food that has drawn most attention in recent years. Although it is often assumed that organic food is produced primarily for export, the domestic

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market for certified organic food is now larger than the export market. But certified organic is only the tip of an iceberg. A visitor to a supermarket in Thailand is confronted with a assortment of labels claiming qualities including organic as certified by IFOAM<sup>2</sup> accredited certifiers, government certified organic, uncertified organic, safe, pesticide-free, natural, good agricultural practices (GAP), hygienic, and so on. The more convincing labels are sold for premiums that are astonishing compared even to the premiums obtained by organic products in North America: In a supermarket survey conducted during 2006, we found Chinese Kale, a popular vegetable, selling for about 17 baht per kilogram when it was uncertified and not packaged, for as high as 96 baht per kilogram for packages displaying multiple labels, and for many other prices in between.<sup>3</sup>

In some provinces, NGOs and/or local governments have set up fresh markets that specialize in organic products, often “certified” by the market operators. In my recent visit to the site in Southern Thailand where I did dissertation research 25 years ago, many villages had formed organic fertilizer groups; organic gardening was expanding, and some local villagers were exploring ways of bringing back local rice varieties. The government has launched major programs to support sustainable, organic, or self-sufficient farming, including one that employs hundreds of farmers to act as centres of “local knowledge” and train thousands more farmers in sustainable or organic farming techniques. One should be careful not to exaggerate the influence of this movement; the Department of Agriculture is arguably still oriented primarily to supporting corporate and industrial agriculture, but one should also not underestimate the widespread influence of this new green revolution.

Thailand is not the only country where national programs and NGO work seem to be turning a page on the green revolution. One can find a growing number of sustainable or organic farming projects in India, China, and many other Asian countries. In a few cases, entire districts or states have adopted the goal of going completely organic. Few donor organizations or national agriculture departments would dare to openly reject the importance of promoting agriculture that is sustainable by some measure.

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<sup>2</sup> International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (see <http://www.ifoam.org/>)

<sup>3</sup> We found similar prices ranges for other vegetables; somewhat lower for fruits (prices could double) and smaller but still significant premiums for rice. Other research confirms that these sorts of premiums are typical in Thailand, and Southeast Asia.

What are we to make of all this activity? How did organic emerge as the dominant model for practicing and promoting alternative agriculture in Thailand and elsewhere?

To make sense of this proliferation of sustainable agriculture projects, as well as the central place of organics within this field, it would be logical to extend the analyses and debates around alternative agriculture and organics that has emerged among US, UK, and Australian-based researchers. One direction in this research is to draw on “conventions” theory to identify how sustainable agriculture fits into the “worlds” of food (Morgan et al, 2006). That is, how do these food systems cluster around economic, cultural, ecological, and political/institutional norms or logics. Where should we locate different alternative and sustainable agricultural projects into these clusters: are they industrial? interpersonal? civic? domestic?

A second more focused debate has emerged around the argument that the organic sector is being “conventionalized” (e.g., Guthman, 2004; Lockie and Halpin, 2005; Guptill, 2009). Here conventionalization refers to the way that organic farming is being absorbed into the “conventional” agrofood system dominated by corporations. The so-called conventions debate is based primarily on agriculture in the global north. That research that does engage the global south is largely about south to north trading networks (e.g., Reynolds et al, 1997; Mutersbaugh 2005a,b). This work often employs the same frameworks as research on global north agriculture: for example, whether the growth or mainstreaming of alternative food networks necessarily means adopting more industrial/market conventions, while abandoning civic/domestic norms (e.g., Reynolds and Wilkinson, 1997:37).

In this paper I want to explore a somewhat different approach, that builds on my recent writing with Nancy Peluso on the relationship between political ecology and science studies in the study of scientific forestry in Asia (Vandergeest and Peluso, 2008). My approach is not only to ask questions like: is it really organic or not? Is certified organic truly alternative, or has it become industrialized? Does a particular approach to alternative agriculture fit the conventions of what food scholars are calling the industrial/ market “world of food” (Morgan et al, 2006; Reynolds and Wilkinson, 2007), or those of the more interpersonal civic/domestic world? Although these questions do resonate in Thailand, my background in agrarian studies in the region, as well as my work on the political ecology of forestry, draws me toward exploring how models for doing alternative agriculture have traveled and been remade in different agrarian sites—in much the same

way as we have explored how models for professional forestry have moved and changed in different sites (Vandergeest and Peluso 2006a,b).

Bringing this approach to agrofood studies, I will sidestep the question of whether different approaches to alternative agriculture in Thailand belong in the industrial/market (or conventional) box, or an alternative “green” box. Instead, will look into how this green box was made and remade over time as bounded social field (Dupuis and Gillon, 2009) called “alternative agriculture,” or later, “sustainable agriculture.” I will also look inside the box to see what kinds of epistemic objects (Dupuis and Gillon, 2009) or boundary objects (Forsyth, 2003:141; Star and Griesemer, 1989) can be found there. The objects refer to models for doing alternative agriculture: in Thailand, these have included integrated agriculture, natural agriculture, as well as organic agriculture. I am borrowing the term boundary object (Star and Greisemer, 1989) to highlight how different models for practicing alternative agriculture have spanned, moved through, and linked distinct networks that operated internationally, nationally and between sites in Thailand.

I will show that when these models arrived in Thailand, they were inserted into development work, which can also be understood a distinct social field (Li, 2007). As boundary objects, they formed the interface between alternative agriculture networks on one hand, and development networks on the other hand. This merging of alternative agriculture with development has shaped how alternative agriculture is practiced in the “developing” world, and makes it distinct from alternative agriculture in the global north.

As Dupuis and Gillon (2009) show, the making of epistemic objects like organic or alternative agriculture also involves “boundary work”—usefully invoking, for me, Tania Li’s (1997) article on boundary work in the making of communities. In the case of Thailand, the emergence of alternative agriculture was tied up with the understanding of rural “communities” as a non-state space, as well as attempts to reverse the commercialization of agriculture. In other words, I will pay particular attention to the changing ways that alternative agriculture framed its relationship to government actors, and to long distant markets and corporations. What I will show is that differing views about creating boundaries with, or engaging corporations and government have splintered the social field. Very broadly, the approach will involve tracing both the work of making and sustaining articulations, and the work of making and sustaining boundaries.

Finally, as this outline suggests, the paper will consider more tangentially whether it might be useful to “provincialize” (Chakrabarty, 2000) agrofood studies, and what this project might imply. Can the current literature on alternative agriculture can be framed as an area studies-based research program that speaks primarily to the case of global north? What are some of the key concepts that might help us better understand global south alternative agriculture? What might it mean to qualify the “diffusionist hypothesis” (Anderson 2002:648) that describes science as spreading outwards from centre to periphery? The diffusionist hypothesis was the organizing principle for most accounts of the extension of green revolution technologies, which are generally understood to have been produced in large research institutions, and extended to farmers. Alternative agriculture demands a different approach because of claims that its techniques emerge at least in part not from large research institutions or the global north, but from the local knowledge of global south farmers. At the risk of overgeneralization, I will identify some key ways that alternative agriculture in global south sites may be distinct from that in those in the global north while still retaining an identification as alternative agriculture. The specific conditioning factors that I explore are the legacies of cold war violence and insurgency, the overarching context of development, and the positioning of farmers as unruly and threatening subjects that need to be disciplined.

In the remainder of this paper, I will take up these themes through sections loosely oriented around three kinds of boundary work. First, alternative agriculture in relation to militant opposition to oppressive states; second; alternative agriculture in relation to the commercialization of agriculture; and third, alternative agriculture in relation to state agencies. This is not to underplay the significance of how boundary objects move through networks; but for the purpose of organizing this paper, boundaries turned out to be easier as a basis for organization.

The information used in this paper was produced through interviews with alternative agriculture activists, farmers, certifying organizations, and government officials, and by reading publications written by and about the alternative agriculture movement. Project documents obtained at the former country office of CUSO have proved particularly helpful, thus many of my specific examples will refer to CUSO-funded projects. CUSO worked until recently with other key donors to support individual projects, the creation of networks, the organization of seminars, and importantly, to bring to Thailand various models for practicing alternative agriculture, alternative

marketing, and even at one point, a community currency that drew on models including the Ithaca dollar—the latter being quickly shut down after drawing the attention of the Internal Security Operations Command.

### **Boundaries 1: Cold War Legacies and Alternative Development**

The label “alternative” indicates the production of a field distinct from non-alternative—in other words, mainstream agriculture. Unlike the global north, in Southeast Asia that would refer to the Green Revolution. Thus we initially framed this research in relation to the Green Revolution, describing the new Green Revolution as follows:

In the old green revolution, the modern farmer was set against the traditional one. Drawing on Tania Li’s (2007:7) framework, we can say that the old green revolution started with the premise that traditional farming practices were deficient with respect to producing enough food and income, and that the solution was a technical package that comprised the green revolution. The new green revolution emerged as a political critique of the deficiencies of the old green revolution, but the critique has in turned spawned new technical and regulatory projects. To the degree that the new green revolution has become another program of improvement, it has also identified deficiencies to be corrected: the health and environmental effects of agrochemicals, the vulnerabilities produced by decreased crop diversity, and increased dependence on international markets.

A review of the literature on agrarian change during the 1980s in Thailand, however, quickly reveals that the sorts of boundary work through which alternative agriculture arrived was more complex than a simple reaction to the green revolution. The space of alternative agriculture was also produced into relation to two other fields: urban bias in state development policies, and militant opposition to the state among activists and farmers.

Most writing on rural Thailand during the 1970s and 1980s was framed as an explanation for why many rural people were attracted to radical political alternatives. The 1970s were a period of intense conflict, during which students and workers collaborated with peasant organizations in attempts to force the government to take action on land reform and land rents (Haberkorn, 2007). After the violent repression of the student movement in October 1976, many activists joined the insurgent Community Party of Thailand (CPT), and there was general fear that Thailand could fall

to a Maoist-inspired communism. Although the insurgency came to an end in the early 1980s, the urban fear of peasant radicals, and activists' fear of state violence, continued to shape development programs.

The diagnoses at the time was that rural disaffection was the result not of the green revolution, but rather its limited reach or absence, as well as government exploitation of agriculture in favour of urban and industrial economic growth. A World Bank (1985:19) study estimated that just 9% of total land in paddy in Thailand was planted in modern varieties during the early 1980s; compared to 60% in Indonesia. Critics argued that it was the neglect of agricultural development and exploitation of farmers through taxes that explained why rural people were alienated from the government in Bangkok, and why peasants were attracted to the CPT. This was not just the opinion of liberal minded scholars (e.g., Morell and Chai-anan, 1981) but also the more political economy-oriented agrarian scholars who in other places might have attributed rural class conflict to the polarizing effects of the adoption of green revolution agriculture (Turton, 1989:56). Political economists portrayed government rural development programs both as inadequate, and as contributing to rural class formation and the marginalization of small rural farmers on account of their limited reach. Turton (1989; 1987), for example, had concluded by the end of the 1980s, when militancy was at a low point, that the ability of the rural elite to control what resources had been made available by development programs had created a new class of "local powers." These local powers were acting as a new rural class that controlled village political and administrative institutions. This control allowed the state to prevent, mitigate, and suppress conflict between rural classes (Turton, 1989), and hinder the expression of political voice of small rural producers (Turton, 1987:6).

The general point is that much of the writing on rural Thailand during the 1980s concerned questions of rural militancy, insurgency, and counter-insurgency. This deserves emphasis because of how the counter-insurgency narrative portrayed rural people: not just as poor, neglected, and alienated, but also as undisciplined subjects and a potent danger to the national "geo-body" (Tongchai, 1994), especially if they collaborated with (or were led by) radical students and workers (Haberkorn, 2007: 143). From the 1960s through the 1980s, most government/donor development programs were therefore not just programs of improvement, but also a counter-insurgency program through which the government aimed to drive back the insurgency.

The lack of a green revolution during the 1970s and early 1980s does not mean there was no commercialization or growth in the agricultural sector: rather, expansion was taking place largely through increasing the amount of land under agriculture. The expansion of cash crops into upland or rainfed areas was particularly important, often facilitated by counter-insurgency development programs. These crops were oriented towards providing raw material for agro-industries and other manufactures, and they became the focal point of the alternative agriculture critique of capitalist development.

Alternative agriculture emerged not only as an alternative to “top down” development, but also as part of a broader alternative to violent revolution or militant opposition to state policies, that is, as “alternative development.” Many writers (e.g., Missingham, 2003) date the beginning of alternative development to the establishment of the Foundation for Thailand Rural Reconstruction Movement (TRRM) in 1967. The TRRM’s 14 principles continue to be cited as what defines alternative development: They include: *staying, learning, working with the people, teach by making them learn from practices. Not to patronize, but to empower* (Missingham, 2003: 28). Each of these principles is implicitly opposed to mainstream and state development. Under Puey’s guidance, the early TRRM approach followed that of the well-known International Institute for Rural Reconstruction in the Philippines. The IIRR was in turn the continuation of work in North China carried out by Y.C. James Yen (see Judd, 1988:231) who founded the IIRR after being forced to leave China. A 1986 citation for the Magsaysay award provides the following reasons for choosing the Philippines:

*Here a predominantly agrarian, newly independent nation faced problems typical of much of Asia. Here, too, civic leaders were searching for a blueprint for reform which, in addressing squarely the causes of rural poverty and unrest, would defuse the more radical and violent solutions advocated by others.*

Contemporary activists whom we interviewed in Thailand, and who started their work during the 1970s and 1980s, still identify the TRRM as distinct from the radical movement in that it adopted principles of non-violence, and sought to avoid direct confrontation with the government. Although it was shut down in 1976, TRRM left a legacy of development workers,

many of whom went on to found or work among development NGOs during the period of rapid expansion in the early 1980s (Gohlert, 1991:127). In 1983 former members established the Rural Reconstruction Alumni and Friends Association, which coordinated the creation of the national Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN) in 1989-90.

A second stream of NGOs that identified with alternative development emerged through religious organizations, both Catholic and Buddhist. Ideas on alternative development and engaged religion circulated through regional networks such as the Asian Cultural Forum on Development (Sakamoto, 1985:37; Gohlert, 1991:120) and the Asian Regional Exchange for New Alternatives (Gohlert, 1991:120).<sup>4</sup> The Catholic Council for Development (CCDT) was particularly active in bringing Friarian ideas about popular education and “conscientization” into alternative development during the 1970s (Sakamoto, 1985:21; Gohlert, 1991:101).

The emergence of alternative agriculture as a development program thus needs to be understood in relation to the ways that the violent efforts of the postcolonial state to consolidate sovereignty in rural areas shaped how it was possible to work for social justice in the countryside. Rather than land reform and rent controls, social justice became oriented toward the plight of the small farmer. The language of “small farmers” also had the effect of keeping the politically explosive issue of land reform out of sight.

This context also helped produce an aversion to working with the government among many activists, tempered only by the personal relationships they formed with some, usually local, officials. The basic idea that emerged from this double rejection—of the state, and of militant opposition to the state—was that rural communities in the past were in effect “non-state” spaces (Scott, 1998). That is, non-state spaces could be found not just among upland ethnic minorities seeking to escape predatory states (as Scott has argued), but also in the wet rice cultivating lowlands. Alternative development was understood as pushing back the influence of states and commercialization through encouraging farmers to recover and develop these communities—a line of thinking labeled “the community culture school.” Agriculture emerged as important to this work as NGOs sought to build non-state and non-commercial spaces in rural areas. What they

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<sup>4</sup> The well known Sulak Sivaraksa has cited (in an online interview) the following people as particularly influential for him and other activists of the period: Paulo Friere, Ivan Illich, Thich Nhat Hanh, Schumacher, Thomas Merton, Gandhi, radical Quakers and the Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (Rothberg, 1993).

found was that if they were to support alternatives to agricultural commercialization, was that they had to give careful attention to the more technical aspects of farming. Out of this emerged alternative agriculture as a distinct social field.

The growth and elaboration of this field was funded and supported by international development donors; these donors were also key to the way that specific models for doing alternative agriculture moved both among sites within Thailand, and internationally. The 1980s was the period when some donors reframed development less as a top down program led by centralized state development agencies, and more as change instigated by the subjects of development, with development agents taking a facilitating role. This reframing converged with the ‘Washington consensus’ around the desirability of reducing the role of the state, and resulted in increasing support for NGOs who advocated for alternative participative, community-based models of development (Mosse, 2005:24; Muscat, 1990). In Thailand, smaller donors like CUSO (Canada),<sup>5</sup> NOVIB (the Netherlands), and Redd Barna (Norway) were among the first to support NGO development work. They helped create the Alternative Agriculture Network during the early 1990s, which in turn created Bangkok-based institutions for the purpose of network coordination, publicity, lobbying the government to support AA, and marketing (below). Project documents from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s describe frequent cross visits among farmers and activists, as well as international trips to study alternative agriculture in places like the Philippines and Japan. It was arguably this donor support for NGOs that underwrote the idea that alternative development could be based in non-state spaces.

But like the other boundaries that defined alternative agriculture, that between confrontational social movements and alternative development proved problematic, especially after many former militants joined development NGOs and farmer organizations during the 1980s. The history of conflicts and tension among agrarian social movements (Somchai, 2006) is often described as debate between these two approaches, called the community culture school on one hand, and political economy on the other—a debate that had international dimensions (Li, 2002). The political economy school found much that was problematic in the community culture

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<sup>5</sup> Originally called Canadian University Service Overseas, CUSO was set up during the 1960s as a development volunteer organization modeled on Peace Corps. By the 1980s CUSO was transforming itself into a donor that supported alternative development. I first went to Thailand as a CUSO volunteer during 1979-1982, as the turn to working with NGOs was beginning.

approach: for example, scholars identified with Chiangmai University argued in a 1986 seminar that rural communities were not isolated but situated in field of power relations. Thus improving the situation of small farmers could only happen through changing power relations (Atchara, personal communication). This critique was influential among what are called the next generation of NGOs who organized around rural resource rights (dams, political forests, fishing) during the 1990s. But it was generally not accepted among alternative agriculture proponents at the time (Atchara, personal communication).

At the same time, the militant movements that re-emerged during the 1990s were tied to alternative agriculture networks through overlapping networks of NGOs and farmer organizations. There was a close if often tense relationship between the two approaches (Somchai, 2006; interviews). In some situations, alternative agriculture organizations joined more confrontational activities, especially where state development threatened rural communities. Activists described key issues and strategies as being either “hot” and “cold” (Somchai, 2006: 134-135; project documents) with hot issues (largely about displacement) requiring mass protests and confrontation with the state. The two approaches were considered complementary in that alternative agriculture provided a positive alternative to the more critical campaigns of the militant movements. In particular, alternative agriculture could be reframed as sustainable agriculture, and mobilized by militant movements to argue that small farmers were best suited for managing valuable ecologies like forests, fisheries, and rivers.<sup>6</sup>

A key moment for the Alternative Agriculture Network was their decision to join the Assembly of the Poor mass protests during 1997, despite discomfort with confrontational strategies. Missingham’s (2003:48) account of the Assembly of the Poor mobilizations notes how the AAN was distinct in that unlike the other problem groups, they had no specific local grievances. Instead they demanded broader government action in support of alternative agriculture, including a plant varieties protection law; implementation of provisions supporting alternative agriculture that had been included in most recent Agricultural Development Plan, and financial support for the non-governmental sector’s work in alternative agriculture (interviews).

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<sup>6</sup> Anusorn, 2003: 149-150; and interviews. Via Campesino proposals for “family farm based, sustainable agriculture” is also framed in the same complementary fashion in relation to their more militant demands around agrarian reform, ownership of genetic resources, and so on.

These demands were made in the context of the withdrawal of major donor funding from Thailand over the 1990s, as Thailand was classified as a country that no longer needed development aid. As part of the agreement that ended the Assembly of the Poor protests, the government agreed to these demands. The plant protection law was enacted two years later. The promised financial support was eventually provided in the form of a three year, 633 million baht [about 15 million U.S. dollars] “pilot project” to fund various research and pilot project activities. This project marked the transition away from donor support toward government support (below).

Many of the other participating groups in the Assembly of the Poor found that the government often failed to honour the agreements that ended the Assembly of the Poor protests. It was easier for the government to follow through on its agreement with the AAN because there was much less incompatibility of interests compared to, for example, conflicts around the creation of protected areas. At the same time, the AAN did establish closer relationships with some parts of the militant movement during the pilot project. They did so by funding studies that used research to argue that upland farmers could manage natural resources sustainably, in effect bringing upland agriculture into the purview of alternative agriculture (Atchara, 2003).

### ***Boundaries 2: Commercial Agriculture***

When alternative agriculture first emerged as a development approach during the early 1980s the emphasis was not on ecology, sustainability, or the prohibition of agro-chemicals. The entry point activity (Mosse, 2005:81) through which development agencies could enlist farmers into alternative agriculture networks was instead the creation of groups that helped farmers reduce their vulnerability to markets and debt: credit cooperatives, rice banks, buffalo banks, chemical fertilizer buying groups, and even (very early on) group purchase chemical sprayers (Sakamoto 1985; interviews).

As the emphasis on low-input agriculture increased, the first named model for practicing alternative agriculture was called “integrated farming. The approach picked up on the Integrated Rural Development model that was popular in international development circles at the time, appropriating it to describe how farmers could reduce their dependence on the market by turning away from cash crops to a farming system that was diverse and integrated. The basic proposition was that rural people in the past had lived in self-reliant communities, producing most of what they

needed themselves on diverse farms that included rice, vegetables, and livestock (e.g. Gohlert, 1991:149-151; Seri, 1990). Debt was not a problem, and Buddhist cultural values such as harmony, balance, and non-desire guided people in their everyday lives, at least as an ideal. However, commercialization and cash crops were undermining farm diversity, creating dependency instead of self-reliance, and undermining Buddhist values. Most small farmers had become heavily indebted because they were encouraged to buy agricultural inputs and consumer goods, forcing them to generate more cash income through cultivating cash crops, or migrating for wage labour.

To solve these problems, certain forward-looking farmers were returning to “integrated farming.” Integrated farming reduced external dependency by allowing farmers to provide first for themselves on diverse farms, selling only the surplus. A key difficulty in achieving a “turning point” (Seri, 1990) where farmers were no longer dependent and had achieved self-sufficiency was indebtedness. Thus development efforts needed to include group-based strategies to overcome debt, including rotating credit groups, rice banks, or buffalo banks.

A central tension produced by the merging of alternative agriculture with development turns around the way that alternative developments “trustees” (Cowen and Shenton, 1996) distinguished themselves from mainstream development in part through the claim that their work was not to lead, but to facilitate farmer leadership. The resolution was to identify farmers who were articulate and who could serve as an example, and sites where farmers and development practitioners could go to observe and learn about alternative agriculture: what I will call exemplary farmers and exemplary sites. The first exemplary sites were for integrated agriculture, but they later became even more important for organic.

Seri’s (1990:129) writing is exemplary of the way that these exemplary farmers and sites became key elements of the social field:<sup>7</sup>

"Inspiration for this has come from so-called exceptional cases of individuals who have never been caught up in the current of debt and other problems . . . They were laughed at, but now

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<sup>7</sup> Seri Phongphit is an important intellectual of the community culture school; he entered into alternative development through his training in Catholic institutions and the CCTD, and has worked with and co-founded a series of community development organizations.

many of them have become resource persons . . . . Their farming sites have become learning centres for people from nearby villages, provinces, and even from other regions . . . . The essence of this turning point consists of a critical attitude towards industrial mono-cropping”

Exemplary sites work to demonstrate that alternative agriculture is possible, and that farmers are leading proponents of alternative agriculture. They thus constitute an argument that circulates through the AA networks, and that can be mobilized for different audiences: for the government while advocating for policy in support of AA, and later, for buyers of organic and fair trade food in Europe. These arguments are made in seminars, books, articles, blogs, websites, and through pilgrimages to these sites. Associated with many of these sites is a historical narrative of how previously degraded ecologies and lives improved with the adoption of alternative agriculture, narratives that build and hold together networks around these sites and farmers.

By the early 1990s, “natural farming” had joined integrated farming as an important model. This approach followed the ideas of Fukuoka, whose book “One Straw Revolution” was translated into Thai in 1987. Unlike integrated farming, natural farming maintained an identity with an articulated approach to farming practiced in a variety of sites around the world, an approach that remains active today. Fukuoka visited Thailand in 1990 and 1991, and Thai NGO workers spent time on his farm in Japan as well (CUSO documents). A major 1990 seminar on alternative agriculture in the northeast that brought together model farmers included a number of farmers who described themselves as doing natural farming inspired by Fukuoka. CUSO subsequently funded the formation of a Natural Farming Network, which helped natural farmers to share experiences in how the system could be used in Thailand, where ecological conditions were different from that in Japan. Natural farming was attractive partly because it provided a detailed model based on ecological processes for how to reduce chemical use. Farmers were instructed not to plow the land or burn straw, but instead broadcast rice together with a legume, and cover the field with rice straw. Unlike integrated farming, this farming system did not try to recover past practices, but instead adapted a model that had travelled from Japan. Its attraction also derived from its association with Buddhist and Asian philosophies; the major long-term influence has been on the religious group Santi Asoke, which today has become a major producer of what is now called organic food.

At the time that the Alternative Agriculture Network was created around 1990, the key

models were still Natural Farming and Integrated Farming although activists also referred to other models, including agroforestry as appropriate for forested uplands, and organic farming. The arrival of organic farming as a model for practicing alternative agriculture was associated with a destabilization of the boundary between commercial farming and alternative agriculture.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the term organic starts to appear in AA project documents along with “natural” as a way describing farms that focused on avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides through the use of organic substances (e.g., Alternative Agriculture Group, 1991). The term organic has continued to be used in this general way to the present, for example, through government programs to support the production of organic fertilizer. Organic as a farming system that followed a series of regulations was introduced into the alternative farming repertoire in Thailand during the late 1980s and early 1990s via both donor agencies like CUSO, and large buyers in Europe who were at that time beginning to develop certified organic lines. From the beginning, it appears in association with marketing, and was often taken up by groups that rejected the rejection of commercial agriculture.<sup>8</sup> That is, organic was brought into Thailand through efforts to turn alternative agriculture into a food quality that consumers could purchase. As such, it was tied up with a rethinking of the question of commercialization, and generated a series of debates that have persisted to the present around the questions of the appropriate roles of markets, exports, standards, and middle class consumers.

*Certified* organic agriculture was introduced into Thailand by trading companies responding to requests by European buyers. Specifically the first certified organic food export was the outcome of a project started in 1989 after Italian buyers asked a large rice trading company if they could supply organic rice. The project worked through farmer groups in northern valleys considered less contaminated by the Green Revolution, to train them in producing rice that could be certified by Bioagricert, an Italian organic certifying company. The Department of Agriculture assisted with extension work, and used the project to develop government standards for organic rice, under what would later become the government’s Organic Thailand label. The international standards regarding research and conversion periods meant that it was 1994 before Capital Rice started to sell organic rice under its Great Harvest label. Capital Rice has today branched out into

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<sup>8</sup> For example, by the SSFAI (Small Scale Farmers Assembly of Isan) which had split from the Assembly of the Poor (Somchai, 2006:182).

other organic food products, and Bioagricert remains one of the major certifiers in Thailand, often working with government departments to expand organic farming, as well as certifying large capitalist palm oil and sugar cane farms.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of certified organic may have been introduced by European buyers, but by 1993, certified organic food was appearing in the domestic market as well. There were over 60 green shops in various locations in Thailand (Noulmook, 1999:100). In this first phase, it was the government organic labels that were most familiar to middle class consumers (Noulmook, 1999:101).

Also at this time, the notion of “alternative marketing” was introduced to NGOs (Noulmook, 1999:103), and some NGOs started to work in the area of producer-consumer networks under the rubric of creating alternative markets as an ethical relationship between farmers and consumers. Two key organizations are worth describing in some more detail because of the way they have come to represent opposing positions with respect to alternative markets and how organic standards should be set. Green Net was formed by AA activists in 1993 to promote organic agriculture and green consumerism. Green Net and its associated organization Earth Net have become key points of passage for international buyers and NGOs working on organic and fair trade certified products in Thailand. The director has taken on a provocative role within the AAN through his challenges to some of key boundaries that had constituted alternative agriculture as a social field. He argues that farmers are motivated primarily by economic incentives, and will turn to organic agriculture if they can make a better income; that the ideal of integrated or diverse farming makes no sense for farmers specialized in rice farming; that organic not a traditional farming system, but a “modern” technique that needs to be learned; and finally that the farming sector in Thailand can only thrive through exports. They do not challenge boundaries on government, but reframe these boundaries in relation to setting standards and acting as a certifier. Instead, in their view the government should restrict its support to training. Most of all, they argue that there should be only one set of organic standards for Thailand, and they should be the international ones based in the IFOAM general standards.

Like many other long time AA activists, Green Net staff see that the older approaches to AA

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<sup>9</sup> Sources: Interviews, and Vandenberghe and Sarakosas (1997).

never seemed to go beyond a limited set of farmers and sites, despite optimism in the documents and publications in the 1980s to the present that the model was attractive and would soon spread rapidly. Their answer is to embrace commercialization. They express a new optimism that with recognition of the true commercial nature of agriculture, most agriculture in Thailand will eventually be organic.

Although many international (primarily European-based) organic certifying organizations are active in Thailand, the AAN also created a local certification body, which has now become the main Southeast Asia based certifying body for organics, expanding its activities to many Asian countries. It was launched in 1995 to systematize standards at a national level, under the name ‘Alternative Agriculture Certification Thailand.’ The initial goal was to certify food produced by alternative agriculture for sale by local Green Shops and other alternative outlets. Alternative agriculture was understood as including integrated, natural, organic, and other kinds of farming systems. It seems that these diverse models did not speak to consumers as much as did the question of safe food, and so its first labels were “Pesticide Free Product,” and “Organic Product.” In 1998, the name was changed to Organic Agriculture Certification Thailand to reflect a decision to focus on certifying only organic, using international standards. It was accredited by IFOAM in 2002; and by ISO 65 standards for third party certification in 2005. It became oriented towards meeting the requirements of buyers in the Europe and North America, and now also offers inexpensive inspection services for non-local certifying bodies, allowing farmers to be certified by more than one label through a single inspection. More recently it has reemphasized the domestic market as well, adding standards for industrial processors, restaurants, and retailers. Like Green Net, ACT staff argue that the government should not be involved in organic certification in part because they violate ISO 65 principles on conflict of interest, specifically, around the requirement that capacity-building (training and extension) must be separate from certification. In effect, ISO 65 severs certification from development

In the North, the “PRO-CON” (Development of Alternative Agriculture Producer-Consumers Network in Upper Northern Thailand) project was initiated in 1991. One of the project’s first activities was to study alternative agriculture systems; the result was the selection of organic farming as the most appropriate. In 1994, the project set up the Northern Standards Association, which developed standards for organic agriculture through a local “deliberative” (Dupuis and

Gillon, 2009) process. The network continues to operate and certify farmers today, and has continued to generate donor as well as government support even in the face of the withdrawal of most donors from Thailand. Unlike the Green Net group, the organization continues to defined itself through setting limits on commercialization. It rejects an export orientation, endorses local markets and consumer-producer links, insists that organic farming standards should be set locally by farmers and consumers, and adopts the principles that farmers should emphasize crop diversity, natural farming methods, and production for their own subsistence first, only selling their surplus. Although they are all members of the AAN, they see themselves as competing with Green Net and ACT both philosophically (as the director explained), and over specific sites and farmers. ISAC staff say ACT/Green Net are benefiting (stealing) from the years of work they invested in farmer training and capacity-building when they move in to certify northern farms where ISAC has been active—in reference to one particularly well known exemplary sites where farmers are now growing certified organic baby corn for export. They seek to build legitimacy not by conforming to international standards, but by a locally-oriented, deliberative mode of governance (Dupuis and Gillon, 2009).

Besides the northern groups, there are a number of other local certifying organizations, often working through local fresh markets. The most well known has been in northeastern province of Surin, where there is a regular organic fresh market. In other provinces there are many smaller projects that more informally label organic farmers for local fresh markets, now often with government support, especially through local hospitals and in collaboration with Ministry of Health staff (below).

So far I have emphasized certified organic as it has emerged from the alternative agriculture movement as well as European buyers. But in recent years the domestic market has become as important to the growth of organics. This growth can be partly attributed to the “supermarket explosion.” The year 1997 was significant in Thailand not just for the Assembly of the Poor protests, or the adoption of the 1997 “people’s constitution,” but also a major selloff of what had until then been domestically owned supermarket chains, precipitated by the financial crisis. The largest supermarket and hypermarket chains in Thailand are now European, although there was later a reassertion of domestic ownership in smaller chains. After using the financial crisis as their entry point, the European chains launched aggressive expansion strategies. Estimates of food sold

in supermarkets and hypermarkets vary widely, ranging from over 60 percent (USDA GAIN) to what may be a more realistic figure of 35 percent in 2002, based on retailer industry figures (Wiboonpongse and Sriboonchitta, 2006). The proportion has doubtlessly increased since 2002 with the continued increase in the number of mini, super, and hyper market outlets.

Food retailers have leaped into the safe food and sustainable food movement, with different chains outdoing each other in promising more organic and safe vegetables, fruit, rice, and so on. The most recent turn has been to expand from organic fresh products into organic processed foods, which is in turn dependent on introducing organic agriculture into industrial crops. Major food processors are thus also seeking to expand their supplies of organic inputs. The following item in one of the English language newspapers gives an idea of the general tone, as of 2006:

MarketPlace with The Nation, September 4, 2006

*Wangkanai takes the organic route*

The problem of low yields in the country's sugar-cane industry combined with growing health awareness has prompted the Wangkanai Group, the Kingdom's largest sugar refiner, to decide to convert to organic farming [ . . . ] The company says the system will eventually increase yields by 30 percent and guarantee food safety. The final result will be increased production of a more valuable product: organic sugar [ . . . ]. Wangkanai has 20,000 contracts with sugar-cane farms with a total size of 600,000 rai. [...]. In the beginning, 800 leaders among the contracted farmers will be trained in organic practices. The practices will then be introduced in stages to the other contracting farmers by 2010.

I have not followed up to see if Wangkanai has achieved its ambitious targets, but the item does illustrate the distance traveled by alternative agriculture since it emerged as an alternative to commercialization and cash crops.

What attention to the everyday practices of certification highlights is the degree to which it is often an intensely disciplinary process. Discipline, in the Foucaultian sense, refers to efforts to reform designated groups through detailed supervision in confined quarters (from Li, 2007; see also Mutersbaugh, 2005a). This is an excellent summary of organic certification. Certification involves the mapping out of a distinct farm territory (the confined quarters) and certifying this

territory based on careful monitoring of farming practices. Fields must be surrounded by buffer zones of specified width, while all agricultural flows onto the fields must be certified as organic (ideally). Careful documentation of flows onto the organic space is an important aspect of maintaining status as organic. In Thailand a major problem has been the widespread use of non-certified organic fertilizer produced under a government program—the involvement of the government only increases the sense that this fertilizer is illicit. In the context of wet rice farming, the flows of water across fields is a problem that local certifiers generally ignore as there is not much to be done about it. Other provisions that farmers often try to negotiate or evade include prohibitions on burning rice straw, use of non-certified organic fertilizer, and child labour. Underlying this discipline is an urban middle class, and global north distrust of farmers, no longer as potential communists, but as producers of potentially dangerous food—thus the front cover of the ACT brochure says in large letters *Why Organic Produce is Trustable*, alongside the IFOAM logo. Farmers not only failed to understand that they should not vote for the populist prime minister Taksin, but also threaten to literally poison the Thai geo-body, reconstituted as middle class consuming bodies.

Proponents of IFOAM's standards see both government and local certification schemes as undermining the trustability of certified organic not because of illegitimate governance, but because multiple standards causes confusion among consumers, and because the government cannot be trusted. This confusion creates a lack of clear boundaries between what is truly organic, and what is not. Thus the territorial boundaries that create legitimately certified agriculture in the field must be transposed into the marketplace so that consumers can identify what food is safe.

### ***Boundaries 3: Government***

This section briefly outlines some of the major features of government participation in alternative agriculture and organics. I should first note that despite suspicion of the governments' commitment to and understanding of alternative agriculture, AA activists have long worked with local government units and individuals. By the mid-1990s, the central government had adopted a national level policy of promoting sustainable agriculture; thus one of the AAN's demands during the Assembly of the Poor protests were that these provisions be implemented.

Many government agencies have become involved in alternative agriculture and organics. First, organics has been strongly promoted as way of increasing value-added agrofood exports. In this field, the Departments of Export Promotion and of Agriculture have worked closely with export-oriented corporations, as part of a larger “Kitchen of the World” program that promotes Thai food and food products globally.

Second, some departments have sought to enhance their jurisdiction and power by developing their own organic standards and labels. Most important has been the Department of Agriculture’s “Organic Thailand” certification, drafted in 1999, and gazetted in 2001. Certification is carried out by Department of Agriculture officials, typically on government agricultural projects. Royal projects for the development of upland ethnic minorities in the north are especially important in this regard. The projects have already required some upstream farmers to become organic, and have plans to require all participating farmers to be certified as organic. The problem is that the Organic Thailand label was not recognized internationally, and was thus not useful for promoting exports. To address this and the growing importance of standards as a potential trade barrier, the government has centralized authority for setting standards related to food and agriculture into a new office, the National Bureau for Agriculture Commodity and Food Standards (ACFS), established in 2002 (Ratanawaraha et al 2007). This bureau is developing standards for certifying not only farms, but also retailers, restaurants, and so on, under a single “Q” label with different colours for levels and types of certification. To obtain international recognition, they are working from the Codex Alimentarius guidelines for organic foods, which they see as most relevant in relation to how organic standards could be challenged as constituting a trade barrier.

More interesting for my purposes has been the shift in the relationship between Alternative Agriculture Network members, and the government. Since 1997, “self-sufficiency” has become an important element of the government’s response to the financial crises and market instability, with the reasoning that farmers who were less dependent on buying agriculture inputs including fertilizer and pesticides, and who maintained diverse farms, would also be less vulnerable to unpredictable markets. The king’s support for self-sufficiency has forced relevant government departments to respond with major programs. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health has latched onto food safety and nutrition as important for the general health of the population that has become

increasingly urban and middle class, and has also become involved in agriculture and food projects at many levels.

None of these programs necessarily imply organic farming or organic food. But in practice, the tendency has been for the government to turn to organics because it is a recognizable and known model, and one where previous NGO work had already created local expertise—the exemplary farmers and sites. Put differently, organic farming and organic food are constituted as boundary objects that enable government agencies, farmers, and NGOs to work together despite a history of mutual suspicion. The turning point, as mentioned above, was the AAN's success in forcing the government to fund their work through their participation in the Assembly of the Poor protests. Partly as a result of relationships formed during that project, government agencies are now collaborating with farmers, NGOs, and individual activists, enlisting them as organic farming experts, advisors, reviewers, administrators, and so on. At the local level, provincial governments have also employed AAN farmers and NGOs to implement organic farming initiatives.

Government interest in organic agriculture, combined with the loss of international development donor funding, has virtually erased the idea of rural communities as a non-state space, in practice if not in theory. The decentralization mandated by the 1997 constitution as well as broader changes after the 1997-98 financial crisis have reinforced these trends: every village and subdistrict is now the recipient of development funds, some of it earmarked for self-sufficiency projects. In most cases, these funds are given to registered groups—which works to the advantage of AAN participants who have long used groups as an entry point. This also means that most funding for alternative agriculture is now going directly to farmer groups, bypassing the NGOs who used to administer the funds provided by international donors.

Some examples will give a sense of the scope of these new collaborations. In 2005, as part of the self-sufficiency emphasis, the government created the “National Agenda for Organic Agriculture” with a stated goal of reducing the volume of imported agrochemicals through converting 850,000 farmers to organic agriculture within five years. A key activity was a program to train farmers in organic farming. During 2007, according to Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC) announcements, it completed a program that funded 37 farmers to be centres of local knowledge and run training programs for about 23,000 farmers. The ministry later announced that it has approved 131 centres for an expanded program during 2008, with a target of

75000 farmers to be trained. Many of farmers who successfully applied to run these centres had worked with the AAN.

In 2006, the post-Taksin military government converted one of his populist programs, the “Small, Medium, and Large Village” (SML) program for building infrastructure in villages, to one for promoting self-sufficiency, under a new name: the Well Being and Happiness Project. Total allocations were 500 million baht (over 100 million US dollars), of which half went to provincial governors, and the other half directly to villages. Each village received a direct allocation that had to be spent on projects that qualified as promoting self-sufficiency. NGO workers in Songkla reported that many of these funds supported organic farming, loosely defined.

A key new funder for NGOs working in alternative agriculture has been the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, set up in 2001 as a relatively independent organization under the Ministry of Health, with a budget generated by taxes on alcohol and tobacco.<sup>10</sup> The foundation takes a broad view of healthy living, and provides support for projects in safe and healthy food, as well as farmer exposure to chemicals. As of 2008, they were providing significant funds to Biothai, an NGO created by the AAN during the mid-1990s to advocate for policy reform around biodiversity, plant varieties protection, and GMOs. BioThai has become the main national NGO for mobilizations around protecting farmer rights to crop varieties, and the key point of passage for issues having to do with plant variety rights, anti-GMO activism, and so on. It now also acts as an administrator on behalf of Thai Health for local projects around conserving local plant varieties, especially rice varieties. Other examples of projects funded by the Thai Health Foundation included work with the Northern Alternative Agriculture Network to help two subdistrict governments turn entire subdistricts into agro-chemical-free zones; and in Khon Kaen in the Northeast, where they funded training programs tied to a fresh market where they also tested food for chemical residues.<sup>11</sup>

At the local level, health stations and hospitals often work with NGOs to reduce chemical use and promote organic agriculture. Thus in Songkla province in the south, where I have been doing research for the past 25 years, the provincial government worked with Southern Alternative Agriculture Network groups, hospitals, and other groups to create a provincial health plan that

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.thaihealth.or.th/english/>

<sup>11</sup> According to interviews at the Foundation.

included the creation of consumer-producer associations, and fresh organic food markets at local hospitals.<sup>12</sup> Organic was defined as local products with no use of pesticides. Occasional use of chemical fertilizer was considered acceptable.<sup>13</sup>

During my recent stays in villages in Songkla (2008, 2009) I found that farmers were generally aware of organic farming, and that many had received direct or indirect support for organic farming projects. In two of the four villages where I focused my research, farmers had recently established organic fertilizer groups, supported by government funds. A few farmers were working bring back local varieties of rice. In a nearby subdistrict, a farmer well known around the country as an AAN exemplary farmer had been especially successful in tapping into the new regime: as leader of an alternative agriculture farmer group, he had not only not obtained government funds for building a three million baht organic fertilizer factory, but also to build a community windmill for generating electricity.

I should qualify this account to add that critics continue to question the government's broader commitment to alternative agriculture, with the argument that support provided to alternative agriculture continues to be dwarfed by broader support for industrial or conventional agriculture, and for major agrofood companies (especially CP). NGO critics also contend that Ministry of Agriculture officials are usually trained in agricultural universities in mainstream agriculture, and have no real understanding of what it takes to promote organic and alternative agriculture. A major change in direction takes more than a few seminars, training sessions, and speeches to achieve, but requires long term work with farmers. It is in the Ministry of Health that many AAN activists have found their most supportive allies.

### ***DISCUSSION POINTS***

The purpose of this paper has been to explore how some ideas drawn from science studies might help me understand past and current trends in alternative agriculture in Thailand, with the hope of generating ideas that might also be useful in other global south sites. Central to my

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<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.songkhlahealth.org/healthplan>

<sup>13</sup> At the same time, AAN NGOs in Songkla were also associated with militant protests against a gas pipeline project (demonstrators assembled at their green market), and despite collaborations with specific government departments, maintained a strongly critical perspective on the government more broadly.

argument has been the observation that in the global south, the field of alternative agriculture was incorporated into another field, that of development. Development can be understood in part as a program of improvement (Li, 2007). But it has also veered into a more disciplinary mode, and was mobilized to help consolidate the sovereignty of the postcolonial state during the period of widespread insurgency in the region. Alternative agriculture was initially framed as outside state and commercial development, and thus primarily as a program of improvement. However, the erasure of these boundaries among some proponents has brought discipline into some parts of the alternative agriculture movement. Although not taken up in detail here, coercion has also become important in how organic agriculture has been introduced as part of a broader program to domesticate upland ethnic minorities.

One purpose of this paper is to trace how organics has emerged as the standard for alternative agriculture in Thailand. One answer is that it works very well as a boundary object. Alternative agriculture emerged during the 1980s through the making of at least three boundaries: against radicalism and militancy, against commercialization, and against the state. While donor funds helped AA activists maintain these boundaries through the 1980s, each of these boundaries proved unstable in the long term. Organic farming as a model for practicing sustainable agriculture has provided a way for parts of the AA movement to work commercial interests and the state across these boundaries. Its meaning is flexible enough for these collaborations to emerge between disparate entities in multiple ways, while at the same retaining an identity across these different projects and across space. Organic, it seems, speaks to almost everyone. In comparison, models like integrated farming and natural farming did not. Integrated farming was not identified with similarly named farming systems abroad. Natural farming, while important locally for Buddhist groups, did not build the kinds of transnational networks that could compete with organic. Most important may be how certified organic became defined through detailed farming regulations and disciplinary practices that answered to the insecurities of distrustful middle class consumers. At the same time, uncertified organic could be opened up in more local contexts to meanings that look a lot like those associated with integrated farming.

This flexibility has given rise to new debates and fissures within the alternative agriculture movement. Some proponents would like to see much less flexibility in meaning, arguing that only food produced by IFOAM standards should qualify and that, moreover, there should be a clear

boundary between organic certification and the state. Others are more willing to work with state agencies in promoting organics, or reject the imperialism of northern-oriented international standards in favour of standards produced through locally-oriented deliberative processes.

I have not yet examined closely the adoption of the language of “sustainable agriculture,” partly because it often seems to have no boundaries at all, rendering it close to meaningless. But it has become an important term among AAN activists, and more narrowly defined, may be the boundary object that links alternative agriculture in Thailand to similar models elsewhere. For example, Via Campesina’s sustainable agriculture proposals seem very close to what was and continues to be labeled “integrated agriculture” in Thailand.

Taking a view from within the perspective of improvement: this research inclines me to the view that certified organic agriculture is of limited use for promoting agriculture that is ecologically sustainable and socially just. Although certified organics may be flexible enough to have meaning for many different groups and organizations, on the ground it remains exclusionary. It is organized as a socionatural field through boundary work that strictly separates it from non-organic, in multiple places and ways, from field to market. Moving this model to a global south context where farmers are already distrusted and considered less than fully capable subjects brings out the more disciplinary dimension of this approach. Looking through long lists of required and recommended practices in IFOAM-based organic standards leaves one wondering how it is that buyers and international bodies have become so involved in specifying farming practices, well beyond obtaining assurance that the food is free of harmful chemicals. When buyers of baby corn in Europe or organic rice in the US can specify in detail how farmers in northern Thailand should fertilize their soils, deal with crop residues, and ask their children to help out in the fields, then it seems that techniques of alternative agriculture are not at all based on the local knowledge of global south farmers, but rather on a distrust of these farmers among middle class and northern buyers, and the organizations that promote certified organic agriculture.

A little discipline might not be a bad thing especially for more industrial farmers, but a broad-based approach to sustainability needs to enroll a majority of global south farmers, not exclude them. In Thailand, the new collaborative practices that bring together farmers, activists, and local government units to promote sustainable agriculture in ways that are open to local definitions of what this means have more promise than certified organic. Certified organic by

international standards is closed to these practices. A final conclusion is it may be useful find a way of recognizing these practices at a broader scale through a new social field that re-organizes boundaries in relation to who and what practices are included and excluded.

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