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SOPHORNTAVY VORNG

State, Religion, and Transnationality in the
Golden Triangle



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Abstract

Research among ethnic minorities in highland Southeast Asia tends to focus on issues of integration and/or resistance. Arguing for a more nuanced theoretical framework, this article examines the role of religion, state and transnationality in shaping modes of inclusion in northern Thailand. The discussion is based on a comparative exploration of Buddhist and Christian approaches to the regional illegal drug trade. Government outreach and development programs implemented through Buddhist monasteries aim to construct loyal Buddhist subjects and realise agendas of national security in unstable border areas. Yet, they also offer channels for upward social mobility through education and cultural citizenship. Meanwhile, Christian gospel rehabilitation centres working in the region provide otherwise inaccessible addiction treatment services whilst simultaneously drawing ethnic minority individuals into transnational spheres of fellowship. Consequently, I argue that the relationship between ethnic minorities and the state can be defined in terms of aspiration and negotiation, as well as resistance and evasion.

Keywords: religion, conversion, ethnic minorities, state, transnationality, addiction, Thailand

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Introduction

Widespread issues of poverty, substance abuse, and limited educational and employment opportunities pervade the marginalised highland ethnic minority groups who make their homes in the five mountainous border provinces of Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Phayao, and Nan in northern Thailand. These villages and communities are embedded within the backdrop of the distinctive ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity of a region that is often argued to transcend the politico-geographic boundaries of conventional area studies paradigms. Referred to variously as the Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud 2000) or 'Zomia' (van Schendel 2005; Scott 2009), it is a milieu informed by its long history as a major drug production and trafficking region dubbed by the CIA as 'The Golden Triangle': a rugged, isolated, and politically unstable zone where the modern borders of Myanmar, Thailand, and Lao PDR meet.

The drug trade in the Golden Triangle engages a complex interplay of global economic flows of supply and demand, national and cross-border drug policy, colonial expansion, ongoing regional ethnic tensions and political instability, and state agendas of national integration and security. While I situate my enquiries within the context of these important social, political and historical factors, the main scope of my paper is to demonstrate how these dynamics also play out on the intimate individual and community levels in settings of intense poverty, inequality, and suffering. Previous research has examined the themes of legal status and citizenship (e.g. Renard 2000; Vaddhanaphuti 2005; Toyota 2005; Sakboon 2013; Laungaramsri 2003, 2014) as well as the striking phenomenon of widespread religious conversion among the marginalised ethnic minority groups in Thailand and other parts of highland Southeast Asia (e.g. Tapp 1989; Kammerer 1990; Keyes 1993; Hayami 1996; Buadaeng 2003; Platz 2003; Buadaeng and Boonyasaranai 2008; Salemink 2009; Ngo 2010). My aim in this paper is to contribute to this body of research by exploring how we can better understand the intertwinement of religion, marginalisation, and illegal drug trade among highland ethnic minority groups in Chiang Rai, Thailand's northern-most province.

In his influential book, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Scott (2009) characterised the relationship between highlanders and the state in terms of resistance, refuge and evasion. He defines the remote, mountainous region of Zomia as a 'non-state space' in opposition to the dominant, oppressive space of the state, the latter of which in modern times is inexora-

bly encroaching upon the independence of the highlands. Scott also places a strong emphasis on the agency or intentionality of Zomia's hill populations, who he argues have consciously chosen to escape or avoid state control or expansion in their migration into the inaccessible highlands, in a form of 'deliberate and reactive statelessness', which gives rise to such socio-cultural forms as the tendency towards 'slash-and-burn'-type swidden agricultural techniques, the favouring of oral transmission of knowledge over the use of written text, and egalitarian social structures (Scott 2009: x).

Lieberman (2010) highlights the theoretical significance of Scott's formulation in its regionally unifying perspective of Zomia, as a 'vast shatter zone formed by a historic pincer movement from both Chinese and Southeast Asian states' and the weaving together of 'ostensibly unrelated economic and social phenomena in the hills as common responses to lowland pressure'. This approach provides hill peoples with 'voice, agency, and rationality' rather than depicting the communities in terms of 'stasis, primitivism, essentialism, and isolation' (Lieberman 2010: 336). Simultaneously, however, he draws attention to some major flaws in Scott's (2009) analyses, such as its weak evidential base (particularly that drawing on pre-1850 Southeast Asian and more specifically, Burmese-language, historical documentation), its rather ahistorical rendering of the Southeast Asian state as an entity constantly driven to augment labour and hence political and economic power without considering the changing and situationally-specific nature of both demographic and non-demographic pressures, and not least, its dependence on 'monocausal explanations focused on lowland provocation, to the virtual neglect of dynamics within the highlands themselves' (Lieberman 2010: 336-340). As Lieberman suggests, this ignores the possibility that in the hills, 'autonomous social/cultural dynamics seem to have favoured physical dispersion, swiddening, and defensive strategies at least as persistently as did pressures emanating from the lowlands' (Lieberman 2010: 344).

Jonsson (2010) additionally points out that the concept of Zomia has an analytical appeal in its intent to challenge conventional area studies divides and urban-rural binaries. At the same time, however, it is open to various reifications that threaten to replicate previous area studies biases. Formoso (2010) critiques other aspects of Scott's argument, such as his glossing over of the hierarchical nature of some hill societies (e.g. the Nuosu or Yi of Sichuan and northern Yunnan), the fact that a large proportion of mountain peoples in southwestern China had already been subjected to indirect rule and taxation from the Song dynasty onwards, and the trade and migratory relations between 'centre' and 'periphery', which demonstrated that

the region of Zomia was based more on intermixing and linkages than on division (Formoso 2010: 314-315).

In light of these issues, the present paper attempts to grapple with Jonsson's theoretical challenge of how we can start to go 'beyond Zomia', rather than taking 'either the community or state for granted as an analytical principle; as the driving force of social relations or historical dynamics' (Jonsson 2010: 208). This is particularly significant given the fragmentary nature of state formation in the highlands of Southeast Asia, which continually defies binary analytical models that tend to depict the resistance of non-state actors against the state (van der Veer 2016). Consequently, this paper aims to contribute to the critical literature that reflects upon Scott's thought-provoking conceptualisations of relations between hill peoples and states, by showing that these dynamics are often much more nuanced and complex than a simple juxtaposition between controlling lowland states and defiant Zomian hill populations.

A pertinent example is Fiskesjö's (2010) discussion of the place of mining in the history of the central Wa region (straddling the borders of modern-day Myanmar and China) in reference to agency, autonomy, and state formation. According to Fiskesjö, the Wa's egalitarianism and identification of Wa lands as the centre of the world, rather than as its periphery, subvert the usual understandings of nation-state and highland relations as is encapsulated in Scott's exegesis of Zomia. Fiskesjö shows how in the central Wa country, which was politically independent until the mid-twentieth century, profits from rich mineral resources such as silver, gold, iron, and tin. He also shows how lucrative mining concessions placed the Wa in a position that allowed them to defend their autonomy against the encroaching Burmese and Chinese, maintain non-hierarchical social structures and prevent the emergence of hierarchical ones and the subsequent formation of a Wa state (e.g. in the form of Shan-style 'kingships'), in major mining areas located in Banhong and Menglong (Fiskesjö 2010: 256, 259-260). Ultimately, Fiskesjö argues that

the notion of refuge is inadequate for the autochthonous central Wa...they were not part of any state, and their social formation emerged from a trajectory involving complex factors (including resistance to others' state-making) adding up to more than the negation of state-making (Fiskesjö 2010: 263).

Drawing on fieldwork in northern Thailand from October 2014 to April 2015,¹ I argue in this paper that situating the analysis within the historic and contemporary

1 During the course of fieldwork, I stayed at or made regular trips to approximately ten ethnic minority villages in Chiang Rai province, in order to obtain a general sense of

backdrop of drug abuse and trafficking in the Golden Triangle, as well as the pervasive phenomenon of Buddhist and Christian religious conversion among ethnic minorities, provides a productive way to engage with questions of marginality, state control, and transnationality. My discussion is based on a comparative analysis of two contrasting religious approaches to the regional drug problem. The Buddhist example centres upon the work of a charismatic monk, Phra Khruba Neau Chai Kositto, abbot of the Golden Horse Monastery (*Wat Tham Pa Acha Thong*), in a border district of Chiang Rai province.² Phra Khruba is well known for his anti-drug-outreach and his proselytising work in the villages along the Thai-Burmese border. This work is part of the Thai government's approach of using Buddhist monasteries in the implementation of national integration policies in border areas under the auspices of the Phra Dhammajarik ('Wandering Dhamma') program, which has been running since 1965 and has its headquarters at Wat Srisoda in Chiang Mai. These policies are aimed at preventing the spread of communism, assimilation, and gaining the loyalty of ethnic minority peoples in the border regions by means of converting them to Buddhism, recruiting young men to ordain as novice monks, providing access to formal education, and helping to develop agricultural methods (Suksamran 1977; Platz 2003; Evrard and Leeprecha 2009).

The Christian example focuses primarily on the Roem Mai ('New Start') Gospel Rehabilitation Centre, located near the Thai-Lao border in Chiang Rai province.

poverty and the drug problem in the area. Many of these trips were as a volunteer with a local, non-faith-based NGO that worked with vulnerable ethnic minority children, many of whose parents were too heavily addicted to drugs to care for them. I discussed a variety of topics with my informants, including poverty, religion, health, ethnicity, and drug use. Approximately twenty formal interviews were conducted with staff, managers, or senior administrators of the gospel rehabilitation centre, various NGOs, and the monastery. However, I found that participant observation and informal conversations were the most productive way of gathering data among villagers who were reserved and uncomfortable in formal situations or who were reluctant to express their views around an unfamiliar outsider, especially concerning the topics of addiction and the trade in illegal substances. I focused my enquiries in one community based around a Chinese-owned tea plantation, at which a Christian Akha village, a Christian Lahu village, a mixed-faith Lisu village, and a Buddhist Yunnanese village (each comprised of around 20-30 households) were located in close proximity to one another. For part of the time, I was assisted by a female Akha translator. The rest of the time, I communicated with informants in Thai.

2 Where appropriate, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of informants and their villages and communities. However, due to the uniqueness and easily identifiable characteristics of the Golden Horse monastery, pseudonyms were not used in that particular case.

Salvation from addiction is seen to come from the healing powers of the gospel and Christian fellowship. Founded in 1997, it is modelled upon and heavily influenced by Operation Dawn, a global network of Christian rehabilitation centres. In addition to the Roem Mai Centre, there are two Operation Dawn gospel rehabilitation centres, both in Chiang Rai.³ All three of these Christian rehabilitation centres provide in-patient drug and alcohol treatment to predominantly ethnic minority villagers from all over the Chiang Rai area. Since its beginnings in Hong Kong and Taiwan, the Operation Dawn project has spread globally to India, Nepal, Canada, the United States, Myanmar, and Thailand through devoted missionaries, many of whom have had their own lives affected by drugs in some way.

In the first section of this paper, I explore the dimensions of the regional drug trade, political instability, uneven economic development, and social inequality that have contributed to the drug addiction and trafficking problem in Chiang Rai, Thailand's northernmost province. I go on to examine the cases of Phra Khruba and the Golden Horse Monastery and the Roem Mai gospel rehabilitation centre. I investigate how these forms of religious engagement shape modes of aspiration and inclusion for ethnic minority people in northern Thailand in ways that complicate the usual narratives of resistance, incorporation, and state control. In other words, I attempt to show in these examples that relations between hill people and the Thai Buddhist nation-state, and between hill people and transnational Christian networks, are characterised by

3 The Operation Dawn project was founded by Hong Kong Baptist missionaries in the early 1980s. From Hong Kong, Operation Dawn expanded to Taiwan in 1989 under the leadership of Reverend Simon Lau, a former drug addict and Triad gang-member. Gospel rehabilitation programs have an extended history in Hong Kong, where the Operation Dawn organisation was first founded. Hong Kong itself has long been associated with opium, with its creation as a British colony in the direct aftermath of the first Opium War (1840-1842) (Joe-Laidler 2005: 1257). The first residential gospel rehabilitation centre was established in Hong Kong as early as 1955 by Reverend Agnar Espegren (Vungkhanching 2000). Another early pioneer of Christian-based rehabilitation was the English missionary Jackie Pullinger, who preached the gospel amongst prostitutes, addicts, and criminals, many of them Triad gang members, in the notorious Kowloon Walled City in 1968. Also well known for working among addicts in Hong Kong in the late 1960s were Reverend John Paul Chan of Hong Kong Beautiful Gate Baptist Church, and Reverend Harold Schock, an American Baptist missionary, who founded 'Operation Dawn' and 'Wu Oi Christian Centre', respectively (ibid.). Operation Dawn began as a centre in Long Ke Wan, in Sai Kung, in 1968. The centre was later relocated to Fu Tau Fan Chau, in 1976 and renamed to 'Dawn Island Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Centre' (Operation Dawn Hong Kong English-language website <http://opdawn.org/hk/e/> accessed 2 March 2015).

complex desires for legal and cultural citizenship, upward mobility, and belonging, as mediated through religious conversion, rather than as (only) resistance towards the Thai authorities and state control in the sense of anarchic, ‘deliberate and reactive statelessness’ (Scott 2009: x) intended to escape the ‘oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys’ (ibid. ix).

My theoretical framework is inspired by Appadurai’s (2004) notion of the sub-altern ‘capacity to aspire’, which he characterises as a ‘cultural capacity’ and ‘future-oriented logic of development’ in which the economically deprived may ‘find the resources required to contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty’ (Appadurai 2004: 59). As Appadurai argues, theorising aspiration in such a way provides a way to overcome the long-standing opposition between ‘culture’ and ‘development’, wherein which:

Culture has been viewed as a matter of one or other kind of pastness – the keywords here are habit, custom, heritage, tradition. On the other hand, development is always seen in terms of the future – plans, hopes, goals, targets...culture is opposed to development, as tradition is opposed to newness, and habit to calculation (Appadurai 2004: 60).

Appadurai further elaborates that the capacity to aspire is a ‘navigational capacity’ which is unequally distributed between the more and less privileged members of society, with the consequence that ‘relative poverty means a smaller number of aspirational nodes and a thinner, weaker sense of the pathways’ – in short, a ‘more brittle horizon of aspirations’ (Appadurai 2004: 69). Such an approach is also helpful insofar as it offers the possibility of addressing, as Formoso (2010) contends, the overemphasis in studies of the hill peoples of Zomia to ‘limit their perspective to upland communities of the past. Entirely focused on the ethnohistory of mountain peoples, they convey the idea that they do not exist any more in the features that characterise them in contrast to state societies’ (Formoso 2010: 316).

Formoso also provides a practical understanding of the ways that ethnic minorities negotiate their relationships with the states in which they are embedded, suggesting that:

Hill peoples develop relationships with lowland state societies that are more complex and ambiguous than usually portrayed...political and religious acculturation by lowland societies sometimes proves to have been instrumental in the perpetuation of a specific identity under the guise of surface assimilation...hill peoples often take advantage of new forms of partnership resulting from globalisation to renegotiate their image and status more favourably, and to counter the pressure exerted by the dominant society (Formoso 2010: 313).

In this paper, I argue that in the Buddhist sphere, ‘negotiation’ and ‘aspiration’ entail working within the bounds of the nation-state’s assimilation and integration policies as not merely a form of submitting to state control, but as a pathway to pursuing the goal of upward mobility through education and social support. In the Christian domain, this involves engaging with transnational religious projects in order to obtain much-needed addiction treatment at a minimal cost, something which is out of reach for many ethnic minority people who lack legal citizenship status in Thailand (and hence, access to state-subsidised addiction treatment services).⁴ At the same time, however, I do not suggest that transnational networks offer a simple pathway to circumventing marginalisation. Similarly, Thai national integration projects, as pointed out by Sakboon (2013), are contradictory in nature, offering possibilities for inclusion, while at the same time circumscribing them.

The Evolving Drug Trade in the Golden Triangle

Opium cultivation has traditionally been a way of life and an important source of livelihood for many of the highland villagers inhabiting the Southeast Asian Massif. For instance, among the Akha of northern Laos, opium played an important role in trading for goods and livestock, hiring labour, rituals and ceremonies, recreational use, and as medicine for a variety of physical ailments (P. Cohen 2013: 182). Hmong and Yao have been the predominant ethnic groups involved in growing opium, although the Akha, Lisu, and Lahu have also been cultivators (McCoy et al 1972). Communities of these ethnic groups, which migrated from China to Southeast Asia, brought with them knowledge of opium poppy cultivation (Chouvy 2011: 15). A great many tended to settle along the China-Bangkok caravan routes, in areas above 1000 metres where the climate was favourable to the cultivation of opium (Crooker 2007: 18).

However, the development of the drug trade in the Golden Triangle cannot be comprehended outside of the role played by the historical and political backdrop of imperialistic expansion by European powers and the violent ethnic and border

4 In Chiang Rai province, there are outpatient programs offered in two public hospitals: Chiang Rai Prachanukroh hospital, which offers a four-month Matrix program for 4800 THB, and Wiangkean hospital, which offers a four-month modified Matrix program and services at a methadone clinic accessible for 2500 THB (website of the Thanyarak Institute: www.thanyarak.go.th, accessed 5 April, 2015).

tensions and chronic instability that have plagued the region for decades, and which continue to shape its political, social, and economic dynamics in complex ways. For instance, monopolies on the production and trade of opium were instrumental to the viability and profitability of the European colonies in Southeast Asia, and were a significant factor in the development of the drug trade in the region. This was especially the case after the increase in contraband opium grown in Myanmar and China became a competitive threat to exorbitantly priced Indian opium imported by the British to their Asian colonies. This forced the British and Siamese authorities to legalise the local production and the export of Burmese and Chinese opium. In French Indochina, disruption of supplies from the Middle East after World War II broke out, led to the legalisation of opium production in Laos (Chouvy 2011: 7, 15-18).

Following these earlier catalysts, a dramatic boom in opium production in the region was intimately linked to political events in China in 1949, when the communist People's Liberation Army (PLA) defeated Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) Army. A similarly instrumental stimulus was the Cold War and the American response to the communist threat. As Chouvy points out, the participation of the CIA in the conflict between the PLA and KMT as well as French fiscal and military policies in Indochina were vital to the maturation of the Southeast Asian drug trade:

The Golden Triangle emerged all the more easily because its growing production supplied over one million Southeast Asian opium consumers and offered funding opportunities for French and United States covert operations...this situation was to have unexpected consequences, increasing the tension and conflict inherent to the region. From 1948 on, the independence of Burma and the ethnic conflict that ensued, coupled with the growing influence of Chinese communism throughout Southeast Asia, considerably increased opium production and trade in the region (Chouvy 2011: 18).⁵

Secretly supported by the CIA in their struggles against the PLA, the KMT funded much of their political activities by handling a great majority of the opium traded from Myanmar to Thailand and Laos from bases in northern Thailand (McCoy et al 1972; Kramer et al 2009; Chouvy 2011: 65). During World War II, the Japanese encouraged an alliance between the KMT and Phin Choonhavan, then-commander of the northern Thai army, which at that time was occupying Myanmar's Shan states.

5 For a detailed discussion of the role of covert French and U.S. military operations in Laos and Vietnam in stimulating local and global opium and heroin trafficking, see McCoy et al (1972).

Together with two other members of his military clique, Sarit Thanarat and Phao Sriyanond, the three powerful figures went on to monopolise opium and heroin trafficking in Thailand for years, transforming the country into the major regional drug-trafficking hub that it continues to be today (Chouvy 2011: 68).

The 1960s and 1970s were a period of booming illicit opium and heroin production in the Golden Triangle region. Organised crime rackets and armed insurgency movements in Myanmar were direct financial beneficiaries, funding their supply of arms and their political activities with profits from the drug trade: ‘the opium economy and the war economy have clearly nurtured one another in a country that has suffered from internal war for the past sixty years and where the world’s longest armed insurgency still continues’ (Chouvy 2011: 24). A major catalyst in the rise of the ethnic militia in Myanmar was the insurgency within the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in 1989. The rebellion was fuelled by ongoing discontent within the CPB as a result of ethnic tensions between the various groups that comprised the party, including the Wa, Kachin, Shan, Kokang Chinese, and the aging Maoist leadership (Lintner and Black 2009: 17).

Another significant factor was the CPB leadership’s crackdown (presumably due to Chinese pressure) on the drug trade, which generated lucrative profits for the local party commanders. A ceasefire arrangement with Myanmar’s ruling military junta provided certain of the ethnic militia groups that emerged from the CPB split, such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA), unofficial permission to continue their business operations in exchange for promises not to attack government forces and to sever ties with other rebel forces, including the pro-democracy activists who rose up against military rule in 1988 and the ethnic rebels fuelling insurgency efforts along the border, such as the Karen, Mon, Karenni, and Pa-O (ibid. 18-25). Subsequently, after the collapse of the CPB, the UWSA rose to dominance, funding their separatist political activities with profits from opium, heroin, and nowadays, methamphetamine production and trafficking.

For over two decades, from around 1974 until 1994, the Burmese drug lord Khun Sa and his anti-government Mong Tai (previously, ‘Shan United’) Army commanded a massive proportion of the opium and heroin trade in the Golden Triangle.⁶ When Khun Sa finally ‘surrendered’ to the Burmese government in 1996 and ceased his activities in the drug trade,⁷ control shifted into the hands of another Burmese drug

6 Born as Zhang Qifu, Khun Sa adopted the name Burmese name ‘Khun Sa’ himself. It translates as ‘Prince Prosperous’.

7 Khun Sa retired to a luxurious life as a business tycoon in Yangon (The Economist, 2007).

lord, Lo Hsing Han, who managed to rebuild the empire he had previously lost to Khun Sa (McCoy et al 1972; Lintner and Black 2009; Chouvy 2011). Furthermore, as Kramer et al (2009: 11) point out, although the KMT has no longer been active as an armed force since the 1980s, the trading routes and networks established during that time continue to exist, and many of the key actors in the regional drug trade – which is still dominated by ethnic Chinese networks – emerged from, or have close connections with, the KMT.

In the meantime, patterns of drug production and usage in the region were changing. Until the 1960s, opium had been exported out of the region for refining elsewhere (mainly in the Mediterranean basin) and heroin was unavailable locally, unless it was imported. However, from the late 1960s onwards, lower production costs saw an increase in heroin refining in the region and the consequent local availability of the drug at relatively low prices, which led to the emergence of markets for it (Stimson 1996). From the late 1950s to the late 1970s, as the local supply of opium decreased, there was a gradual transition from opium smoking to heroin smoking, and subsequently, to heroin injection (Poshyachinda 1988). The shift to intravenous heroin use was followed by an HIV-AIDS epidemic among injecting drug users, the epicentre of which was northern Thailand (Gray 1998; Razak et al 2003).

Intense cross-border eradication efforts in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a dramatic decrease in illegal opium cultivation in the Golden Triangle and the surpassing of Myanmar by Afghanistan as the world's largest illegal producer of opium.⁸ However, rather than solving the drug problem, the crackdown led instead to a shift towards the large-scale production and trafficking of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) by the drug gangs formerly involved in producing and trafficking opium and heroin. Although the Thai government began criminalising ATS in 1996, the supply reduction of methamphetamine pills – or *yaba*, as they are called in Thailand – has proven to be a challenge to authorities. Whilst opium fields can be located via satellite and ground surveillance, and heroin production requires heavy and costly equipment, methamphetamine laboratories are mobile and inexpensive to set up and are much more difficult to detect (Chouvy and Meissonnier 2004; Lintner and Black 2009).

The situation in the Golden Triangle today is one of a thriving market for methamphetamines, as well as an increasing revival of opium and heroin production and

8 Thailand officially began eradicating opium fields in 1984, 15 years after the commencement of the Royal Project. By 2013, the UNODC estimates that only 702 hectares of poppy cultivation occurred in Thailand, compared with 89,500 hectares in Myanmar (UNODC 2014b: annex I, vi)

trafficking. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that the trade in opiates and heroin in Southeast Asia exceeded 16.30 billion USD in 2014 (UNODC 2014a: 3), while the street value of methamphetamine pills produced in Burma was projected to be approximately 8.5 billion USD (UNODC 2013). Levels of poppy cultivation in Thailand are currently almost non-existent, but have been on the increase in Burma and Lao PDR, rising to 63800 hectares in 2014 from 61200 hectares in 2013 (UNODC 2014a: 3).⁹ The exact volume of ATS manufactured is difficult to quantify accurately due to the transient nature of laboratories. Of the 144 tons of ATS seized globally, half was seized in North America and a quarter in East and Southeast Asia (UNODC 2014b: xii). The Official Narcotics Control Board of Thailand (ONCB) reports seizing over 4.6 tons of methamphetamines in 2010 (ONCB 2010: 53). However, this is generally considered to be only a small fraction of the actual amount of methamphetamine flowing into Thailand, which was estimated in 2013 to be as high as 1.4 billion pills (UNODC 2013). The bulk of these illicit substances make their way to the rest of Asia through the borders of northern Thailand (Chouvy and Meissonier 2004; Kramer et al 2009; Chouvy 2011; UNODC 2014a; Zocatelli 2014).

Inequality and Alternative Development

A setting abundant with the wild natural beauty of lush hills and mountains, hot springs, idyllic waterfalls, and shady streams, interspersed by vast stretches of lowland paddy fields, Chiang Rai is home to a large number of ethnic minority groups, which migrated to the area from southwestern China, the Lao PDR, and Myanmar in successive waves from around the 1880s. Although not yet anywhere near as heavily developed as the city of Chiang Mai, its more famous northern counterpart (which has managed to earn itself the dubious moniker of ‘Little Bangkok’), Chiang Rai is nevertheless a significant tourist draw in its own right for its adventure trekking and proximity to the infamous Golden Triangle. These attractions revolve in

9 Current estimates place the total amount of opium produced in the area in 2014 at approximately 762 tonnes. From these figures, the UNODC further estimates that approximately 76 tonnes of heroin of unknown purity is produced in Burma and Lao PDR. The overwhelming majority of opium poppy cultivation continues to take place in Burma, particularly in Shan state (UNODC 2014a: 3).

particular around the ethnic tourism promoted by the Thai government that focuses on the colourful traditional dress and exotic customs of the Lahu, Akha, Karen, Yao, Lisu, Hmong, and other minority groups which make the area their home.

During my visits to an Akha village called Baan Namsai, located on Doi Fah to the northwest of Chiang Rai, I would often spot 74-year-old Api sitting cross-legged on the ground with the other Akha grandmothers along the narrow path connecting Baan Namsai with the nearby waterfall and tea plantation.¹⁰ As she sits, Api squints through her glasses and painstakingly sews beads and shells onto cotton strings to make bracelets, or weaves colourful patterns onto bags and belts. The finished product will be displayed on a cotton cloth in front of her along with the other accessories and trinkets she has made, in hopes that it will catch the eye of one or another trekker as they march by under the watchful eye of their guide, wielding makeshift bamboo hiking staffs and sweating profusely in the stifling humidity. The picture is postcard perfect, down to Api's betel-stained teeth, colourful clothes, and ready laugh, an image that has been reproduced countless times in the tourist-oriented literature to depict the tranquil nature of life in the remote mountain villages on Thailand's border.

Api's life story lurks behind this idyllic-seeming surface. In my chats with her, she revealed that she was dependent for many years on opium, heroin, and the methamphetamine pill *yama*.¹¹ Her daughter and son-in-law were also addicts. Around fifteen years ago, Api's pregnant daughter was diagnosed with HIV, as was her partner. Both succumbed to AIDS when the child was just an infant, leaving Api as the sole caretaker for her granddaughter. Fortunately, the virus was not transmitted to the baby. After her daughter and son-in-law died, Api managed to quit drugs and supported herself and her now-teenage granddaughter on her meagre income, which came to an average of around one thousand baht per month.¹² Her husband is long dead and her shelter is dilapidated. Having never been formally educated, Api also sometimes works as a day labourer in order to make ends meet and support her granddaughter's education.

10 *Doi* is the northern Thai word for 'mountain'; *fah* is the Thai word for 'sky'. 'Api' means 'grandmother' in the Akha language.

11 The original name for *yaba*. *Yama* literally translates as 'horse drug'. In July 1996 Thai authorities changed the name from *yama*, which has connotations of enabling the user to work tirelessly as a horse, to *yaba*, or 'crazy drug', in order to convey to the public the drug's harmful effects (Lintner and Black 2009: 2).

12 Approximately 27 euros at the time of writing.

Stories such as that of Api and her granddaughter, in which poverty, drugs, and HIV-AIDS intersect, are not uncommon.¹³ Hence, while the verdant mountain setting draws visitors for its spectacular scenery, who come to stay in cosy guesthouses perched on misty mountaintops, to step inside the quaint-looking bamboo huts that serve as shelter for the most disadvantaged villagers, is to see a very different picture emerge. Foul-smelling rivulets of water ooze underfoot because there is no plumbing, and rags and rubbish lie in discarded piles on the mud floor or on dusty mattresses. Smoke from wood-fire stoves chokes the air. Infants blink listlessly in makeshift hammocks, rocked by blank-eyed siblings with dirt-streaked faces barely older than themselves. Parents are often absent, labouring in the fields, plantations, factories, construction sites, restaurants, hotels, gas stations, and in other menial roles in Chiang Rai city or further afield in Chiang Mai or Bangkok.¹⁴ Outside the tourist 'bubble' (E. Cohen 1972) of colourful costumes and exotic languages and cultural customs, the situation for many ethnic minority people in Chiang Rai and other parts of northern Thailand is a dire one.

High rates of addiction are an increasingly observed feature of uneven transitions to neoliberal capitalist modernity and incorporation within the nation-state. For instance, Lui's (2010) research among the Nuosu in Sichuan province in southwestern China traces a connection between urban labour migration, the transition to modernity, and heroin consumption and addiction among young Nuosu men.¹⁵ Zocatelli's

13 Upon the onset of the HIV epidemic in Thailand in the late 1980s, the occurrence of the disease was highest in the region of northern Thailand, with a prevalence in the population of 50 in 100,000 compared to an estimated 580,000 people who were living with HIV-AIDS across the whole of Thailand at the end of 2005. The most cases of HIV-AIDS were concentrated in Chiang Rai province (Sirisopana et al 1996; MOPH 2005; UNAIDS/WHO 2006, as cited by Keereekamsuk et al 2007: 1062).

14 Urban migration to engage in sex work is seen as a particularly widespread problem. The subsequent return of the women and girls to villages has been observed to have spurred drug addiction and HIV-AIDS epidemics in villages throughout the region (Kammerer and Symonds 1992). Montreevat and Pongsakunpaisan's study of over two hundred highland villages showed that at least 36% of 1,683 women and girls worked outside cash-poor villages as prostitutes (Montreevat and Pongsakunpaisan, 1997: 290). Feingold also notes that undocumented women in the upper Mekong region are particularly vulnerable to trafficked or non-trafficked sex work and the related threat of HIV-AIDS as a result of being less likely to command the national language or other minority languages, causing them to end up in non-traditional forms of employment and to have less access to information about the wider world (Feingold 1998: 5; see also Feingold 2000).

15 Although Nuosu community leaders tried to cope with the crisis by making use of traditional kinship and authority structures, their efforts were weakened by the growing

(2014) study of the heroin epidemic among large numbers of youth in Qilin city in Yunnan province, in southern China, shows similar factors to be involved, including lack of employment and study opportunities leading to labour migration, increased financial independence, weakening of traditional kinship ties, and the individualisation of ambitions and desires.

These examples share some striking similarities with the situation in northern Thailand, where the history of opium production by highland ethnic minorities in northern Thailand remains a core part of the region's identity today. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Thai government began introducing alternative cash crops in an effort to foster development in the region and combat the growing drug and communist insurgency problem (Vaddhanaphuti 2005). Yet, in spite of these initiatives, studies have shown that crop eradication and the lack of viable economic alternatives have had a detrimental effect on communities in the region, and led to greater poverty and inequality. For instance, among the Akha in northwestern Laos and northern Thailand, Lyttleton (2004) found that the tension between cultural differences and national development led to a number of social disjunctions including large-scale migration to urban centres, widespread uptake of heroin and ATS, engagement in sex work, and epidemics of HIV-AIDS and malnutrition. In another study, Gillogly (2008) shows how opium interdiction profoundly changed the nature of social relations among the Lisu in northern Thailand, decreasing household autonomy, delaying the age of first marriage, and leading to the re-emergence of the patrilineal organisational structure as a result of land access regulations. While young Lisu men experimenting with smoking opium was not uncommon, the period of experimentation normally ended with marriage. However, the combination of delayed marriage, difficulties establishing an autonomous household, cessation of opium production, and the increased availability of heroin, saw addiction rates among young men increase dramatically (Gillogly 2008: 704).

The most prominent alternative development strategy in northern Thailand is the Royal Project, a state-run initiative that began in 1984, and which subsidises the irrigation, packaging and transportation of fresh produce grown by highland ethnic minority people. Through the Royal Project's chic, glossy shop fronts, this produce is

influence of the state, the expanding capitalist market, and young people's growing sense of aspiration and individuality to expand their horizons beyond their remote community. The failure of interventions by the state and international agencies as a result of bureaucratic inadequacies and lack of understanding of local knowledge and social relations also played a major role (Lui 2010).

sold – at rather inflated prices – to affluent middle and upper class Thais and expatriates. Conveniently and hygienically wrapped in glossy plastic packages and sold in upmarket shopping malls in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and other urban centres around Thailand, the Royal Project's marketing strategy is based on providing consumers with the assurance that their patronage of the store directly contributes to 'saving the "hill tribes"' from their nefarious, uncivilised, opium-growing past, and bringing them into sync with the modern market economy, while also highlighting the benevolence and oversight of the authorities who made the transition possible. Doi Thung, another ubiquitous, state-subsidised project, markets products such as coffee, macadamia nuts, and ethnic handicrafts such as clothing and bags designed to appeal to trendy city hippies and world travellers, again at outrageous prices. Taking centre stage at its stores, is a UNODC-endorsed sign, which declares that any purchase will contribute to 'the achievement of a drug-free world'.

In addition to Doi Thung and similar programs, there are an increasing number of trendy cafes hawking locally grown Arabica coffee and numerous varieties of green, black and Oolong tea direct from the mountains. Their logos – plastered everywhere from shop windows, to sofa cushions, menus, and Styrofoam cups – feature caricatured renderings of minority men and women in exotic headdresses. The sprawling coffee and tea plantations situated in the hills and mountains and which supply the cafes with their aromatic brews fuel a burgeoning tourism industry that has seen an enormous influx of Chinese tourists in recent years. All such ventures, whether government driven or privately owned, operate on the same marketing principle of replacing a 'backwards', illegal, cash crop with commodities that align more closely with the imperatives and identity of the modern capitalist nation-state.

On the one hand, some members of ethnic minority groups *have* derived significant financial gains from the economic development in the area. The head of an NGO prominent in Chiang Rai's Akha community revealed to me that at one well-known coffee-growing mountain towards the south of Chiang Rai, the villagers had banded together to create a company through which they had borrowed, in his estimation, more than 700 million baht from the bank. However, rather than channelling the funds towards expanding the business, he reported that people used the money to buy expensive cars and build large houses, with some mansions on the mountain being worth at least three or four million baht. In his view, the advantages of the increased flow of cash were of an ambiguous nature, leading to the emergence of intense material competition and conflict between friends and neighbours. At a nearby animist/Buddhist Lahu village, where the villagers were owner-operators of thriving coffee,

fern, and vegetable plantations, my informant confirmed that involvement with the Royal Projects had been a positive source of development in that particular village, although there were many other villages where such projects had started off well before deteriorating due to mismanagement or conflict.

Those who had managed to capitalise upon the tourism industry also managed a degree of financial success, and in a couple of villages where I conducted fieldwork, which were located in close proximity to one another, the success of a local Akha guesthouse owner who ran his own business was singled out as something to be aspired towards, earning him much respect from the rest of the community. He also employed many of the villagers in his guesthouse as tour guides for the foreign visitors who passed through, thereby providing the chance to earn livelihoods to numerous others in the locality. The same was true of a young entrepreneurial Lahu man who had managed to save enough cash and accumulate enough contacts working as a freelance trekking guide to establish his own tour company, based out of Chiang Rai city.

These were the exceptions. In general, I found much more evidence of unemployment, underemployment, and economic insecurity in the villages where I conducted interviews. As previous research has highlighted, lack of citizenship is a root cause underlying exclusion and economic and political marginalisation among highlanders, having a deep impact on both physical and social mobility, educational and employment opportunities, and access to human rights (Sakboon 2013). Rather than being involved in running their own businesses, most of the villagers with whom I spoke, reported that they were employed as day labourers (*khon rap jaang*). Working as a day labourer is one of the few options available to the many highland ethnic minority people without the legal status or educational qualifications or vocational skills to engage in conventional employment. It is economically precarious, and often, extremely physically demanding work.

Unfortunately, due to the large numbers of unregistered migrants in ethnic minority communities as well as the lack of reliable and current census data in existence, it is difficult to accurately estimate levels of education and household income and therefore, contextualise the level of success achieved by public development projects or private ventures. Fujioka (2002) reports that in surveys conducted by the Department of Public Welfare, the annual per capita income for ethnic minority individuals was approximately 2,500 baht (about US\$100) in the mid-1990s, with an approximate household income for a family of five to six persons of around 14,000 baht. In contrast, national household averages in 1994 and 1996 were 61,903 baht and

76,804 baht respectively, and in northern Thailand averages were 30,607 baht in 1994 and 38,228 baht in 1996 (Fujioka 2002: 3).

Through informal discussions during the course of my fieldwork, I found that although the minimum wage in the urban centres is now 300 baht per day, some individuals reported earning as little as 50 to 150 baht, for a day's worth of labour in the field or in a tea or coffee plantation up in the mountains. Additionally, some of the female villagers made and sold handicrafts to tourists, earning an inconsistent income of one to two thousand baht per month on average,¹⁶ while the most disadvantaged families collected firewood, bamboo, or banana leaves from the forest to sell to shops in Chiang Rai city, the latter of which would send trucks up into the mountains to pick up the goods on a weekly basis. A Yao woman I interviewed, one of the poorest in her village, revealed that she supported herself and her children by exchanging the bundles of firewood she gathered from the forest for small canisters of rice from her neighbours.

Survey data places secondary school (13 to 18 years of age) attendance rates at 82.4% in northern Thailand, compared to 79.8% in Thailand overall (Thailand NSO 2006). However, these figures do not disaggregate between school-aged youth residing in urban centres and those residing in remote upland communities. Neither do they take into account undocumented youths in hill communities. Hence, they cannot be taken as an accurate representation of education levels in the area. While Thai citizenship is no longer a prerequisite for access to education, many ethnic minority youths are unable to complete secondary or vocational school as many of their families don't have sufficient economic resources to support their educations or because they live too far away from the nearest school. Often, children and young people are needed to perform menial work in order to contribute to the household income. For those individuals who have managed to negotiate the lengthy and complicated process of acquiring Thai ID cards and attaining legal status, many challenges remain. For instance, even if a certain level of education is achieved, obstacles can arise when searching for employment in terms of intense competition, negative stereotypes, and discrimination. These factors often result in ethnic minority candidates being passed over in favour of equally or less-qualified ethnic Thai.¹⁷ As a result, horizons can be

16 Approximately 28-57 euros at the time of writing.

17 For instance, one Lahu man I spoke with who had attained a bachelor's degree in law at a provincial university was working as a massage therapist alongside his mother (who had never been formally educated) as a result of not being able to find employment appropriate to his degree.

extremely limited and the cycle of unemployment (or underemployment) difficult to break.

Yaba: Keeping Up to Speed with the Modern Economy

Opium was officially outlawed at the end of 1958 in Thailand. As we have seen, however, this did not herald the end of the drug trade in the area. As a result of crop eradication efforts, the pattern of drug usage in the region changed from opium smoking, to heroin injection, to an escalation in ATS abuse in the late 1990s (Chouvy and Meissonnier 2004).¹⁸ As both a recreational and labour drug, methamphetamine abuse cuts across demographic boundaries with users ranging from manual labourers to hard-partying urban socialites and teenagers, the latter of whom are targeted by producers through the manufacturing of *yaba* pills in bright colours and candy flavours. The main market for ATS is Thailand, with usage spreading across South-east Asia and China (Chouvy and Meissonnier 2004; Lintner and Black 2009). Some observers suggest that the transition from opium to heroin was the result of aggressive marketing efforts on the part of traffickers, as well as what has been described as a pervasive sense of hopelessness and oppression amongst highlanders (Choupah and Naess 1997; Gebert and Kesmanee 1997, and Kammerer 2000, as cited by Lyttleton 2004: 922-923). As Lintner and Black point out,

[*Yaba*] is an even more serious threat to society than heroin ever was, as the consumers are not only 'traditional' drug users – young men and some women in the slums of Bangkok, juvenile delinquents, and other outcasts – but also high school and university students, workers in factories and on construction sites, long-distance bus and truck drivers, and ordinary partygoers. Millions of people across Thailand have become regular or occasional users. And, unlike heroin, *yaba* has successfully transcended socioeconomic barriers, creating a new wave of drug addiction on an unprecedented scale in Thailand (Lintner and Black 2009: ix-x).

18 See Joe-Laidler (2005) for a discussion of a similar shift in Hong Kong from opium to heroin and later, 'club drugs' such as ketamine and ecstasy, as a result of opium prohibition in the post WWII period. Dikotter, Laamann and Zhou (2004) observe a similar occurrence as a result of British prohibition of opium in nineteenth and early twentieth-century mainland China, which resulted in the transformation of drug culture from that of opium used mainly for recreational and medicinal use, to the consumption of far more harmful drugs such as heroin, morphine, and cocaine.

As the UNODC notes, reliable survey data on the prevalence of drug use and addiction in Asia is unavailable, although tentative estimates suggest that cannabis is the most commonly used substance with annual prevalence of use at 1.9% in those aged 15-64 years, followed by ATS at 0.7%, ecstasy at 0.4%, opiates at 0.35%, and cocaine at 0.05% (UNODC 2014b: 15). China accounts for approximately 70% of heroin users in Asia, and is the single largest heroin market in the world, with the number of users estimated to be over 1.3 million. An increase in heroin use was also reported in Lao PDR, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand in 2014, although, as a result of an increase in methamphetamine use, overall heroin use as a proportion of all drug users has actually declined (UNODC 2014a: 3). In 2007, the estimated number of opiate users in Thailand was 96,284 (UNODC 2014a: 3). In comparison, in the same year the Ministry of Public Health recorded 62,905 persons that sought rehabilitation treatment, a figure which rose to 120,153 in 2010 (ONCB 2010: 74). The main substance of addiction was methamphetamine, at 83% of treated patients, compared with 2.2% for opium and 1.4% for heroin (ibid. 33).

In one small Lahu village in the Chiang Rai area, the staff of the local NGO with which I volunteered estimated up to 90 per cent of villagers, from pre-teen youths to elderly women, to be addicted to *yaba*. There, we often went to visit an elderly Lahu woman, and her grandchildren. Just metres away from their bamboo hut was a ramshackle drug den, holes in the walls patched with rotting wood and faded cloth, which we observed to have a steady flow of visitors, causing the NGO workers to dub it 'Seven-Eleven', after the ubiquitous convenience store chain that can be found all over Thailand and which never shuts its doors. Keeping the children away from such negative influences was a constant challenge, especially given the dearth of possibilities available for a bright future.¹⁹ We also came across a number of cases in the same village in which children were regularly exposed to the drug use of parents or other villagers. Additionally, when parents are addicts, the nutrition and education of the children can be neglected, a consequence of the channelling of already scarce finances towards the purchase of drugs. One Lahu couple reported earning three to

¹⁹ One of the Lahu woman's grandsons, eighteen-year-old Jador, had graduated from secondary school and was now working as a petrol station attendant in Chiang Rai city. Although he only earned minimum wage, she was proud that he was holding down a steady job, paying off his own motorcycle, and saving enough money to help support her and his siblings. She hoped the same for her younger grandson, who was now 14 years old and living with a foster family closer to his school so that he could attend lessons more regularly.

five baht per kilo²⁰ for the banana leaves that they collected from the forest to sell to a shop in Chiang Rai city. They had four children, the youngest only a few months old. Both parents were *yaba* addicts, and spent a large proportion of their income on methamphetamine pills, leaving little to spare for the children.

Lyttleton (2004) and A. Cohen (2014) both report on the significance of *yaba* consumption as a mode of engagement in modern, capitalist and consumer-oriented society. Among the Akha in Laos, Lyttleton suggests that ATS became a ‘symbol of a social ethos geared to increased production, money income and a consumer culture oriented to the pursuit of pleasure through purchase’ (Lyttleton 2004: 916; see also P. Cohen and Lyttleton 2002). Similarly, A. Cohen observes that in Chiang Mai, ‘with increased leisure time and spending power, *yaba* – like music and fashion – became another global commodity for consumption and a lifestyle choice for many young Thai’ (A. Cohen 2014: 778).

In the course of my own fieldwork, informants described drug use as both a pleasurable activity and as a form of relief from financial and personal stress. In addition, for many of the ethnic minority villagers with whom I discussed the topic, *yaba* consumption was seen as a way for tired bodies to withstand the intense physical demands of the hard labour that is crucial to their economic survival. The phenomenon has been reported by journalists among jade miners addicted to heroin in Myanmar’s Kachin state (Kessel 2014; Al Jazeera 2014), and rubber plantation workers addicted to *yaba* in northeastern Thailand (Presser and Drahmoune 2014). In Laos, Lyttleton (2004) reports that Akha labourers were paid in methamphetamines as well as cash and opium for labouring in the rice fields or in construction projects (Lyttleton 2004: 928). In a study based on methamphetamine use among young underclass men in a Philippine port, Lasco (2014) reported that *shabu*, as it is called in the Philippines, served as an important performance enhancer that allowed for a greater chance of success in the competitive informal economy.

To say that blotting out the opium fields did little to solve Thailand’s drug problem is a major understatement. Initiatives such as the Royal Project and others like it are lauded worldwide as hugely successful examples of crop substitution campaigns. Yet, while many ethnic minority people are involved in these economic networks to one extent or another, whether as labourers in the fields, investors with a stake in the businesses, or as trekking guides, guesthouse owners, or hospitality workers, it is safe to say that the advantages of the alternative development projects have been

20 Approximately 8-15 euro cents at the time of writing.

uneven, failing to reach individuals and communities equally. Instead, the evidence suggests that incorporation into modern economic networks has exacerbated, rather than alleviated, the drug problem in its various guises – not least in terms of placing the burden on wage labourers to perform competitively in the capitalist market by creating a situation in which methamphetamine use and abuse is perceived as a necessary evil in order to survive economically. Not least, crop eradication efforts and alternative development programs fail to address the ongoing political instability and ethnic tensions within the region, which, combined with high-level corruption and sophisticated transnational networks, drive the local and global drug trade (Lintner and Black 2009; Chouvy 2011).

Ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's controversial 2003 'War On Drugs' was another strategy that failed to address the fundamental causes of the drug problem, resulting instead in over 2500 extrajudicial killings and the incarceration of low-level, predominantly ethnic minority, traffickers and drug dependents (Mutebi 2003). The majority of deaths occurred in northern Thailand, with authorities blaming inter-gang warfare for the high number of killings (Lintner and Black 2009: 6). In addition to such harsh suppression campaigns, the Thai government has also implemented its anti-drug and border security initiatives through softer campaigns aimed at inculcating political loyalty in ethnic minorities. These initiatives, known as the Phra Dhammajarik programs, operate by providing avenues for disadvantaged ethnic minority youths to attain formal education. They also focus on drug education and mass Buddhist conversion. Next, I examine one of these programs, which focuses on the work of Phra Khruba Neau Chai Kositto and his disciples at the Golden Horse monastery in Mae Chan, in Chiang Rai province.

The Golden Horse Monastery: Constructing Loyal Buddhist Subjects

The sight of saffron-robed monks enveloped in the light of dawn, making their way through the streets on their morning alms round, is a familiar one in Thailand. Bowl in hand, they are met by lay people who offer the monks their daily sustenance, heads bowed in reverence to a practice that stretches back millennia. However, high up in the fog-covered mountains of Chiang Rai, near the Burmese border, the villages are far flung and the paths, such as they are, are inaccessible by car or motorbike. Instead,

a small group of tattooed mendicants subvert what Scott (2009) calls the ‘friction of terrain’ by horseback, traversing the steep and rocky trails not only to receive *dana* (‘donations’) from their devotees, but to offer, in exchange, blessings, *dhamma* teachings, and much-needed worldly provisions: clothes, food, blankets, and school supplies.

Known in Thailand as *phra kee ma bintabhaat*, or literally, ‘monks who ride horses to collect alms’, the unconventional monastery and its charismatic abbot, Phra Khruba Neua Chai Kositto, have become widely known through a 2003 Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) campaign lauding it as one of the treasures of ‘Unseen Thailand’, as well as a famous documentary by Dutch film-maker Mark Verkeke. As a result, the Golden Horse Monastery currently attracts its fair share of both foreign and domestic tourists. The monastery is extremely popular with Thai amulet enthusiasts hoping to capture the potent charisma, or *barami*, of its abbot, who is surrounded by tales of invincibility and strength in the face of attacks by knife, gun, and poison-wielding assailants, including henchmen of the Burmese drug lord Khun Sa, himself. The title of ‘Phra Khruba’ is not an official title, but rather, a term of honour given by lay people to revered monks in northern Thailand. Phra Khruba’s reputation is bolstered by his former career as a professional Muay Thai boxer. Indeed, the *sak yant* (‘sacred protective tattoos’) covering the abbot and some of his monks can give them a somewhat menacing air.

Rather than being a drug rehabilitation facility, the core of Phra Khruba and his disciples’ work consists of outreach, anti-drug, and development work with Lahu, Lisu, Akha, Yao, and other ethnic minority communities in the border regions. A great majority of this work is performed in the Mae Chan and Mae Fah Luang districts through approximately twelve outreach temples where reconstruction and renovation are taking place. Financial support for the monastery and its projects comes from donations from Phra Khruba’s disciples and lay supporters, as well as through donations from the general public, the Royal Thai Army, and the sale of amulets and other sacred paraphernalia. The Golden Horse monastery’s activities centre on four main projects under the official patronage of the Supreme Patriarch, head of the central order of Buddhist monks in Thailand. These include reforestation initiatives and conservation of horse breeds. In this paper, I narrow my analysis to the aspects of the monastery’s programs that focus on Buddhist proselytisation and the cultivation of Buddhist Thai identity.

In order to implement the ‘Saint of the Mountain Project’ (*Khrong Karn Nak Bun Haeng Khun Khao*), teams of monks and novices from the monastery travel long

distances by horseback to reach the difficult-to-access ethnic minority communities along the Thai-Burmese border, with the aim of encouraging loyalty to the Thai nation through the propagation of the Buddhist religion. As Platz points out in relation to the Phra Dhammajarik program, ‘more important than teaching Buddhism, these teams taught that becoming a good Thai citizen meant to love the King and the nation’ (Platz 2003: 476). Monks are also based at remote border outposts for months at a time in order to become familiar with local ethnic minority communities, the latter of whose Buddhist ‘conversion’ and religious practice typically revolves around offering food to the monks or bringing amulets and other items to be blessed. These activities are conducted in conjunction with the ‘Sending Warmth Into The Mountains’ project (*Khrong Karn Mop Ai Un Suu Khun Khao*), which provides ethnic minority villagers with food, blankets, clothing, educational resources and equipment, medicines, and other essential provisions and supplies.

The monastery also provides humanitarian assistance to villages in the area affected by flooding, storms, fire, and other natural disasters. In addition, Phra Khruba and his disciples encourage Buddhist activities in the area through the construction and renovation of temples along the Thai-Burmese border, spread through the subdistricts of Mae Salong Nai, Thoed Thai, Khun Korn, and Sri Kham. The project also involves an educational campaign and the development of villagers’ vocational skills for the purpose of protecting the environment and conserving natural resources. For instance, the monastery provides juvenile coffee plants as well as agricultural training to local ethnic minority farmers in order to provide them with sustainable livelihoods and ostensibly less reason to engage in the regional drug trade.

Another significant sphere of activities undertaken by the monastery is the ‘Ordination Project and Training Camp for Moral and Ethical Behavior’ (*Khrong Karn Buat Op Rom Kai Khunatham Jariyatham*). The main aim of the project is to instil a sense of moral virtue, Thai culture, and responsibility towards the Thai nation. According to Luang Phi To, one of the senior monks at the monastery, a central focus of their work revolves around nurturing the heart and minds of ethnic minority youths, so that they would have – through their loyalty and connection to Phra Khruba and, by extension, the Thai nation-state – the strength and determination to stay away from drugs. During the annual training camp, several dozen boys and young men are ordained and reside at the monastery. There, they undergo training as novices (*sammen*) or, if above the age of eighteen, full monks. During the training camp, the ordinates attend workshops and talks facilitated by Thai army soldiers

and monks on the dangers of abusing and trafficking in drugs, the national sport of *muay Thai*, and the principles of being a good Buddhist and Thai citizen.

As Kittiarasa (2006) argues, ordination into monkhood is seen as the Buddhist ideal for Thai men. Additionally, *muay Thai* is an embodiment of masculine national Thai identity; its protective powers are closely related to the literal and symbolic safeguarding of Buddhism and the Thai nation. Kittiarasa's analysis of the symbolism of *muay Thai* as portrayed in the 2003 hit film *Ong Bak: Muay Thai Warrior* is an argument that also holds true in the case of the Golden Horse monastery. He observes that: '*muay Thai* is Thailand's true national heritage, culturally woven into delicate tissues of the country's national tri-pillars: nation, religion (read Buddhism), and monarchy...its real existence is to protect the pillars of "Thai-ness" against intruding enemies' (Kittiarasa 2006: 276). These enemies of the Thai nation are embodied in (global) social problems such as gambling, drugs, and prostitution, which erode Thai-Buddhist cultural values (ibid. 278).

At the Golden Horse monastery, the *muay Thai* practice is seen to build character, strength, and self-esteem in the disadvantaged minority youths. This ultimately helps to build an aversion to the 'national enemies' of drug abuse, engaging in the drug trade as a means to earn income, or associating with traffickers and other 'unsavoury' figures in the 'uncivilised' border zones, thereby keeping the country, religion, and monarchy safe. As is the case at the school at Wat Srisoda, chanting sessions, Buddhist scripture, and meditation classes are also taught in the training camp in Chiang Rai. Just as when Thai men and boys ordain as monks, the novices and their families can choose how long they will stay, and the mass ordination, which happens on an annual basis, is free of charge. Some of the youths stay for a few days, while others stay for a week or a month or more. A few, typically those who come from troubled backgrounds – those who are abandoned by their families, whose parents cannot afford to care for them, who are orphaned or whose parents are in prison, usually in connection to drugs – will stay permanently, and are taught Thai language literacy and other basic skills by volunteers at the monastery.

The work of Phra Khruba and the Golden Horse monastery can be viewed on the one hand as an extension of the traditional social function of monasteries in Thailand, which have long served as places of moral and formal education, where men and youths from troubled backgrounds are sent to stay in a structured and disciplined environment, away from negative influences back at home in their villages. In the past, it was also one of the only ways that youths of low socioeconomic status could access formal education. On the other hand, it can also be seen as another

instance of the Thai state's co-opting of the *sangha*, as well as the charisma of influential monks, in order to bolster its own sanctity and legitimacy in line with the construction of Buddhism, monarchy, and the nation, as the three pillars of Thai nationalism (Keyes 1978). In the case of the northern regions, these strategies have also served as attempts to bolster national security and subdue illicit, drug-related activity in border areas, where ethnic minority peoples have long been saddled with negative stereotypes as opium growers, drug addicts, and narcotics traffickers – even as the Thai government ignores the underlying causes of these social issues in contradictory state policies which often exacerbate situations of marginalisation and exclusion (Sakboon 2013).²¹

Concepts used to frame the program disseminated through the Golden Horse Monastery include *kaan op rom* (literally, 'to train' or 'to educate') and *kaan pattana jit jai* ('to develop the spirit'), which couch state tactics of control and governance in the language of paternalistic nurturing and protection. As Mills observes of ethnically-Lao labour migrants, who are also embedded within structures of profound economic inequality and social disadvantage in Thailand, and who often migrate from the impoverished northeastern provinces to urban centres for wage labour, practices of geographical mobility can be understood not just in economically beneficial terms, but also as symbolic performances, which express 'powerful desires for national belonging and cultural citizenship' (Mills 2012: 87).²² In the present case, conversion to the Buddhist religion *muay Thai*, formal education, and the promise of upward social mobility, all function as markers of a kind of 'cultural citizenship' that establishes the experience of inclusion and validation within the sphere of the modern Thai nation in much more than just legal terms, and includes important aspects of social identity (Rosaldo 1994; Mills 2012; Sakboon 2013; Boonyasaranai et al 2014).

21 For a comparative perspective from Laos, P. Cohen (2013) argues that within Lao state-promoted processes of 'Laosiation' or national integration and assimilation of highland ethnic minorities, opium production and use is negatively depicted as backward, primitive, and antithetical to modernisation and development. These notions were reproduced in official government and international aid agency discourses which claimed that opium cultivation and consumption were the main causes of poverty among ethnic minority communities, arguments which were not supported by Cohen's fieldwork among Akha of in northern Laos.

22 Examples that Mills provides include not only conventional wage labour migration to urban centres within Thailand and abroad, but also, merit-making trips, domestic tourism, and other activities which echo 'media images and middle class practices of leisurely travel' (Mills 2012: 99).

As far as I could discern, the reverence that local communities expressed towards Phra Khruba and their faith in his compassion were authentic. Yet, in addition to the altruistic and humanitarian nature of the projects, there is also a civilising overtone to the activities. Broader objectives include subduing the threat of instability and illicit activities along the border and constructing loyal Buddhist subjects from animistic, 'savage' opium growers, addicts and traffickers. The nationalistic agendas that frame Phra Khruba's work on the Thai-Burmese border can be compared with the activities of the Roem Mai Gospel Rehabilitation Centre, which attempts to replace dependence on drugs with faith in God as the foundation for spiritual rebirth. Distinctly transnational in character, it signifies an alternate trajectory of aspiration and belonging compared to that offered by the Thai state.

Gospel Rehabilitation: New Lives and Transnational Belonging

In a mixed Christian Akha and Yunnanese village close to Thailand's shared border with Laos, red lanterns denoting auspicious Chinese characters hanging from dusty roofs mark the way to the Roem Mai Gospel Rehabilitation Centre. Non-descript concrete buildings serve as clean, if rather spartan, dorms. A large, open sermon hall with numerous rows of plastic chairs takes visual prominence. The grounds of the centre, including its farms, cover around 300 *rai* (480 square kilometres) of land and consist of corn and rubber plantations, bees, vegetable plots, a mushroom house, and numerous pigs. The centre is run by Pastor Chaleo and Pastor Nawaratcha, a married Thai-Yunnanese couple, along with four other pastors and supervisors, some of whom have been through the program themselves and who have lived at the centre for years. Pastor Chaleo formerly suffered from addiction himself before finding a way to overcome it through the gospel and feeling compelled to help others on the same path.

These days, the approximately 200-person community is comprised of the staff and 30 or 40 resident former patients who assist with the centre, approximately 10 to 20 patients in recovery at any given time, and around 120 school-aged ethnic minority children and youths who are cared for by the centre in its foster home (*sathan song-khror*), which provides them with food, accommodation, and educational support. The children come from backgrounds of severe poverty and hardship. Some have addicted or incarcerated parents, many of whom are undergoing rehabilitation at

the centre, while others have been abandoned by their families or have suffered other forms of abuse and trauma.

Most patients at the centre are also members of ethnic minority groups from all over Chiang Rai province. According to the pastors, a predominantly large number of these are Akha. There are also some Yunnanese patients, as well as some Thai patients who have come from as far away as Bangkok. Most patients are men, in their twenties and thirties, although there are a few women in residence, with heroin and *yaba* being the main substances of addiction. The youngest patient was a ten-year-old boy who was addicted to *yaba*. Most heard about the centre through word of mouth from friends, family, and acquaintances who had attended the program themselves, or through one of the many Christian networks that can be found throughout Thailand. The program is based on a minimum six-month stay, for which patients pay 3500 baht, including all food and accommodation. For those who can't afford it, even this minimal fee is waived. The majority of funding comes from evangelical Taiwanese churches, and the school and recovery program are conducted in both Thai and Mandarin Chinese. Volunteers and congregation members from Taiwan visit regularly to help at the rehabilitation centre or teach at the school, and the pastors also travel to Taiwan themselves for further training.

The abstinence demanded at the gospel rehabilitation centre extends to all substances: cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, and medications. Even the detoxification process is 'cold turkey' – a marked contrast to government detoxification hospitals such as Thanyarak Institute,²³ which rely heavily on drugs such as the antipsychotic haloperidol, benzodiazepine-type tranquilisers, and anti-depressants, to ease substance-dependent patients through physical withdrawal. Instead, the only 'medicine' that the patients receive here are the prayers of the entire community (*athithaan*), who beseech the Lord on his or her behalf for a successful progression through the har-

23 The original branch of Thanyarak institute in Pathumthani was established in 1967 and offers inpatient and outpatient treatment based on a four-stage plan involving a preparation phase, withdrawal phase, rehabilitation phase, and follow-up phase. The first four months of treatment at Thanyarak are subsidised by the government. The rehabilitation phase is based on the FAST model: Family, Alternative Activities (sports, music, etc.), Self Help, and Therapeutic Community. The original hospital in Pathumthani province, near Bangkok, was expanded into a network of five provincial addiction treatment centres in Chiang Mai, Songkhla, Khon Khaen, Pattani, and Mae Hong Son. In addition to Thanyarak, the available state-supported treatment services can be categorised into three main categories: voluntary (typically hospitals and clinics), compulsory (military-style forced rehabilitation centres), and correctional (implemented through the penitentiary system).

rowing withdrawal phase. It is the profound surrender to a higher power that defines the program, in which transformation and rebirth – a life free from the bondage of addiction – comes only through the acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's saviour.

At the same time, as Keane (2007) points out, despite the emphasis on divine agency in Protestant theology, purposeful activity (i.e. in prayer, worship, bible study, discipline, and so forth) is a central element of Christian conversion and practice (Keane 2007: 56). Hence, while patients are not required to be Christians prior to arriving at the centre, they are expected to follow the faith-based program while undergoing treatment, participating in prayer sessions (*namasakarn*), listening to sermons (*fang teyt*), and diligently engaging in bible study (*aan phii*).²⁴ Days start early, at 5am, and also include maintenance of the centre, the school, and the farm, singing, sports, and Chinese language classes. The work serves as a form of physical rehabilitation, helping physically abused bodies become stronger. Yet, more importantly than keeping the hands occupied, the work keeps the mind busy, and away from thinking about drugs.

The long-term emotional care and support available at the Roem Mai and within its Christian community are seen to be far more appealing than the cold, clinical nature of government programs that are in existence, especially during a time of great personal crisis, as was often the case with patients who entered the program.²⁵ Indeed, a number of patients had brought their wives and young children to stay with them during their time in the program, something which offered an additional source of support during the recovery process. Some of those who have completed the program often stay on to help out, living in separate, more private quarters than the main dorms that are assigned to new patients. Recovered addicts become positive role models for the new patients, and new patients are assigned a 'partner' for their first week of the program, who will orient them with the schedule, activities, and help monitor their withdrawal. For those who have made it far enough to be role models, being of service also helps support their own recovery by helping them atone for their sins.

24 Patients are a mixture of Buddhists, animists, and those who were already Christians, prior to arriving at the centre. During the time I conducted fieldwork at the centre, there was a Muslim man in residence, who was there for alcoholism.

25 As Platz (2003) found among Karen Christians, the phenomenon of religious conversion during a time of crisis (especially during extended sickness or psychological crisis) was also something I found to be common amongst villagers, who related stories about being ill or in some great personal difficulty which was alleviated after they consulted the village pastor (*saiyaphiiban*) for help.

Nevertheless, the themes of love, faith, and forgiveness, which inform the philosophy behind the Roem Mai centre, are underscored by elements of strict discipline. The conditions are basic, the rules stringent, and the schedule regimented. In addition to use of intoxicants, running away, stealing, and aggression are other offences punishable by shackling. Escape attempts during the first few days are highly common. For up to the end of the first week, the staff and volunteers at the centre will search for new patients who run away. After the first week, however, those who run away are left to go their own way. Those who continuously break rules, or who refused to be shackled as punishment, are expelled from the centre.

While many patients who manage to get through the first few difficult weeks do continue on with the program and manage to stay away from drugs while at the centre, relapse is common.²⁶ Former addicts who manage to retain their ties to the church once they returned home had a better chance of staying clean and sober, due to the greater availability of social and emotional support. The scarcity of employment opportunities close to the gospel rehabilitation centre made it difficult for former patients to stay connected to their recovery fellowship and the guidance of the pastors. Yet, a return to the village inevitably means resuming life under the same impoverished conditions, as well as being surrounded once more by friends and acquaintances that are, typically, still abusing substances. In such a situation, as Chaleo and Nawaratcha reflected, relapse was extremely difficult to prevent, and many patients returned to the centre for repeat treatment after having returned to their home villages and falling back into drug abuse, and feelings of emptiness and despair.

Neither the embedment of northern Thailand's ethnic minority communities within transnational missionary networks, nor the widespread religious conversion that followed, are particularly new. Christian missionaries have had a long history in northern Thailand. The first Protestant Church was founded by American Presbyterian missionaries in Chiang Mai province in 1858, while Catholics began their proselytising work in the area almost a century later, in 1951 (Swanson 1984, cited by Platz 2003: 477). Yet, Roem Mai and Operation Dawn (the organisation that runs the two other gospel rehabilitation centres in Chiang Rai) are unique in a number of ways. One notable feature is the prominence of Taiwanese rather than Western proselytising networks in providing funding and facilitating their work. Another is

26 Unfortunately the centre does not keep records of treatment retention or relapse rates or conduct formalised surveys to gather this data. Therefore, it is difficult to accurately estimate the success rate of the program.

the involvement of Han-Yunnanese missionaries descended from rebel Kuomintang armies in the conversion and humanitarian projects.

Indeed, much like the founding of Hong Kong as a British military outpost and trading port, the history of Yunnanese migrants in northern Thailand is one that is intimately connected with the history of opium in Asia. As Dikötter, Laaman, and Zhou (2004) observe, during the late nineteenth century, China had become ‘a missionary battlefield, opium the chief enemy. The image of 300 million souls hopelessly enslaved by the “pernicious drug” represented a powerful tool in legitimising missionary activities’ (Dikötter, Laaman and Zhou 2004: 100). Proselytisation was carried out by depicting opium addiction as a ‘disease of the will’, with faith in the gospel and Christ as the divine healer being the only possible path to salvation (*ibid.*). Similar missionising activities occurred in Thailand in the aftermath of opium illegalisation in 1958, although as Kammerer pointed out in reference to the Akha, this merely resulted in Christian villages filled with relapsed addicts, and a decrease in the number of ethnic minorities converting to Christianity as a way to escape opium addiction (Kammerer 1990: 287).

The transnational gospel rehabilitation networks in Chiang Rai speak to the ‘reglobalisation’ of religion occurring within the increasing prominence of influential new forms of transnational spiritual flows (Csordas 2009). Furthermore, their situation within a number of crosscutting far-reaching global socio-historical dynamics subvert the typical highland ethnic minority narrative of integration and assimilation within the nation-state as part of the inevitable trajectory towards belonging and modernity. While gospel rehabilitation centres like Roem Mai do not overtly set out to undermine Buddhist national identity or Thai sovereignty, as I will show in the following sections, they nonetheless highlight issues of sovereignty and nationalism in ways that are rather problematic for the consolidation of the Thai Buddhist nation-state within the border regions.

Sovereignty, Nationalism, and Religious Identity

Essentially, the Thai state’s exclusionary policies towards ethnic minorities play a significant role in exacerbating the very issues of national integration and border security that it is attempting to tackle. In a scenario that shares many parallels with

the situation in Thailand, in the midst of prohibition campaigns during the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century in China:

[The] 'war on drugs' allowed political leaders and social elites to invent a fictive enemy on to whom social anxieties could be projected: narcophobia created a scapegoat...opium became the rallying point around which social unity could be asserted, as both addicts and imperialists emerged as the ultimate alter ego against which national identity could be defined (Dikotter, Laamann and Zhou 2004: 93-94).

In similar fashion, the Thai government's opium eradication and exclusionary citizenship policies have not only appeared to worsen rather than improve social and economic conditions for ethnic minorities, they have also contributed to producing a border security problem resulting from the regional 'drug threat', as well as a politically-disloyal, criminally-minded, drug-addicted 'hill tribe' subject against which Thai national identity can be defined.

In another paradox, this process has provided the impetus for alternate modes of transnational belonging to emerge in the form of gospel rehabilitation and widespread Christian conversion among ethnic minorities, in response to the marginalisation engendered by state policies. As observers have noted, Christian conversion can be seen as a way to mark out an alternate identity to that of Thai Buddhist identity. For instance, Platz argues that for the Karen, 'defining oneself as Christian means being more or less in opposition to Buddhist Thai society' (Platz 2003: 487; see also Hayami 1996). Li (2013) notes the similar construction of new forms of identification among the Akha in Chiang Rai, who have converted to Christianity from the traditional Akha religion. Christian conversion facilitates the construction of religious identities in ways that do not serve to bolster the authority and control of the state, but rather, which comprise a striking source influence in contrast to the Thai government's nation-building projects that revolve around the spirit of Buddhism and loyalty to the monarchy and country.

Additionally, the increasingly globalised and transnational nature of religion means that 'religions, religious institutions and communities also transcend, sometimes with scant regard, the carefully marked boundaries of the nation-state' (Sinha 2006: 207). This diminishment in state control is compounded by the inherently transnational nature of the illicit drug trade, with production and trafficking networks that stretch within the Golden Triangle as well as across Asia and the rest of the world. Although the official policy in the war against illicit drugs is cooperation and coordination between the nations involved, the ambiguity of borders and

boundaries of sovereignty has emerged as a prominent issue. One particularly pertinent example is the 2011 incident in which Naw Kham, an associate of the late drug lord Khun Sa, was arrested by Chinese authorities in Lao territory and subsequently tried and executed by the Chinese government for killing thirteen Chinese soldiers during a drug battle on the Mekong River (van der Veer 2016).

Ultimately, national integration programs such as those implemented by Wat Srisoda in Chiang Mai and the Golden Horse Monastery in Chiang Rai offer the possibility of upward mobility through free education, as well as cultural citizenship through instruction in the Buddhist religion, national sports, and the Thai language. Meanwhile, Christian drug rehabilitation programs such as that offered by the Roem Mai Centre, involve creating a sense of support, community and fellowship in ways which are mediated not by the Thai state, but rather, through missionary projects that emphasise belonging within a transnational spiritual Christian community with strong links to Taiwanese missionaries and congregations.

In the examples provided here, I have attempted to show that state and minority relations can also be defined in terms of aspiration, belonging and inclusion, as well in terms of resistance and evasion. Transnational flows complicate a situation in which state and periphery are mutually constitutive rather than antithetical in any simplistic fashion, and in which the concept of sovereignty is not always clearly defined.

Conclusion

Alternative development and crop substitution strategies have been lauded triumphantly, presenting Thailand as a regional and international model of opium eradication success. In reality, these strategies have failed to improve the economic situations for the greater majority of highland people living in Thailand, providing opportunities for a few individuals and communities while excluding the remainder from the global trajectory of modernisation and development. From certain perspectives, opium substitution initiatives appear to have actually exacerbated and given new forms to the drug problem, by creating the need for labourers to consume methamphetamines in order to perform at the required level in order to survive economically. Furthermore, while there has been a great deal of discussion in recent years about inequality in Thailand stemming from the ongoing political crisis, this dialogue sel-

dom, if ever, includes a discussion of ethnic minorities, which are among the most disadvantaged populations in the country and which arguably have the lowest status of all the highlanders dispersed across the Southeast Asian Massif.

Not least, the development programs' limitations lie in their inability to address the long history of ethnic tensions, violent conflicts, and political profiteering from the drug trade in the region, which comprises one of the root causes of the issue. It is undeniable that 'drug use among highland populations emerges from the constant intersection of poverty and lack of access to services' (Lyttleton 2004: 920). However, it would be a fallacy to assume that the success of development programs would unequivocally solve the region's drug problem. As Chouvy, referring to the world's two main sites for illegal drug production, argues, 'economic development, whether in rural or urban areas, can only occur in countries and regions where peace prevails and is sustainable...until the conflicts and political crises of Afghanistan and Myanmar have been solved all anti-drug efforts will most likely be in vain' (Chouvy 2011: 201).

Ultimately, in their emphases on individual psychology and morality, the Roem Mai Centre and the Golden Horse Monastery frame addiction and poverty in terms of personal failure, rather than as complex and interconnected social, political and economic problems. Religious conversion in both the examples presented here, expresses aspirations of inclusion and belonging. At the same time, I am not suggesting that Christian or Buddhist conversion represents a simple way for ethnic minority individuals to move out from marginalised situations. As mentioned earlier, for ex-patients of the gospel rehabilitation centre, relapse is extremely common upon returning to the village. For the youths who ordain at the Golden Horse Monastery, upward social mobility is circumscribed by a combination of structural factors, including lack of opportunities, negative stereotypes of, and pervasive discrimination against, ethnic minorities, which continue to form the bases for exclusion – even as the government capitalises on 'hill tribe' culture as the lucrative cornerstone of northern Thai tourism.

Comparative research on similar phenomena in other highland Southeast Asian contexts is needed in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this issue and to build a more nuanced theoretical framework in which the usefulness of the concept of Zomia rests not so much in its definition as a physical space or object of inquiry, but in its utility as a 'site for the production of knowledge'; a set of theoretical problematics 'whose starting hypothesis would be the fundamental complexity, instability, and permeability of sociocultural systems to permeable influ-

ences' (Formoso 2010: 316, 332). Such research would also shed more light on the relationship between highland peoples and nation-states, and between highland peoples across nation-states, in a manner which recognises that the issue is more complex than the juxtaposition between the 'non-state' space of Zomia and the 'state space' of the dominant authority. It is an ambiguous social location that entails neither full incorporation nor exclusion but rather, intricate dynamics of aspiration, belonging, and negotiation.

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