

# *Economic Transformation in a Hmong Village of Thailand*

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The article presents one of the montagnard societies of Thailand, the Hmong, and considers the traditional and the modern patterns of wealth. A set of observations of the visible signs of wealth in one village is further developed by a detailed appraisal of the economic performance for the year 1991. A synthesis of data reveals that within the context of a more and more complete integration with the market economy and the increasing monetarization of exchanges, the maintenance, and even the augmentation, of household wealth seems to be tied to the ownership of the means of production to the detriment of the customary cooperation within the lineage. The possessors of these means grow well-off — or, at least, have the means to do so — while those lacking them are, at best, in a phase of economic stagnation which mutual help cannot suffice to overcome. The result is necessarily a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor.

**Key words:** Hmong, social change, economy, tourism; Thailand

This article is an analysis of social change in a Green Hmong village in Northern Thailand. Field work was conducted over two periods: from September 1991 to August 1992, and from February to April 1993. The main goal of the research was to develop a comprehensive understanding of such phenomena as sedentarisation and the decline of swidden agriculture, the disappearance of the opium poppy-based economy, increased dependence on the national market due to the imposed conversion to commercial agriculture, and the monetizing of economic exchanges and a new reliance on exterior markets for the purchase of goods that have become necessary to group reproduction in Hmong society. The addition to the analysis of tourism, a new factor for transformation which has been neglected in past research on social change in the highlands of Southeast Asia, is original.

To plant firmly the analysis in its ethnic context, we will first consider the traditional and the modern patterns of wealth common to most Hmong societies of Southeast Asia, especially those of Thailand and Laos where most of the ethnographic research on this group was conducted over the last 40 years. A set of observations of the visible signs of wealth in one Hmong village will follow, further developed by a detailed appraisal of the economic performance for the year 1991. A synthesis of data is made thereafter, and conclusion highlights the specific contribution of this research to the understanding of the pattern of social and economic change in Hmong society.

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## *Wealth in the Hmong Tradition*

The Hmong are a good example of the historically difficult rapport between the Thai State and the montagnard swidders (Michaud 1994b). Among the highland minorities in that country, the Hmong are the second largest group demographically with a population of 91,537 out of 573,369 individuals (TRI 1992), thus forming 16% of the total of highland societies, and around 0.16% of the overall population of the country. A village case study of this ethnic grouping makes a good illustration of the actual state of affairs of montagnard economies during their shift to a sedentary life and the transition to commercial agriculture. But before making this analysis, it is first necessary to briefly examine what forms wealth takes among the Hmong — how they conceive of it and display it — both in their traditional and contemporary practices.

The forms which material wealth could take in a traditional Hmong society in Southeast Asia were limited in number. The indications of these described in the following paragraphs are the same as those noted in Ban Suay (fictive name, c.f. Wakin 1992) in 1992. Numerous other indicators may actually be evident in other Hmong communities in Thailand or in Laos, especially possessions acquired in the process of modernization in villages closer to large lowland centers.

Let us note first the symbols of wealth as seen through Hmong eyes. In all cases, one of the prime status symbols among Hmong males is to have more than one wife. It is at one and the same time a sign of family wealth, proof the husband and his family can afford to pay the bride price more than once, as also the guarantee of a prosperous future by means of the large number of descendants anticipated; in the context of subsistence farming on a large scale, field hands are a major resource.

After this come certain material goods. Even though capital in money form is not part of their tradition, still silver in the

forms of ingots and jewelry is an essential part of both their economy and the maintenance of each lineage. The acquisition of brides depends on the possession of this silver and, depending on the amount that a suitor is ready to lay out on his future, the relative prosperity of his lineage is thus established. There is little likelihood of any attempt at dissimulation in such cases since the wearing of numerous silver pieces in public is a measure of prestige among peers, allowing them to attract the interest of possible future spouses. Thus one can recognize the importance of these precious ornaments worn by both the men and women of the household, whether in a complete display of all their portable wealth on such special occasions as New Year festivities, or in daily life when they usually confine the display to a neckpiece and, for the women, earrings.

The quality of the cloth used to make clothes, which in the past 15 years in Ban Suay has not included the time consuming task of spinning and weaving the hemp fiber, displays the purchasing power of the family. The relative delicacy of the embroidery on them shows the amount of time invested in their creation by the women, and furthermore, shows that their time has not been spent on agricultural tasks. The frequency of the replacement of the family's festive and workaday costumes are also a clear economic indicator.

Another assembly of indicators that the Hmong recognize is made up of the house, its fixtures and furnishings, and the adjoining structures. The size of the farm, the presence or absence of an abutting kitchen, the nature of the construction materials employed, the state of wear of the building and its constituent parts, the amount of furnishings, the number of rooms it contains, the space set aside for entertaining guests, the volume of the interior rice granary along with the stocks presently held in store, the number of guns, of harnesses, of tools and diverse gear leaning against the wall or hanging from the beams, the quantity of produce stored under the roof of the main room, not one of these details would escape the eye of a visiting parent. Around the compound, the everyday facilities add to the picture: the presence of a forge, of a rice dehusker, millstones for grinding maize, a stable, a sty, the number of pigs, chickens, dogs, and even the quantity of clothes hung out to dry after the family washday are all carefully evaluated economic indicators.

As confirmed swidders, the Hmong measure the yield of their fields and not their extent, except when they make estimates of the surface under cultivation in order to gauge the potential amount of the crops they can expect to harvest. Around the fire in the evening, having eaten a meal the size and savor of which depends on what happens to be available, the ensuing conversation allows one to follow up on an evaluation of the household's prosperity. Comparisons are made of the amount of land under cultivation, their layout and character, their present use and other types of cultivation they might be employed for, last year's yields, work already carried out in the current year, the present state of the crops, the number and state of health of the cattle — especially water buffaloes these days — the amount one is in debt to parents or neighbors, and so forth. Another common topic is the arrangements already entered into for upcoming marriages, and those forthcoming ones that will soon need to be negotiated.

The special topic of opium revolves around the ability to mobilize a large labor-force for intensive work during the short period when the latex must be tapped, and the amount of latex

harvested will govern the buying power of the group in the coming year.

As can easily be imagined, it is extremely difficult, certainly hazardous, and probably an exercise in futility to attempt to figure out precisely the exact level of wealth of each household in the village. Thus, to give but one example, two wives and eight children to feed and clothe represents at present a far greater outlay than for a single wife and two children; in effect, the net revenue of the former family is likely to be lower than the latter. But in five or six years, several young adults added to the workforce in the fields will result in the larger group prospering at a gathering speed.

### *The Changes in the Source of Wealth*

Robert Cooper has remarked with some justice that a description of the distribution of wealth in a present-day Hmong village is essentially one of a crystallization of the situation of economic inequality that prevailed at the time when the group adopted the sedentary life. The catalyst of this inegalitarian crystallization was the recent introduction of the principle of property ownership, and no longer solely the ownership of the produce yielded by the land. In fact, in the case of one of the four Hmong villages he studied in Northern Thailand while undertaking research for his doctoral thesis in the 1970s, he noted:

The fluidity that characterized patterns of wealth in a swidden system of agriculture disappeared in Khun Sa with the advent of land ownership. Those who were traditionally wealthy at the right time and place obtained the means to perpetuate their position through ownership of land, buffaloes, etc. By investing part of their traditional wealth in permanent agriculture they were able to institutionalize their economic status. Those who were traditionally poor during the few brief years that change took place remained poor. (Cooper 1984:198)

Following this analysis, one can only conclude that the present balance of wealth between the principle lineages of Ban Suay is in direct correspondence with that which prevailed just before the transition to sedentary agriculture, and the subsequent bringing into cultivation or purchase of stretches of land for permanent cultivation.

In fact, the work required to transform swiddens into semi-permanent plots and, immediately following this and henceforward, to keep them productive by the use of a wide variety of chemical products, demands a heavy investment of labor, and to a lesser extent, of capital. This amount of labor is within the reach of most of the households whose members add up to the average for village households, that is around ten people; beneath or above this figure, the task becomes either too hard, or considerably easier. The work required to terrace an irrigated rice paddy demands an even higher labor input, and in that the larger family groups have a clear advantage. A fair number of households in Ban Suay have devoted themselves to the latter type of agricultural practice over the past few years. A few among them, despite the large labor force at the disposal of their group, have rented out the cultivation of these paddies to other villagers on a share-cropping basis, with the tenants paying a certain percentage of the harvest as rent. Among the

Hmong this exchange of labor in return for produce has not been customary. It displays the inauguration of inegalitarian relationships based on a disparity of property as the means of production, and it is certainly symptomatic of the emergence of a relationship of exploitation by a category of owners over another one of those less well-endowed. Formerly this exploitative relationship was never present, except for work involved in the harvesting of the latex of the poppy, in which the Hmong welcomed the opportunity to employ individuals from other ethnic groups to carry out the harvesting, for which they were paid in kind from the fruit of their labors. It was rare for Hmong to employ other Hmong in this manner. Moreover, when it came to renting out rice fields, it was quite common that the only recompense demanded of tenants was simply the maintenance of the field; they were allowed to keep the whole of the yield for themselves. In the context of extensive cultivation, when it was not thought necessary or desirable by the leader of the household that held recognized rights over the *rai* used for irrigated rice paddies, economizing on the investment of labor needed for the upkeep of productive paddy fields seemed to some a sufficient return.

From the time these Hmong cultivators realized that from hence forwards they would have to remain for a long time alongside the previous investments, they were now in a position to be able to acquire more land, in particular already functioning irrigated rice paddies, depending on their availability on the regional market, on the availability of capital and, in the case of *rai* officially registered on title deeds, on Thai citizenship. Although much older than the national legislation concerning them, the cultivated areas of Ban Suay and the village location itself are considered an encroachment on land protected by the State. The swiddens and rice paddies under cultivation have only limited legal status and can neither be bought nor sold — but they may be left to heirs. Who were the holders of cash and capital in the traditional Hmong society, that is to say above all the silver ingots? They were the lineages who had been able to capitalize on the growth and sale of opium. Traditional wealth could thus be converted into contemporary forms, and thence to fructify, since this first injection of funds opened in its turn the door to further increase in capital via the transition to commercial agriculture and the extraction of a rent in nature drawn from the yields of irrigated paddy fields.

### *Observing the Balance of Wealth in Ban Suay*

#### BAN SUAY VILLAGE

The village of Ban Suay is located in the highlands in the north of Chiang Mai province. It had nearly 400 inhabitants occupying 40 households in 1992, all of them Hmong by birth or having become so by marrying in. The village is a traditional one in that it was established on a site chosen nearly 20 years back in accordance with customary Hmong practices and rites. Until recently, the great majority of the villagers have cultivated swiddens in a subsistence agricultural economy. Nowadays, though, under the influence of state agencies and programs, they are making a rapid transition to permanent, commercial forms of agriculture. Opium poppies are still being grown though, since the 1980s, the extent of this activity has dramatically dropped. The community is the recipient of few

government facilities or services; an unsurfaced road linking it to the national highway network, a primary school, and the relics of a variety of agricultural development projects that have operated sporadically in its environs in the course of the last thirty years.

Three dominant clans groups, identified by patronyms, comprise the whole populace of Ban Suay. These are the Tang, the Li, and the Moua. Generally speaking, the village's three clans are grouped together across the terrain (Figure 1). That is to say that the Tang households abutt on each other, with the lineage clusters at their center. The same pattern holds for the Li and the Moua. This well-documented customary constellation is still adhered to and is derived from the straightforward, age-old rules of consanguinal affinity and duties of mutual help, most importantly within the lineage network and then within the clan circles.

In conformity with Hmong tradition, certain village elders, by virtue of their sex, age, and status within their lineage, are recognized as the heads of their respective lineages. For the Moua clan, Lao Pa in house 32 is the sole leader. Among the Li, Lao Tchang and Lao Su, respectively in houses 31 and 19, share these duties, though the former has more authority than the latter due to the larger size of his lineage group and his longer residence in Ban Suay. In the case of the Tang clan, Pao in house 6 is the largely dominant figure, though he shares a minor part of his prestige with his cousin Souyi. Beyond the clan structure, and in accordance with the traditions of the group, there is no larger political form or function. Which is to say that the village itself, divided among the clans, has no single chief. The administrative structure, imposed from outside by the State, calls for a representative to be designated for the whole populace. The Hmong therefore award the title of "chief" to one or other among themselves, but, as far as they are concerned, he is simply a messenger whose duty it is to relay communications from the outside world to the elders in authority — the lineage heads.

#### THE SIGNS OF WEALTH

Given the array of the traditional signs of wealth some clear indications make it possible to assess the economic level of each of the three clans in the village. We will begin with the least well endowed, the Tang clan. All of the Tang structures at the top of the village are of poor quality, small and cramped, and often decaying. The materials used in their construction are, whether gathered from the forest, such as bamboo and palm fronds that are rotting away, or whether brought in from outside, in an equally dilapidated state, such as the extremely rusty sheets of corrugated iron used for roofing. In fact, the Tang buildings are only ever repaired when some part no longer functions, for instance when a roof starts leaking or a door's hinges are damaged. The interiors of the houses are very sparsely furnished and without any sign of luxury. The single fireplace is an indication that the family has not many pigs. Many houses have no stables and thus no horses. Sties are few and the pigs sickly. There are no polygynous unions among the Tang. Neither children nor adults wear silver collars, and many of them wear old, torn clothes, which speaks of a lack of time and opportunity of the women of the group, whose priority is work in the fields. Such a survey of the exterior signs of wealth leaves no place for doubt; the principle lineage of the Tang clan is visibly poor, truly the poorest in the village.

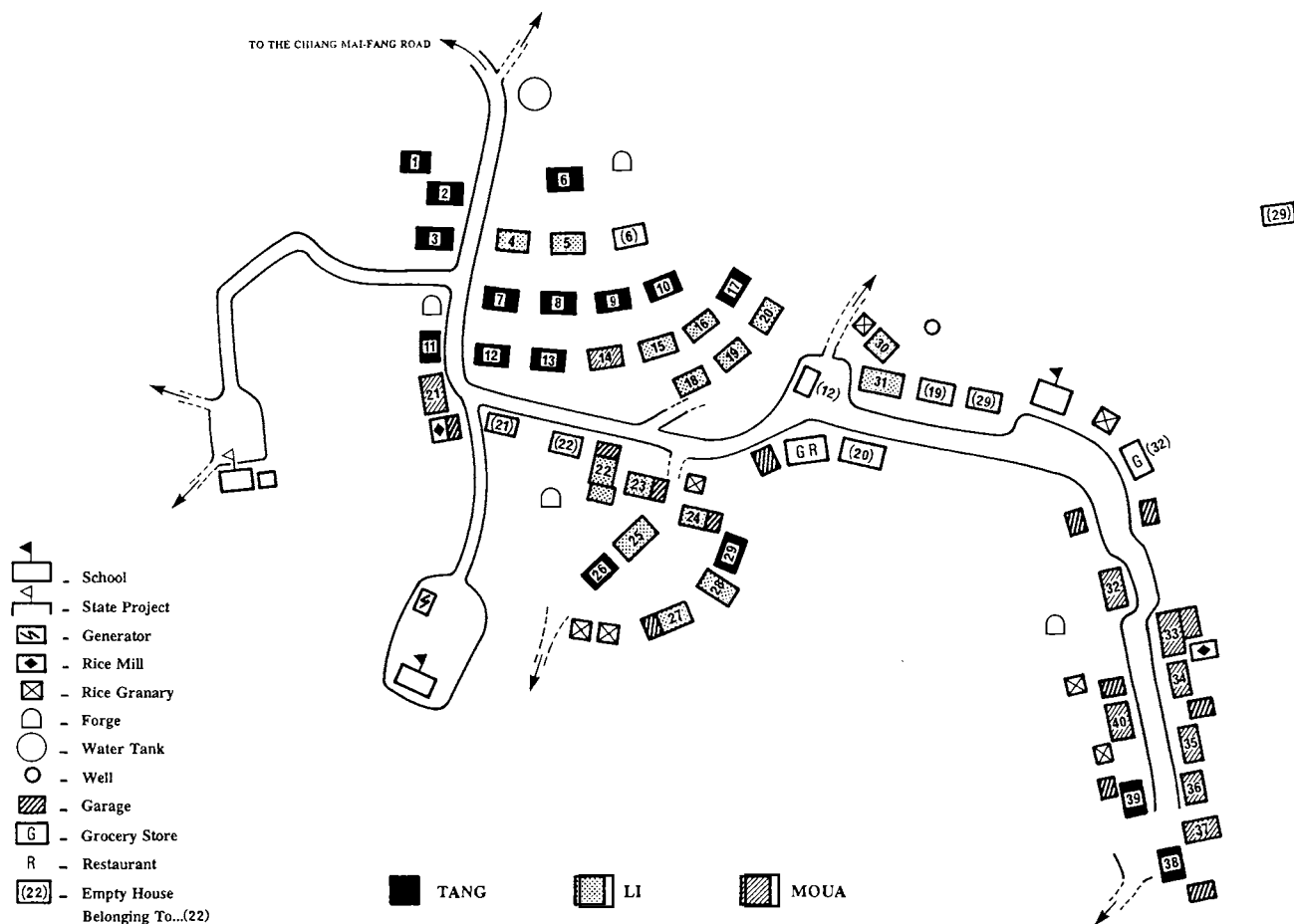


Figure 1. Ban Suay, 1992 — Clan by House

The most important Li lineage, that of Lao Tchang, give us two cases of polygynous marriage. Their farm buildings are obviously more sturdily built than those of their Tang neighbors. The walls are often made of the traditional handcut planks, while a fair number of roofs are covered with mineral materials bought from the towns (corrugated iron or asbestos sheets). House number 22, belonging to Tou — as also that of Lao Su, house 19, of the other lineage in this clan — even has a concrete floor and walls made of planks from a timber mill; it also has a separate kitchen annex. As for the second most important Li lineage, Lao Su's, the range of possessions both fixed and portable ranks it between the principle Li lineage and the Tang lineage, in that the edifices are of a generally higher quality than those of the Tang, while they do not have sufficient supplementary goods to place them on a level with their lineage partners. Taken all in all, the Li clan have more shelter for their horses, cattle, pigs, and chickens than their Tang cousins, along with the stock to fill them. Neither children nor adults are dressed in rags and they most often wear their traditional apparel.

The Moua are the best housed group in the settlement since not one of their buildings is constructed of the lowliest material,

bamboo. In the purest tradition of rich Hmong households all over the continental Southeast Asian massif, their walls are built with handcut planks. Nearly all the houses are surrounded with stables and sties sheltering fair numbers of the appropriate stock. House number 33, belonging to Leng, son of Lao Pa and his next-door neighbor, is comparable in every way to the above described house of Tou, while that of Djaleune, number 21, is very similar, though somewhat older. There are three polygynous marriages among the Moua. The young children of the more prosperous households wear silver neckpieces, and it is rare among them if a child of school-going age does not wear well-made traditional clothes in a good state of repair. Around 30% less numerous than the Li clan, yet relatively well-off, the Moua clan has the best standard of living in the village, in terms both of quantity and quality of possessions.

Ownership of swidden in that area being not officially recognized by the State, only paddy can give for sure an idea of one's household wealth. Officially, number of *rai* of paddy (one *rai* is equal to 1600 m<sup>2</sup>, or 0.16 hectare, or 0.40 acre) amount to 9 for the Moua, 42 for the Li and 13 for the Tang. If we count the paddy owned by the Tang households 38 and 39

among the Moua holding — in fact they are worked by the Moua as a result of marriage links — the more realistic totals then come to 13, 49, and 9 respectively. While these figures seem in accordance with the relative wealth of the Tang and Li clans already observed, those for the Moua appear startlingly modest. Why, therefore, is this figure so low when the clan by other standards appear well-off. For instance, the number of Moua rice granaries is comparable to those of the Li — even though the former has fewer members — which would seem to indicate a substantial rice production. It is well known in the village that the Moua clan in fact own much larger extents of rice land than these figures indicate. In point of fact not all their rice fields are within the vicinity of the village as they have, through official channels, bought other paddy fields in the lowlands, leaving their cultivation in the hands of Thai sharecroppers who pay their rents in kind. Which is to say, that the large stocks of rice in the Moua granaries are largely extracted from the labors of their tenants working on property owned by the Moua, or sharecropping. This is another indicator of the emergence of class differentiation concerning the Hmong, although in this case exterior to the village society itself. Nobody in the village has ever suggested that these sharecropping tenants in the lowland paddy fields were Hmong from Ban Suay.

Modern breeding methods brought in by the swarm of governmental bilateral agricultural development projects that spread throughout the region provided another opportunity for investment. The purchase of ruminant grazing animals, above all of cattle, by contrast with the more traditional pigs and poultry, has been going on for twenty years now, thus revealing the existence of disposable capital for the acquisition of these marketable commodities. The Moua are the clan with the largest number of grazing animals, with an average value of Bht 41,408 per household, followed by the Li at Bht 22,147, and the Tang with Bht 14,407 (in 1992, there is approximately 25 baht for 1 \$US). If an adjustment is made for the Tang households 38 and 39, for the same reasons as described above for agricultural production, the spread is even wider, respectively Bht 44,854, Bht 22,147, and Bht 7,841. These levels accord with the other data given so far.

Beyond the agricultural and stockbreeding activities themselves, there are still further indicators of household investment capacities that reveal the availability of excess capital. These have only more recently become evident, symbols of the increasing encroachment of the external world on the village scene. The most obvious are innovations in construction; rice granaries on stilts, building materials brought up from the lowlands, metal water tanks, architectural novelties such as windows and self-contained kitchens, the sheds for motorized rice mills, and the garages for the pickup trucks. Which villagers own these revealing innovations? The Tang of the main lineage, that of Pao, own no pickup, no rice granary on stilts, no metal water tank, no rice mill. By contrast the two Tang households associated by marriage and residence with the Moua, households 38 and 39, share a pickup between them, while a young adult in house 29, as the only case for any household in his lineage, owns a motorcycle. As for the Li, the lineage of Lao Tchang have four garages sheltering as many vehicles; four rice granaries on stilts and one metal water tank can also be numbered among their possessions. Lao Su's lineage has none

of these. The Moua, besides their six garages and as many pickups (seven if households 38 and 39 are included), also own three rice granaries on stilts, three metal water tanks, along with the only two motorized rice mills in the village.

#### THE BALANCE OF WEALTH IN THE VILLAGE

The above review shows that following traditional criteria of wealth, the Moua clan appears the best off, the Li clan comes next due to the lineage of Lao Tchang, while the lineage of Lao Su and the rest of the Tang, always with the exception of the two households associated with the Moua clan, trail well behind. Thus judging from verifiable possessions — while remembering these exclude such hidden goods as the ingots of silver, and also the not as yet verified assumptions about the Moua's receipts of agricultural rents paid in kind — all the observable indicators confirm that the increase in wealth accompanying the shift to a sedentary life via, essentially, the ancient production of raw opium, has been achieved through the purchase of investment goods affecting the means of production involved in the processes of agricultural work — land, vehicles, and rice granaries — and in stockbreeding, herds.

But not all has yet been said. It is fortunately not necessary to confine this general analysis to these first conclusions in order to work out a table showing the economic performance of each village clan. To get a more complete picture of the effects of the transition to a sedentary life and the growth of commercial agriculture on the economic equilibrium of the village, it has been possible to evaluate the amounts of commercial agricultural production, of wages, of the impact of the opium commerce within the general revenues in order to confirm, or deny, the tendencies identified by the means used so far. To this end, estimates in tabulated forms do in fact exist for income and expenses for each household referring to the particular production methods and the introduction of the so-called commercial agricultural products. They consist of observations made by outsiders — by a diverse range of rural development agencies as well as by the author himself — and of periodical questionnaires about crops, agricultural yields, revenues drawn from marketing opium, wages earned, and various other commercial activities. In so far as these findings shed light on the intensity of the economic activity orientated to the commercialization of this produce, a dimension of the expansion of the village economy, and equally in so far as they provide a relatively viable basis for comparison between the different households, these estimations are useful for checking up on the tendencies revealed by the inventories which have already been described. They were examined in detail in the fifth chapter of the thesis from which this article is derived (Michaud 1994a). It would be overdoing it to lay it all out again in detail here, but we can usefully draw on it simply to figure out net household revenues. This was established by subtracting from the total revenues for agricultural production (including opium), and stockbreeding, along with such complementary activities as hunting, gardening and more rarely income from wages, the expenses directly linked to these various activities (fertilizer, pesticides, wages, vaccines, stock, animal food). Then, from the remainders, direct household maintenance expenses were deducted (purchase of food, cloth, expenditure on ceremonies, and medical expenses).

Table 1. Total Village Income, 1991

	<sup>A</sup> Agriculture <sup>1</sup>			Stock Breeding <sup>2</sup>			Opium <sup>3</sup>	Other Incomes <sup>4</sup>			Total Net <sup>5</sup> HH <sup>6</sup>	Profit			
	Ind.	Income	Expen.	Income	Expen.	Net	Value	Tourism	Others	Total	Income	Expen.	Per HH <sup>7</sup>	Per ind. <sup>8</sup>	
			Net			Income					(1+2+3+4)		(5-6)	(7/A)	
			Income			Income									
<b>Total (baht)</b>	388	966102	239864	<b>726298</b>	215245	10310	<b>204935</b>	<b>328720</b>	110710	79550	<b>190260</b>	<b>1450213</b>	<b>466290</b>	<b>983923</b>	
<b>Per HH (baht)</b>	9.70	24153	5997	<b>18157</b>	5381	258	<b>5123</b>	<b>8218</b>	2768	1989	<b>4757</b>	<b>36255</b>	<b>11657</b>	<b>24598</b>	2536
<b>% 1 (%)</b>		<b>100</b>	25	<b>75</b>	<b>100</b>	5	<b>95</b>		58	42	<b>100</b>				
<b>% 2 (%)</b>				<b>50</b>			<b>14</b>	<b>23</b>			<b>13</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>68</b>	

### Evaluating Net Incomes for the Year 1991

Once having worked through all these computations — and despite their partial nature, and in certain regards, the skewed criteria chosen by government agencies to apply in the context of a Hmong highland village — the following set of tables give us a useful arrangement of economic data which can throw light on the situation in the village.

Let us look first at Table 1, "Total Village Income, 1991". Each economic activity is here summed up independently with, the only added detail, a note of the associated incomes and expenditures. There are thus columns for agriculture (column 1), stockbreeding (2), other incomes (4), the total of net income before expenses (5), and following this the supplementary production expenses to be subtracted (6), giving finally the total net revenue, or profit, by household (7), and by individual (8). Column 3 involves income derived from opium, which will be treated separately in the following section, but for which the totals have been included here in the table to give an overall perspective on economic activity.

The last two lines at the bottom of the table are the most useful for our purpose. The one entitled "%1" shows the ratio of income to outlay in each field of economic activity, except for the columns headed "Opium" and "Other incomes". It is evident from these lines that the highest return is obtained in activities related to stockbreeding (95%), while cultivation requires an outlay that reaches as high as a quarter of the revenue generated; practically all of these expenses are an integral part of commercial agriculture. The absence of expenditure in money or in materials associated with the cultivation and the marketing of opium certainly makes it the most worthwhile of all these activities with a profit of 100%; we will come back to this. It is moreover obvious that "Other incomes" also involves expenditure, but the state statistics do not deal with these. We will have to bridge this gap by accepting the supposition that the level of expenses associated with these activities amounts to nil. Furthermore, we have not given any details here of the proportion relative to tourism as an activity generating income. Nevertheless, even at this level of analysis it allows us to see that the five households involved share among themselves 58% of all the income derived from these other revenues, which is a considerable figure. The root cause of this is the lodging provided for trekkers brought to the village by Thai agencies. I have described this activity in detail elsewhere (Michaud 1997), so here we only need to consider the direct economic impact. The significant revenues derived from tourism in Ban Suay can all be summarized in a limited number of categories, as can the individual economic beneficiaries from this enterprise. Leaving aside the tips kids get for posing for photographs, a

negligible amount, only two households share between them most of the income gained from providing accommodation for the groups, while the Thai owner of the village store scoops in the major share of revenue from sales. The money received in the former cases remains in large part within the family economies involved — which in their case is limited — since little is used in exchanges with other community members, with most of these profits being spent in lowland markets on items used for reproduction, and also for status symbols, an important budgetary consideration among the youths of these households. As for the profits of the Thai village storekeeper who sells drinks and other bits and pieces to the visitors, they also end up in the lowlands where they are invested in the owner's village of origin, thus not improving the lot of the Hmong of Ban Suay in any way.

Despite the fact that an almost daily influx of groups of Occidental tourists over the past several years, is supposed to make for a substantial financial support according to some researchers, still one can see from Table 1 that the actual part played in the Hmong economy of Ban Suay amounts to a proportion of only 7.6% (58% of 13% or Bht 110,710 out of Bht 1,450,213) of the total village revenues before deduction of supplementary expenses of reproduction. This income is shared among five households of which two receive more than 91% of the benefit. If one adds that opium addiction is of a distinctive character, and when it occurs, the habit becomes indispensable to those involved in this commerce, so that it can hardly be called in such a case the mark of a collective and long-lasting factor in development, whatever way one looks at it.

The line entitled "%2" goes on to compare these fields against each other, with a summary of those sections of each that generate a revenue, columns 1, 2, 3, 4, brought together in column 5, "Total net income." To the right of the latter follows column 6 showing the proportion of this net revenue laid out on "Household expenditure on supplementary reproduction" which, subtracted from column 5, gives the figures for "Profit" shown in column 7 (by household) and 8 (by individual). Thus, for the village as a whole, revenues derived from agriculture amount to exactly 50% of the total, followed by revenue from opium at 23%, and those almost equal from stockbreeding and other revenues at 14% and 13% respectively. It is therefore possible to say that at Ban Suay, agricultural activity in its largest sense, including the cultivation of the opium poppy, nowadays makes up 73% of the total village revenues. What's more, one can also add to this the revenue derived from stockbreeding, since this activity is largely traditional, and if this is done then 87% of village revenue is today still largely drawn from activities in consonance with Hmong traditions and which have their roots in the customary practices of the group, and this

Table 2. Income by Clan, 1991

	^	Agriculture <sup>1</sup>			Stock Breeding <sup>2</sup>			Opium <sup>3</sup> Value	Other Incomes <sup>4</sup>			Total Net <sup>5</sup> Income (1+2+3+4)	HH <sup>6</sup> Expen.	Profit	
		Ind.	Income	Expen.	Net Income	Income	Expen.		Net Income	Tourism	Others			Total	Per HH <sup>7</sup>
<b>TANG</b>															
Total (bhat)	118	224660	62825	161835	47275	500	46775	65000	73320	48600	121920	395530	190050	205480	
Per HH (bhat)	7.4	14041	3927	10115	2955	31	2923	4063	4583	1989	7620	24721	11878	12843	1741
% 1 (%)		100	28	72	100	1	99		60	40	100				
% 2 (%)				41			12	16			31	100	48	52	
<b>LI</b>															
Total (bhat)	159	494815	95724	399091	112900	1150	111750	197200	31890	14000	45890	753931	153190	600741	
Per HH (bhat)	10.6	32988	6382	26606	7527	77	7450	13147	2126	933	3059	50262	10213	40049	3778
% 1 (%)		100	19	81	100	1	99		69	31	100				
% 2 (%)				53			15	26			6	100	20	80	
<b>MOUA</b>															
Total (bhat)	111	246627	81315	165372	55070	8660	46410	66520	5500	16950	22450	300752	123050	177702	
Per HH (bhat)	12.33	27403	9035	18375	6119	962	5157	7391	611	1883	2494	33417	13672	19745	1601
% 1 (%)		100	33	67	100	16	84		24	76	100				
% 2 (%)				55			15	22			7	100	41	59	

despite the fact that these revenues from agriculture are forms of commercial cultivation and that the revenues from stockbreeding stem largely from the hiring out of draught animals for irrigated rice farming.

Finally, we should note that "Other incomes" is mostly drawn from tourism and only involves five households, and these other sources, which include wages earned and profits from other kinds of commerce, account for less than 5.5% of the total revenue. Such computations allow us to say that the customs of Ban Suay village persist in the sense that the essence of economic activity continues to harmonize with much of tradition despite the socio-political constraints already described. Whatever might be the cause or effect, this cultural continuity does not necessarily indicate a vigorous identity which it would be difficult to diagnose simply with the aid of a few symptoms in the form of numbers, but rather to the contrary a real absence of the degradation of the social and cultural network with the only deviation being an economic adjustment to the reality of the present time.

However, if we follow the analysis in the table further, it will be seen that the "Household expenditure on supplementary reproduction" amount in their turn to 32% of the net revenue before expenditure. This high proportion then indicates that in spite of a lively traditional economic structure, one third of the revenue generated by this must nowadays be devoted to sustaining the group's production capacity by means of buying goods and materials not only from outside the village but from outside the montagnard's world. There is no base for comparison available to give concrete figures concerning the situation prevailing before the montagnard swidders settled to a sedentary life. But it is a good bet, as is evident from the ethnographic accounts of the 1970s, that the total proportion of revenue then spent on purchasing essential commodities such as rice and clothes was in those days far less.

Let us now interpret more closely the facts presented in Table 2, "Income by Clan, 1991," which provides a categorization of this data by patronymic groups and emphasizes overall tendencies. The strongest is certainly a positive multiple correlation visible for the Li. This clan shows the highest rate of agricultural efficiency (81%), they share the best return in

stockbreeding (99%), and their total for revenue from this activity is the same as that from opium which is higher than the total of the two other clans combined. They show the lowest revenue totals in economic activities unrelated to tradition (Bht 14,000) and, above all, their rate of expenditure on supplementary expenditures (20%) is half that of their neighbors. As a consequence of this the total profit per person among the Li (Bht 3,778) is more than double that of the Tang (Bht 1,741) and of the Moua (Bht 1,601). That is a truly remarkable performance.

This becomes even more evident if one continues the analysis in more detail as far as distinguishing the principle lineages in each clan, as in Table 3, "Income by Each of the Principle Lineages, 1991." In effect, in distinguishing between the lineage of Lao Tchang and that of Lao Su among the Li, and despite the incorporation of households 38 and 39 with the lineage of Lao Pa of the Moua (an adaptation which advantageously reflects the reality on the ground), the principle Li lineage dominates all the columns on traditional revenues: they are the least dependent on other revenues; their rate of expenditure outside the village is the least; and, as a result, their per capita revenue is even higher than in the preceding table, both in relative and absolute terms. To sum up, the Li clan is the one that has most resolutely taken the road towards commercial agriculture. They have invested time, labor, and disposable capital to this transition, while at the same time keeping up a fairly substantial production of opium. With a far lower level of investments in land and stock than their neighbors the Moua, yet still the Li are visibly committing their family's labor force into productive means to assure prosperity.

As opposed to the case of the Li, that of the Tang gives a picture of a quasi anemic economic condition. When the two most productive households are separated out and grouped with those of the Moua, the Tang are clearly at the bottom of the league under all headings. In particular, their dependence on nontraditional revenues is marked and their rate of expenditure on supplementary production is high, nearly half of the total revenues. It also has to be remembered that in comparison with their neighbors the Tang can scarcely be said to be engaged in commercial agriculture. They thus have not even the excuse of

Table 3. Income by Each of the Principal Lineages, 1991

	<sup>A</sup> Agriculture <sup>1</sup>			Stock Breeding <sup>2</sup>			Opium <sup>3</sup>	Other Incomes <sup>4</sup>			Total Net <sup>5</sup>	HH <sup>6</sup>	Profit		
	Ind.	Income	Expen.	Net Income	Income	Expen.	Net Income	Value	Tourism	Others	Total	Income (1+2+3+4)	Expen.	Per HH <sup>7</sup>	Per ind. <sup>8</sup> (7/A)
<b>Lineage of Pao Sae TANG *</b>															
Total (bhat)	79	97060	16025	81035	31900	0	31900	65000	4380	38600	42980	188515	92550	95965	
Per HH (bhat)	6.08	7466	1233	6233	2454	0	2454	2508	337	2969	3306	14501	7119	7382	1215
% 1 (%)		100	17	83	100	0	100		10	90	100				
% 2 (%)				43			17	16			23	100	49	51	
<b>Lineage of Lao Su Sae LI</b>															
Total (bhat)	40	62750	9670	53080	19420	200	19220	40400	31890	3000	34890	147590	39490	108100	
Per HH (bhat)	10.83	12550	1934	10616	3884	40	3844	8080	6378	600	6978	29518	7898	21620	2703
% 1 (%)		100	15	85	100	1	99		91	9	100				
% 2 (%)				36			13	27			24	100	27	73	
<b>Lineage of Lao Tchang Sae LI</b>															
Total (bhat)	119	432065	86054	346011	93480	950	92530	156800	0	11000	11000	606341	113700	492641	
Per HH (bhat)	11.9	43207	8605	34601	9348	95	9253	15680	0	1100	1100	60634	11370	49264	4140
% 1 (%)		100	20%	80	100	1	99		0	100	100				
% 2 (%)				57			15	26			2	100	19	81	
<b>Lineage of Lao Pa Sae MOUA*</b>															
Total (bhat)	135	372927	127515	245472	68640	9160	59480	82000	5500	23950	29450	416402	161350	255052	
Per HH (bhat)	13.5	37293	12752	24547	6864	916	5948	8200	550	2395	2945	41640	16135	25505	1889
% 1 (%)		100	34	66	100	13	87		19	81	100				
% 2 (%)				59			14	20			7	100	39	61	

\* Tang households number 38 and 39 have been added to the Moua lineage.

high outlays on fertilizer, on pesticides, and on the purchase of seedstock to explain their poor performance. To their credit, though, the Tang have done well in stockbreeding; but the absence of expenditure on this indicates both their reliance on herds and flocks of small monogastric creatures and a lack of ability rather than of non-volition in the purchase of veterinary medicines and vaccines. It is therefore not at all inappropriate to conclude that the Tang, quite simply, are not very productive in economic terms.

As for the main Moua lineage, they take their place between the two former groups in matters of economic performance. With outlays comparable to those of the Li (line %2), they moreover show high expenditure on both agriculture and stockbreeding (respectively 34% and 13%) and, above all, a rate of expenditure on supplementary reproduction notably much higher (39%). The lineage of Lao Pa can be assimilated in practically all ways to the whole clan, while even the addition of the two Tang households (38 and 39) does not suffice to make it possible to detect from these figures any significantly different character. If one confined oneself to the evidence of these numbers, it would seem acceptable to postulate that the economic performance of the Moua was little better than that of the Tang.

However, we must be careful not to yield to this temptation since the Moua clan, as we will recall, display in the village a wealth markedly grander than that of the Tang, that they own a large herd of cattle, several rice granaries and pickup trucks, that they produce little themselves for their own subsistence, and that they probably have invested in the purchase of rice paddies which they rent out to sharecroppers who pay their rent in kind rather than in cash; and furthermore their level of performance in the field of cultivating the opium poppy may well be much higher than appears in the table, as we shall shortly see. The Moua clan thus derive profit from a sort of dual economy that makes a contribution to their production

performance comparable to certain of their neighbors by drawing income from a large and varied range of investments.

#### THE SPECIAL CASE OF OPIUM

Table 4, "Total Village Opium Production, 1992 vs. 1982," allows us to make several observations which can usefully expand the scope of this discussion. The first thing to note is that the major part of the opium produced by the villagers in 1992 was used within the family or exchanged between households, since only 28% of the amount produced was sold. As for the tiny amount produced in 1992, though bearing in mind that nearly every family harvested their own crop, the question then arises as to who bought the 28%. One thing is sure, the mountain traffickers are no longer interested in such minute quantities, and it has been some years since their caravans passed through this area, the village total of 32.87 kilos being considered an insignificant amount in the illicit refining industry. The buyers were thus literally consumers in passage like the itinerant Thai opium addicts, or even village addicts lacking sufficient quantities of their own produce, or yet again people from other places. In the village, the tourist trade cannot be neglected since smoking opium is judged a desirable part of the experience by a fair number of trekkers. This activity accounts, though, for a maximum of 10% of village production, so it is not a truly significant amount (cf. Michaud 1994a, Ch. 6).

This table also reveals, in the section headed "Difference," that 1992's production when compared to that of 1982 comes to 9% of the latter in weight and 18% in value. This means that over ten years, the villagers have been obliged to reduce production of this cash crop by more than 90%, which has been accompanied by a drop of over 80% in the cash return on their labors. This is a considerable loss in revenue represented in figures here as Bht 36,295 annual average (in baht at the 1992



Table 4. Total Village Opium Production, 1992 vs. 1982

	Production 1992				Production 1982		Difference 1992 vs 1982		
	Production		Sale		Weight (kg)	1992 Value (baht)	1992 Loss in profit (baht)	1992 compared with 1982	
Weight (kg)	Value (baht)	Total (baht)	value (%)	value (%)				weight (kg)	
Total	32.87	328720	90897	28	356	1780500	1451780	18	9
Per HH	0.82	8218	2272	—	8.9	44513	36295	—	—

Table 5. Opium Production by Clan, 1992 vs. 1982

	Production 1992				Production 1982		Difference 1992 vs 1982		
	Production		Sale		Weight (kg)	1992 Value (baht)	1992 Loss in profit (baht)	1992 compared with 1982	
Weight (kg)	Value (baht)	Total (baht)	value (%)	value (%)				weight (kg)	
<b>TANG</b>									
Total	6.5	65000	21017	32	95	476500	411500	14	7
Per HH	0.06	4063	1314	—	5.96	29781	25719	—	—
<b>LI</b>									
Total	19.72	197200	51300	26	195	976000	778800	20	10
Per HH	1.32	13147	3420	—	13.01	65067	51920	—	—
<b>MOUA</b>									
Total	6.65	66520	18579	28	66	328000	261480	20	10
Per HH	0.74	7391	2064	—	7.29	36444	29053	—	—

rate) per household, a loss which the transition to commercial agriculture does not yet seem capable of compensating for, since, as we have seen in Table 1, the total net annual average per household in 1991 only amounted to Bht 24,598. These figures would seem to indicate that there has thus been an overall fall in incomes in Ban Suay, since the opium trade has been largely suppressed. This drop might even be much larger than it seems here since already in 1982, our year of comparison, the politics and the policy of crop substitution and opium suppression had already been underway in Thailand for several years by then. This data, then, also gives some weight to the theory put forward here that despite the apparent success of some village households in the shift to commercial agriculture, still the state goal of eradicating the village economies based on the cultivation of the opium poppy and replacing them with others based on horticulture, irrigated rice paddies, and stockbreeding has not till this day proved to be as profitable a solution for the Hmong of Ban Suay as the previous equilibrium. Nevertheless, a rider should be added to this assertion due to our ignorance on the subject of the overall economic balance in 1982 when, perhaps, a high level of production of the opium poppy was accompanied by a much lower level of subsistence production than today; it could be also that the profits from opium were needed to acquire subsistence products at a much higher level than is presently the case. This, however, remains an unsubstantiated hypothesis.

As far as reading this data by clan in Table 5, "Opium Production by Clan, 1992 vs. 1982," it would appear that it was members of the Li clan who harvested the greatest yields in 1982, that is an average per household equal to those of the other two clans combined. This information needs to be verified. Not because the Li totals appeared to be exaggerated, nor the low levels of the Tang either, but since the figures for the Moua

clan seem open to speculation. It seemed astonishing that this clan, notoriously involved in the opium trade during the 1970s, could have reduced their production to this point in the course of only five years, that is to say since the death of their leader Te who, up until 1977, ran the trade for his clan. At least unless the Moua had been vigorously restrained by the authorities due to their prior deep involvement in this illicit trade. And in such a case it would have been illogical if the other villagers had not been treated in the same way, the authorities never having made any distinctions among clans within the interior of an ethnically homogenous highland village. Still again, it is possible that the Moua's poppy swiddens had all been cultivated in the same circumscribed location which had then been the target of radical suppression activities on the part of agents of the State, and not those of other clans. Finally, it was perhaps possible that the discrepancy was due to a simple error in the information given by the Moua while they were being questioned for the purposes of the questionnaire. Whichever it was, it is extremely unlikely that the Moua of Ban Suay do not profit nowadays from the same "facilities" as the other villagers in the production of opium, and it would be astonishing if they did not endeavor to maximize their possibilities in this lucrative undertaking. Expensive material possessions, such as the numerous pickup trucks of the group, bear witness to a stronger purchasing power than an average agricultural performance and the renting out of a few inundated rice paddies suffice to explain in a convincing manner.

Equally, in the comparison between the groups, the loss of market outlets and profits from opium as compared with the total net revenue by clans in 1991 shows up as very different proportions among the patronymic clans. On average, the Li households suffered a loss of 23% (with revenues of Bht 51,920 from opium as compared to Bht 40,049 of total net revenue

today), the Moua lost 32% (Bht 29,053 against Bht 19,745), and the Tang lost 50% (Bht 25,719 against Bht 12,843). If the figures for opium must in fact be augmented for the Moua, as we suppose should be the case, the percentage for losses should be increased by a few points in their case.

### *Summary of Observations*

In the light of the information presented in this latter section and in the perspectives of the portrait traced out of the wealth both traditional and contemporary of the village, it appears certain that as Cooper has suggested (1984:148), the great losers in the suppression of opium poppy cultivation combined with an obligatory transition to commercial agriculture are those who lacked both capital and substantial means of production before or even at the time of this change, and who since then have not been able to acquire either the one or the other means of production which would allow them to earn and conserve wealth nowadays. In Ban Suay, they are the Tang.

In the opposite case, the Li — at least its principal lineage — appear to have succeeded better than anyone else in making up for the loss of revenue from a previously important source by means of a successful conversion to this other economic sphere, market gardening and plantations. In their case, it would seem that the major cause of this success was the availability of a large and competent family labor force, and also of “old money” derived from opium production, in which they had been active.

As for the Moua, they occupy an intermediate position, in some ways suspect. While their actual agricultural performance is not impressive on the village scale, their wealth is nonetheless manifestly evident. The causes for this wealth are apparently a large and long-established amassment of cash derived from the opium trade, that was invested in property assuring the group of having all the rice they might need at their disposal without further monetary outlay or investment of labor. It is equally plausible that a supplementary factor in the maintenance of the Moua’s wealth is the simple fact that they might still be deriving a significant profit from the sale of opium. The fact is that this clan commands financial means which allow them to make substantial transactions in lowland markets.

As a corollary to this summary, it appears sensible to think that the impoverishment of the weaker producers of the opium poppy in the past has been perpetuated and, even, has deepened in the context of having become permanently dependent on agricultural markets whether regional or national. And this is not due to any lack of competence in their agricultural labors, but is entirely due to their inability to acquire the kind of means of production that have become indispensable in present circumstances, such as land, fertilizer, pesticides, vehicles, occasional hired labor, and so forth. A vicious circle has developed that it is extremely difficult to break out of.

### *Conclusion*

Results of this research rejoin, confirm and, to a certain extent, enrich the analyses of Yang (1975), Geddes (1976) and Cooper (1984) on the economic and political dimensions of social change in Hmong communities in Thailand’s and Laos’

highlands. They demonstrate that despite ongoing economic modernization in Ban Suay, villagers appear determined to maintain the political equilibrium of custom, which has shown considerable flexibility in adapting to new circumstances, or, at the very least, to preserve a system of traditional local authority parallel to that which prevails outside the village. Traditional beliefs are tenacious, cultural practices persistent, social life continues to be modeled on ancestral ways and inter-Hmong marriage remains the preference. In fact, enforced dependence on the market economy presently appears to be confined within well circumscribed limits, and does not seem to interfere directly with Hmong tradition.

If one should wish to identify the particular contribution of this study to the existing corpus of research, it is undoubtedly the comparison and contrast between the factors of social change that until now have been treated separately or, in the case of tourism, are currently neglected. Thus, the development of a diachronic as well as a synchronic perspective in this study of Ban Suay, the anchoring of economic dynamics in the kinship structure, the analysis of the local equilibrium of power between the clans, the examination of the division of wealth and the research into its historical foundations, as well as the comparison between the traditional expressions of wealth with its newer manifestations linked to commercial agriculture and by the inclusion of the market which all provide a kind of support that is novel to the experience of the Hmong. As for the discussion devoted to an analysis of social change, it forms a useful addition to the pioneering ethnographic writings on the Hmong of Thailand and Laos.

The social changes in cases of transition to sedentary farming from shifting cultivation combined with a conversion to intensive commercial agriculture, by people formerly occupied in subsistence agriculture, has brought about crucial consequences. The monetarization of exchange models, degradation of the cycle of mutual aid between lineage members and fellow villagers, the withering away of local power, loss of economic autonomy and a resultant dependence on external markets, all of these results have been observed and analyzed by these authors.

However, in the case of the Hmong of Ban Suay, the practice for over a century of the cultivation of the poppy and the marketing of the opium set a precedent whose consequences were instrumental in the apparently high capacity of this group to adapt to the present economic situation. Their relatively long term apprenticeship in this form of intensive commercial agriculture, in comparison with many other groups of swiddeners of the eco-region, gave them a precedent from within their traditional economy — “In every wealthy household it is possible to trace the original source of wealth to the opium economy,” (Cooper 1984:211) — and to open a breach in the monolithic practice of an agriculture that was characterized primarily by the satisfaction of subsistence needs. This causal relationship between the old performance of cultivating the poppy and the present day success in intensive agriculture is in evidence in Ban Suay. What is more, as Cooper suggested (1984:196), the wealth of each lineage at the exact moment of sedentarization and the change in agricultural practices appears to have been a key factor in the capacity of the lineages to invest in rental property and to purchase new means of production (land, chemical inputs, tools, vehicles, agricultural labor), thus allowing them even to generate wealth despite all

the problems linked to this forced transformation of cultural patterns.

Nonetheless, the issue of maintenance of customary social structure needs to be considered in greater depth. For example, even though the combined influences of the State and the market on village life are not ostensibly manifest in the short term, they unquestionably favor increased social differentiation and the development of stronger hierarchies within the community. Such increased differentiation has been observed in numerous cases of transition to a market economy, and the author has no reason to believe that Ban Suay constitutes an exception to the rule. In fact, considerations of current economic performances all tend to suggest that inequalities between the three village clans are progressively growing.

From this, the question arises about the possibility of the emergence of social classes within this society which has been traditionally egalitarian by and large. Geddes (1976:190-194) briefly considered this issue as regards the Hmong in the region of Meto on the basis of field studies carried out during the 60s. He concluded that custom largely reined back, where it did not entirely preclude, the formation of social classes, particularly in cases associated with shifting cultivation and a total reliance on the elements, the ineluctably decisive factor in harvest yields. Cooper, on his part, on the basis of field studies in the middle of the 1970s, is more affirmative than Geddes as to the emergence of social hierarchies coming close to the concept of social classes. Cooper (1984:210-212, 236-250) rests his main argument on the existence of wage labor in the four villages covered by his study, all of them moreover in the course of sedentarization and the transition to intensive agriculture. He agrees that the extraction of added-value from the labor force leads to accumulation. This in turn translates into the capacity to invest in the supplementary means of production, especially in land, which further allows an augmentation in extraction capacity. He concludes his proposal in the following manner:

Divisions of wealth certainly exist and, from the available evidence, would seem to be increasing. If we are to consider these divisions as forming economic classes it is necessary to show that these classes can reproduce themselves through time.[...] The situation can be summed up as one in which classes are coming into existence in Hmong society. (Cooper 1984:211, 212)

The case of Ban Suay confirms Cooper's opinion on this up to a certain point, but does so through different characteristics. In fact, there is very little wage labor in Ban Suay so the favorable conditions for the emergence and the continuation of social divisions founded in the economy are to be found elsewhere. The author proposes to take into account here several factors that were not yet implicated at the time when Cooper carried out his researches. One can count as major ones here the legal access to owning land through the adoption of Thai citizenship, of the direct transformation of the wealth gained from opium production to such means of production as irrigated rice paddies, vehicles, and motorized rice mills. Rent paid in kind by the sharecropping tenants of paddy fields allows the family labor force to be deployed on other tasks and, in the case of the

youngest, makes it possible for them to further their education in the state system. The prosperity derived from all this in its turn contributes to attracting both male and female "best quality" prospective marriage partners, and also in greater numbers which, in the medium term, favors a high household reproduction rate.

Thus, within the context of a more and more complete integration with the market economy and the increasing monetarization of exchanges, the maintenance, and even the augmentation, of household wealth seems to be tied to the ownership of the means of production to the detriment of the customary cooperation within the lineage. The possessors of these means grow well-off — or, at least, have the means to do so — while those lacking them are, at best, in a phase of economic stagnation which mutual help cannot suffice to overcome. The result is necessarily a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor.

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