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Studies of the Tai world often treat 'state' and 'community' as polar opposites: the state produces administrative uniformity and commercialization while community sustains tradition, local knowledge and subsistence economy. This assumption leads to the conclusion that the traditional community is undermined by the modern forces of state incorporation and market penetration. States rule and communities resist.

Tai Lands and Thailand takes a very different view. Using thematic and ethnographic studies from Thailand, Laos, Burma and southern China, the authors describe modern forms of community where state power intersects with markets, livelihoods and aspirations. Modern community is not easily created nor is it inevitable, but rapid social and economic change in the Tai world has provided many opportunities for new forms of communal belonging to emerge.

Tai Lands and Thailand opens up fresh perspectives on a region in transition, and the discussion promises to inform future studies of contemporary sociality in Southeast Asia.

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Tai Lands and Thailand

Community and State in Southeast Asia

edited by Andrew Walker

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Andrew Walker

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Cover: New Year offerings presented to a senior government official in northern Thailand. Photo by Andrew Walker.

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1

Modern Tai Community

Andrew Walker

This book provides a new approach to the study of community in the Tai world of mainland Southeast Asia.

Much of the current ethnographic work in the Tai world is constrained by a conceptual framework that associates community with tradition, locality and subsistence economy. This traditional community is commonly portrayed as being undermined by the modern forces of state incorporation, market penetration, globalisation and population mobility.

In this volume, we take a very different view. We challenge the widely held view that community is a traditional social form that is undermined by modernity. Using case studies from Thailand, Laos, Burma and China, we explore the active creation of 'modern community' in contexts of economic and political transformation.[1] Our aim is to liberate community from its stereotypical association with traditional village solidarity and to demonstrate that communal sentiments of belonging retain their salience in the modern world of occupational mobility, globalised consumerism and national development.

Our focus is on the Tai world, made up of the various peoples who speak Tai languages. The largest groups are the Thai of Thailand, the Lao of Laos, the Shan of Burma and the Dai of southern China. Of course, each of these categories is problematic; they are all the modern products of historical circumstance rather than being natural or self-evident ethnic groups. There are certainly linguistic and cultural similarities that justify the shared label 'Tai' but this must be treated as a preliminary delineation of a field of interest without rushing to

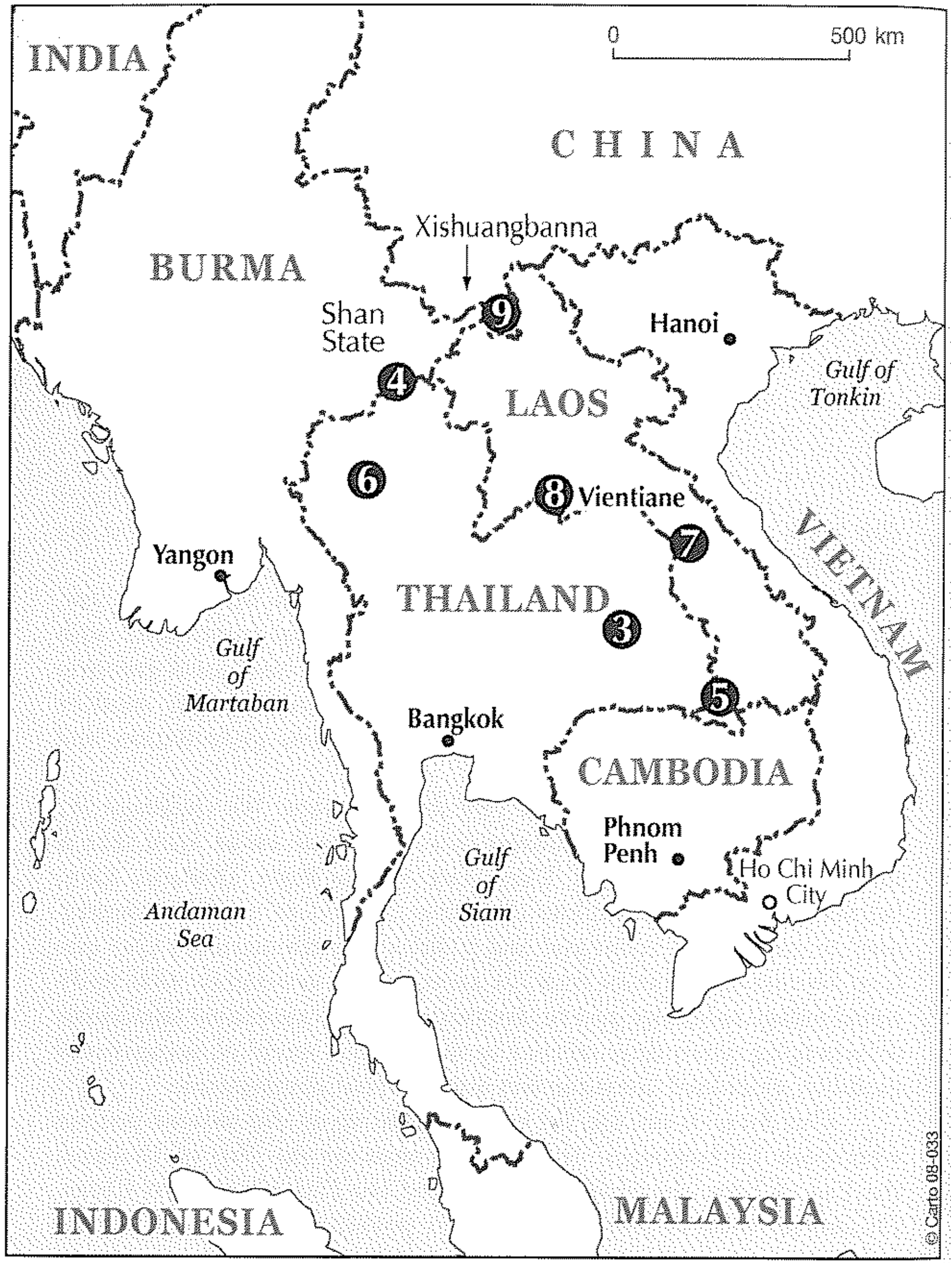

Figure 1.1 Mainland Southeast Asia, with locations of the case studies examined in this book (numbers refer to the chapters).

assumptions about a common identity or a sense of shared history. Indeed, our primary goal is to critically examine contemporary notions of belonging in this Tai world.

The Tai world is a particularly interesting place to examine ideas about community. For some, the Tai world itself is a transborder community of historical linkages, cultural commonality and shared identity. As Cold War political tensions in the region have declined and as opportunities for cross-border contact have proliferated, the cultural template of 'Tai-ness' has been promoted as a cultural foundation for regional integration in a globalising world. Advocates of modern Tai integration argue that a culturally authentic community of transborder belonging has persisted despite the disruptions of colonialism, state-building and warfare. One of the elements of this revitalised cultural commonality in the Tai world is the form of the local community itself. Many recent observers of the Tai world have made reference to a particular type of (rural) community that is seen as representing authentic Tai-ness: "the village community is the basis for the economy and culture of the Tai including the Thai of Thailand" (quoted in Farrelly, 2003: 33). Those constructing this modern imagery of traditional community often look across borders to find versions of it that are more in keeping with their vision of authentic Tai-ness.

In the modern Tai world, the idea of local community is mobilised in projects of state building, economic development and grassroots empowerment. In Thailand, during the 1990s there was a persistent campaign by non-government organisations (NGOs), academics and public intellectuals to develop a policy framework that was more sympathetic to community-based approaches to development and natural resource management. This culminated in a much-cited provision of the former constitution which granted "persons so assembling as to be an original local community ... rights in the management, maintenance, care and use of benefits from natural resources and the environment in a balanced and sustainable manner" (Government of Thailand, 1997).[2] Exactly what is meant by an "original local community" is not completely clear, but it conveys a strong sense of longstanding residence, a predominantly local focus and the persistence of what are seen as traditional practices. This particular constitutional provision was often cited as adding high-level legal legitimacy to the strengthening of communal resource management institutions. Across the Mekong River in Laos, community has an even more prominent position in public discourse. In the national campaign of poverty eradication — driven to a significant extent by international development agencies — the village community is the key site of implementation and resource mobilisation. As High (2005: 69) writes, these local communities are seen as being the site of poverty: "the causes of poverty are to be found there, and it is through communal action within the village that poverty is to be addressed." And at a national level in Laos, one of the reactions of the modern state to the impact of globalisation has been an appeal to traditional symbols of communal attachment "to create a national identity that is distinct from those of neighbouring states" (Rehbein, 2007: 79).

One of our key aims, then, is to document some of the ways the idea of community is deployed in academic analysis, government policy and NGO advocacy throughout this region. However, we intend to go beyond documentation in two ways. First, the book explores the usefulness of community as an analytical concept — we are contributing to the long sociological tradition of critical reflection on the nature of community. As in other contexts, one of the key themes of critical reflection is the usefulness of the commonly assumed distinction between community and modernity. Our second strand of critical engagement is with the strategic or political use of community in the Tai world. It is often argued that the importance of community lies not in its analytical precision but in its ability to provide a basis for various forms of empowerment, political mobilisation and economic development. We document these strategic uses of community in a number of contexts but we also argue that the strategic benefits of community cannot be taken for granted. Community is a highly malleable notion and it can also contribute to marginalisation, disempowerment and bureaucratic incorporation.

A new orientation to community in the Tai world emerges from this critical discussion. The term 'modern Tai community' is an explicit statement of the view that there is no necessary tension between community and modernity. Community is symbolically and practically constructed in new political and economic contexts. This does not mean that familiar ideas of village community should be abandoned, but it does suggest that the experience of community by people living in villages — or anywhere else — is not inevitable, natural or all-embracing but subject to diverse processes of social and symbolic construction. The idea of modern Tai community also extends the idea of community well beyond its stereotypical village setting to include, for example, senses of belonging based on spatially dispersed networks, common identification with key commodities, ephemeral alliances around development projects and forms of bureaucratic organisation. Modern Tai community extracts community from its normative and nostalgic embeddings in tradition and presents it as one problematic dimension of sociality in the modern world.[3]

TRADITIONAL TAI COMMUNITY

For many commentators, the traditional Tai community is a form of 'total community' in which diverse economic, social, cultural, political and environmental elements are subjected to the normative force of community regulation (Delanty, 2003: 21–5). This imagery of total community is built around the rural Tai village in which economic activities are primarily oriented to subsistence production (Chatthip, 1999). Production of rice for local consumption is seen as underpinning local economy and sociality. Rice production is supplemented by mushrooms and wild vegetables from the surrounding forests and from the abundant fish in the streams and paddy fields. In these subsistence-oriented communities housing is made from timber, bamboo and grass, while farm tools are fashioned from readily available local products. Of course, it is well recognised that some essential items, such as iron and salt, may have been obtained through local and long-distance trading relations, but these external economic ties are seen as being peripheral to local systems of production (Ireson, 1995). Similarly, aristocratic or mercantile elites may have had some interest in "skimming a surplus out of the villages" but they had little interest in transforming local production systems. The image is of a "radically dual economy" in which subsistence production within the community was relatively disconnected from the external forces of state extraction and mercantile transformation (Baker and Pasuk, 1999: 122).

These rural Tai villages are commonly portrayed as being built around the communal management of resources "ranging from the temple, the cemetery, the school, the irrigation system up to the forest itself". These resources are seen as the "heritage of the ancestors that the villagers have to protect and manage for the collective benefit according to agreed rules and traditions of the community" (Anan, 2001: 121). Most iconic in accounts of communal resources are the local irrigation systems that require considerable extra-household cooperation for construction, maintenance and operation. A study of village irrigation in Laos concludes that the "patterns of cooperation" provide for "effective and egalitarian management of common resources"

(Ireson, 1995: 555; see also Uraivan, 1995). Another iconic institution is reciprocal labour exchange in which farming households contribute labour to others to assist with important agricultural tasks such as rice planting and harvesting. Large labouring groups are said to create a communal style of sociality, equality and generosity that is absent in more individualistic production processes. Some also see these approaches to production as reflecting a long-standing emphasis on communal property arrangements. Anthropological accounts from many parts of the Tai world have proposed that rice fields were communally owned or subject to strict communal regulations, which prevented the dispersion of land to non-members (Pratuang, 1997: 132; Chatthip, 1999: 10; Tanabe, 1988: 6).

The traditional Tai community is also seen as naturally self-governing: "self rule is the ideal of villagers" writes Chatthip (1999: 10). He adds, "It is a blessing from the past which villagers long to retain." Authority is exercised by community elders, kinship groups and ritual leaders who draw on the moral force of local spirits. Disputes are resolved internally. Communities sought to maintain their independence from urban centres of power, often fleeing to more remote areas when the predations of central authority became excessive. According to Turton (1972: 242), "the princes were feared more than tigers and bears". Political independence was ritually expressed in local spirit cults that distinguished local forms of authority from the centralised authority of the chiefly elites. Those entering or leaving the village had to make appropriate representations to the village guardian spirit and during the annual offering to the spirit, villages were ritually closed, with passage in or out forbidden (Tanabe, 1988: 10). "Such practices demonstrated village autonomy and, more significantly, the collective feeling of antagonism directed both against adjacent village communities as well as against official intervention from the... authorities" (Tanabe, 1988: 10–11).

Subsistence production, communal resource management and self-government are often portrayed as underpinning an intimate relationship with the environment. Locally oriented economic systems prevented over-exploitation of natural resources, while local institutions provided a basis for the sound management of resources by those who were most directly dependent on them. Dependence on the local environment is said to have generated diverse forms of ecological knowledge and conservationist cultural practice. In recent discussions of Tai community, considerable emphasis is placed on various forms of local wisdom (*phum panya*) that provide a basis for sustainable resource management. One account of northern Thai local wisdom describes the ways in which the subsistence production of the region's farmers is based on technologies and practices that "harmonise lifestyle with the natural environment". Forest product collection is governed by "local wisdom that comes from villagers' observation of nature and environmental cycles" (Ekawit, 2001: 21, 77). Other publications have documented the precepts, ritual prohibitions and taboos that reflect the sympathetic relationship between local Tai culture and the encompassing environment: "you should not cut down big trees. It is not good to make paddy-fields or gardens, or to build a house in those areas. If you live there, there will be no happiness" (Khomnet, Buntha and Silao, 1996: 49). Communal action taken to protect forested areas is often regarded as one of the important antecedents of the modern community forestry movement throughout the region (Walker, 2004). In these various ways the moral force of community is extended to incorporate the natural environment (Rose, 2000).

Of course, it is widely recognised that much of this has changed. Drawing on one of the classic tropes of Western social science, writers on the Tai world regularly lament the evolutionary transition from traditional community to the individualism and anomie of modern society. The key forces that have brought about the fragmentation of the total Tai community are the market and the state. With the emergence of cash-crop production and the undermining of local handicrafts by manufactured imports, rural households have come to depend on the market for a wide range of subsistence goods normally produced within the household. Consumer goods were often offered on credit by "shop keepers and merchant traders aspir[ing] to optimise market potential" (Uraivan et al., 1988: 101). Farmers were drawn into the production of cash crops so they could repay their debts and fund further purchases. The high costs of agricultural inputs and volatile market prices forced many further into debt and led ultimately to the loss of their land. Previously cooperative communities were divided into socio-economic classes with differential access to resources. Diverse forms of labour cooperation and networks of support collapsed as wage labour relations proliferated. As systems of communal regulation broke down, sustainable management of local resources came to be replaced by a free-for-all tragedy of the commons. And the rise of individualism was mirrored in spiritual orientations as communal rituals were increasingly replaced by ritual observances at a household level (Anan, 2001: 123).

The state is seen as playing a key role in this transformation. In what is often described as a process of "territorialisation" (Vandergeest, 1996), state extension of power has undermined local systems of communal resource management. States have seized forest land, often encouraging unsustainable resource exploitation by external commercial forces such as logging companies, forest-product traders and agribusinesses. Furthermore, states have promoted systems of individual land tenure at the expense of less legible communal arrangements. Political incorporation has created new forms of local leadership, marginalising the traditional leaders whose authority relied on a holistic mix of personal charisma, ritual legitimacy and the ability to offer protection. In many parts of the Tai world, state development initiatives have also encouraged the adoption of market-oriented economic strategies. State extension efforts, infrastructure construction and international trading agreements have facilitated the penetration of commercial agriculture into what were previously subsistence-oriented agricultural systems.

However, this picture of community destruction is not uniform. Some observers argue that many aspects of community culture still persist. Tai community persists in the more remote regions of Thailand and, in particular, in the peripheral regions of Laos, Burma and southern China where contact with the capitalist system has been brief (Chatthip and Pornpilai, 1998). A key thrust of recent anthropological scholarship in the Tai world has been to document the origins and persistence of Tai community in areas outside Thailand. This venture, which Yos (2001: 16) describes as "construct[ing] the distant past by studying the geographically distant" is most clearly represented by the Project on Tai Social and Cultural History led by Professor Chatthip Nartsupha. This project seeks to mobilise ethnographic and ethno-historical material from the region as a critique of the impact of modernity in the Thai heartland.

REVISIONIST VIEWS OF TRADITIONAL TAI COMMUNITY

These images of Tai community have generated significant critical commentary and debate. An important contribution was made by Bowie (1992) in her attempt to unravel "the myth of the subsistence economy". Bowie traces the creation of the imagery of self-sufficient rural communities in royalist, post-royalist and Marxist accounts from Thailand. Provocatively, she describes an "odd convergence between conservative and progressive intellectuals" with the former seeking to romanticise the past in order to evade class tension and the latter glorifying the past in order to sharpen their critique of capitalism (Bowie, 1992: 819). Bowie (1992: 797) argues that these various accounts "have been virtually unanimous in their characterisation of the peasant economy as a subsistence economy", a paradigm that promotes an image of the Thai peasantry as "homogenous, egalitarian, self-sufficient, non-market and unchanging". To counter this view, she argues for the importance of trade in the premodern Thai rural economy, constructing an alternative vision of a rural economy that is based on "a complex division of labour, class stratification, dire poverty, a wide ranging trade network, and an unappreciated dynamism" (Bowie, 1992: 819). I have made a similar argument in response to the common view that rural Laos was characterised by a "natural economy" in which market exchange was peripheral, local production systems were relatively static and the focus of rural economic activity was on self-provisioning (Walker, 1999). Focusing on northern Laos, I argued that trade between rural and urban areas — particularly in rice and forest products — was a key feature of pre-colonial rural social relations and underpinned the survival of inland trading centres such as Luangphrabang. "A rudimentary system of political-spatial specialisation occurred where lowland settlements concentrated on handicrafts and trade, while the uplanders focused on agricultural production" (Walker, 1999: 39; see also Giersch, 2006; Masuhara, 2003; Hill, 1998; and Koizumi, 1992).

Of course, there is some risk in overstating this critique. Even the most ardent advocates of the self-sufficient Tai community recognise the existence of local and regional trading relations. As Evans (2008: 514) points out, "any serious consideration of the anthropological literature on the peasantry... would make it clear that peasants are part of larger political, cultural and economic networks". But it is also clear that much of the literature on the Tai peasantry not only plays down the importance of these external networks but often sees them as being antithetical to an authentic or traditional sense of Tai community. Critics may occasionally erect straw men of autarchy, but there is little doubt that there is a predominant concern in much of the literature on traditional Tai community with what Evans (2008: 514) refers to as a "high level of self provisioning" and, more importantly, that localised production (rather than exchange) is seen as the basis of local sociality. Overall, a preoccupation with self provisioning has drawn attention away from the extent to which external economic relations shaped premodern settlement patterns, marriage practices, ritual networks, occupational specialisation, social differentiation and agricultural innovation.

A more fundamental critique of the imagery of the Tai community emerges from considering more contemporary developments. The work of a number of revisionist researchers suggests that the commonly cited distinction between traditional community and modern society is unsustainable. Community emerges as a thoroughly modern phenomenon, constructed in dialogue with both the state and the market.

Kemp's work (1987; 1989; 1991) on the "seductive mirage" of the Thai village is a good starting point. The argument presented by Kemp is that Thai villages are a quite recent product of the extension of state administrative action to local levels. He suggests that the village is a creation of the administrative reforms of the 1890s, which introduced a new form of territorial administration: "The changes in Siam marked the modernising elite's incorporation of an outsider's image and model of the village community into the new administrative structure and its subsequent imposition on the countryside" (Kemp, 1991: 313). According to Kemp, this fixed territorial organisation (in which the village was the primary unit) displaced previous forms of government based on multi-stranded and flexible linkages between people. In other words, the idea of discrete, bounded and distinct villages — which is the core image of the traditional Tai community — is a product of modern state incorporation. Kemp's argument applies better to the central plains of Thailand than, for example, the mountainous north, where there has long been a nucleated settlement pattern. Nevertheless, his critique does usefully highlight the role of state administration in generating sentiments and institutions of local belonging that are not necessarily an inevitable product of co-residence.

Reynolds (Chapter 2) explores more recent phases of this administrative consolidation. In his exploration of the genealogy of the Thai term for community (*chumchon*), he identifies the importance of the community development discourse adopted by sections of the Thai bureaucracy, especially during the influx of American aid money in the 1950s and 1960s. Reynolds points to the institutionalisation of community within the powerful Ministry of Interior through, for example, the creation of the Department of Community Development and the bureaucratically produced *Community Development Bulletin*. "In this sense," Reynolds writes, "community belongs to the history of the structuring of village society by the state". In relation to an even more recent historical phase, Rigg (1994) shows how modern development initiatives have encouraged mobilisation along community lines. The international discourse of 'participation' has been crucial in this creation of community: "the state has not only created the 'village', but it has introduced policies to ferment and then cement a sense of village identity" (Rigg, 1994: 131). Often the only way in which local people can effectively engage with state development initiatives is by adopting the key symbols and institutional forms of local community.

The productive interplay between state and community points to the role of the community in modern forms of governance. Drawing inspiration from the work of Foucault, a number of writers have suggested that community embraces sets of meanings, institutions and norms through which state power is embedded in local practice (Herbert, 2005; Rose, 2000; Marsden and Murdoch, 1998; Agrawal, 2001a; 2001b). Agrawal's work on the "regulatory community" is a useful discussion of the ways in which forms of environmental governance ("environmentality") are achieved through local resource management institutions. As states seek to shed traditional regulatory functions, the community emerges as a key site for the enforcement of dispersed standards of responsible citizenship. In the Lao context, High (2005: 58–9) argues that many community development initiatives can be seen as a form of state-led "participatory corvée" based on "views of villages as stable, cooperative units, prone to group effort for the common good". The classic cultural trope of cooperation is used as a basis for the "extraction of labour, time and resources from rural residents towards state projects". With more than a little irony, High (2005: 69) notes that "the term for this extraction is 'participation'".

Nevertheless, it would be unfortunate if the role of the state in the creation of community was perceived in purely negative terms. There is a risk of reintroducing the modern-traditional distinction through a view that state-mobilised forms of community are necessarily more authoritarian and coercive than more authentic forms of local sociality. In many situations, local residents and state agents actively collaborate in the creation of modern community. In fact, many community contexts are characterised by the lack of a clear boundary between state officials and local residents. In Chapter 6, I describe the proliferation of local development projects which have become one of the key preoccupations of northern Thai village politics. These projects, such as the construction of a handicraft centre or the upgrading of an irrigation system, are sites of institutional elaboration where forms of community organisation represent the blurred interface between state and locality. They are the sites where local residents, often under the legitimising banner of collective endeavour, participate in local projects of state-making. Another local perspective on the state's role in community formation is provided by Singh (Chapter 7) in her account of the "dormitory community" of state officials in central Laos. This important contribution places community firmly within a bureaucratic context, but in a way that highlights the ambiguities of state formation in a peripheral region. Singh's dormitory of marginal state officials can be seen as a state-created space of intense and intimate community where a proliferation of "transparent moments" renders formal and simplified statements of authority problematic.

So, the modern state can be seen as a participant in the formation of Tai community. But what about the modern capitalist market? As we have seen, accounts of Tai community typically point to the intrusive and disruptive effect of modern market relations. Of course there is nuance in these accounts that should not be overlooked. In some cases the community is seen as being complementary to the market: providing forms of livelihood support, social security and cultural resilience not catered for by the market. In other cases, the community is seen as a basis for strategic engagement with the market. This is one way of interpreting the "sufficiency economy" theory, promoted by Thailand's king, which emphasises the importance of "a firm foundation of self-reliance" prior to moving onto higher stages of economic development (UNDP, 2007: 28). These perspectives point to the potential for non-destructive relations between community and market, but community and market are still treated as fundamentally separate domains and there is little recognition of the productive role of commercialisation in actually constituting community.

However, there is good evidence that capitalism can be creative, rather than destructive, of community (Shigetomi, 1992). Exchange labour is often seen as a marker of Tai community and its decline is attributed to the proliferation of wage labour arrangements under the regime of capitalist agriculture. But this is an overly simplified narrative of community decline. In fact, growing pressure on local labour resources can lead to intensified labour-group cooperation. Local pressures on the work force arise from intensive schedules of cash-crop production combined with the diversion of young people to the urban labour force. In this labour-scarce context, exchange labour can become more prevalent than in the past — when it was mainly associated with rice planting and harvesting — because of the need to meet strict agricultural production schedules set down by commodity buyers. These exchange labour groups can also provide a structural basis for the provision of credit and agricultural inputs. Agricultural brokers cultivate the solidarity of these groups — including hosting parties at various stages in the production cycle — to enhance productivity and reliability. For these commercial agents, groups provide a more manageable commercial environment, particularly in relation to enforcing the repayment of credit. Of course, more individualistic wage labour and contracting arrangements are also common, but these too are often culturally framed in the idioms of community: exchange labour, cooperation between kin, and helping out in times of peak labour demand.

Similar observations about the recent creation of community can also be made about cooperative irrigation systems that are common throughout the Tai world. In the past, these systems functioned mainly to provide supplementary water during the wet season, especially early in the season when abundant water was required for field preparation, and in mid-season when changing monsoonal influences often meant a lack of rainfall. The widespread market-led adoption of dry-season agriculture throughout the region over the past few decades has placed these systems under unprecedented pressure. They are now required to provide virtually the entire water supply to agricultural fields during the dry season. Given the low stream-flow that often prevails during the dry season, this requires a much higher level of local cooperative management involving the development of new community-based institutions for water sharing, dispute resolution, system maintenance and infrastructural improvement. In many cases, this amounts to a regulatory elaboration of communal management previously unknown. In some cases, it also encourages higher levels of cooperation in relation to land use, with cultivation consolidated in dry years on better-watered areas of land.

These observations focus on the relation between community and market-oriented production. But what about consumption? Here again there is evidence of the formation of new types of community based on the shared consumption of commodities. Part of the social life of commodities is that, through human networks of circulation and exchange, they become sites for the production of meaning and the generation of new forms of attachment. In a recent contribution, Rehbein (2007: 112–22) describes the proliferation of hybrid genres of popular music in Laos. This contemporary music has a strong

Western and Thai influence in style, melody and instrumentation but maintains a distinctly Lao orientation in the lyrics: "the language and content of these songs make it clear that these are *Lao* relationships" (Rehbein, 2007: 119). This combination of global and local influences in consumption patterns and forms of cultural expression — what Rehbein calls "glocalization" — contributes to new dimensions of belonging, particularly among upwardly mobile groups of entrepreneurs, government officials, aid workers and academics. According to Rehbein (2007: 86), these elite groups are now "defining their position within the global order, not within the nation".

This theme is taken up by Mayes (Chapter 8) who provides a fascinating account of a group of marginalised urban Lao men creating shared forms of transnational identity based on their membership of the Vientiane Vespa motor-scooter club. This is a form of belonging that is built around the ambiguous European-Asian origins of the Vespa in Laos and it is a form of belonging very different from the officially promoted 'imagined community' of the Lao state. While Rehbein emphasises the increasingly globalised community of the elite, Mayes shows that there are also forms of transnational identity accessible to more marginal segments of the Lao population. Diana's contribution (Chapter 9) also suggests the importance of consumption-based aspirations in strengthening some forms of belonging, while weakening others. For the Chinese Tai girls who are the focus of her study, the commercial impoverishment of the Lao markets across the border underlines their commitment to Chinese modernity. Common notions of a seemingly inevitable transborder Tai community are challenged by her account. The young women she describes seem more closely connected to the lure of livelihood mobility and conspicuous consumption represented by the globalised Chinese cities of Shanghai and Beijing than to the drab Lao townships just across the border. Being Tai is by no means irrelevant in their lives but, in contrast to the marginalised Vespa owners of Vientiane, a highly commodified version of ethnic minority 'Dai-ness' provides them with a niche within the Chinese national community.

THE STRATEGIC COMMUNITY

Revisionist views of Tai community open the way to a more creative exploration of the diverse relationships between forms of sociality, state formation and commercialisation.[4] They highlight the selectivity

of the reassuringly familiar narrative of community decline in the face of modernisation. Yet, selectivity may be not such a bad thing in some contexts, especially when community is deployed as a strategic, rather than analytical, concept in pursuit of political mobilisation and assertion of basic rights:

> Ethnographic accuracy is not the relevant criterion upon which such representations should be judged .... Their analysis may fail to convince or impress anthropologists, but this is presumably not their goal: simplified representations can be more effective than subtle ones, when deployed in a macro policy context (Li, 1996: 504).

Some may even see academic scrutiny of traditional representations of community as irresponsible, given that it threatens to undermine the claims for self-determination, resource control and political representation made by powerless and marginal people. Simplified concepts of community may indeed embrace mythical representations of village life but they may also provide a mythical charter for action in the contemporary resource struggles of late capitalism. Central to this 'strategic community' line of thinking is the view that community opens up a space for alternative representations of sociality, economy and culture. Simplified representations of community are seen as valuable in challenging and shifting dominant nationalistic, bureaucratic and commercial frames of reference and in opening up alternative spaces for mobilisation and resistance (Li, 1996; 2000; Liepins, 2000: 28).

In the Tai world, community has been widely used as a basis for political campaigns of advocacy and empowerment. In these campaigns, waged by NGOs and activist academics, the imagery of community is deployed as a critique of the adverse impacts of both the state and the market, and to provide a basis for grassroots mobilisation. There are a number of elements to this empowerment campaign. First, community is seen as providing an alternative to state power, both in the sense that it represents a domain of localised resistance against state incursion and in the broader sense that the transnational network — or community — of Tai communities subverts the modern territorial borders of the nation-state. This anti-state politics frames and motivates many discussions of Tai community: "we oppose the state, we oppose all states in the region, we want to build networks between all Tai communities" (quoted in Farrelly, 2003: 34). A more specific anti-state orientation is also signalled in the various community-based forms of development that are promoted as an alternative to the predominant state emphasis on infrastructure, commercialisation and national integration.

A second and related element in the empowerment campaign is the advocacy of community rights. In an important contribution, Anan (2001: 5) argues that viewing community simply as a form of social capital through which people may cooperate and help each other is ineffective without adequate recognition of community rights. Exactly what is meant by community rights in the Tai world is not always clear. Much of the research in this area focuses on traditional regulations and ritual practices relating to the management of land, water and forest resources. Anan (2001: 133–4) distinguishes between "use rights", whereby resources such as land are temporarily allocated to community members for their productive activities, and "natural rights", whereby members of the community can access resources provided free by nature (such as mushrooms or ants' eggs) even if they are found on land where another member holds use rights. There is a strong historical dimension in many discussions of community rights, but contemporary ethnography is also drawn on to assert that communal institutions continue to form part of the repertoire of local capability. The community rights of the Tai of southern China have attracted much interest because they are seen as relatively successful in maintaining forms of communal organisation dating from the early stages of Tai state formation (Ratanaporn, 2000). The community rights campaign argues that legislation, which has privileged state property on the one hand and private property on the other, needs to recognise the status of longstanding processes of communal decision-making and forms of local knowledge that regulate resource use.

These dimensions of empowerment and political engagement are certainly important, and they highlight some of the politically productive uses of simplified images of Tai community. But can the strategic usefulness of community be taken for granted? One of the objectives of this book is to engage critically with this form of advocacy. While there is no denying that the concept of community may provide a liberating space of manoeuvre, consideration also needs to be given to the extent to which the contemporary language of community acts as a pathway, channelling diverse aspirations in pre-determined directions. Often, the language of community produces standard and highly simplified images around which appropriate claims to rights and benefits are framed. It is hard not to be disturbed by the extent to which economic development projects judged appropriate in community-based discourse are normatively constrained by anti-commercial, anti-state and environmentalist stereotypes that do not necessarily express local aspirations. There is a real risk that the political uses of community normatively confine people within narrow frames of sociality and economy. As a political tool, community cannot escape from its various histories. As Delcore (2003) has argued, some popular images of community can be seen as a form of nostalgia by rural elites for times past when local authority structures were more immune from external influence.

The normative use of community in political campaigns lies at the heart of what I have referred to as the "limited legitimacy" of much community rights discourse (Walker, 2001b). In assessing community rights campaigns in northern Thailand, I have argued that while they make a "strong case for the legitimate presence of [minority] communities in upland catchments", they do this "on the basis of an idealised rural lifestyle based on subsistence-oriented, self-sufficient and non-commercial agricultural production" (Walker, 2001b: 155). This, no doubt, can be viewed as a strategic simplification but its erasure of a history of long-term commercial exchange and agricultural intensification runs the risk of undermining the claims of marginal farmers for scarce agricultural resources (such as dry-season irrigation water) and state development assistance. This limited legitimacy is underlined in the longstanding Thai campaign for community forest legislation. The bill, which has been a rallying point for community rights campaigners, renders agriculture illegal in community forest areas, despite the fact that a key objective of the campaign is to secure the tenure rights of farmers whose lands fall in forest reserve areas (Walker, 2004). The bill is based on an idealised notion of communal co-existence between villagers and the forest and, as such, creates a regulatory framework that is disconnected from primary livelihood concerns.

Haughton (Chapter 3) makes a useful contribution to rethinking how community may be deployed in contemporary empowerment campaigns. His chapter suggests that the distinction between analytical and strategic usefulness may be unproductive. He proposes that the approach commonly adopted in NGO local development projects is based on a misreading of Thai economic history and that this misreading contributes to practical outcomes quite different to what is intended. As an alternative to notions of community based in tradition, Haughton argues for contemporary "communities of common interest" based, for example, on achieving access to affordable capital or the shared experience of urban employment. A similar argument is also made by Farrelly (Chapter 4) in relation to the Shan of the Thailand-Burma borderlands. The Shan are disadvantaged and marginalised in multiple ways, but this is often elided by a discourse of transborder Tai community motivated by an anti-modernist vision of subsistence economy and local community cohesion. "Living in contested, militarised or uncertain areas, the Shan cannot be divorced from their jumbled and speculative engagement with Southeast Asian modernity, conflict and economics" (Farrelly, Chapter 4).

SYMBOLS AND SOCIALITY

Our ethnographic objective in this volume is to consider the ways in which community is created and maintained, as one form of sociality, in diverse modern contexts. We aim to rescue the concept of community from its over-immersion in notions of tradition, subsistence livelihoods and local wisdom and instead promote it as a "term which continues to represent sets of practices, meanings and political possibilities for lay and academic activities alike" (Liepins, 2000: 28). Our choice of the term 'modern Tai community' is a deliberate attempt to subvert the assumption that modernity is opposed to community. The various essays in this volume explore the ways in which community is being creatively reworked in modern political and economic contexts. While the notion of modern Tai community may be disconcerting for those who seek to mobilise community against the predations of state and market, the view presented here is that engagement with contemporary aspirations, including aspirations for diverse forms of communal belonging, provides a much sounder basis for empowerment.

What might the dimensions of this modern Tai community be? A useful starting point is the important book on the symbolic construction of community by Anthony Cohen (1985). Cohen moves away from debates about the structural features of community to focus on its symbolic construction. He makes two main points. First, community is imagined, not just at the national scale as famously argued by Anderson (1991), but at the local scale of face-to-face interaction. Cohen rejects naïve assumptions about the simplicity of face-to-face interaction and argues that people involved in direct sociality require symbols that provide a basis for common orientation. These shared symbols are socially orienting and serve to define social boundaries, marking out the community of 'us' from 'them'. Cohen's second important insight is that these shared symbols of community are effective because they

are vague. Unelaborated symbols are able to accommodate a diversity of meanings that more elaborated or specific symbols could not. In this important sense, symbols of community are aggregating rather than integrating. Cohen (1985: 21) illustrates this nicely:

> A courting couple may exchange an expression of sentiment:
>
> 'I love you!'
>
> '*I* love *you*!'
>
> without feeling the need to engage in a lengthy and complicated disquisition on the meaning of the word 'love'. Yet it is, of course, a word which masks an extremely complex idea. So complex is it that were our two lovers to attempt to explain their meanings precisely they might well find themselves engaged in fierce argument. Symbols are effective because they are imprecise … transform[ing] the reality of difference into the appearance of similarity.

Anthony Cohen's argument provides important insight into discussions of community in the Tai world. In particular, from Cohen's perspective, cultural and social phenomena that are often promoted as being key elements of Tai community can be seen as aggregating symbols. Exchange labour, for example, can be understood as a simplified symbolic form that embraces diverse labour recruitment arrangements. Rather than it comprising a central structural component of Tai economy, the various linguistic and cultural markers of exchange labour amount to an ideological statement about a morally valued domain of collective endeavour. Discussions about the details of labour recruitment often lead to arguments but general appeals to cooperation and mutual help can contribute to a broader sense of common purpose. Similarly, 'community forest' is a sufficiently vague notion that it can, in some contexts, symbolically unify people with diverse approaches to forest use and management. Rather than representing a specific institutional form, livelihood orientation or ecological zone, community forest can be understood as a symbol that enables diverse local and non-local actors to express a common commitment to vaguely defined environmental objectives. Given the diversity of meanings conveyed by these symbolic components of community, it may well be unrealistic to expect them to carry the administrative weight that NGOs, development workers and state agencies often place upon them: "Community thus exists as a false floor, ready to collapse when laden with excessive political expectations" (Herbert, 2005: 853). It is a mistake to assume that symbolic forms that are emblematic of community are, in fact, structural components of it.

One of the key benefits of recognising the symbolic construction of community is that it detaches community from its embeddedness in locality. Sentiments of belonging and common purpose can be constructed around mobile, spatially dispersed and even de-territorialised symbols, what Liepens (2000) calls "stretched-out communities". Of course, this is not to argue that locality is unimportant, as the symbolism of neighbourhood, village, birthplace and landscape are regularly drawn on in creating, and manipulating, sentiments of common attachment. However, shared attachments to locality need not represent a uniformity of meaning, value or agreed-upon rights. Village, home, and kin are vague symbols that embrace diverse local interpretations and these interpretations are shot through with the symbolic influence of other extra-local referents of belonging.

Nevertheless, there are risks in overstating the symbolic dimensions of community. Some writers have argued that Cohen's primary emphasis on the symbolic construction of community draws attention away from its social dimensions. Amit (2002b), for example, is the editor of a collection on "realizing community" in which community is not so much imagined through symbols as realised through patterns of day-to-day interaction and communication. *Realizing Community* argues that the maintenance of community is difficult in the absence of direct interpersonal relationships. This is a view that sees community as emerging out of ongoing processes of communicative action rather than residing in orientating symbols (Delanty, 2003: Chapter 6). Of particular interest is Amit's scepticism about accounts of diasporic community in which community becomes a virtual phenomenon that relies on categorical similarity and is stripped of any meaningful social content. Others have argued that notions of de-territorialised community, including Internet-based communities, lack a sense of engaged and embedded commitment to the welfare of others (Willson, 1997; Calhoun, 1991; but see Wilson and Peterson, 2002). In these virtual or diasporic communities, membership of broad categories and affiliation to shared symbols replaces commitment to fellow community members, resulting in a thin sense of commonality that lacks the real-world political commitment which some see as inherent to meaningful community experience. As Calhoun (1991: 107) has argued, "there is a great deal of difference between the social groups formed out of direct relationships among their members... and social categories defined by common cultural or other external attributes of their members and not necessarily linked by any dense, multiplex, or systematic web of interpersonal connections".

This debate has important implications for the Tai world, where there has been considerable interest in forms of transnational community. For many commentators, cross-border cultural commonalities provide a basis for a sense of transnational Tai community that challenges the bounded imagined communities of the region's nation-states. A transnational Tai community (and even family) is asserted on the basis of linguistic similarities, historical connections and similarity in cultural practice. Some recent Thai scholarship has suggested that these historical connections are now being enlivened by the modern circulation of commodities across national borders, creating a "culture of brotherhood" informed, in part, by the desirable status of goods produced in Thailand (Aranya, 2007: 16; see also Wasan, 2005). But how viable is this transnational community in the absence of meaningful social interaction? Circulation of music, videos and publications (Davis, 2003; Wasan, 2005), participation in regionally oriented religious festivals (P. Cohen, 2000a; 2001) and involvement in cross-border commerce and consumption (Walker, 1999; Aranya, 2007) may well contribute to a sense of connection between Dai, Lao, Shan and Thai, but questions need to be asked about the strength of this regional Tai community in the context of numerous alternative frames of belonging and day-to-day livelihood preoccupations. To some extent, the transnational Tai community is a compelling construction only to the extent that it is abstracted from more quotidian and socially embedded concerns. This abstraction can result in a culturalist orientation in which a hollowed-out politics of identity displaces a more grounded engagement with livelihood struggles and aspirations. So, while a symbolic approach can help liberate community from a narrowly defined preoccupation with the local, close attention needs to be given to the ways in which symbols gain salience through forms of day-to-day social interaction (Diana, Chapter 9).

Another reservation about Anthony Cohen's work arises from his emphasis on the boundary of community. For Cohen, symbols of community demarcate 'us' from 'them'. In this formulation the symbolic emphasis on the boundary is more important than the cultural content that lies within it — a position clearly influenced by Barth (1969). Few would disagree that community can sometimes involve drawing sharp distinctions between inside and outside. The clear demarcation and enforcement of village boundaries during important Tai rituals is one obvious enactment of this symbolic boundary. Yet it is also evident that sentiments of community often focus on cultural and social components that do not necessarily serve a boundary-marking function. Community is often constructed around important resources or assets, a sense of shared enterprise, forms of interpersonal communication and, in some cases, the immediacy of physical assembly. Here the emphasis is on the core cultural content of community, rather than on the symbolically marked boundary (Gray, 2002).

In fact, rather than marking boundaries, key components of community often point to linkages between 'inside' and 'outside'. In the Tai world, the Buddhist temple is a good example. Of course, the temple can be used as a basis of differentiation from other communities — "our temple is more beautiful" or "our monks are more virtuous" — but the temple is also the focus of an extensive network of relationships with other places. The temple is a core institution of local community but its grandeur and spiritual potency is based on networks of relationships that are reproduced through festivals and elaborate institutions of inter-temple reciprocity (Walker, Chapter 6). Other forms of community based on shared orientations to commodities or lifestyles are not necessarily informed by a desire to mark boundaries but by desire to participate in a cosmopolitan world of connections.

ELEMENTS OF MODERN TAI COMMUNITY

In the chapters that follow, the symbolic and social construction of community is explored in three different ways. The first part, *Critical Engagements*, examines the development of the Thai concept of *chumchon* (community) and its application in contexts of national development, local empowerment and regional scholarship. In these various accounts, the common imagery of Tai community can be seen as a form of contemporary symbolic simplification. The selective and simplified imagery of traditional communal livelihood has been sufficiently vague and alluring to encourage widespread agreement and desire. As the chapters demonstrate, its symbolic referents lie in rural areas, but it is hard to escape the sense that the imagery is most compelling for its activist and academic advocates who live in urban Thailand. For these advocates, traditional Tai community does appear to function as a boundary-marking symbol — it sets them off from what they see as an undesirable mainstream preoccupation with national integration, economic development and rampant consumerism.

A rather different perspective on local community emerges in the following part, *Local Networks*. These two chapters focus on the dynamics of "doing community" — to use High's perceptively inelegant term — in local ritual contexts. While spirit propitiation and Buddhist ceremony are often associated with stereotypical images of total Tai community, these chapters propose that the forms of community created are partial, personal, idiosyncratic and often extra-local in orientation. Most importantly, they demonstrate that imaginings of community gain traction when they are embedded in social action. However, this embedding also challenges the efficacy of communal symbols. As symbols are refracted by their day-to-day entanglements, clear distinctions between private and public domains collapse, symbolic inclusiveness is replaced by more ephemeral alliances and village solidarity disaggregates into unbounded networks of personalised practice. Recognising this complexity does not eliminate the importance of senses of belonging but it does encourage greater attention to ongoing projects of community creation. Thus, community comes to be seen as a work in progress.

The third part, *Negotiated States*, places community within a different contextual frame. Here we see community being created as a result of dialogue with state power. In some cases this can be interpreted within a familiar framework of resistance, whereby marginalised groups seek forms of belonging that are denied them in the official imagery of the nation-state. In other cases, however, there is a more nuanced engagement with state power and its modernist aspirations. State visions of national integration and economic development are certainly not compelling in all contexts, but they often intersect creatively with individual aspirations for prosperity, education, mobility and security. New modes of communal belonging are formed at these modern intersections between official policy and personal orientation.