

# Thailand's Upland Cabbage

## Economy

By Runako Samata

*Editors Note: The following is an edited extract from the Master's thesis submitted by Runako Samata at Chiang Mai University in 2003. The title of the thesis is "Agricultural transformation and highlander choice: a case study of a Pwo Karen community in northwestern Thailand." This extract examines cabbage cultivation and marketing in Mae Hong Son province.*

In Ban Mae Chang and other neighbouring Pwo Karen villages, cabbage has been essentially the sole cash crop for the swiddeners for about fifteen years. Some of them have engaged in cabbage cultivation since the middle of the 1980s when the Hmong group introduced cabbage cultivation by renting the farmland of the Pwo Karen people in Mae Sariang. In Ban Mae Chang, cabbage cultivation had been conducted regularly by a limited number of about 10 households until 2001. However, the number of households growing cabbage in the rainy season of 2002 jumped up to 23 households, which is 31.5 percent of the total 73 households. All of them know how to grow cabbage through their wage labour experience, and they utilized Village Fund 2002 loans in order to partially or totally invest in cabbage cultivation. Five households incurred debt from the failure of their cabbage crop. Actually, there are several households that regularly grow cabbage and struggle with heavy debt from previous trials. In the nearby village of Ban Dong Luang, almost all the Pwo Karen villagers have heavily relied on cabbage cultivation as a supplement to rice. Due to the increasing population, the per-household arable land has steadily shrunk to under half the size of before, and consequently they can no longer produce enough rice for their household consumption by the traditional rotational fallow system. Thus, there are only two choices available—to adopt the cabbage cultivation to supplement rice, or to work as wage labourers in the cabbage fields of the richer households inside and outside the village.

Why do they grow only cabbage, and why do they not try other cash crops? The most practical answer to this question is that only cabbage has easy market access.

There are three cabbage-trading places at Mae Ho, which is at the junction connecting the mountain road from the Karen villages to the national highway Route 108 running from Chiang Mai to Mae Sariang. Mae Ho is situated 1,088 m above sea level, which is higher than the altitude of Ban Mae Chang (874 m) and Ban Dong Luang (1,073 m). Taking advantage of the cool weather and access to the highway, the cabbage trading places (or regional cabbage markets) developed successfully. Each of the trading places is regarded as a sort of *koodan* (i.e. "godown" in English) in Thai where there are at least four main actors; (1) the "producers," coming mainly from the highland ethnic minority villages, transporting the cabbage by pick up trucks from their own villages to obtain cash by trading the cabbage, (2) the "middle agents," in other words, "forwarding agents" or "merchants," mainly coming from the large markets in the country to the *koodan* and transporting the cabbage by large-size trucks away from Mae Ho to large markets in cities, (3) another group of "middle agents" as "investors" in the cabbage, who are also involved in cabbage trading by providing the producers with all of the necessary materials for cropping and (4) the "store owners of the trading place" who offer the market space and facilities (e.g., weighing machine) for the other agents and, in parallel, operate other businesses such as gas stations, grocery stores, and restaurants. The trading of cabbage is usually conducted under a commission system. Each agent, such as storeowner, labourer, merchant, and producer has to pay a commission fee. For instance, the storeowner requires the producers from the villages to pay 20 *baht* per a pickup truck of cabbage that comes to the



Cabbage fields, Ban Mae Chang, Thailand.  
Runako Samata

---

trading place.

Around those four main actors, there are various kinds of sub-actors working under the employment system in each role at *koodaη*. In the *koodaη2* store, which is the biggest trading place at Mae

---

After the completion of loading the cabbage to a large-size truck with his teenage son, he got around 6,500 baht for 2,040 kilograms of cabbage. Another Hmong man from the same village gained around 7,000 baht from over 2,200 kilograms of cabbage on the same day.

---

Ho and is attached to the house of the sub-district administration, they run a restaurant together with a grocery store and also sell car parts next to the unloading and loading section. This restaurant conducts good business and receives many customers from early morning until the evening almost every day. The business hours depend upon the situation of the cabbage trading, and therefore they close the shop after the cabbage trading is finished sometimes around eight in the evening. At this *koodaη2*, some Skaw Karen women are working at the reception box, to which the producers come by pickup truck full of cabbages to register at first on the weighbridge, and then receive cash for the cabbage yield after loading their cabbage on to the large-size truck. Those Skaw Karen women reside near Mae Ho and are hired as wage labourers. The Karen males also work mainly for loading cabbage on to the large-size trucks at each of the *koodaη*, and sometimes work at the gas station too. There is another *koodaη1* located about 300 meters away from *koodaη2*. Its owner deals petrol as well as groceries. According to a local informant, the owner of *koodaη1* is a Chinese-Thai, that of *koodaη2* is a Thai, and that of *koodaη3* is Hmong. These trading places and their attached stores of *koodaη* provide both Thai lowlanders and the ethnic highland farmers with job opportunities.

To the cabbage-trading places at Mae Ho come the producers from Mae La Noi, Khun Yuam and Mae Sariang districts as well as from several other districts in the northern part of Mae Hong Son province. The ethnicities of producers are

mostly Hmong, Skaw Karen and Pwo Karen. The market price of cabbage was 3 *baht* per kilogram on January 26<sup>th</sup> 2003, when I had the chance to interview a Hmong farmer from a highland village near the upper border of Myanmar. The Hmong village from which he came is under a scheme of the Royal Project and engaging in the Food Bank project with a fine irrigation system. They can thus grow cabbages and other crops throughout the year. The problem for the Hmong farmers, however, is that the market places for the cabbage and other cash crops are too far from their village. In practice, it is only possible for them to bring the cabbage to the market at Mae Ho by themselves, which is the nearest market for them, even though it takes about six hours for the 280 km journey from their home village. The Hmong man whom I spoke to has grown cabbage for ten years. He also grows rice for family consumption in the rainy season and cabbage only during the dry season. In the Hmong village, all households of around 55-60 families grow cabbage at present. On that day when I met him, he said that ten households including his own from his village came to Mae Ho to sell the cabbage. After the completion of loading the cabbage to a large-size truck with his teenage son, he got around 6,500 *baht* for 2,040 kilograms of cabbage. Another Hmong man from the same village gained around 7,000 *baht* from over 2,200 kilograms of cabbage on the same day. He told me as follows about the system and condition of *koodaη* at Mae Ho, his cabbage cultivation and his livelihood:

*This morning we left our village for Mae Ho before dawn. It took six hours for us to get here. Before I come to sell the cabbage here, I need to book the space for a large-size truck. Otherwise, if the carrying capacity of the truck here is full, we might have to go to Chiang Mai by ourselves to sell the cabbage. We have to inform in advance the size of the crop and when we want to come to sell at koodaη. Mae Ho is a convenient place for storing the cabbage because of the cool weather. They say cabbages can be kept for two days here at Mae Ho. Around April to May, which are the hottest months in Thailand, the price of cabbage is the highest because usually they cannot grow the cabbage in the highlands around that time. Actually, in this dry season, it is not necessary for us to book the space beforehand, since it is less crowded than usual, and we can come here directly. My life after growing cabbage? Sometimes in the black, and sometimes in the red. As you know, village life has gradually*

*progressed, but at the same time debt has become a big burden for me.*

There are a number of agents, which can be companies, associations and individuals, who invest in the cabbage cultivation in the highland areas around Mae Ho and around the town of Mae Sariang. They offer all of the required materials for cabbage cultivation—seed, fertilizer and pesticide—to villagers. Producers in turn offer their labour and land. In general, during the harvest period, the investors come up to the cabbage field in the highland to collect and transport the cabbage to Mae Ho. The transportation costs are counted as extra expenditures of the production. The profit is shared fifty-fifty between the investor and the producer. If they do not make a profit, the investor will lose all their money, while the producer would not lose money but lose the opportunity cost. The Hmong farmers sometimes become investors in the Pwo Karen villager of Ban Mae Chang, Ban Dong Luang and other nearby villages as well. For the Pwo Karen people in Ban Mae Chang, the middlemen who invest in cabbage are frequently their neighbours in the same village or rich highland farmers outside the village such as those from Ban Dong Luang and Ban Huai Pla Kang.

The merchants come to Mae Ho from around Thailand with the large-size transport truck, which

can carry 12,000 kilograms of cargo. It means that about five pickups (around 2,000-2,500 kilograms of cabbage can be loaded per pickup) of cabbage can be contained in one big truck. They transport the cabbage, for example, to Bangkok, Nakhon Sawan (surveyed on August 14<sup>th</sup> 2002) and Nakhon Phatom (surveyed on January 26<sup>th</sup> 2003). According to a receptionist at the trading place, the large-size trucks of the middle agents come to the store approximately 40 times per month. In the rainy season, there are about 60 per month.



Cabbage trading centre, Mae Ho, Thailand. *Runako Samata*

*This edition of the Thai-Yunnan Project Bulletin was designed by Nicholas Farrelly.*