

# Investigating the Agricultural Techniques Used by the Hmong in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past decades the Hmong have migrated from northern China down south to Vietnam and Laos. In 1975 after the United States pulled out of the Vietnam War thousands of Hmong feared for their lives and fled to Thailand. During their migration from China to Thailand, the Hmong have adapted to several agricultural techniques. The Hmong are one of many hill tribes in northern Thailand that mastered the traditional slash and burn technique, which the Thai government believed it pollutes the environment. In response to this problem, His Majesty King Bhumibol of Thailand established the Royal Project to help hill tribes improve on agricultural developments and become self-sustainable. I investigated the different techniques used by the Hmong and took note of the differences and similarities between the traditional slash and burn, and the advanced techniques developed by the Royal Project. This research was influenced by my interest in cultural preservation and agricultural practices by hill tribes.

## INTRODUCTION

Over a thousand years ago, the Hmong lived in the high mountains of northern China. They mastered the slash and burn agriculture technique to ensure that they would have food to feed their family. Slash and burn agriculture involves cutting, burning, and clearing the forest for spaces to farm. Therefore, moving from place to place allowed Hmong families the opportunity to find adequate land to farm. By the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the Hmong began to have increasing disputes with the Chinese about land and self-determination, and were forced to migrate south towards Laos. In Laos, the Hmong continue to live in the mountains that provided them with forests full of game, land for farming, security from outsiders, and the relative freedom to run their own affairs.

In 1975, the United States pulled out of the Vietnam War and left thousands of Hmong to fight off the North Vietnamese troops in Laos. As they began their Communist rule, the Pathet Lao announced the cleansing of the Hmong ethnic group. Tens of thousands of Hmong feared for their lives and fled across the Mekong River to get to the refugee camps in Thailand.

About fifty years ago, His Majesty King Bhumibol of Thailand took a personal fact-finding journey to see what could be done to improve conditions for people living in hill-tribe villages in the high mountains of Thailand. The King noticed the beauty of millions of blossoming opium poppies in the mountains northwest of the city of Chiang Mai. These opium poppies were the cash crop for the hill tribes. Villagers were also unconsciously destroying their own environment by practicing the traditional slash and burn agricultural techniques. To let either practice continue, the King responded by launching the Royal Project on agricultural development. The program aims to provide an initial financial boost to hill-tribe villages as well as advice and guidelines to handicraft work. In Thailand, there are about 70,000 Hmong people settled in villages throughout a wide area of the north. With the help of the Thai Royal Project, many Hmong villages in the northern part of Thailand had been transformed into well-developed agricultural systems.

## METHOD

I spent four weeks in Thailand in which I interviewed and observed the Hmong living in the villages located northwest of Chiang Mai. I created a list of questions to ask my interviewees which followed a general guideline. These interviews were done informally with Hmong males and females over the age of 18. At the beginning, this method was effective as my interviewees were willingly to share their agricultural experiences with me. But eventually I could not take note of all the small details shared by my interviewees. I had to use a tape recorder to record the stories and experiences told by the local Hmong villagers. The tape recorder method was effective since I

did not interrupt my interviewees only when I had to ask another question or need more clarification on an answer. I also took pictures of gardens in the villages which I visited and conducted interviews.

The trip started in Chiang Mai, which is located in the Chiang Mai Province. There is a significant number of Hmong that live in the Chiang Mai Province especially around the city Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. I arrived at the Chiang Mai airport where I met my uncle and aunt. From there we took an hour and a half bus ride to their village located in the Mae Rim district. During my stay with my uncle and aunt, I conducted interviews with the local villagers and took pictures of their gardens. Then my uncle took me to two more neighboring Hmong villages also located in the Mae Rim district to continue my interviews. Since transportation was an issue, I could not conduct interviews until my third week, which I traveled thirty minutes to the Doi Saket district to visit two more Hmong villages. During my last week, I traveled back to Chiang Mai where I took two tours to the local Hmong villages to examine the different transformations made in the villages since the establishment of the Royal Project. I also visited several museums and markets to find the different handicrafts being sold in the local markets.

## RESULTS

The end product was series of photographs that documented my research in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Each photo represented my visits to the Hmong villages and the local markets around Chiang Mai. Photography is a strong media that captures every decisive moment so readers could understand the importance of agriculture to the Hmong. I have sat in panels at conferences and gave presentations on my research project to students in higher education to encourage them to further learn and understand the Hmong life of agriculture.





## CONCLUSION

The Hmong villages in northern Thailand, have been transformed into a better agricultural system and has become self-sustainable since the Royal Project was launched in 1969. The traditional slash and burn agriculture technique is no longer used by the Hmong. Many Hmong villages in the north have been introduced to the usage of greenhouses. In these greenhouses, all sort of vegetables are being grown without the use of pesticide so the vegetables could be sold in local and international markets. In the off-season, the Hmong would grow flowers to sell in the locals market during the high season of tourists and for local festival events.

There are several Hmong villages around Chiang Mai that have been transformed into a tourist attraction where the Hmong in those villages no longer relied on agriculture. Instead they sell their beautiful handicrafts to tourists

and in the local markets. The Hmong in these villages seem to be satisfied with the transformation made by the Royal Project.

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