

A global commodity's regional cast:
governance, smallholder rubber, and the state in southern Thailand

By

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*For my parents, Dedee and Bill. You are loving, patient,
and encouraging of my curiosity and wanderlust.*

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Summary

In this dissertation, I consider the politics of rubber in southern Thailand in light of steep declines in global natural rubber prices falling off of peaks since 2012. Drawing from close to sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, I focus primarily on the ways in which many smallholder rubber farmers I engaged with in and around Nakhon Si Thammarat's Cha-uat District interpret the factors that underlie low rubber prices and in turn envision ways in which prices can be lifted. I selected my primary research site to be Cha-uat, a district where substantial protests over falling rubber prices took place in August and September 2013. While these episodes were critical in prompting rounds of protest in Bangkok that would culminate in a coup d'état ousting then-Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra from office in May 2014, considering them in retrospect (close to two years after they had transpired) during my research eventually presented as an entry point, instead of an end, into studying rubber as a political concern. Although, as will be shown, 'political' implies appealing to extra-partisan lenses as well.

Concerning low rubber prices in recent years, I found that people often framed the problem in large part as a consequence of an ever-expanding footprint of rubber cultivation across Thailand, especially into northeastern provinces. This, many held, has been geographically wayward and largely attributable to faulty policy maneuvers by the administration of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in the early 2000s—in sum, leading to widespread senses that there is a glut of Thai rubber. Such claims are in some tension with the fact that Thai prices are highly correlated with global prices of crude oil and other commodities such as copper, not to mention rubber futures prices on commodity exchanges such as those in Singapore and Tokyo—monthly averages for one-month rubber

futures on the Singapore Commodity Exchange exhibited a correlation coefficient of 0.99 with average monthly Thai rubber prices over the past eighteen years.

Thus, the markedly regional frames invoked by people I spoke with in southern Thailand about rubber prices suggest a reconfiguration of emphasis, fastening contentions about rubber prices into processes that have transpired within the nation state. Of course, the incidence of farmers expressing frustration with low product prices and subsequently placing calls on the government for interventions or other forms of agricultural assistance is not unique to southern Thailand, nor is it unique to rubber. However, in this dissertation I hold that it is worth paying attention to the way in which calls for interventions intersect with geographic registers, namely those pertaining to southern Thailand as an identifiable subnational region. In the title, I have chosen to use the term, regional cast, as a descriptor of this type of economic governance. 'Cast' simultaneously implies actors (as in the Thai state and individuals) as well as imprints left on agricultural landscapes.

The relationships conveyed, between rubber as a form of agriculture and senses of belonging in southern Thailand, allow me to look at both the inclusionary and exclusionary dimensions of the region, considering, on the one hand, the ways in which rubber has contributed to senses of regional belonging. On the other hand, I take into account peoples' perceptions on the Thai state's roles in reconfiguring the geographies of rubber in the country as ones compromising—conflicting with and shaking the filaments of this identity nexus. Through four substantive chapters and a conclusion, I argue the following thesis: Not only was southern Thailand's rubber economy a key 'actor' in the political changes that took place within Thailand's national government in 2013 and 2014; additionally, I contend that responses to declining rubber prices in recent years (pre- and post-coup) reify senses

of regional identity—and its activation, regionalism—that are mobilized to challenge and renegotiate existing scales of economic governance.

After the introductory chapter below, I discuss how the production and pricing of natural rubber, in other words actually-existing features of economic governance, cohere within the analytical purviews of scholarship in the vein of global production networks in economic geography. I thus begin with a consideration of this work and bring up how production-network, or GPN, studies are held to be improvements over earlier iterations of commodity analyses, such as global value chains, in part because of a broader engagement with other ‘actors’, such as the nation state as well as various institutional arrangements. A number of studies take GPN-related work to task, though, for instance due to an overly economic focus. Such scholarship offers an important point of departure for me, and I aim to draw out the significance of a nexus forged at the intersection of smallholder rubber cultivation and the subnational region, as this engages with the *sine qua non* scales of economic governance over the price of rubber. As an intervention into scholarship in economic geography, critically engaging with GPN perspectives is meant to demonstrate that continuing to draw from, and develop the conceptual and analytical capabilities of, these approaches is a productive exercise that lends toward making the GPN framework more robust by deepening the geographical insights made available through a study of situated relations surrounding a global commodity, such as those I consider here.

Specifically, this means deploying a greater degree of malleability when thinking through the concept of scale itself, to take seriously peoples’ interpretations and perceptions of rubber in Thailand—perhaps in addition to, or beyond, the clearly global presence that the production and exchange of natural rubber has. As these frames rely on

registers of regional identity and belonging, the concern is rendered necessarily political at the same time as it is economic. In other words, if rubber is conveyed as a regional concern, then the national government's not addressing low prices is, by extension, felt to be a shortcoming in administration and political obligation.

In the first of my substantive chapters, I provide discussion on the role of the Thai state, since the early 20th century, of supporting smallholder rubber economies. This chapter mainly provides background to contextualize what people often said to me while I conducted research, of considering rubber as a livelihood—which they distinguished from a job or merely source of household income—and tying it into inclusionary senses of regional belonging. It also shows how state support for rubber and its widespread entry into rural agricultural profiles were for long geographically limited to Thailand's southern provinces as well as a few provinces to the southeast of Bangkok whose climatic conditions are similar. Gradually, though, this would change, and rubber would begin to be planted widely throughout Thailand starting in the early 2000s—importantly, helped along through state subsidies.

In the fourth and fifth chapters, I step back and consider the broader contexts of contest in which low rubber prices are situated. Chapter 4 looks specifically at the price protests that had taken place in 2013 and offers that, inasmuch as they may have helped to catalyze political protests further down the road in Bangkok in 2013 and 2014, they also shed light onto more complex, multidimensional political concerns of rubber for many in southern Thailand. Due to the meeting points I hold there to be between rubber and region in southern Thailand, through this chapter I show how it is possible to infer the ways in which inattention to rubber prices is in turn perceived broadly on par with other regionally

defined political concerns—for instance representation in Thai parliament and even more mundane issues such as perceived differences in highway and railroad infrastructure across Thailand’s provinces. Further, by zeroing in on the protests as more than partisan-political, I draw attention to the senses among people that, ultimately, these protests had not met their intended substantive objectives and had actually been coopted in large measure by politicians’ agendas.

Chapter 5 extends this conversation into the period after the coup d’état in 2014, during which time clampdowns on free speech by the military government have meant that open protests would be followed by arrests of those involved. As rubber prices had continued to drop, though, a lack of protest clearly does not mean that peoples’ frustrations had gone away. Considering various other forms in which discontent is shown, in this chapter I engage with the example of the shadow play, which, in Thailand, is a public performance art closely associated with the South specifically. I look at the work of one performer who includes the current Prime Minister, Army General Prayut Chan-ocha, as one of the puppets in the show who engages with one from a recurring cast of clowns. These plays enjoy widespread popularity, and as scholars have noted, clowns are caricatures of southern Thai villagers themselves. The themes that emerge between the conversations involving the clown and Prayut Chan-ocha speak to overall themes of regional distance and marginalization, which include, but aren’t limited to, rubber.

Chapter 6 returns to focus on the rubber-region nexus and economic governance, but it builds from the discussions of regionalized solidarities and collective senses of marginalization which permeated discussions in the preceding two chapters. This chapter keys into senses of agricultural transgression, that rubber’s growth beyond southern Thai

provinces has led to price declines. I choose to refer to these as ‘scalar translations.’ While they may also be considered as frames, the word, translations, captures the emphasis devoted to the amount of rubber grown within Thailand while bracketing out the growth within neighboring countries as well as the other features determining rubber prices. The chapter focuses specifically on perceptions that policy maneuvers to support rubber cultivation in northern and northeastern provinces have been faulty and have adversely impacted rubber prices—and by extension southern Thais themselves.

I conclude the dissertation in Chapter 7 by returning to the focal points of the conceptual discussion in Chapter 1: while acknowledging the economic outcomes rendered through articulation into a global production network, it is also necessary to pay close attention to the ways in which extra-economic, political factors embed peoples’ experiences producing a commodity such as rubber, in turn deepening geographic insights into these processes. Additionally, avenues for future work are identified.

บทคัดย่อ

วิทยานิพนธ์ปริญญาเอกฉบับนี้เน้นศึกษาเรื่องข้อการเมืองต่างๆที่เกี่ยวข้องกับราคายางพาราที่ตกต่ำนับตั้งแต่ปี พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๕ ซึ่งผมได้นำข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพที่รวบรวมเป็นเวลา ๑๖ เดือนมาใช้ โดยสนามการวิจัยอยู่ที่จังหวัด นครศรีธรรมราชและพัทลุง เนื่องมาจากในเดือนสิงหาคมและกันยายน ปี ๒๕๕๖ มีการประท้วงครั้งใหญ่โดย ชาวสวนยางทางภาคใต้ได้ทำการปิดถนนและวางรถไฟตั้งแต่เดือนเมษายน ปี ๒๕๕๘ เป็นต้นมา ดังนั้นผมจึง ตัดสินใจเลือกทำการวิจัยที่ อ.ชะอวด จ.นครศรีธรรมราช การศึกษาของวิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้มุ่งเน้นพิจารณาว่า ชาวสวนยางในเขตนี้และเขตใกล้เคียงเข้าใจปัจจัยต่างๆที่ส่งผลต่อราคายางพาราตกต่ำภายในประเทศไทยอย่างไร รวมทั้งพิจารณาว่าทำไมชาวสวนยางทางภาคใต้ถึงมองว่าทางรอดจากความเดือดร้อนด้านราคายางควรจะอยู่ที่ นโยบายของรัฐบาลไทย ซึ่งต้องยอมรับว่าการประท้วงปิดถนนดังกล่าวมีความเชื่อมโยงอย่างมากกับการประท้วงใน ครั้งต่อไปที่กรุงเทพฯ ซึ่งนำโดย สุเทพ เทือกสุบรรณ และแกนนำคนอื่นๆที่เป็นสมาชิกของคณะกรรมการ ประชาชนเพื่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงปฏิรูปประเทศไทยให้เป็นประชาธิปไตยที่สมบูรณ์แบบอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรง เป็นประมุข (กปปส.) ในที่สุดก็มีรัฐประหารเกิดขึ้น อย่างไรก็ตามแทนที่จะมองว่าปัญหาราคายางพาราตกต่ำเป็น เรื่องของพรรคการเมืองเท่านั้น ผมอยากให้มองถึงมิติอื่นๆของปัญหานี้ ดังนั้นในวิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้ผมจะวิเคราะห์ พิจารณาและกล่าวถึงมติดังกล่าวว่ามีอะไรบ้าง

ระหว่างการดำเนินการวิจัย ผมพบว่าชาวสวนยางหลายคนคิดว่าสาเหตุสำคัญที่ทำให้ราคายางตกลงเป็นเพราะมี การปลูกลูกยางพาราที่เพิ่มมากขึ้นในหลายจังหวัดการปลูกลูกยางพาราได้ขยายตัวภายในประเทศจากจังหวัดในภาคใต้ ไปสู่จังหวัดในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือและภาคเหนือ ชาวสวนยางในภาคใต้หลายคนคิดว่าความนิยมในการปลูกลูก ยางในภาคเหนือและภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือนั้นเป็นผลมาจากนโยบายของ อดีตนายกรัฐมนตรีนายทักษิณ ชินวัตร นอกจากนี้ชาวสวนยางในภาคใต้ยังคงคิดว่าการปลูกลูกยางพาราที่เพิ่มขึ้นทำให้ปริมาณยางพารามีมากกว่าความ ต้องการ ดังนั้นจึงส่งผลให้ราคายางพาราตกลงซึ่งความคิดดังกล่าวนี้ถูกตั้งเพียงบางส่วน เพราะว่าการผันผวน ของราคายางพารานั้นยังเกี่ยวข้องกับสาเหตุอีกหลายประการ เช่น ราคาน้ำมันดิบ ราคาทองแดง และราคาสินค้า เกษตรอื่นๆที่มีในตลาดโลก นอกจากนี้ราคายางพาราที่ไทยยังผันแปรโดยตรงกับราคายางในตลาดล่วงหน้าที่ โตเกียวและสิงคโปร์อีกด้วย สำหรับสิบแปดปีที่ผ่านมา ค่าความสัมพันธ์เชิงบวกระหว่างราคายางแผ่นรมควันชั้น ๓

ในตลาดสิงคโปร์และราคาขายแผ่นรมควันชั้น ๓ ในตลาดกลางยางพาราจังหวัดสงขลาอยู่ที่ ๐.๙๙ การเปรียบเทียบดังกล่าวคำนวณจากราคาเฉลี่ยของยางแผ่นรมควันชั้น ๓ ต่อเดือน

การที่ชาวสวนยางมักจะคิดว่าปัญหาราคายางตกต่ำและการแก้ไขปัญหายางพาราเป็นเรื่องที่เกี่ยวข้องกับการดำเนินนโยบายของรัฐอาจแสดงให้เห็นว่า กรอบวิเคราะห์ทางภูมิภาค (regional frame) มีความสำคัญอย่างมากต่อความเข้าใจระบบเศรษฐกิจยางพาราของไทย เมื่อวิเคราะห์ปัญหาจากมุมมองของชาวสวนยาง ชาวสวนยางทางภาคใต้เรียกร้องให้รัฐบาลเข้ามาแทรกแซงช่วยเหลือตนเองโดยอาศัยแนวคิดความสัมพันธ์ทางอัตลักษณ์และทางภูมิภาค หรือก็คือรัฐบาลควรมองว่าการทำสวนยางเป็นอัตลักษณ์อย่างหนึ่งที่เหมาะเป็นของคนใต้ ด้วยเหตุนี้ ผมขอใช้คำว่า ร่างภูมิภาค (regional cast) ในการอธิบายถึงการจัดการทางเศรษฐกิจของรัฐบาลโดยใช้มุมมองของผู้กระทำ นอกจากนี้คำว่า ร่าง (cast) ในภาษาอังกฤษหมายถึงรวมถึงความคงที่และความไม่เปลี่ยนแปลงบนพื้นที่การเกษตร ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างมุมมองที่ว่า การทำสวนยางเป็นกิจกรรมทางการเกษตรและเป็นอัตลักษณ์อย่างหนึ่งของภาคใต้ทำให้มีการพิจารณามิติของหัวข้อภูมิภาคนิยมในสองมิติ คือการรวมและการไม่รวม ทั้งๆที่การทำสวนยางพารามานับหลายสิบปีจะช่วยสร้างความรู้สึกว่าเป็นสมาชิกของกลุ่มภาคใต้ก็ตาม แต่การที่การเพาะปลูกยางพาราได้ขยายตัวไปหลายจังหวัดนอกเขตภาคใต้โดยนโยบายรัฐบาลที่ต้องการช่วยเกษตรกรภาคอื่นๆ อาจทำให้เกิดความข้องใจเกี่ยวกับพื้นฐานของอัตลักษณ์ของคนใต้เอง วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้จึงขออภิปรายว่า เศรษฐกิจยางพาราของภาคใต้ไม่ใช่แค่เคยมีบทบาทสำคัญในการเปลี่ยนแปลงสถานการณ์การเมืองระหว่างปี พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๖ ถึง ๒๕๕๗ แต่การไม่แก้ปัญหาสถานการณ์ยางพาราตกต่ำอย่างยั่งยืนทั้งก่อนและหลังรัฐประหารยังทำให้ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างการทำสวนยางพาราและอัตลักษณ์ทางภูมิภาคของคนใต้มีความชัดเจนยิ่งขึ้น และความสัมพันธ์นี้ได้สร้างความคิดและพื้นฐานทางการเมืองที่ไม่ได้มาจากพรรคการเมืองเท่านั้น ชาวสวนยางได้นำมุมมองด้านอัตลักษณ์ทางภูมิภาคไปใช้เพื่อถกเถียงการบริหารตลาดยางพาราและเรียกร้องให้รัฐบาลเข้ามาแทรกแซงช่วยเหลือชาวสวนยาง

วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้มีทั้งหมด ๘ บท โดยบทแรกเป็นบทนำ บทที่ 2 เป็นบทที่อธิบายระบบตลาดยางพาราทั้งระดับโลกและระดับภายในไทยด้วย โดยบทนี้จะเสนอมรรณกรรมในกลุ่ม ห่วงโซ่การผลิตโลก หรือที่เรียกกันว่า global production networks (GPN) ที่เหมาะสมและสามารถสร้างบริบทเชิงวิเคราะห์ได้ การทบทวนกลุ่มมรรณกรรมห่วงโซ่การผลิตโลกถือว่ามีส่วนสำคัญในการเข้าใจระบบเครือข่ายการผลิต ดังนั้นนักวิชาการจึงควรพิจารณาปัจจัยหลากหลายเพื่อวิเคราะห์กระบวนการการผลิตอย่างครบถ้วน ได้แก่ ผู้ผลิต ผู้บริโภค และส่วนต่างๆของรัฐ

เช่น กฎหมายและนโยบาย เป็นต้น ถึงแม้ว่านักวิชาการบางท่านอาจจะมองว่าการทบทวนกลุ่มวรรณกรรมนี้ยังคงมีปัญหา เพราะว่วรรณกรรมเหล่านี้ส่วนใหญ่มุ่งเน้นการศึกษาและอภิปรายในเรื่องของบริษัทมากเกินไป แทนที่จะพิจารณาในส่วนของคุณค้หรือผลกระทบต่อการพัฒนาทางเศรษฐกิจ อย่างไรก็ตามวรรณกรรมกลุ่มนี้ยังคงมีความสำคัญอยู่ในด้านของการเข้าใจสถานการณ์ในตลาดยางพาราซึ่งมีบทบาทสำคัญในการพิจารณาหัวข้อต่างๆในเรื่องยางพาราทางภาคใต้ ทั้งนี้การทบทวนวรรณกรรมด้านห่วงโซ่การผลิตโลกเป็นเพียงแค่จุดเริ่มต้นของการศึกษาเรื่องยางพาราเท่านั้น ดังนั้นควรมีการพิจารณามุมมองด้านอื่นๆจากกลุ่มวรรณกรรมในกลุ่มอื่นด้วย โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งควรมีการศึกษาในระดับภูมิศาสตร์ (geographic scale) และ ในระดับภูมิภาค การนำวรรณกรรมที่หลากหลายดังที่เสนอไว้มาวิเคราะห์ร่วมกัน จะสามารถพัฒนาความคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับกระบวนการผลิตยางพาราได้อย่างลึกซึ้งและกว้างขวางมากยิ่งขึ้น โดยเฉพาะในด้านของวิชาภูมิศาสตร์ ซึ่งจะช่วยให้เราเห็นได้ว่าปัญหาราคายางพารานั้นเป็นปัญหาที่เกี่ยวข้องกันทั้งกับระบบเศรษฐกิจและระบบการเมืองการบริหารระดับชาติ โดยปัญหาดังกล่าวกลายเป็นปัญหาที่คนภาคใต้รู้สึกน้อยใจและอาจคิดว่าถูกเพิกเฉยจากรัฐบาล

ในบทที่ 3 ผมได้อธิบายประวัติศาสตร์ยางพาราในไทยโดยแสดงให้เห็นว่ารัฐบาลไทยมีบทบาทสำคัญในการสนับสนุนเศรษฐกิจยางพารารายย่อยมานานนับหลายสิบปี ซึ่งการสนับสนุนนี้เคยมีเฉพาะในถิ่นภาคใต้และบางจังหวัดในภาคของตะวันออกที่มีสภาพอากาศที่คล้ายคลึงกับพื้นที่ภาคใต้เท่านั้น ในบทนี้จะเน้นอภิปรายบริบทที่ชี้ให้เห็นถึงการสร้างความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างการทำสวนยางพาราและแนวคิดด้านภูมิภาคนิยมหรืออัตลักษณ์ของคนภาคใต้ การอภิปรายนี้จะช่วยให้เราเข้าใจว่าคนภาคใต้บางคน โดยเฉพาะผู้ที่ถูกผมสัมภาษณ์คิดว่าการทำสวนยางเป็นมากกว่าอาชีพ หน้าที่ หรือตำแหน่ง สำหรับคนภาคใต้การทำสวนยางเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของวิถีชีวิตและการดำรงชีวิตของคนภาคใต้ อย่างไรก็ตามการที่รัฐให้ความช่วยเหลือสนับสนุนการปลูกยางพาราในภูมิภาคอื่นๆ ตั้งแต่ปี พ.ศ. ๒๕๔๓ ทำให้คนใต้บางคนอาจสงสัยว่าการทำสวนยางพาราในภูมิภาคอื่นๆนั้น กำลังแย่งอาชีพและการดำรงชีวิตของพวกเขาหรือไม่ นอกจากนี้ชาวสวนยางทางภาคใต้บางคนอาจเห็นว่าการทำสวนยางพาราควรเป็นอาชีพของคนภาคใต้เท่านั้น

บทต่อไปจะกล่าวถึงการประท้วงปิดถนนและวางรถไฟใน พ.ศ. ๒๕๕๖ ที่ อ.ชะอวด จ.นครศรีธรรมราช อย่างละเอียด เพื่อวิเคราะห์ถึงความเชื่อมโยงระหว่างการประท้วงที่ จ.นครศรีธรรมราชกับการประท้วงทางการเมืองที่กรุงเทพฯ ซึ่งนำโดยแกนนำ กปปส. และเพื่ออธิบายให้เข้าใจว่าการประท้วงเรื่องราคายางตกต่ำนั้นสะท้อนเรื่องราวทางการเมืองในมิติอื่นๆที่ไม่ใช่แค่มิติที่เกี่ยวกับพรรคการเมืองเท่านั้น หมายถึงการที่รัฐบาลไม่ตอบสนอง

กรณีราคาขายตกต่ำอย่างที่น่าพอใจสำหรับคนภาคใต้หลายคนได้กลายเป็นปัญหาที่กว้างกว่าที่เกี่ยวพันกับความไม่ยุติธรรมเชิงภูมิประเทศ ผมขออภิปรายว่ามรดกการทำสวนยางอาจเป็นพื้นฐานที่ช่วยสร้างความคิดเห็นสำคัญในเรื่องการเมืองและการบริหารสำหรับคนส่วนมากในภาคใต้ได้ ซึ่งสามารถฝังรากในความสำนึกได้ ที่การรบกวนขอพบหาทางรอดจากสถานการณ์ราคาขายตกต่ำต้องอาศัยรัฐบาล โดยรัฐจำเป็นต้องเป็นผู้รับรองความเป็นอยู่ของประชาชน

หลังจากที่มีรัฐประหารเกิดขึ้นแล้วชาวสวนยางถูกห้ามไม่ให้ออกไปประท้วงเรื่องราคาขายแม้ว่าราคาขายยังคงตกลงไปเรื่อยๆ ทำให้ชาวสวนยางลำบากมากยิ่งขึ้น อย่างไรก็ตามแม้ว่าชาวสวนยางทางภาคใต้จะไม่สามารถทำการประท้วงได้ แต่การแสดงความไม่พอใจต่อรัฐบาลเรื่องการแก้ปัญหาราคาขายพารา ยังคงมีอยู่ เช่น ชาวสวนยางมักจะประชุมพูดคุยกันเกี่ยวกับปัญหาการราคาขายและร่วมกันยื่นหนังสือแก้ตัวแทนจากกระทรวงเกษตรและสหกรณ์ เป็นต้น นอกจากนี้ชาวสวนยางยังแสดงความไม่พอใจด้วยวิธีอื่นๆ เช่น การแสดงความไม่พอใจผ่านการแสดงหนังตะลุงซึ่งเป็นศิลปะท้องถิ่นของคนใต้ ทั้งนี้ในบทนี้ ผมจะอธิบายถึงการตีความหนังตะลุงของนักแสดงหนังตะลุงชื่อดัง โดยในหนังตะลุงนั้นมีบทสนทนาระหว่างตัวตลกกับ พ.อ. ประยุทธ์ จันทร์โอชา นายกรัฐมนตรีของประเทศไทย บทสนทนาเป็นการพูดคุยกันเรื่องปัญหาพาราและปัญหาทางภาคใต้โดยทั่วไป โดยมีการล้อเลียนและเสียดสีทางการเมืองอย่างสนุกสนาน

สำหรับบทต่อไป ผมจะกล่าวถึงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างวิถีชีวิตการทำสวนยางพาราในภาคใต้และแนวคิดด้านภูมิภาคนิยม รวมทั้งจะเปิดเผยถึงความรู้สึกของคนภาคใต้โดยทั่วไปเกี่ยวกับเรื่องราคาขายพาราที่ตกต่ำลง ผมจะเสนอว่าการขยายพื้นที่ปลูกยางพาราไปสู่ภูมิภาคอื่นๆ แม้จะมีบทบาทบางส่วนในการทำให้ราคาขายต่ำลง แต่อย่างไรก็ตามการที่ราคาขายตกลงนั้นยังมีสาเหตุมาจากอีกหลายปัจจัย ดังนั้นความเชื่อของคนที่คิดว่าราคาขายตกลงเพราะยางพาราถูกปลูกมากขึ้นในพื้นที่จังหวัดอื่นๆนอกจากภาคใต้นั้นชี้ให้เห็นถึงว่าชาวสวนยางได้ใช้แนวคิดกรอบระดับ (scale frame) ในการวิเคราะห์และแสดงความคิดเห็นเกี่ยวกับสถานการณ์ราคาขายตกต่ำ ซึ่งผมขอเรียกกระบวนการนี้ว่า การแปรระดับ (scalar translations) ดังนั้นในบทนี้ผมจะอธิบายถึงนโยบายของรัฐบาลเมื่อกลางทศวรรษ พ.ศ. ๒๕๔๐ และความคิดเห็นในมุมมองของชาวสวนยางทางภาคใต้ ส่วนในบทสุดท้ายนั้นผมจะสรุปการวิจัยและเป้าหมายของวิทยานิพนธ์ พร้อมกับเสนอมุมมองวิจัยในอนาคตที่เกี่ยวข้องควรมีหัวข้ออะไรบ้าง สุดท้ายผมจะอธิบายถึงสถานการณ์ราคาขายที่ตกต่ำในภาคใต้ให้ผู้อ่านได้เข้าใจกระบวนการของห่วงโซ่การผลิตโลกได้อย่างถ่องแท้มากยิ่งขึ้น

Introduction

Stories about low rubber prices in Thailand have made their way into international news outlets over recent years. In June 2018, for instance, when prices in Thailand were just shy of 44 baht per kilogram (about \$1.30 USD) a publication from the *Financial Times'* emerging markets group (FT Confidential Research 2018) noted the continuing stresses shouldered by the country's rubber farmers. Rubber prices, driven largely by Chinese import demands, the article summarizes, had dropped substantially since 2011. Amid promises by the Thai military, in power since 2014, of elections to be held in 2019, the piece additionally ties these poor market conditions into electoral possibilities, commenting that "there is much to play for" in terms of rubber farmers' votes, should rubber prices not rebound in the interim. While, understandably, neither conclusions nor predictions are drawn about what impact the rubber-farming constituency, for long concentrated in across Thailand's southern provinces, might hold in the next round of national elections, the article does suggest some instrumental connections between rubber and Thai politics: "Southern Thailand is a stronghold of the Democrat party."

Concerning media within Thailand, the Editorial Staff (2013) of the Thai-language publication, *Thai Rubber Magazine*, which targets a general audience and is for sale in small family-owned news shops and 7-11 stores throughout southern Thailand and other parts of the country, classified rubber as one among four 'political crops' (in addition to cassava, sugar cane, and rice) in Thailand in its September 2013 volume—meaning those crops with intimate connections to state policies over numerous previous government administrations. 'Political' because when prices fall, the writers contend, "the state might intervene in the way of policies." (2013, 42) This particular piece was published at a

significant juncture in Thailand's recently tortuous political climate: beginning in August 2013, and extending well into October, demonstrations were staged in protest over falling rubber prices in southern Thailand, as the central government of Yingluck Shinawatra, of the *Phuea Thai* Party, declined to intervene through price supports. Furthermore, these events came together shortly before massive political demonstrations in Bangkok, led by well-known Democrat politicians from southern provinces, presented a direct challenge to Yingluck and her administration. These latter events ended in May 2014, at which point the military came to power through a bloodless coup d'état. As highlighted in the *Financial Times*' piece above, the military's (potentially) waning days in office and organization of elections in the near future could spell policy and/or political opportunities to address an issue of widespread concern for many in rural southern Thailand—as well as those in other parts of the country whose experiences cultivating rubber are relatively more recent, dating back within the past two decades.

Unwrapping such political observations are at the core of my aims in this dissertation, and three broad concerns steer the discussions of subsequent chapters. Firstly, I seek to explore reasons behind the unfolding of the former set of protests, over rubber prices, in 2013, principally those at two sites in Cha-uat District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, in southern Thailand (Figure I.1, inset). By 'exploring', I specifically mean understanding how these events intersected with larger political contests at the time. Though not contending that the protests held a few months later in Bangkok were merely an outgrowth of those in Cha-uat, I will argue that these events were nonetheless related to one another in crucial ways, demonstrating, thereby, how ostensibly economic problems connected to contests with significant political outcomes.

These discussions are in line with my sketches of PhD research plans in late 2013: I had proposed to examine whether rubber's longstanding and widespread presence in rural southern Thailand in turn meant that low rubber prices—in addition to serving as the basis for protest—may have also rendered opportunities to effect political changes on a national stage. However, as a result of conducting dissertation research, I will also critically engage with what may appear to be a seamless unity across episodes, to consider what the protests in 2013 reveal about less transparent forms of political tension residing within contexts of rubber cultivation in southern Thailand—in other words, beyond the partisan associations.

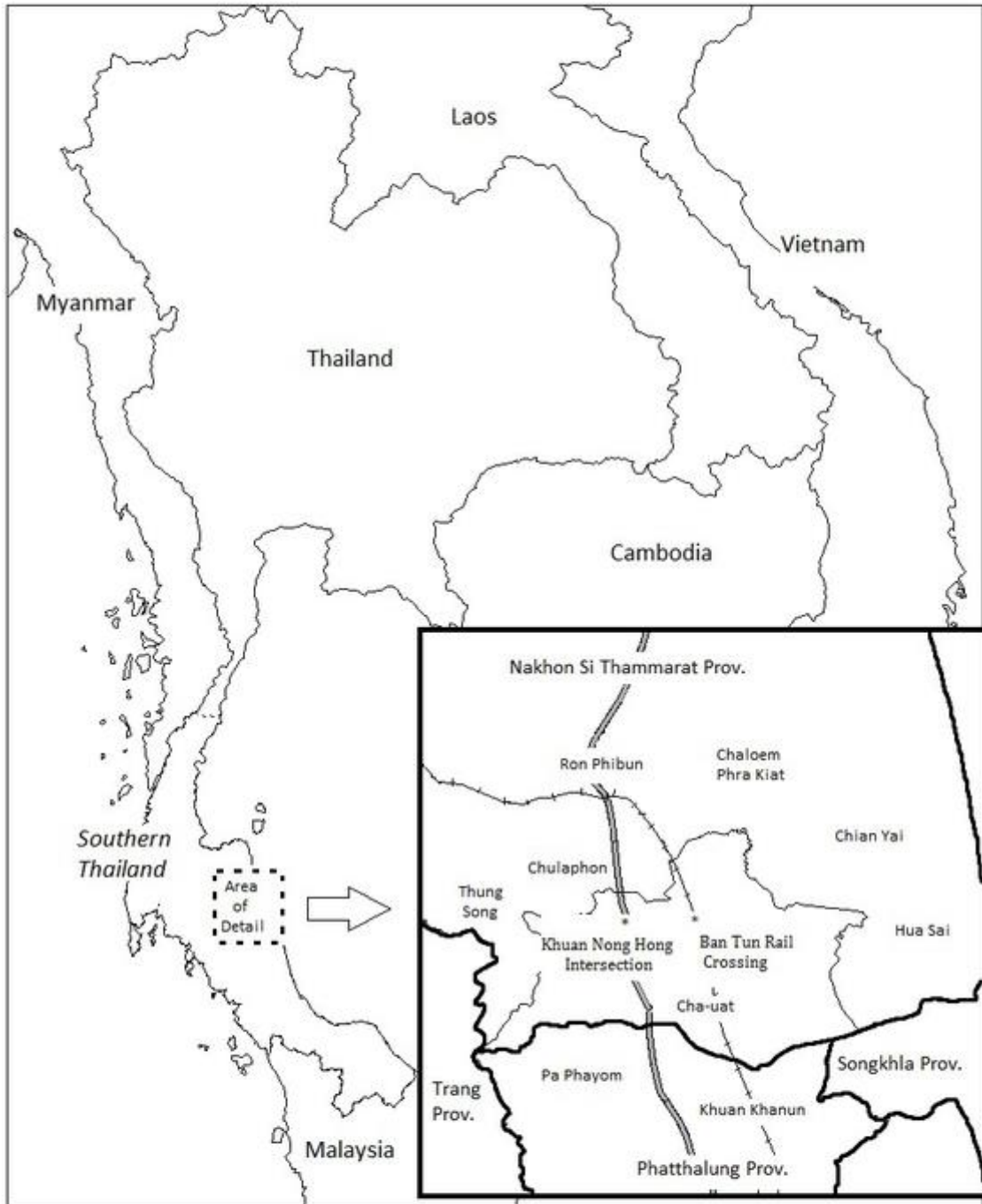


Figure I.1 Southern Thailand and Demonstration Sites (inset)

Following this first objective, my second and third aims are to discuss the ways in which people interpret the factors that underlie low rubber prices and in turn envision

ways in which these can be lifted. During fieldwork in and around Cha-uat District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province—a fifteen-month period from April 2015 to July 2016, as well as a shorter, one-month follow-up research trip in June and July 2017—I met frequently with smallholder rubber farmers to understand how they perceived these issues. Across a number of conversations, I found that low rubber prices were often conveyed through frames suggesting that the ever-expanding footprint of rubber cultivation across Thailand, but especially outside of the southern region, has been geographically wayward and largely attributable to faulty policy maneuvers by the Thai state—in sum, leading to widespread senses that there is a glut of Thai rubber and prices have fallen as a result. Solutions, I found, were envisioned through frames appealing to the state for price floors and other forms of public financial assistance. Accompanying both issues, though, were often citations with regional overtones, of southern Thailand’s longstanding role as leading producer of the country’s natural rubber output.

In a slight departure from points in the pieces cited above—as well as my own dissertation proposal, which brought to light connections among rubber, policy, partisanship, and political opportunities/opportunism—my research has thus led me to inquire about the nexus between rubber, a global commodity, and the ways in which responses to declining prices have recently been inflected through nation-centric filters, and in particular senses of rubber’s regional origins and belonging in southern Thailand. As I will highlight, conceptions of responsibility and citizen-state relationships are revealed through peoples’ referencing national and subnational agricultural histories, which also span broader processes of twentieth-century nation building and development.

Above, I have deliberately chosen to use the term 'global commodity.' The arguments that I will develop in subsequent chapters, I contend, contribute to conversations among economic geographers working on global production networks and studying relationships of commodity production and exchange across an array of scales. Information gained from one-on-one and small-group interviews I conducted in southern Thailand, as well as that from listening in during meetings that drew together farmers and representatives from provincial and national governments, helps to probe the dimensions, and work toward a more spatially sensitive assessment, of governance over trans-scalar production network relationships than is often apparent from scholarship in this subarea of human geography.

In the title of this dissertation, I have chosen to use the word, *cast*, due to its dual meaning. On the one hand, it implies a range of individuals and other 'actors', e.g. institutions and policies, involved in a particular undertaking or set of processes: in the chapters below, I consider the dynamics of rubber production and exchange as they are conveyed through frames that emphasize the contours both of the nation as well as southern Thailand. On the other hand, *cast* suggests permanence and fixity: as I will show, territorial narratives of rubber as a form of agriculture—tied to southern Thailand and southern Thais' livelihoods—convey senses of embeddedness, and furthermore peoples' frequent remarks on not entertaining a switch from rubber to some other agricultural undertaking due to low prices could imply relatively consistent agricultural landscapes going forward. Such narratives are telling because, inasmuch as rubber is articulated into a highly relational global geography of production (and, as a tree species, is furthermore an exotic to Asia), it is clear that many people perceive the determinants of (and solutions to)

low rubber prices through a filter defined through the nation state—in other words, through decidedly political relationships. I show that interpretations of such nation-centric governance are in part a consequence of the uneven power dynamics in rubber markets themselves, as well as the ways in which the histories of rubber in Thailand are passengers on nation-building journeys from the late nineteenth century onward—as Thongchai (1994) writes, the construction of Thailand’s geo-body. Moreover, though, I demonstrate how these interpretations actually elevate senses of regional belonging, whose implications extend far beyond questions of commodity production and value capture alone.

My central thesis in this dissertation can thus be stated as follows: not only was southern Thailand’s rubber economy a key ‘actor’ in the political changes that took place within Thailand’s national government in 2013 and 2014; additionally, I contend that responses to declining rubber prices in recent years (pre- and post-coup) reify senses of regional identity—and its activation, regionalism—that are mobilized to challenge and renegotiate existing scales of economic governance. As a consequence, these moments of probing and prying dually shape foundations of rural political consciousness as well as the arcs of agrarian transition in southern Thailand.

In conversation with recent studies on rural political consciousness in Thailand, particularly that of Andrew Walker (2012), this study similarly attends to the concerns of what is arguably a ‘middle-income peasantry’, or that which seeks to address issues of disparity and inequality rather than absolute poverty—an issue of concern particularly for prior generations. Walker makes these points with broad reference to Thailand’s rural communities, highlighting the temporal aspects at play leading to such shifts in political bargaining. Through my discussions below, however, I contend that gaining perspective on

contemporary political consciousness in rural Thailand can be complemented by considering the role of another form of geographical division, beyond the urban-rural divide: the presence of the subnational region and notions that instances of bias and injustice have been fundamentally territorial and have thus intersected with senses of regional identity and belonging more broadly.

I will devote four substantive chapters and a conclusion to supporting this main argument. Following this introduction, though, I will first detail the conceptual framework that structures my arguments (Chapter 1). In Chapter 2, I discuss the methods I employed to carry out my research, consisting primarily of qualitative interviews. The second part of the chapter (Section 2.1) is devoted to providing background and context on the research sites. Chapter 3, the first of the substantive chapters, explains the particularly strong relationships with rubber that many people conveyed to me during research, while situating these senses within the historical geographies of state support for smallholders and portraying them against rather different experiences with rubber in Phitsanulok Province (northern Thailand) and southern Laos. Chapter 4 deals principally with the protests in Cha-uaat in 2013 and the national political changes that took place in Thailand thereafter; by ousting the Yingluck Shinawatra administration from office, the latter reflected a tremendous victory for her political opponents, which, as I will discuss, configure a sizable portion of the representation of southern Thais in Parliament. In Chapter 5, I move to consider senses among people in southern Thailand that, despite political transitions over the past few years, Bangkok has been consistent in neglecting to sufficiently address problems of low rubber prices, impacting families whose household incomes depend on rubber. For illustrative purposes, beyond my own research data, I

appeal to an example of a venue less contentious than a protest space, though nonetheless configuring an important for(u)m for critique: the shadow play, or *nang talung*. In the *nang talung* political and social issues intersect with entertainment, and the recent work of one performer in particular, Banyat Suwanwaenthong (who goes by the stage name Nong Diao), has become immensely popular for performances that feature interactions between Ai Phunkaeo, one of the play's recurring clowns, and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, whose voice and speech patterns Mr. Banyat imitates with remarkable precision.

Chapter 6, the last of the substantive chapters, is in part a synthesis of the preceding three chapters. Departing from the regionalized relationships with rubber cultivation discussed in Chapters 3 through 5, the chapter focuses specifically on the interpretive moments that concern the scales of rubber's production and exchange. I show that emphasis given to regional-national, in other words Thai, stories about declining rubber prices entails noteworthy moments of translation: here, scales themselves are reinterpreted and negotiated through appeals to regional legacies and perceptions of a transmission of 'southern Thai rubber' outside of the South. Chapter 7 concludes this dissertation by summarizing the preceding chapters' discussions and synthesizing their implications toward how we conceptualize and develop sociospatial inferences on governance over production relationships pertaining to a globalized economy. Chapter 7 will also identify limitations of the work carried out as well as opportunities for future research.

Chapter 1: A Global Commodity's Local Perceptions

The empirical point of departure for this dissertation is the incidence of falling rubber prices in Thailand and, subsequently, the ways in which people have responded to these trends—people whose incomes derive from growing and/or tapping rubber. However, given my interest in broader political questions surrounding rubber, particularly the seams that have formed between contending with low prices and regional belonging, I will show how these empirical phenomena confront the beliefs and perceptions of rubber farmers, or *chaosuan yang* in Thai,^a themselves, concerning the dynamics of rubber markets, which place substantial emphasis on the roles of (and possibilities for) interventions from the Thai state.

In this chapter, my aims are thus threefold. Firstly, I provide a brief sketch of the mechanisms at work determining rubber prices as they materialize across rural Thailand. This first section will show that rubber-price determination is a clearly multi-scalar, multi-sited phenomenon, extending far beyond the boundaries of southern Thailand. To be clear, this is something of which *chaosuan yang* are fully cognizant, and, as such, it is evident that

^a Unless otherwise noted, italicized words are Thai. I will use this particular term, *chaosuan yang*, throughout my dissertation. Although a rough translation would be 'smallholder rubber farmers', the Thai term is more appropriate to use because it connotes a range of people who are nearest to these agricultural practices and derive the majority/all of their household income from rubber, but they need not solely be either landowners or tenants. Included in this definition are people who have their own plots of rubber and tap the trees themselves; people who have their own plots, some part of which they tap and another part of which they have other people tap (sharing revenues on percentage basis); and people who don't have their own plots but work tapping others' plots. Not included in this term are people who own plots of rubber but do not tap themselves. This last category is rather common in southern Thailand, where plots may be inherited from family members, yet the income from rubber nonetheless comprises a substantial portion of the individual's or household's total income. A final note, all informational notes aside from this one will appear as endnotes at the end of the dissertation. Footnotes are reserved for documenting the date and place of interviews.

the contentions vying for state-led interventions are at their foundation highly political maneuvers.

Following this first, largely descriptive section, I address how natural rubber prices in Thailand could be brought into conversation with work in economic geography, principally that on global production networks, or GPNs. I weigh the potentials of this branch of scholarship to explain both the economic and extra-economic dimensions of low rubber prices in southern Thailand, but I offer that a deeper engagement with scale as a concept and analytical tool helps to shed light on ways of studying economic governance as, to a greater extent, negotiated.

Thus, in the section that follows, composed of two sub-sections, I first trace debates in human geography broadly attending to the politics of scale. As responses to declining rubber prices in recent years warrant an examination into the regional inflections they have assumed, though, I then attend to work in regional geography. In generating this conceptual framework, which provides the scaffolding for my empirical discussions later, I thus elevate the concepts, scale and region, together for close inspection on the relationships between them in the case I consider here: I show how scales are invoked, politically, to perceive and negotiate rubber prices, yet I contend that senses of regional belonging critically, and fundamentally, shape these discursive angles. Beneath these dynamics are foundations both material and cultural, which I bring to light through my substantive chapters, Chapters 3 through 6. The final section of this chapter gives background on the institutionalization, i.e. identification and naming, of regions in Thailand over the twentieth century, a process that developed concurrently with the rubber economy across the southern provinces.

1.1 Determinants and Perceptions

Yields from rubber trees, of the species *Hevea brasiliensis*, are obtained by first tapping, or scoring, the bark, allowing latex to collect in dishes attached to the tree trunks. Often in the form of liquid latex, these yields then course through a series of intermediaries, monetary exchanges happening at each turn. In Thailand, close to 90% of rubber is exported, mostly through one of five large exporting firms known widely as the Five Tigers (e.g., *Bangkok Post*, August 27, 2017). Thus, one does not tap rubber for household consumption. These yields are also firmly globally embedded, as the prices that face *chaosuan yang*, derive from the churns of commodity markets, whose transactions involve traders in Singapore, brokers in New York City, among a host of other actors beyond the borders of Thailand. Below, I will briefly sketch these pathways of exchange as a means both to demonstrate how the experiences of *chaosuan yang* are entwined with global production and trade networks, rendering certain ‘economic realities’ that they in turn must contend with, as well as to accentuate the deeply territorial and political claims made about rubber that comprise the focus of subsequent chapters.

As I observed during fieldwork, rubber trees in southern Thailand are typically tapped in the hours after midnight, a time of cooler temperatures that encourages greater latex flows. Not long ago (within the past ten to twenty years), *chaosuan yang* I interacted with had previously collected rubber latex in the mornings following tapping, and then processed it into rubber sheets—a process in which a coagulant is added to a pan filled with latex, and then this mixture is ironed into rectangular sheets before being hung to dry outside. However, *chaosuan yang* rarely make sheets anymore; instead, most sell liquid latex and/or cup lumps.¹ Latex needs to be sold soon after tapping and cup lumps are the

products of latex accumulating and hardening for about a week in the collecting dishes attached to the trees. The sale of both happened principally through two venues—cooperatives and private intermediaries—as I observed.

Cooperatives require that members invest some of their own money, but they also give them an opportunity to share in the profits. At one cooperative that I visited regularly during work in 2015, after members had emptied their latex into a large collection tank, the latex is made into sheets, which are then hung to dry for a period before entering the smoke room, from where they exit as smoked, preserved, sheets. Smoked sheets are delivered by semi to the Central Rubber Market in Hat Yai, where they are procured by manufacturing and processing firms.²

Conversely, after collecting latex from *chaosuan yang*, independent buyers I visited (e.g., Figure 1.1a) would then make a delivery to an independently owned and operated smoked sheet-making facility. Similar to the cooperative, smoked sheets are then brought to sell at Central Rubber Markets—either in Hat Yai or in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. Other intermediaries might deliver the smaller batches of latex to a larger intermediary, from which point latex makes its way to a factory producing latex gloves and/or other non-vulcanized products (Figure 1.1b).



Figure 1.1: (a, left) Equipment used to purchase latex directly from *chaosuan yang* for delivery to a sheet-making factory in a nearby village. (b, right) Collection basin and semi equipped with tanker (at left), used for latex delivery to factories in neighboring provinces. (Photos by author)

Most days (excluding Saturday and Sunday as well as national holidays) state-run Central Rubber Markets hold auctions for different types of rubber—e.g. unsmoked sheets, smoked sheets, rubber cuttings—into which companies submit bids electronically. The bidder who wins the auction for a particular product, such as a grade of rubber sheet, sets its price and will acquire the entirety of it in the market that day. Figure 1.2 is an illustration of the auction results: the company in row 2 that submitted a bid price of 40.55 baht per kilogram (roughly US\$1.25) won the auction for grade 3 smoked rubber sheets, thus setting the price. As I learned through interviews with a number of latex intermediaries in Cha-uat District, the Hat Yai Central Rubber Market (CRM) prices are often the main reference point to buy directly from *chaosuan yang*, with small deductions taken out per kilogram to cover the intermediary's own expenses such as those related to processing and travel.

Some processing factories, however, do not bid into the CRMs. Two managers at a factory owned by Sri Trang Agroindustry in Thung Song district, for instance, told me that

the factory does not procure from the CRM.^a Instead, it buys mainly cup lumps directly from other intermediaries, enabling the factory to produce Technically Specified Rubber—a rubber product used mainly in the production of vehicle tires that can be manufactured from different types of inputs, for example latex, unsmoked sheets, rubber cup lumps, or rubber scraps (afet.or.th). Technically Specified Rubber, for its part, constitutes the most important export product for large firms like Sri Trang, one of Thailand’s ‘Five Tigers’, which additionally has a presence across Southeast Asia: revenues totaled 56.1 billion baht (roughly US\$1.8 billion) in 2016, or close to 73% of sales from all rubber products (Sri Trang Agroindustry 2016).

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ลำดับ ที่	เวลา	ผู้ประมูล	ราคา					ยางฟอง	Cutting
			1	2	3	4	5		
1	10.42	XXXXXXXXXX	-	-	-	-	38.89	38.79	-
2	10.46	XXXXXXXXXX	-	-	40.55	-	-	-	-
3	10.46	XXXXXXXXXX	-	-	-	-	-	-	35.89
4	10.47	XXXXXXXXXX	-	-	39.81	39.61	39.11	38.61	-
5	10.48	XXXXXXXXXX	-	-	40.07	-	-	-	36.39
6	10.50	XXXXXXXXXX	-	-	40.55	39.90	39.30	39.10	36.40
7	10.50	XXXXXXXXXX	-	-	40.55	39.68	39.08	38.57	-
8	10.53	XXXXXXXXXX	-	-	40.41	40.00	39.49	38.73	36.66
ตลาดสุราษฎร์ธานี									
น้ำหนัก	32,000	ก.ก.	-	-	40.37	40.00	40.00	40.00	39.00
ตลาดนครศรีธรรมราช									
น้ำหนัก	162,000	ก.ก.	-	-	40.39	39.49	38.70	38.88	36.77

Figure 1.2 December 15, 2015 auction results for smoked rubber sheets. The top block shows results for the Central Rubber Market in Hat Yai, the lower two for Surat Thani and Nakhon Si Thammarat, respectively. Companies, listed in the third column from left, submit electronic bids for each grade (columns labeled 1 through 5) until a bid price (in bold) for each grade is struck by 11:00 am. In the image company names are crossed out. The manager at the Hat Yai CRM who provided me with these

^a December 7, 2015

results, asked that company names be redacted, as this auction is ‘silent’, in the sense that companies bid without knowing the bids of other companies.

In 2016, Sri Trang’s export sales income was four times greater than domestic sales income, its sales of natural rubber to Chinese firms totaled 16% of all natural rubber imported into China, and it held the position of being the largest midstream rubber processor in the world (supplying processes using technically specified rubber) (Sri Trang Agroindustry 2016).

Many *chaosuan yang* commented to me that firms such as Sri Trang have the most influence on rubber price determination.³ On the other hand, some directly attributed price fluctuations to the Thai government more broadly—one *chaosuan yang* told me that the price depended on whichever administration was in power.^a Others held that prices are determined through what they alleged and/or suspected were firm-government alliances: a latex and cup lump buyer in Cha-uat’s Khuan Nong Sub-district was of the strong opinion—“absolutely,” he said—that there must be some sort of cooperation between politicians and the Five Tigers.^b He then pointed to the central government’s administrative divisions broadly as enabling these firms’ outsized influence and profits. While he did not spell out any precise administrative mechanisms, instead mentioning notions about payments and corruption in broad strokes, his comments nonetheless speak to a common acknowledgement that the whereabouts of price determination are well beyond the influences of those who tap the rubber trees.

In the absence of government-led price interventions (see Chapter 3 for a discussion), prices in the Central Rubber Markets and subsequently those perceived by

^a August 21, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^b February 17, 2016, Cha-uat District, latex and *khi yang* intermediary

chaosuan yang in Thailand are closely related to futures contracts struck on the Singapore Exchange and Tokyo Commodity Exchange.⁴ Very simply, futures contracts are financial mechanisms that allow buyers and sellers to hedge risks by agreeing to price and quantity delivery of a particular commodity at a later date, e.g. one or several months after the date of purchase (Chen 2018). A manager at one of Sri Trang's factories in Songkhla Province told me that daily bid prices made into Central Rubber Markets are determined directly from one-month futures contracts on the Singapore Commodity Exchange.^a Between the beginning of May 2015 and the end of February 2016 (approximately one tapping season, before seasonal defoliation in March and April and subsequently temporary cessation of tapping), Pearson correlation coefficients between daily latex prices in southern Thailand (available through the Rubber Authority of Thailand, raot.co.th) and daily one-month rubber futures contracts on the Singapore Exchange (available through sgx.com) as well as one-month futures contracts on the Tokyo Commodity Exchange (available through tocom.or.jp) were both 0.96 ($n = 193$ and 188 , respectively). The latex price is reported by the Central Rubber Market in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province on each business day; it is a simple arithmetic average of latex purchase prices at four to five factories in Songkhla and nearby provinces.^b While a correlation coefficient very specifically does not convey causality, it does nevertheless point toward the extent of a linear relationship between two values. In other words, rubber prices on these two commodity exchanges and latex prices in southern Thailand move in sync.

^a April 28, 2016, Hat Yai, factory manager for Sri Trang Agroindustry

^b December 15, 2015, Hat Yai, manager at Central Rubber Market in Hat Yai

For reasons having to do both with focus and relevance to the main arguments I propose in subsequent chapters, I will not launch into an exhaustive account of all nodes and connections that link the experiences of *chaosuan yang* in southern Thailand with, for instance, the new tires a suburban American family has recently installed on its station wagon or the latex gloves a hygienist uses during a cleaning appointment. However, suffice it to note that these socioeconomically and geographically disparate actors are indeed all tied into natural rubber's production and consumption processes that span the globe.

Above, I have indicated what happens to the rubber that leaves the plot (as latex, cup lumps, and sometimes sheets) and enters into processing and production circuits. Given the significant presence of the 'Five Tiger' firms—in addition to Sri Trang, Thai Hua, Southland, Von Budit, and Thai Rubber Latex Group—in both the manufacture and export of rubber products, it is worth noting that the goods of each company are primarily destined for intermediate purposes: as noted on their websites, all five companies are involved in the production of concentrated latex, and all except for Thai Rubber Latex Group produce smoked sheets as well as technically specified rubber—both of which are used for vehicle tires (e.g., Sri Trang Agroindustry 2016). As for more processed goods, Thai Rubber Latex Group manufactures rubber threads, latex gloves, and bedding; Sri Trang, as noted in its 2016 Annual Report (Sri Trang Agroindustry 2016), is involved, through cooperation with other businesses, in the manufacture of latex gloves, industrial hoses, and escalator handrails. This annual report also makes clear that the company perennially has to contend with fluctuating rubber prices. Clearly, the financial circumstances of a transnational company such as Sri Trang and those of a household in

rural Nakhon Si Thammarat are quite different; however, both face price outcomes that are set beyond Thailand's borders, in exchanges such as Tokyo and Singapore.

In light of the ways in which natural rubber comprises such a fundamental component in a host of industrial and consumer end-uses,⁵ it is noteworthy that these financial centers—the transactions of which arguably have the most direct bearing toward the financial wellbeing of *chaosuan yang* and their families—actually touch relatively little of rubber-the-physical-good itself. Indeed, on a rubber 'factsheet' available for download from the Singapore Commodity Exchange's website, the claim, "Singapore is recognised as the world's price discovery centre for natural rubber and SICOM [the exchange] today is synonymous with providing the pricing standard for the rubber industry globally" (SGX 2018, 2), is somewhat remarkable when set against the observation that substantially higher quantities of rubber bypass the Exchange entirely.

Futures contracts executed and delivered through the Exchange's mechanisms—where quantities of physical product are delivered to buyers after the contract matures—are relatively few in number by comparison with cumulative global export volumes. For instance, annual physical deliveries of Grade 3 Smoked Rubber Sheets (one of two rubber futures traded on the Singapore Commodity Exchange, the other being Technically Specified Rubber), were under 5% of Thai exports alone (some of which included the futures contracts) each year between 2011 and 2014, increasing to 7.3% in 2015 (rubber.oie.go.th, sgx.com). Of course, futures prices in Singapore may not be relevant in some contexts on the ground, so to speak, in situations where rubber holdings are vertically integrated into the business of processing firms—something which I observed in southern Laos in 2017 where people were hired to tap for the Vietnamese firm, Hoang Anh

Gia Lai (HAGL), on HAGL's own plantations (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3). In these circumstances, prices paid to hired tappers were much lower than those offered through cooperatives as well as independent latex intermediaries I visited in southern Thailand. While it is important to acknowledge the significant presence and position held by Thailand's main exporting firms within the country's rubber economy—ones which, as I bring up in Chapter 3, may have once led to a greater squeeze on the incomes of *chaosuan yang* before the state-led establishment of central rubber markets in the 1990s (see Kitti (2009), Phonkiat (1994), Suwit et al. (2012) for discussions (in Thai))—it is also instructive to observe that the tensions spurred by low rubber prices within Thailand that I address are in critical ways tied to the turns of global finance. As I will discuss shortly, these price signals are to some extent related to rudimentary supply-demand dynamics (e.g. excessive rainfall constricting latex output), yet a host of other factors are also at play. In the conclusion to this dissertation (Chapter 7), I will synthesize how this 'embeddedness', to borrow from the global production networks literature, is implicitly challenged and, ultimately, appears to fall from view as people negotiate the circumstances within local rubber markets.

In Chapter 6 specifically, I highlight the explanatory frames people deploy to reason why rubber prices have fallen—and thereby how the Thai state is implicated in designating the appropriate set of solutions. Such points are intensely political, revealing critiques that in turn render questions about the politics of rubber in/for southern Thailand, and which also speak to recent scholarship critically engaging with global production networks perspectives' on agriculture, namely that of Vicol et al. (2018) on smallholders and economic development. Before discussing such points, however, it is worth providing some

context of recent trends in rubber markets more generally. To be clear, many of the *chaosuan yang* whom I met are well aware that several factors, global in scope, drive Thai rubber prices upward or downward. Nonetheless, it is critical to note how the points of emphasis discussed in later chapters perceive these determinants through territorial lenses attending to notions of government ir/responsibility.

Rubber prices have indeed dropped over the past several years (Figure 1.3). Analyses attribute price fluctuations to an interplay of a number of influences, such as currency exchange and national interest rates, and many note that rubber prices trend in line with prices of other primary commodities, foods, fuels, and crude oil (Jumpasut 2014, Khin et al. 2012, Nontasak 2016, Suratwadee et al. 2017). Global crude oil prices, in particular, are often held to have a significant impact on natural rubber prices due to oil comprising the main input in synthetic rubber, a substitute for natural rubber (e.g. Suratwadee et al. 2017). Applying standard econometric techniques,⁶ Suratwadee et al. (2017) estimate global natural rubber supply and demand equations using data over the period, 2004 to 2015, and find that crude oil prices were statistically significant (at the 95% level), resulting, on average, in an increase in natural rubber output of 0.05% for each one-percentage increase in crude oil prices. By implication, the opposite is expected to result, on average, from an oil price decrease. They reason that rising oil prices lead to rising synthetic rubber prices, in turn driving up both global demand and supply of natural rubber. A textbook reading of this finding would convey mixed results for natural rubber prices, given that a simultaneous increase in both demand and supply quantities could result in either a higher or lower natural rubber price depending on relative magnitudes of increase. However, Suratwadee et al.'s study also demonstrates the influences of demand-

side variables, such as global GDP growth (positive effect on quantity demanded), as well as supply-side factors, such as rainfall and area under rubber cultivation (positive effect on quantity supplied), on both natural rubber quantities and prices. Extrapolating analysis of historical data into the period 2017 to 2026, Suratwadee et al. estimate supply outpacing demand (global natural rubber stocks increase) and crude oil prices continuing to fall. Finally, their calculations lead them to anticipate declining global natural rubber prices over the decade. Khin et al. (2012) conducted a similar type of study, although with focus in particular on the natural rubber price in Malaysia, and found, among other controlling variables, that crude oil prices and global stocks of natural rubber were statistically significant predictors (positive and negative, respectively) of rubber prices.



Figure 1.3 Average monthly prices for grade 3 smoked rubber sheets (Data Source: Thailand Office of Agricultural Economics, oae.go.th)

Gaining a sense of rubber price movements need not come from peer reviewed academic studies alone. Indeed, the monthly industry publication, *Rubber World Magazine*, which has been in print since 1889 (and offers open-access online content, rubberworld.com), periodically publishes synopses of market trends, in the column,

“Market Focus.” These often include information summaries from the International Rubber Study Group (IRSG), whose own publications come with access fees of thousands of Singapore dollars. A browse through *Rubber World’s* issues from the beginning of 2011 through the end of 2016 reveals a multifaceted story about the influences on rubber prices: from the June 2012 issue, the Market Focus reported the IRSG’s finding that in 2011 there was a global surplus of natural rubber on the order of 1.6 million metric tons (Rubber World 2012). In the March 2013 issue, 2012’s increase in natural rubber output is held to be attributable in part to new smallholder cultivation coming online; meanwhile the IRSG reported a contraction of 1.3% in global natural rubber consumption in 2012 and a decline in natural rubber prices by 20% between January and November 2012 (Rubber World 2013a). As the IRSG had remarked, “[w]ithout significant changes in the weakening state of the global demand, the NR [natural rubber] prices remained in the downward trajectory ... With a reported increase in stockpiles in China, the implementation of [an export restriction by Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia] had little impact on prices in the fourth quarter under the overall ‘bearish’ NR market environment.” (Rubber World 2013a, 12) High stocks in China were again cited in the July 2013 issue as a reason behind falling prices in the first half of the year (Rubber World 2013b). The drop in natural rubber exports by 3.2% in the first quarter of 2015 was largely attributed to contracting Chinese imports (Rubber World 2015). First-quarter 2016 reports of production from the IRSG showed increases of 2.4%, with Thailand noted to have contributed over 40% to the total—the largest share (Rubber World 2016). As the following figure (Figure 1.4) shows, Chinese imports of rubber are indeed sizable in comparison with other importing countries, and, in terms of supply-demand considerations affecting prices, need to be considered closely.

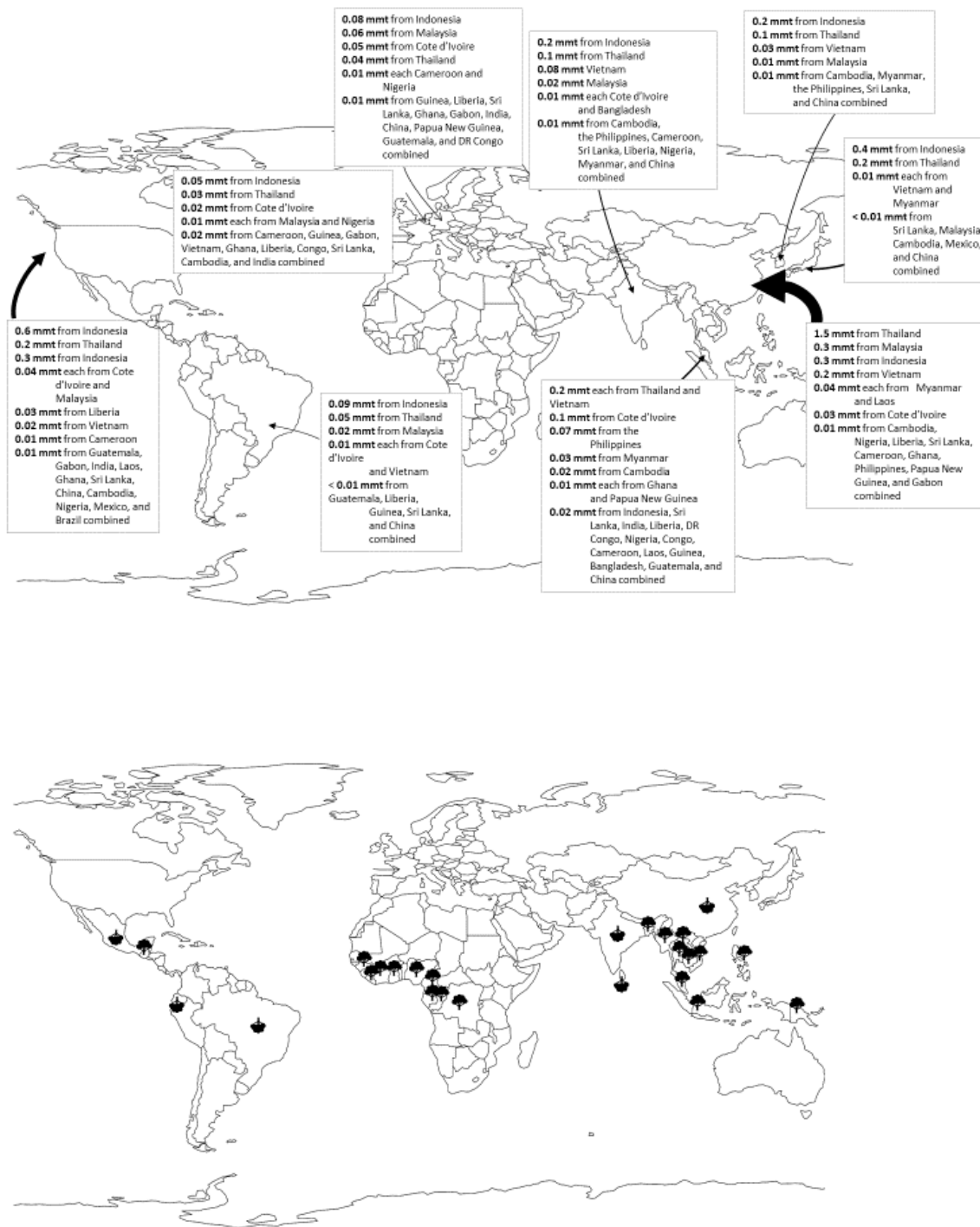


Figure 1.4 Top: in 2015, close to 7.8 million metric tons (mmt) of natural dry rubber (including sheets and technically specified rubber—HS Codes: 400121, 400122, 400129) were exported from

countries with rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*) trees under cultivation. This reflects a 95% share of total worldwide trade in these products, as small amounts of trade occurred between non-producing countries. Roughly 80% was exported (in descending order, arrow weights proportional) to China, the United States, Japan, Malaysia, India, South Korea, Germany, Brazil, and France. **Bottom:** countries with *Hevea brasiliensis* trees under cultivation. Upside-down trees in countries where imports outweigh exports, e.g. China. (Data Source: FAO Stat)

More recently, the Association of Natural Rubber Producing Countries explained low rubber prices through activity in futures markets linked to geopolitics, currency movements, and oil prices (Rubber World 2017). Issues of global oversupply are certainly thought to have a bearing on rubber prices; however, as the econometric analyses summarized above offer, other factors are clearly also at play driving rubber prices upward or downward.

While Market Focus reports cite high growth in Thai production specifically—Jumpasut (2016, 30) writing, in a different column of *Rubber World*, that this “has certainly contributed to the global glut of rubber”—they do not make mention of growth within particular regions of Thailand. This is not surprising, considering that *Rubber World Magazine* is not a Thai-focused publication and information on natural rubber output is only a small part of the publication’s coverage. Reports on new patents, industry meetings, product updates, among other subjects frequently make the headlines. However, it is worth bearing in mind this more global outlook when making sense of the considerably subnational discourses, highlighting Thai regions, which I encountered during my research and discuss below.

Importantly, data supplied through Thailand’s Office of Agricultural Economics (oae.go.th) disambiguate claims that, quite literally, place the blame on Thailand’s domestic

supply geographies, as I often found through my conversations with *chaosuan yang*: in 2014, provinces in southern Thailand comprised 70% of total harvested rubber tree stock, those in northeast Thailand 16%, in central Thailand 11%, and in northern Thailand 3%. Twenty years prior, in 1994, the percentages in the South, the Northeast, and central Thailand were 91%, 0.2%, and 9.2%, respectively, while northern Thailand had no harvested tree stock at all. Clearly, there had been massive acreage increases in provinces outside of southern Thailand, resulting in its share of total output dropping by over twenty percentage points in as many years. However, southern Thailand also continued to plant extensively throughout the 2000s: between 2000 and 2014, the fourteen provinces' collective share of harvested tree stock had increased by close to 600,000 ha (to a total of 1.9 million ha); in the Northeast, over the same period, the increase was on the order of 416,000 ha (a total of 464,000 ha) (Figure 1.5).

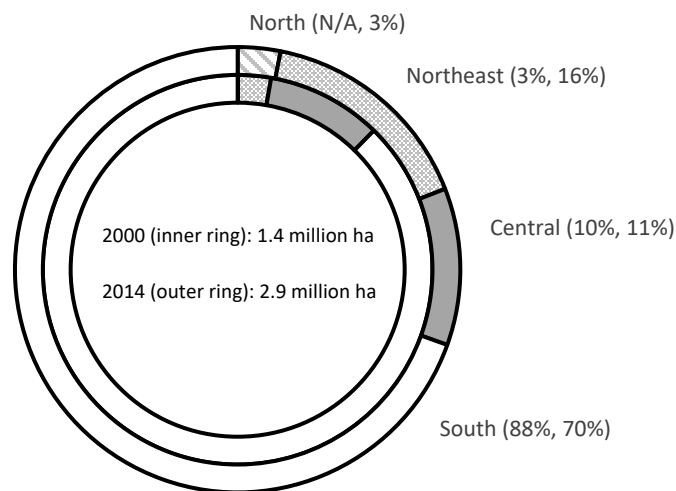


Figure 1.5 Harvestable tree stock by region (Data source: Office of Agricultural Economics)

In Chapter 6, I show that, in light of low prices in recent years, rubber produced outside of the South, yet still within Thailand and especially in the northeastern provinces, is perceived as both a threat to households' incomes as well as an intrusion into livelihoods. As I discuss further in this current chapter, these considerably nation-centered interpretations of rubber prices yield insights into the politics and production of scale, and thereby how spatial imaginaries are particularly prominent in leveraging claims for better prices—in spite, perhaps, of the ways in which rubber prices are decidedly determined through financial and commodity networks that transcend any single nation.

At the same time, we might consider some of the more tangible reasons why such national narratives could resonate with *chaosuan yang* and others in southern Thailand—in particular, how widely read newspapers convey information about rubber prices. Benedict Anderson (2006) notoriously connected constructions of national consciousness with the rise of 'print-capitalism', highlighting, in particular, the dominance of certain languages in print—while reading audiences may have continued to deploy an array of spoken languages in the everyday. The availability and widespread consumption of print newspapers throughout rural Thailand arguably speak to some of Anderson's observations, as newspapers' contents concerning an issue such as declining rubber prices, to some extent, appear to reify the contours that portray prices as negotiated outcomes within a national context.

While conducting research, I noticed that two Thai-language dailies in particular, *The Daily News* and the *Thai Rath*, which are read across Thailand, are not only in peoples' homes but are also often available in places such as restaurants, roadside curry stands, and evening tea stalls, whose customers take pages of the papers to read over meals and drinks.

Although I would not contend that the narratives employed in these print newspapers are solely responsible for seeding conceptions that low rubber prices are fundamentally a national issue—in tension with the considerably global contexts of rubber markets discussed above—the explanatory frames deployed in their pages nonetheless resonate with the information I gained through fieldwork by interviewing *chaosuan yang* and others. It is thus instructive to consider that the broad interpretation of rubber prices as fundamentally a national issue may, in part, be informed through the ways in which these are re-presented and perceived.

By the close of 2015, rubber prices had dropped considerably, and in January 2016, as I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 2, meetings and assemblies were convened periodically in several places throughout southern Thailand, bringing together networks of *chaosuan yang* and representatives from various government ministries. These networks could be considered as loose organizations with leaders (often, but not always, *chaosuan yang* themselves) who would attend meetings to voice the concerns, and advocate on behalf, of *chaosuan yang* associated with the particular group.

In December 2015 the monthly average price for grade 3 unsmoked rubber sheets was 36.4 baht/kg. By comparison, the December average in 2014 was 43 baht/kg, and 71.1 baht/kg. the year before. The price drops had tragically led some *chaosuan yang* to take their own lives after low prices plunged them into debt (e.g., *Daily News*, January 12, 2016, p. 9). While print newspapers documented such stories of the tolls exacted on communities of *chaosuan yang* and their families, whose beginnings often appeared on the front page and would continue later in the papers, articles also attended to laying out the reasons why prices were falling. One piece, in the *Thai Rath* (December 15, 2015, p. 8) summarizes that,

as crude oil prices continue to fall due to such factors as OPEC not withholding production and oil produced from shale adding to global stocks, there will “be ‘good news’ for people driving cars and the industrial sector, but ‘bad news’ for Thai farmers, especially *chaosuan yang*.” Two weeks later, just before the new year, the *Daily News* published a retrospective piece (December 31, 2015, p. 26) on the performance of Thailand’s agricultural sector in 2015. Among commentary on rubber is that on other agricultural products such as rice, fisheries, and processed meat, with notes on the agricultural sector’s rather weak performance compared with overall GDP. Rice and rubber are noted to have confronted supply-related impacts on prices, an outcome of slowing global economic growth since 2014—these two “have to face price-related challenges in line with world market conditions.”

Notwithstanding the availability of these accessible explanations as to the global contexts behind why rubber prices had fallen to the levels observed daily by *chaosuan yang*, articles also devote considerable attention to the set of contests within Thailand surrounding low prices, suggesting that the prices themselves could be negotiated, particularly among government agencies and politicians. For instance, Thawon Senniam, a multi-term Member of Parliament from Songkhla Province and one of the key leaders in the demonstrations against Yingluck Shinawatra’s administration Bangkok from the end of 2013 until the coup d’état in May 2014, criticized the administrative organization, the Rubber Authority of Thailand, for not having begun to address the low rubber prices; furthermore, he called on the Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives to help (*Thai Rath*, January 6, 2016, p. 11). On the same page, the leader of one network, The Federated Society of Thai *Chaosuan yang*, is reported as saying that rubber prices are the lowest they have

been in one-hundred years, “since the time rubber was first planted in Thailand.” He called on the government to carry out several measures, including finding ways to stop the rubber prices from sliding further; having industrial producers in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) convene to discuss, as farmers in all countries were facing difficulties; urgently finish paying out the 1,500 baht per *rai* subsidy to farmers; and use 300,000 metric tons of rubber in the national stocks as inputs for road construction. The 1,500 baht per-*rai* subsidy payment was passed during a Prime Minister Cabinet meeting in mid-December 2015, authorizing a budget of 13.1 million baht to be paid out to *chaosuan yang* for each *rai* (0.16 ha) of land planted to rubber up to 15 *rai* and, if applicable, to be divided between owners and hired tappers following a 60%:40% split (*Daily News*, December 25, 2105, p. 22).

To provide a sense of how lengthy, in-depth articles about the issues concerning low rubber prices are re-presented in newspapers, I have replicated an article from the *Daily News* as Figure 1.6 below, which I have translated from the Thai while attempting to mimic the formatting of the original article. While details on organizations and people mentioned in the article are too numerous to warrant a close examination of each, I have highlighted certain sections, by placing boxes around the text to emphasize the ways in which low rubber prices are at once presented as having roots in global markets, yet are also portrayed as subject to negotiations and jostling through policies and actions internal to Thailand itself.

As in other pieces on low rubber prices, the article in Figure 1.6 makes frequent references to low prices as a ‘problem’ (“*panha*”), which in turn would imply that there are ways of ‘solving’ it. Indeed, boxes 5, 6, and 7 contain the text which I have translated as

“remedy” (in Thai, “*kae khai*”). Furthermore, ‘the government’ is identified using this broad terminology (“*ratthaban*”) as opposed to singling out specific individuals or agencies. Summarizing from the progression of boxed text, readers become aware of a government-led program to purchase natural rubber, with the intended effect of lifting rubber prices (box 1); Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha emphasizing market dynamics behind rubber prices that are beyond his/Thailand’s control (boxes 2 and 4); purchase prices being set to provide baseline measures of assistance to *chaosuan yang* (box 3); organizations of *chaosuan yang* firmly placing calls on the government for price supports (boxes 5 and 6); a former member of parliament acting as an interlocutor between *chaosuan yang* in the South and the central government in Bangkok (box 7); and beliefs that the government is ultimately responsible for ensuring the fair and equitable operations of rubber markets (box 8). The global dynamics of rubber price determination are clearly present in the discussion, yet a substantial amount of the article also depicts what ought to come across to readers as a bargaining process with the central government. Note that the columns in Figure 1.6 should be read like an actual newspaper: column 1 begins on page 32 and ends on page 35, and likewise for columns 2 and 3.

HUNDRED THOUSAND METRIC TON RUBBER PURCHASE

Prices Higher than the Market, Rubber Processing Factories Soon to Open

The Cabinet taps on measures to assist *chaosuan yang* by ordering 8 ministries to purchase 1 hundred thousand metric tons directly from farmers to supply processing factories ♦ *Continued on page 14*

Rubber purchase □

Continued from page 1

without first passing through the market. It is reported that the purchase price will be higher than the market price, but it will not distort the market mechanisms. Jan. 12th D-Day, going down for the first site visits in Trang. Moreover, preparations are underway to open rubber processing factories in 79 locations across the country this year. There has also been a resolution to appoint “General Chatchaloem” to sit on the board of representatives of the RAoT. The PM urges a reduction in the production of rubber—plant other crops instead. Transport and Communications plans to use immediately, increasing latex usage to 20,687 metric tons to construct and repair 37.1 million square meters of roads across the country. Southern farmers’ networks of *chaosuan yang* propose 3 ways to fix the rubber problem. Belief that the government can remedy within 30 days. In Krabi, stressing a 60 baht per kg. guarantee within 15 days. If not, then threats to up the level of mobilization.

○ Appointing “Chatchaloem” as RAoT Rep.

On 12. Jan. at the Prime Minister’s office, Maj. Gen. Sansoen Kaeokammuet, spokesman

At this time, it is about relieving the problem in the 3 months before the period of pausing to tap. As such, the price at which the government and NCPO will purchase will be higher than the rubber sheet market price and must not interfere with the market mechanisms. Prayut said that he is creating clarity, and is wondering why he is being tested. The plummeting oil price is adversely impacting the rubber price. In the long term the government will increase by 50% the use of the 4.7 million metric tons that are in warehouses across the country. (4) Currently, when the oil price falls he cannot force the rubber price up, and therefore the remedy needs to occur through increasing the use of rubber in the country. Moreover, the products produced need to meet standards from the Ministry of Industry before being marketed.

○ Irritated that reporters asking for details

While giving an interview today, the Prime Minister showed irritation with a news reporter asking about the details of measures to remedy the rubber price problem. After reporting the news, the Prime Minister called on the reporter and said, “I’m sorry junior,” before the reporter was about to ask that the PM explain, because the PM speaks

Farmers of the 16 Southern Provinces; Mr. Bunsong Napthong of the Association of the Union of Thai *Chaosuan yang*; and groups of representatives from southern regional networks of *chaosuan yang* together reported recommendations during the meeting of networks of networks of *chaosuan yang* farmers, consisting of 3 issues:

(5) 1. They support the government’s method of remedying the rubber price. 2. Addressing the low rubber prices according to Issue 1 should include the participation of farmers to the furthest extent possible, by having farmers’ networks and networks of *chaosuan yang* farmers’ institutions. And 3. Give the government 30 days to push up the rubber price to the 60-baht target. These proposals will be presented to the government.

Furthermore, summaries from *chaosuan yang* networks will be presented on the stage of the National Farmers Federation this Jan. 13th. Representatives from networks will submit proposals to the Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives. In the event of inaction from the government after 30 days have passed, the groups will mobilize further. However, they still hope that the state will definitely be

for the Prime Minister's office, reported after the Prime Minister's Cabinet meeting that during the meeting the Cabinet passed a resolution to appoint the following 8 people to positions of chairperson and a panel of experts to the Rubber Authority of Thailand (RAoT) Committee. 1. Gen. Chatchaloem as chairman; 2. Mr. Prasit Mitsen, *chaosuan yang* representative; 3. Mr. Sangwoen Thuathoi, *chaosuan yang* representative; 4. Mr. Seni Chitkasem, *chaosuan yang* representative; 5. Mr. Thiraphong Tantiphetrathon, representative from the Rubber Farming Institute; 6. Mr. Sai Inkhom, representative from the Rubber Farming Institute; 7. Mr. Thanawon Phonwichai, rubber business executive with marketing expertise; and 8. Mr. Phichai Thinsantisuk, representative from the rubber business community who has expertise in industrial production. At this time the Board roster has been filled.

○ **Direct purchase of 1 hundred thousand metric tons**

From the survey of natural rubber use needs among 8 ministries, consisting of the Ministry of Transport and Communications, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Industry, the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Maj. Gen. Sansoen further said that there are altogether about 1 hundred thousand metric tons needed. (1) Purchases of natural rubber will be made from farmers directly and brought into factory production. The budget for use in purchasing will mainly come from the budgets of the ministries using natural rubber. If insufficient, there is the possibility of using some of the central emergency budget. While 8 hundred thousand metric

quickly and the younger ones might not catch what he says. The PM then said, "You have to adjust yourself a little, adjust to catch up with what I'm saying. If not, those above won't get it either."

○ **In favor of using latex for road construction**

Mr. Akhom Toemphithayaphaisit, Minister of Transport and Communications, reported that in the Cabinet meeting he was in favor of the plan to use the Ministry of Transport and Communications' budget to use latex for road construction and repair across the country in '16. This is according to the government's policy of having 8 agencies increase their use of natural rubber in order to remedy the low rubber price problem. The Ministry of Transport and Communications will have the highest use of latex, around 20,687 metric tons with finances of 10,223 million baht. These figures can be divided into 19,301 metric tons and finances of 9,528 million baht from the routine plan, and additional budgeting to increase natural rubber usage by 1,386 metric tons with finances of 695 million baht.

"In the year '16 rubber will be used to repair a total of 37.1 million square meters across the country of main roads and smaller routes under the Highway Department as well as the Department of Rural Roads. Currently, road construction inputs include about 12.5% latex. However, we will research the positives and negatives of increasing latex use in light of safety considerations and cost effectiveness. At this time, using natural rubber is twice as expensive as asphalt; however, its durability would rise from 7 to 9 years," the Transport and Communications Minister said.

○ **12. Jan. visits to the purchase sites**

Mr. Phisak Chitwiriyawasin, head of the Department of Rural Roads, said that using natural rubber

able to return happiness to the people.

○ **Emphasis on guaranteeing a price at 60 per kg.**

At 12.00 hours at the Krabi City Hall, Mr. Chayokhom Suwanwattana, (6) leader of palm farmers and *chaosuan yang* of Krabi province, along with about 10 *chaosuan yang* representatives from the Krabi City District and Nuea Khlong District in Krabi submitted a proposal through the governor of Krabi, calling for the government to remedy the low rubber prices. Mr. Chayokhom said that right now the latex price is only 22 baht, the rubber cuttings price 12 baht. As such, it is necessary to come out and call on the government to provide assistance according to the following measures:

1. Guarantee the rubber price at 60 baht per kilogram within 15 days, because currently the rubber price is below cost.
2. Use rubber for road construction by having the Ministry of Transport and Communications as well as Provincial Administration Organizations across the country carry this out immediately.
3. Support the private sector to establish factories producing car tires and other rubber products, with the government supporting capital costs.
4. Urgently certify the standards of natural rubber products produced through farmers' groups by having researchers examine the products and certify that they meet industrial production standards. As such, they would like the Prime Minister to address the problem as quickly as possible.

○ **"Thawon" opens forum to discuss with leaders**

At 10.00 hours today, at the house of former Democrat MP (7) Thawon Senniam, on the Inner Airport Road in Khuan Lang Sub-district, Hat Yai District, Songkhla

tons of natural rubber will be produced in the 3 months from now, before the pause in tapping, the purchase of 1 hundred thousand metric tons by the government will be an immediate purchase. It will be a lump purchase, a method that can be considered as a way of driving the market. This will cause the price in the market to increase.

○ **Opening a rubber processing factory**

Maj. Gen. Sansoen further reported that, as for the Ministry of Industry, it is expected that in 2016 it will be able to open 79 of the planned factories to receive rubber products and manufacture commodities. As for factories that are already up and running, these have been asked to cooperate by purchasing and increasing stocks.

(2) Aside from this, the Prime Minister has reiterated that the market demand is lower than production, and as such he is asking that *chaosuan yang* reduce production and switch to substituting rubber with other types of crops. The payment of 1,500 baht per *rai* for people without land titles will be addressed within this Jan., with village funds attending to it.

○ **Product purchase delivery—not passing through the market**

Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha, Prime Minister and head of the NCPO, reported as chair of the Cabinet meeting on remedying the low rubber price problem that, at this time, they have discussed the production and purchase of finished products, using rubber sheets as a foundation, a method which is better than raising the price without having a clear target. As in the past, doing this would leave the rubber sitting in warehouses and spoiling. Concerning the government's and NCPO's purchases, the rubber will be brought into production without

for road construction, or para asphaltic, began in '12—for instance on Rachapruak Road. However, because of the higher costs usage is not widespread. For the most part it is used in coating road surfaces in the form of para slurry seal. Moreover, it is used to fix jagged edges on roads or uneven wheel ruts in roads.

Police Maj. Gen. Kraibun Suatsong, Chairman of the Public Warehouse Organization (PWO) Board, said that on Jan. 13th he will discuss rubber usage within the agencies concerned, following the Prime Minister's order, to determine the methods of working with the order, which assigns responsibility to the PWO to purchase 1 hundred thousand metric tons from farmers. Finances and sources need to be evaluated and executed in line with the Cabinet's resolution. It is expected that this will become clear and can be carried out immediately.

“On Jan. 12th I went down to discuss the methods of carrying out the program with farmers in Trang Province. The farmers were satisfied because the guidelines assigned to the PWO entail the purchase of rubber according to the amount and price set by the Cabinet resolution. After consulting with the agencies concerned, the purchases will be able to be carried out immediately.”

○ **“Big Pom” maintains that leaders will not be arrested**

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Gen. Prawit Wongsuwan was interviewed after the Prime Minister's Cabinet meeting, and said that the Cabinet had submitted a list of names for the RAoT Committee, following recommendations from the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. Concerning rubber price relief, at this time the Cabinet has authorized the purchase of rubber directly from farmers. Officials will visit each site in order to come to an agreement with farmers on what the price will be per kilogram. The NCPO may

Province, a forum was opened inviting *chaosuan yang* leaders from Songkhla Province to participate in a meeting to discuss methods of remedying the low natural rubber price problem. The purpose was to collect information to send to the government so that it can urgently find methods to resolve the issue. Mr Thawon said that today he will travel to visit latex purchasing sites in Village 2, Khokmuang Sub-district, Khlong Hoi Khong District in Songkhla Province. From there he will go see the purchase of rubber at the Central Rubber Market in Kho Hong Sub-district, Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province, before taking information from all sides to summarize the directions to present to the government, so that it can find ways of helping out *chaosuan yang* brothers and sisters as quickly as possible.

○ **Calling on the Prime Minister to use the power of M.44**

At 13.00 hours in front of the Songkhla City Hall, roughly 300 *chaosuan yang* assembled in order to submit proposals through the governor of Songkhla Province, Mr. Songphon Sawattam, to the government for relief from low natural rubber prices. There were about 50 volunteer military police officers to ensure safety. Along with representatives from Prince of Songkhla University (PSU); representatives from the Southern Region Industrial Estate (Chalung); Mr. Sophon, the governor; Mr. Anumat Amat; National Legislative Assemblyman Mr. Suraphon Charuphong, inspector of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and associated state sectors, the governor invited the *chaosuan yang* farmers who had assembled to discuss both methods

first passing through the market, following research to meet standards. Nonetheless, SMEs will need to be involved in production.

(3) The rubber that all 8 ministries will purchase will be purchased at cost, in order to give farmers sufficient compensation and to support businesses going into production. As such, the rubber that all 8 ministries will purchase will have a price slightly higher than the market price; it's a price that will be sufficient for farmers.

This does not involve a withdrawal of rubber from the stock, meaning the government will not collect taxes on the rubber, but will rather have production go ahead first. After products are sold, debts can be repaid in order to establish a cycling of funds.

○ **Aiming to pull rubber in the stock into use**

Gen. Prayut said that if this method is successful, then there will be an increase in demand to use rubber in production, and will have the possible effect of taking rubber out of the stock for use. In any case, concerning the purchase of about 1 hundred thousand metric tons, the government and the NCPO will have to monitor the budget as well as the production capacity.

also provide assistance in carrying this out by cooperating with local cooperatives or the Ministry of Interior, including the Ministry of Finance. It likely will not exceed 1 – 2 hundred thousand metric tons, and we believe that the situation concerning people assembling will improve.

When asked about the news of *chaosuan yang* demonstration leaders in the southern region being detained for attitude adjustment, Gen. Prawit said that this has not happened. He is personally pleased that citizens now have an increased understanding of the Public Assembly Act. Whether in Hat Yai District, Songkhla Province or in Trang Province, leaders have asked for permission before assembling. Like this, we can all talk together.

○ **Mob summarizes 3 recommendations to the government**

At 15.30 hours, journalists reported from the Rubber Authority of Thailand, Trang Office (Trang Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund) that Mr. Prathop Suksanan of the Southern Regional Network of *Chaosuan yang* Farmers; Mr. Sunthon Rakrong, ally of the *Chaosuan yang* Rescuers and the Association of the *Chaosuan yang*

of addressing the rubber price problem over the long term as well as the processing of rubber into products.

News reports have notified that Mr. Chaiyawut Phongphaeo, (8) Chairman of the Songkhla Province Farmers Federation, submitted proposals to Prime Minister Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha calling on him to invoke the powers of M.44 to urgently examine mechanisms in the rubber markets. He suspects that some groups have intervened and distorted rubber market mechanisms, causing detriment to farmers. If groups or individuals are found to have been doing this, they should be considered as economic criminals and firmly prosecuted.

Figure 1.6 An article from the widely read newspaper, *The Daily News*, on government-run purchase agreements and price relief planning in the beginning of January 2016. Text translated from Thai into English by the author. The original, Thai-language version can be found in Appendix B. (Source: This newspaper article, which appeared in print version on January 13, 2016, is available in news archives collected by the Rubber Authority of Thailand:

rubber.co.th/more_news.php?offset=0&cid=10&filename=index)

The above-market purchase program mentioned throughout this article had its start in late January 2016, but it faced a lackluster reception owing to a host of logistical issues, among them a low number of purchase sites and sites not ready to accept sales from

chaosuan yang who had registered with the program (e.g. *Daily News*, January 26, 2016, p. 1, 12). To reiterate, I do not hold that print newspaper articles such as that in Figure 1.6 can be deemed wholly responsible for fomenting the region-centered narratives about rubber that are present in the discussions of following chapters. Nor do I hold that these narratives emerge devoid of broad acknowledgement and understanding that rubber prices, as perceived in Thailand, derive from processes that manifest well beyond the borders of the nation itself. Instead, I maintain that both types of discourse demonstrate the role of interpretation of rubber prices, signalling politically significant moments that shape both how governance over production and exchange is construed and enacted as well as the domains that such governance reaches: clearly, Thawon's meeting with his Songkhla Province constituents and critiquing methods currently deployed by the ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—which, notably, he along with other southern politicians were instrumental in bringing to power in 2014—to address low rubber prices implies that tensions do not stop with concerns solely relating to commodity production, but rather engage squarely with questions of administration and political governance. To understand these connections, among economic and political domains, I hold that it is instructive to consider the politics of scale, and particularly the intersections shared with another spatial register, the region.

1.2 A concern for economic geographers

The previous section brings to light some of the decidedly global features of rubber's production and trade, at the same time as it suggests that the nation state figures prominently into how *chaosuan yang* perceive the mechanisms underlying rubber prices. In light of these observations, in this section my aims are to qualify why a case study on rubber in southern Thailand speaks to key debates in economic geography, specifically those relating to ongoing scholarship on global production networks (GPNs). Given points raised above, about the many tiers involved in rubber markets and the host of determinants behind rubber prices, I will elaborate on how the experiences of *chaosuan yang* can be productively drawn into a conversation with, yet not be completely reduced to, the GPNs into which rubber itself is articulated.

As already alluded to, subsequent chapters will show how recent tensions over rubber prices speak not only to the role of the state in coordinating the accumulation of value through rubber, but also reveal fundamental questions that concern notions of administrative obligations and responsibilities— notions, as I will develop, that rely on resonant senses of regional belonging and interpretations on the geographies of rubber cultivation within Thailand. Yet, the 'backdrop' to these moments of tension and negotiation remains the incidence, experienced transnationally, of falling prices. Thus, as an intervention into scholarship in economic geography, my engagement with literature in the following two sections, as well as empirical accounts in chapters to follow, aim at once to reveal the promises of continuing to draw from the analytical insights that GPN perspectives enable, while also recognizing their limitations. Through such critical

engagement, I am able to trace both the grounded political and economic consequences that unfold in the wake of conditions worked out on the stages of global capital. This is an effort which I hold to be productive toward deepening geographic insights into studying the commodity relations such as those I consider here.

1.2.1 Economic geography, broadly

“Economic geography”, write Barnes and Christophers (2018, 39), “is about the implication of geography in economic processes.” Notwithstanding the commonsense and straightforwardness of such a statement, Barnes and Christophers additionally attend to the difficulties in precisely defining what is/should be subsumed under the term, economic. As they discuss, such questions have certainly occupied the scholarship of a number of geographers contributing broadly to cultural turns in economic geography (e.g. Thrift and Olds 1996, Amin and Thrift 2000; on alternative economies and work to decenter capitalism, see Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2006b). Furthermore, scholars have increasingly been reluctant to put boundaries around the subfield, economic geography, itself (e.g., Barnes 2009, Barnes and Christophers 2018).

Barnes (2009, 180) comments that as a result of the cultural turn, “[r]ather than treating the economy as ‘out there’, as a single inviolable object, it had to be conceived as a cultural product, fragile, performed and capable of realization in a variety of forms.” Barnes and Christophers (2018) understandably gravitate toward open-ended interpretations, and they caution that placing boundaries on ‘the economic’ “is not only arbitrary but often severs activities that in practice are inextricably linked.” (2018, 30) As discussed,

producing rubber is clearly embedded within the fabric of globalized financial transactions, yet it is also perceived by many who harvest latex to consist of a set of relationships tempered through Thai-state policymaking. Additionally, rubber figures into episodes of national political contestation in Thailand. Given these considerations, I would concur with Barnes and Christophers (and many other cultural economic geographers) that such production should not be construed as 'economic' in the narrowest sense of that term.

While scholarship in economic geography includes substantial methodological variety, ranging from Marxian perspectives, studying the emergence of post-Fordist regional industrial enclaves, understanding how gender and other forms of difference configure processes of accumulation and value production, among others (Sheppard et al. 2012), the areas of study collectively reflect a marked distinction from what Sheppard et al. (2012, 3) refer to as "geographical economics", or methods within mainstream neoclassical economics that integrate geography insofar as it is exogenous and external. Beyond remarking on these differences, Sheppard et al. additionally reflect that—notwithstanding economic geography's own diversity of approaches—certain recurring themes continue to cut through this scholarship—i.e. accumulation, governance, and identity.

Concerns of governance, especially, have been critical in dispelling notions of markets and economic activity as unmanaged and self-governing (Sheppard et al. 2012), as well as explaining how these processes of coordination can thus be seen as both a central theme and reflective of economic geography's own methodological variation. Regions, in particular, have long been prominent in this line of research; however, conceptualizing the relationships between regions and economic growth has not been monolithic (e.g., Barnes 2009). In the 1990s, literature in economic geography falling broadly under the heading of

'new regionalism' sought to explain the economic dynamism of particular enclaves, e.g. Silicon Valley in California, and thus brought attention to the resurgence of regions—and the decline of the prominence of the nation state in orchestrating economic activities (e.g., Scott 1998). Storper's *The Regional World: Territorial Development in a Global Economy* (1997) critiques approaches at framing economic activity in terms (solely) of transactions costs and emphasizes how economic agglomerations occur importantly through unquantifiable relations among firms and people, conceptualizing regional economies thereby in terms of "*stocks of relational assets.*" (1997, 28, original emphasis) Institutional environments, such as conventions, and the prominence of interpersonal and inter-firm relationships are given due attention in these discussions. Moreover, Storper's work critically challenges conceptions of globalized economic activity as detached from place. He writes,

"the image of the global economy as a sort of delocalized "space of flows" of human, physical, and financial capital controlled from major corporate headquarters manifestly fails to grasp the nature of the new competition. It fails to grasp the complex ties among these global agents ... and the territorialized relations and conventions upon which they draw" (1997, 218).

Acknowledging how economic activities are territorially embedded is essential, yielding insights into the endogenous potentials of regional growth and development (Coe et al. 2004), and I will return below to discussing why a re/consideration of regions works well for grappling with questions that concern governance in the experiences of *chaosuan*

yang participating in the rubber economies of southern Thailand. However, these regional experiences are not entirely consistent with the new regionalist growth models noted here. Critiques of new regionalist work have been relevant toward shedding light on broader debates in human geography as well as encouraging an expanded consideration of the range of actors, as well as the spaces, involved in coordinating economic activity. Jones' piece "The Local in the Global" (2011), for instance, provides a particularly salient summary of the main points of contention (also see works such as Lovering 1999; Coe and Hess 2012) as well as where scholars have steered methodological and conceptual apparatus since the emergence of a new regionalist canon. In particular, Jones identifies that new regionalist accounts were often found to lack adequate acknowledgement of roles played by the nation state, and further that studying economic processes called for more explicit engagement with relational and networked geographies, concerning the latter citing scholars such as Doreen Massey and Ash Amin. Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), for instance, emphasizes that place "is not [given through] some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus." (1994, 154)

1.2.2 The GPN: applications and complications

Explicitly taking account both of a wider range of actors (e.g., the nation state) as well as the ways in which relations stretch across space configures a substantial amount of recent work in economic geography that seeks to cultivate a more encompassing understanding of production through the analytical devices of the global production

network, or GPN (e.g., Coe et al. 2004, Henderson et al. 2002, see also articles in the *Review of International Political Economy's* issue, "Global Value Chains and Global Production Networks in the Changing International Political Economy" (2014)). Simply defined, a GPN can be considered as "an organizational arrangement, comprising interconnected economic and non-economic actors, coordinated by a global lead firm, and producing goods or services across multiple geographical locations for worldwide markets." (Coe and Yeung 2015, 1-2) In addition, the framework gives analytical priority to the categories of value, power, and embeddedness to understand these processes (Henderson et al. 2002). While some work (e.g., that from Barrientos (2014), Fold (2014), and Yeung and Coe (2015)) highlights substantial overlaps between GPNs and earlier iterations of commodity analysis, e.g. that produced in the early 1990s within economic sociology by scholars such as Gary Gereffi, among others, on global commodity chains and global value chains, GCC and GVC, respectively, the GPN framework arguably reflects an important set of conceptual and analytical developments (e.g. Coe and Yeung 2015) and would thus be better suited to studying the varied forms of coordination over relationships transpiring in circuits of production and exchange of a commodity like rubber. This is so especially in acknowledgment of the ways in which the livelihoods of *chaosuan yang* are intertwined with globalized circuits of production and exchange, as outlined in Section 1.1 above, while the Thai state nonetheless remains critically implicated.

To note, though, the GPN framework did develop in conversation with work on global commodity chains: in their seminal piece, "Global production networks and the analysis of economic development", Henderson et al (2002, 440) summarize that Gereffi's (1995) work "was an explicit attempt to operationalize some of the world-systems

categories”; moreover, it moved beyond the tradition of static core, periphery, and semi-periphery, “and, as such, was better able to grasp the reality of the ‘new’ forms of industrial organization that had become the objects of scholarly attention during the 1980s and 1990s.” However, Henderson et al. comment on both the ways in which the term ‘production’ could better capture “the *social processes*” as opposed to ‘commodities’ (444, original emphasis), as well as the problematic assumptions of linearity reflected in views of production in terms of chains (see also Barrientos (2014) and Fold (2014)). For Coe and Yeung (2015) GPN analyses carry the advantage (compared to frameworks invoking chain metaphors) of paying closer attention to various institutional factors, networks, and changing governance roles. In addition, they remark that “GPN analysis is innately multi-scalar, and considers the interactions and mutual constitution of all spatial scales from the local to the global.” (2015, 14)

Contemporary applications of GPN frameworks are widespread. For instance, in their consideration of a 2013 labor crisis in South African fruit production, Alford et al. (2017) emphasize a multi-scalar approach to analyzing labor agency in a global production network—connecting farm work in South Africa with European supermarkets—giving attention to strategies employed that would reverberate locally, nationally, and globally. The authors conclude that “community-based action was scaled up, in conjunction with collective strategies by trade unions and NGOs, to challenge the national regulatory process and reset wage levels.” (2017, 741) By situating this study within the analytical framework of production networks, they thus draw out the significance of actors’ embeddedness, for instance within particular institutional environments.

However, for all the merits held to obtain over prior commodity and value chains analyses, applications of the GPN framework are nonetheless careful to identify limitations in the range of analytical insights that emerge, for instance as a consequence of GPNs' often economistic and firm-centric emphases (e.g. Alford and Phillips 2018, Kelly 2013, Wood and Roberts 2011). Kelly's (2013) work on industrial growth in Cavite Province, in the Philippines, for instance, seeks to reveal the processes that are not directly captured by the GPN's focus on industrial siting. Thus,

“[w]hile the GPN framework is adept at explaining why certain economic activities are in certain places, how they are embedded in those places, what their implications are for employment, value-generation, wealth, etc., and how they are connected to other places, it is less oriented towards engaging with those places themselves as the locus of analysis.” (2013, 84)

For Kelly, then, the GPN presents an insightful device to an extent, but other socio-spatial phenomena remain peripheral to its analytical purview, in this case landscape changes as a consequence of speculation as well as the continued importance of overseas remittances—both of which are paramount to studying development trajectories. In conversation with Massey's work, Kelly highlights an important spatial shortcoming of the GPN: questions of place emerge insofar as they matter to the study of the production network itself, rather than departing, as Massey (e.g. 1994) does, from the point of investigating place and the ways in which place is both formed and formative, in other words constituted through, and constitutive of, much wider sets of relations.

Alford and Phillips (2018) probe the GPN approach's firm centrism, though their point of intervention is more directly concerned with the question of how governance has been conceptualized and deployed in the literature, namely with the ways in which emphasis has mostly been placed on lead firms in production networks, at the expense of attention paid to state and political relations. For the authors, this focus appears to reflect something of a retreat to earlier modes of commodity analyses, as those developing and engaging with the GPN framework actually sought to make more room for the state in investigating governance relations. Thus, Alford and Phillips look to inquire directly into state forms of governance, isolating three strands in particular—facilitative, regulatory, and distributive—and tracing the conflicts among them as they relate to labor crises in the South African fruit sector. For instance, they identify how, despite efforts at increasing forms of regulatory governance, measures to liberalize the fruit industry led to higher levels of temporary, versus permanent, employment, resulting in significant labor disputes. Alford and Phillips do not replace concerns of private, firm-led governance with those of the state, suggesting instead that their study fits into the broader conversation on public-private relationships in the coordination of economic production. However, they conclude that production's focus on profit accumulation necessarily yields a structural conflict concerning state governance, as underwriter both of the market and conditions facing labor, and as such they endorse emphasizing state and political forms of governance—rather than what they perceive to be the continued tendency of concentrating on firms.

The above critiques are instructive, and, when confronted with choices on which conceptual tools I could employ to help readers interpret the specific empirical studies under consideration in this dissertation, it is reasonable to question whether or not an

appeal to GPN frameworks—to any degree—would offer certain promises over dispensing with the approach entirely and settling on an alternative set of perspectives. These types of questions seem to have come to the fore in recent scholarship, and Phelps et al.'s “An invitation to the dark side of economic geography” (2018) critically, yet concisely, grapples with the concern of whether a number of prominent approaches in contemporary economic geography, including GPNs as well as studies such as those on enclaves, have tended to be overly wrapped up in ‘bright-side’ stories, by concentrating on successful cases of economic coordination and firm upgrading, and overlooking key sites of uneven development.

While the following two sections of this chapter will direct attention, respectively, to scales and regions (on both conceptual as well as empirical fronts) as a means of contextualizing the highly territorial narratives discussed in Chapters 3 through 6, I nonetheless hold that it remains critical to keep in mind the way in which the livelihoods and experiences of *chaosuan yang* are clearly influenced by the processes of the GPN of which they are a part—even if the framing of struggles and points of contention appear to fall away from the GPN's traditional analytical emphases. This decision on my part is informed both through the empirical realities discussed in the previous section as well as the recent scholarship of authors such as Vicol et al. (2018), in particular, who negotiate the uneasy tensions implicated through one's appeal to GPN perspectives for topics outside of manufacturing.

Taking a smallholder agricultural economy as the object of research, Vicol et al, (2018) write that with few exceptions, the GPN framework has remained rather underdeveloped with respect to agriculture in the Global South, and, in an effort to address

this gap, the authors complement the GPN framework with a livelihoods perspective as they consider the intersections between smallholder households' experiences in rural India and development outcomes. A key contention underlying this framing is that smallholder households should not be seen as synonymous with firms, and moreover these households' livelihood profiles are often quite diverse. As Vicol et al. summarize, the analytical insights that GPN studies developed have often maintained a focus on firms, and particularly lead firms in the network. Indeed, by their own admission, Coe et al. (2004, 474) contend, in a conceptual-cum-empirical illustration of the GPN framework, that "regional assets [e.g. technological endowments, labor force skills] can become an advantage for regional development *only if* they fit the strategic needs of global production networks." (original emphasis) Furthermore, writing on power, they note, "[t]he more a region is articulated into global production networks, the more likely it is able to reap the benefits of economies of scale and scope in these networks, but the less likely it is able to control its own fate." (Coe et al. 2004, 475) This perspective is telling, as it implies both the potential that a region benefits from economic gains at the same time as it lacks the internal mechanisms to guard against the uncertainties rendered through the GPN's own logics.

As for Vicol et al. (2018), the authors intend to challenge such a view that lead firms are dominant determinants. The sort of 'passivity' implied to spaces/actors enrolled into GPNs is a point they take up specifically: they see room for negotiation among smallholders especially, an argument that decidedly relies on not equating smallholder households with firms—as a more unproblematized application of GPN frameworks might have it. They consider the ways in which smallholder households within a potato contract-farming region of India engage with the processes wrapped up in a GPN, but whose overall

livelihood experiences are not fully explained by them. Thus, if the GPN framework were applied without any modifications or caveats, then this “would overstate the influence of contract farming on regional development trajectories” (2018, 14), missing out, for instance, on important dimensions such as the way that caste and class intersect with these trends—and thus what the implications toward regional development are due to the varying degrees of exposure that some groups have with the GPN.

Nevertheless, Vicol et al. do not contend that the GPN framework ought to be jettisoned entirely. Indeed, “smallholder household livelihood pathways are influenced by enrolment in GPNs” (2018, 11-12), a comment which, notwithstanding the fact that the empirical context of potato-farming in India does not align one-to-one with the experiences of *chaosuan yang* in southern Thailand, still opens the door to important questions broadly concerning ways of productively synthesizing plural conceptual approaches to grapple with the array of implications and consequences from a case such as low commodity prices. In essence, then, Vicol et al.’s work can orient us to acknowledging that the material intersections between transnational firms and concerns in rural southern Thailand could be traced through the analytical devices afforded by the GPN framework—after all, prices whose determinants are well outside of the influence of upstream farmers have fallen, prompting responses—yet a more expansive set of considerations is also warranted.

The points raised in this work—as well as that of Kelly (2013), Alford et al. (2017), and Alford and Phillips (2018) discussed above—are all well-taken, as they present cases of critical engagement with the scope of GPNs’ analytical coverage, while encouraging the consideration of productive meeting points with other branches of scholarship.

Understanding that the production network of rubber crucially establishes the conditions

from which clearly extra-economic, political concerns about rubber are negotiated in southern Thailand, as I will demonstrate further on, I contend that this stage-setting, so to speak, could be brought into dialog with other themes. Specifically, it will become clear that while peoples' actual shifting economic circumstances, and to a rather substantial extent those of southern Thailand more broadly, are informed through such motions of global capital, points of contention and struggle are negotiated within far more territorial domains. Thus, instead of attending to what smallholders are or are not (i.e., as Vicol et al. (2018) have done), I seek specifically to make an intervention in the discussion of spatial registers—i.e. scale and region—as they are used within GPN-inflected conversations. This, I hold, could help to make GPN theorizing and applications more robust in their geographical insights. Departing from (rather than being limited to) the *sine qua non* determinants of rubber prices alone, I will attend to the role of interpretation as it inflects the forms of negotiation and contestation over governance relationships within the smallholder rubber economy and beyond.

1.3 Geographical Approaches to Scales and Regions

To reiterate, scholarship on GPNs is instructive, given the deliberate focus on contexts beyond firms and the paths their goods trace from point of inception to end consumption. Moreover, refinement toward a “GPN 2.0” (Yeung and Coe 2015, Coe and Yeung 2015) is held to more directly attend to the relationships among networks and development.⁷ Despite the insights potentially enabled through GPN-centered analyses, I hold that bringing these frameworks directly to bear on the ways in which many *chaosuan yang* perceive the causes and consequences of low rubber prices in southern Thailand

should be complemented with more flexibility to engage with the concept of scale itself. In the case of Alford et al. (2017), for instance, the authors deploy scale as a frame through which to understand the positions and possibilities of particular actors in the network. Their use of scale—exploring the crucial issue, indeed, of workers’ agency in a time of increasingly precarious labor conditions—aligns with the proposals set out by Coe and Yeung (2015). These latter authors’ discussion of the territoriality of GPNs identifies actors as “operat[ing] at multiple scales—from the local and regional to the national and the global.” (2015, 68) A figure in their text, reproduced here as Figure 1.7, helps them illustrate the scalar mechanisms at work in GPNs.

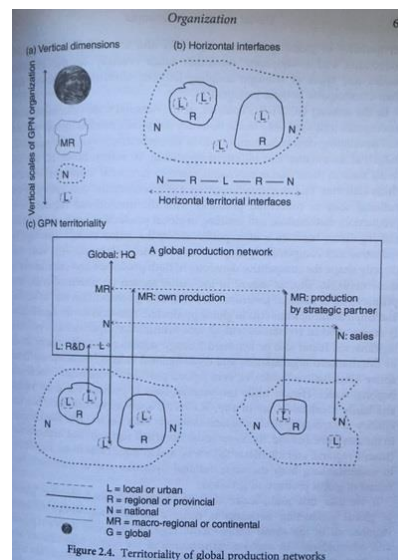


Figure 1.7 Explaining with scale. (Source: Coe and Yeung (2015, 69))

Scale, thus depicted, appears as an *a priori* organizing frame of economic processes. Yet, the perceptions of what rubber’s geographies in Thailand do to rubber prices (as will become clear), however at odds these may be with the realities of price determination, imply the

need for engaging with scale through even greater degrees of malleability: namely, inasmuch as rubber is a commodity enrolled into networks of production and exchange that extend far beyond Thailand's borders, how do we grapple with why and how national and regional scales become so dominant in the narratives attending to the economy surrounding rubber? Such reads at the very least imply the need to entertain interpretation. Clearly, acknowledging articulation into a GPN that enrolls tappers, lead firms such as large tire companies, and consumers alike is critical as an entry point to investigating the impacts wrought by low rubber prices. However, these economic circumstances ought to be examined in tandem with other, highly formative political contexts from which it becomes clear that the actions of firm behavior convey a crucial yet incomplete bearing on the political concerns surrounding rubber in southern Thailand.

In an effort to formulate a response through subsequent chapters to questions concerning rubber's territorial emphases in Thailand, the following two sub-sections address, respectively, the politics of scale and the study of sub-national regions in a post-relational spatial context. I do not contend that bringing both together creates a novel fusion, as, for instance, the title of Paasi's (2004) article, "Place and region: looking through the prism of scale", elicits consideration of similar meeting points. My intention here is to show how this intersection in particular can shed important light onto how we study multiscalar relations of production. These discussions, in turn, intend to frame ways of thinking about the politics of rubber in southern Thailand at a time both when market prices sank and substantial shifts in national government materialized.

1.3.1 The Problem/Politics of Scale

Since Marston et al.'s (2005, 419) provocative proposal that human geography abandon the concept of scale, finding in attempts to redefine it that "at the base of all these corrections and extensions ... [is] a foundational hierarchy" and arguing instead for flat ontologies, other scholars have challenged this stance and advocated maintaining scale in the geographer's toolkit. Collinge (2006, 249), for instance, discusses how approaches inspired by actor-network theory (ANT), in particular, at once problematize scale as a concept though do not jettison the word from the human geography vocabulary altogether. From the perspectives of ANT, Collinge summarizes, "[a] system of nested scales ... is performed through the practices that comprise actant-networks." Scholars such as Kaiser and Nikiforova (2008) likewise contribute to discussions pushing back against an abandonment of scale. They engage with Judith Butler's work on performativity, stating that "[s]cales do not exist as 'things out there' that stabilize political, economic, or cultural relations. Rather, scales are performed by sets of actors through the scalar stances they take within particular sociospatial contexts as they engage in the politics of everyday life." (2008, 541) They consider, for instance, how Estonia and Europe (the EU) have been brought into Narva, so to speak, a city in Estonia on the border with Russia, and in turn how these processes have also been contested within Narva. Thus, returning to Collinge (2006, 250), "whilst 'scale' would exit the language of human geography from one side as an explanans, it would return to this from the other side as an explanandum."

Chapters in the edited volume, *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale* (Herod and Wright 2002) contribute in key ways to conversations that critique scale ontology yet illustrate scale production as well as the discursive influences from scales. Mains' chapter

on policing the US-Mexican border in southern California, for example, demonstrates the presence of narrative in constructing both national identities and scales. She writes, “stories of the border are produced and negotiated through the mutual construction of scale and identity—through the Border Patrol agent and the nation—in order to navigate and narrate the borders of what “America” means.” (2002, 199-200) Thereby problematizing ‘scale’ as a concept, Mains nonetheless maintains its ability, discursively, to produce particular imaginaries of the national scale, i.e. “as a gendered trope” (2002, 204) lending itself toward a “nostalgia for a form of identity, nation and geography that is simplified.” (2002, 206) She thus brings attention to conceptualizations of each side of the border as separate and distinct. This, she explains, contrasts with the forms of hybridity that actually exist there.

While an acknowledgment of scale-as-construction clearly problematizes scalar ontology and thereby opens up pathways into considering the connections, for instance, between discourse and scale (e.g. Mains 2002) or performativity and scale (e.g. Kaiser and Nikiforova 2008), it is also instructive to explore working definitions of scale itself, broadly construed. Doing so enables a more focused reflection on the relationships between the region and scale production, which are crucial to consider in light of the types of critiques that surround the politics of rubber in southern Thailand.

Noting a range of different reasons offered to explain the collapse of the UK’s Barings Bank in 1995—from the actions of one errant trader to financial regulators in Singapore—Swyngedouw (1997, 139-140) writes how

“[t]hese “scalar narratives” provide the metaphors for the construction of “explanatory” discourses ... Scale, it seems to me, is both materially and metaphorically central in structuring the processes of the kind illustrated.”

While Swyngedouw attributes much of the bank’s end to outcomes from the preceding decades during which the Bretton Woods system was dismantled, his consideration of the ways in which scale is differentially invoked brings critical attention to scale as political (rather than “socially or politically neutral” (1997, 140)). Furthermore, in both this as well as a later piece (2004), Swyngedouw refers to scales as ‘arenas’, e.g. “scales become the arenas around which sociospatial power choreographies are enacted and performed.” (2004, 132) With conceptual similarity, Knox and Marston’s (2007, 7) introductory chapter, in an introductory human geography text, invites students

“to think of geographical scales as materializations of real-world processes ... a tangible partitioning of space within which different processes (economic, social, political, etc.) are played out.”

The attention to process is key, bringing emphasis to the instability of scalar identities and the ways in which these are necessarily contested—see also Leitner and Miller (2007), responding to Marston et al. (2005), that scale can be understood as “a diverse array of material and representational practices, shot through with power.” (2007, 119)

In the following chapters I attend to the coupled relationships between rubber and region, the latter of which I infer, appealing to the perspectives above, to fundamentally

inflect the constitution of scalar narratives. In Chapter 6, in particular, I consider how this coupling is invoked both for purposes of interpretation and is also deployed as a way of dealing with low rubber prices by qualifying claims for state-based interventions. In so doing, I take a cue from Kurtz (2003), whose work on questions pertaining to scale in environmental justice research develops the term, ‘scale frame.’ She defines this as

“the discursive practices that construct meaningful (and actionable) linkages between the scale at which a social problem is experienced and the scale(s) at which it could be politically addressed or resolved.” (2003, 894)

As she discusses in this work, a ‘frame’ (whose legacy in social movements research is extensive) involves the social construction of grievances which are thus “interpreted by social movement organizations as problems worthy of response.” (2003, 894) Kurtz views ‘scale frames’ as forms of collective action frames, with the distinguishing definitional feature that scale (as socially constructed) is central to both interpreting a problem and designating its solution. For my purposes, the concept of a ‘scale frame’ is especially insightful, as individualized difficulties contending with low rubber prices become laden with more inclusive (regional) meanings, and then are brought into conveying expectations of national resolution. Importantly, Kurtz envisions three “idioms” that shape scale frame development—regulatory (e.g. municipal, state, federal governments), inclusionary/exclusionary (e.g., “circumscrib[ing] the aggrieved population” (2003, 895)), and analytical (e.g., measured spaces that can be brought into quantifiable analysis). For instance, Kurtz remarks that the inclusionary idiom may be key in portraying a particular,

locally experienced environmental problem as affecting an entire parish (her study is in the US state of Louisiana; a parish is a larger administrative unit, similar to a county in other US states).

Although I work with the region and scales as involving a similar syntax, Paasi's *Progress in Human Geography* piece, "Place and region: looking through the prism of scale," (2004) notes that the two are not identical. Nevertheless, they are related as "two sides of the process of spatial differentiation." (2004, 540) Commenting on Massey's work from the mid-1990s on places (which could arguably be extended to region) considered to be open and negotiated, Paasi remarks that while Massey does not engage with scale directly, he finds that her discussions "imply that scaling is indeed part of their [places'] production." (2004, 540) Thus, as I interpret Paasi's observations, the two concepts should not be taken as interchangeable; however, a critical engagement with regions and regional identities necessarily involves analytically drawing scale into the same conversation. Considering that identity narratives are central in forging the argumentative arcs surrounding economic governance over rubber, the following sub-section will turn to exploring how regions, much like scales, certainly ought to be interpreted as constructions, but also as unstable and contested. As I later tie discussions on regional identity to those on the problems posed by low rubber prices in southern Thailand, I will revisit the work of scale and scale frames along with their idioms. Importantly, like scale, regions-as-constructs should also not be discounted, as critical scholarship attends to what regions become and, importantly, what they can do. Thus, a question before proceeding: With reference to Figure 1.7 above, what are the relationships between rubber and the regional scale (as an 'arena' of production and pricing), and how do situated histories of rubber cultivation and

contemporary political contexts shape the interpretation of these processes—and by extension construction of the region itself?

1.3.2 Boundary-making: Grappling with Regions

As mentioned briefly above, the new regionalist accounts in economic geography were challenged during the 1990s and early 2000s by scholarship in human geography that probed conceptions of place and region based on fixity and territorial closures. These were made through appeals to relationalities and topologies (e.g., Allen 2004; Amin 2002, 2004; Jessop et al. 2008; Massey 1994, 2006) and carried critical implications for how regions were to be worked with as such—if at all. As MacLeod and Jones (2007, 1179) note, under the relational turn, “emerging spatial configurations are no longer interpreted as territorial and bounded. Rather they are constituted through a kaleidoscopic web of networks.”

Geography’s interest in studying regions, though, has long been a central concern in the discipline, as the historical overviews of scholars such as Cresswell (2013), MacKinnon (2009), and Paasi (2009) attest: In the earlier part of the twentieth century, before the Second World War, geographers in France such as Vidal de la Blache and those in the United States such as Richard Hartshorne contributed to studying regional questions, offering, in the case of de la Blache, largely descriptive accounts of ‘ways of life’ (*genres de vie*) and, in the case of Hartshorne and others, scholarship seeking to understand and theorize distinction (i.e. chorology) among places (Cresswell 2013, MacKinnon 2009, Paasi 2009). As Paasi summarizes, such approaches were based on methods,

“to study the natural and human worlds according to their areal differentiation, stressing the ‘areal’ differences between regions as ‘spatial sections of reality’, and to map out ... the causal relationships obtaining within the distinctive assemblages of phenomena within (and in effect constituting) different regions.” (2009, 219)

Cresswell’s, MacKinnon’s, and Paasi’s accounts show that concern with regions waxed substantially in the postwar period, along with the rise of spatial science and the search for generalizable theorization, yet there remained interest among many geographers, which would resurface more boldly under the genesis of new regionalism in the 1970s and 1980s. However, these shifts, in turn, were successively challenged, and the relational perspectives would problematize thinking in terms of boundaries in a highly interconnected, globalized world.

Instructive examples of these can be found in the works of scholars such as Ash Amin. Amin (2004, 37) contends that bounded, territorial conceptions of place carry significant political implications (limitations), and thus, in proposing “a *heterotopic sense of place* that is no longer reducible to regional moorings or to a territorially defined public sphere,” he appeals to an idea of politics viewed in terms of propinquity and connectivity, in other words temporariness and struggle, “relational connectivity and transitivity.” (Amin 2004, 40, original emphasis). Similarly, in his 2002 piece, “Spatialities of globalization”, Amin proposes conceptualizing places not territorially, but rather topologically:

“I take [the relational readings of space, place, and time] to suggest a topological sense of space and place, a sense of geographies constituted through the folds,

undulations, and overlaps that natural and social practices normally assume, without any a priori assumption of geographies of relations nested in territorial or geometric space” (Amin 2002, 389).

In this piece Amin collapses distinctions among relational, topological, and non-scalar; the main point is that such a focus allows us to see places “as nodes in relational settings” (Amin 2002, 391). Precisely what one means by ‘topological’ (a metaphor borrowed from mathematics) is a subject which authors such as Martin and Secor (2014, 420) engage. “Topology, it seems, is everywhere”, the authors begin an article, and proceed to discuss how geographers’ widespread appeals to topology have often also resulted in some confusion. Summarizing from a review of literature invoking this concept, they note that topology conveys interpretation of figures (spaces) as manifolds, in which transformations are intrinsic and maintain certain features, such as vertices, intact—the example of a donut and a coffee cup with handle, both of which have a single hole, is often cited. Importantly, through this exposition Martin and Secor (2004, 429) trouble a frequently implied distinction between topology and topography, the latter “a term richly laden with connotations of land, landscape, place, and region. ... [T]opography is deployed [often in the literature] as the ‘other’ to topology”. With their own appeal to a topological frame of analysis, Martin and Secor summarize, “the point is to understand Euclidean space [topographical] as *one possible topology among others*” (Martin and Secor 2014, 430, original emphasis). As I infer from their discussion, conceptions and representations of boundedness and fixity need not be eschewed altogether; rather, their ontological status is certainly not fixed.

Importantly, considering the prominence of regional belonging and identity in my discussions below, other scholarship engages in less of an ontological endeavor, and instead explores more precisely regions' continued salience and grip for people. For example, Jones and MacLeod (2004, 448) point toward the ways in which "an avowedly territorial narrative and scalar ontology" has been mobilized to challenge particular processes of decentralization to regional development agencies in the UK that course in tension with other, territorially and culturally-historically defined spaces. In the early 2000s, Paasi (2002, 2003) similarly attended to the importance of regional studies in human geography, at once de-essentializing regions yet arguing "[r]egional identities are collective narratives on who and what 'we' and 'our region' are and how these differ from others" (Paasi 2002, 146). His 2003 work on regional identity observes that regional consciousness can develop through a range of sources, among which are dialects and languages, economic processes, marginalization, core-periphery relationships, and so on. Similarly, he writes, "[t]hese elements are used *contextually* in practices, rituals and discourses to construct narratives of more or less closed, imagined identities." (2003, 477)

Entries in the *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (2009), e.g. that of Tomaney on regionalism, identify how regions become important arenas for political and economic struggles. In these readings, then, regions and regional identities are not regarded as ontologically *a priori*, but instead must be understood and analyzed in terms of process and construction. Noting that while the concept of the 'region' has been problematized, Cresswell (2013, 72) summarizes concisely that "once brought into being, regions are seen as real things that have effects and consequences for those living in and outside of them."

The debate, it seems, has come full circle, and it is questionable whether there is an identifiable distinction between the topological/relational/non-scalar views and those underscoring regional identities/identifications, as authors such as Varró and Lagendijk (2015) contend: while Varró and Lagendijk parse recent discussions on the region into ‘radicals’ and ‘moderates’—the former espousing clearly relational views of regions; the latter contending that the radicals underestimate the importance of “actual regional differences/particularities, and how/why these differences/particularities exist” (2015, 29)—they are quick to problematize any sense of actual distinction. They note that both positions de-essentialize regions and summarize ways in which opposing standpoints emerge from different philosophical commitments. Importantly, Varró and Lagendijk (2015) write that the poststructuralist appeals of actor-network theory or discourse theory are not antithetical to place and fixity; rather, “no matter how solid (‘fixed’) and unquestioned power relations and structures seem to be, fundamentally (that is, ontologically) they are always unstable.” (2015, 33) Amin (2002) himself does not actually contest the use of spatial categories; in the concluding section of the paper he writes that the preceding argument “is not to deny the continuing existence and relevance of scalar politics and institutions.” (2002, 396) Moreover, Amin (2004) actually is a bit reticent to offer a final word on place and region; his relational approach to “Regions unbound: towards a new politics of place” is, at its core, a commentary on the political limitations that spring from overly territorialized appeals to place, which disregard or devalue connections with their outsides. In Varró and Lagendijk’s terminology, then, difference may be better understood as “misunderstanding.”

Varró and Lagendijk's work belongs to a special issue of *Regional Studies*, originally published in 2013 and then republished in 2015 as an edited volume, *Regional Worlds: Advancing the Geography of Regions*. The 2013 collection as well as an earlier special issue of *Regional Studies* in 2007 both intend to move this discussion forward through more integrative approaches. In the 2007 issue, for instance, Pike's introduction proposes, "rather than constructing unhelpful binaries, thinking of relational and territorial approaches as complementary might prove constructive even if challenging to undertake given the potentially very different questions and forms of analysis they suggest." (Pike 2007, 1145) Further on in the issue, MacLeod and Jones (2007) note how prior scholarship on political struggles in southwest England had attended to the territorial appeals made, thus signifying a territorial narrative on the one hand. On the other, though, "a network-topological perspective sensitizes us to the ways in which these political struggles are conducted through a myriad of actor networks" (2007, 1185). Thus, by advocating for a more nuanced and combinatory approach that de-emphasizes dichotomy, MacLeod and Jones sketch out a wider set of inroads into perceiving place and region—clearly non-reified, though not barring the existence of territorial identifications and appeals. By the end of the paper, though, MacLeod and Jones convey a rather precise critique toward the relational side:

"a network-topological perspective is less adept at locating the asymmetrical geometries of power. ... the world is neither as multi-nodal nor as flat as some of our colleagues would have us believe" (2007, 1186).

In all actuality, though, it seems that many of Jones and MacLeod's colleagues would agree with them.

The 2013 (2015) collection grew out of the 2008 American Association of Geographers' annual meeting held in Boston, and contributes to the prior work in 2007. Similarly, authors' contributions here aim to decenter claims to a territorial vs. relational dichotomy. Harrison (2015, 67), for instance, writes that the debate centering on territorial-relational conceptions of regions "prompt[s] us to confront searching questions over the degree to which the relative decline in 'territorially embedded' conceptions of regions vis-à-vis the privileging of 'relational and unbounded' conceptions is part of some zero-sum either/or logic." The author advocates returning to Jessop et al.'s (2008) proposal to consider territory, place, scale, network (TPSN)—in an effort not to privilege one dimension over others in theorizing sociospatial relations; for those firmly within the relational camp, the dimension of focus would be the network.

An application of a regional-studies approach is helpful for illustrative purposes. Reflecting perspectives in his work from the early 2000s, Paasi (2013) attends to the role of discourse within and on regional identity constructions—citing Foucauldian biopower to characterize processes of categorization and grouping. For instance, Paasi considers institutional efforts through school textbooks and media, and notes that—in Finland—these have been produced in the service of a nation-building project, "maintain[ing] identity discourses that draw on elements from a region's past in order to define its present and anticipate its future." (1211) Moreover, though, focusing on the case of regional planning, he also disrupts the territorial-relational binary by considering how

regions both attach to territorial conceptions at the same time as they are presented as networked. Drawing attention to this simultaneity, Paasi contends,

“[w]hile notions of territorial coherence and solidarity persist in plans, the evidence of both plans and interviews [conducted with planners] is that regions are not represented and understood merely as self-contained entities: their relational position as nodes in wider economic and cultural environment and processes are equally stressed.” (2013, 1216)

I do not aim to position myself on either side of the regional ‘debate’ (if there is one).

Rather, my objectives through the above summary are to consider the varied strands of thought that have gone into conceptualizing and grappling with the ‘region’ over the past number of decades, especially the most recent two. Importantly, while I cite the above studies as a means to develop conceptual points that help me to draw out arguments in the following chapters, the work cannot simply be transposed onto the cases under consideration here in this dissertation. Indeed, many key conversations on regions are firmly embedded in European contexts (e.g. Jones and MacLeod on England and Paasi on Finland) and do not have to do with the concerns of export-oriented agriculture.

Nonetheless, engaging with this work reveals some important analytical entry points, and I will trace the ways in which “regional moorings” (to borrow from Amin (2004, 37)) are not only conjured, but also mobilized. I thus do not intend to convey any sort of ontological commitment, but instead to consider how a regional imaginary (in this case, southern Thailand) is used by and for people to contend with the scales of rubber cultivation and

pricing, while additionally considering the underpinnings of the region, southern Thailand, itself. The rubber-region nexus I draw attention to is especially noteworthy, given rubber's own articulation into global production networks, not to mention the transient histories of rubber itself, a tree that evolved in the Brazilian Amazon and was brought to Southeast Asia in the latter part of the nineteenth century (e.g. Priyadarshan 2011). As my fieldwork was largely based on meeting with *chaosuan yang* to discuss their experiences with rubber and how they both conceptualize the causes behind low rubber prices in addition to conceiving of appropriate solutions, I will focus in particular on the narrative frames (resonating with Kurtz's (2003) discussion of scale frames) that people project. In turn, I contend that these must be situated within consideration of rubber's historical geographies in Thailand and the institutional processes that gave rise to them. Prior to proceeding, though, some background on Thai regions is instructive.

1.4 Regions Institutionalized

The attention that scholars such as Anssi Paasi give to destabilizing claims that regions are 'out there' and existing, yet nonetheless "[r]egions and regionality ... appear as constructed in the dialectics of materiality and individual and social imagination" (2009, 222) lends crucially to the cases I present here, of the connections among contemporary concerns with commodity prices, agricultural histories, and senses of territorial belonging in a divided national political landscape. In Thailand, the identities of subnational regions hold a great deal of resonance, but such phenomena should be understood through an historical lens that dually traces the country's modern history more generally.

Grouping provinces into distinct regions—oriented with respect to the capital, Bangkok—is in widespread use among Thai government ministries for such purposes as publication of data and various reports on agriculture, economic activity, demographics, and so on: for instance, throughout my graduate studies I have accessed data from the National Statistics Office (NSO) (nso.go.th), particularly the decennial Agricultural Census. The NSO’s homepage has a link, nso.go.th/sites/2014/nsopublic, which directs the user to a page with links to each province’s own NSO branch. Each province (except for Bangkok) is categorized into one of four regions (Figure 1.8). Results from the latest Census of Agriculture (2013) are available in regional summaries; provincial- and district-level data are accessible through provincial NSO sites. Other government agencies, such as the Office of Agricultural Economics, also use this breakdown. On the other hand, the National Economic and Social Development Board employs six divisions (Northeast, North, South, East, West, Central) plus Bangkok and surrounding provinces. In the four-region classification system, provinces surrounding Bangkok are grouped into the central region. In both the six- and four-region classifications, fourteen provinces comprise southern Thailand: Chumphon, Krabi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Narathiwat, Pattani, Phang Nga, Phatthalung, Phuket, Ranong, Surat Thani, Satun, Songkhla, Trang, and Yala.⁸



Figure 1.8 Thailand's four regions, the southern provinces

What is additionally noteworthy about regions in Thailand is that, insofar as my experiences in the southern provinces are concerned, people also reference and appeal to regions and regional boundaries in everyday settings. Such a concurrence, between what Paasi (2002) refers to as the 'identity of a region' and 'regional identity'/'regional consciousness',⁹ is worth considering briefly, as the foundations of many discussions in

subsequent chapters rely precisely on the ways in which people not only cite regional identities, but moreover draw rubber into senses of their own regional belonging as well. As I will discuss in further detail in Chapter 3, there are political-economic precedents behind these latter processes.

Paasi (2002) draws our attention to these dual processes as fundamentally involving expressions of power. In line with this understanding, the following discussion will not only review the administrative histories that resulted in fourteen provinces becoming classified as the region, southern Thailand; in addition, I show that the forging of Thai regions ought to be considered in light of key formative moments of state centralization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—of Thailand's consolidation as a nation state. This discussion moreover works in concert with consideration of the ways in which state involvement in the rubber economy has also been implicated in processes of institutionalizing regions—thereby providing background to the regionally-accented, contemporary narratives about the causes of low rubber prices and their solutions.

Thai regions should arguably be discussed in light of the manifestation of what Thongchai (1994) calls Thailand's 'geo-body'. Thongchai draws his conclusions about the formation of Thailand's (as a nation state) modern borders from discussion that details the jettisoning of premodern conceptions of space and political governance (i.e., places in present-day northeastern, northern, and southern Thailand, among others, having formerly been in tributary relationships with multiple centers of power, including with Bangkok but not exclusively), in favor of an homogenizing modern geography. Subsequently, Thongchai shows how this led to constructions of Thai citizenship. While acknowledging the external

pressures of colonial powers in Southeast Asia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Great Britain in Malaysia and Burma; France in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam—in steering the Siamese polity to define its own borders, Thongchai also brings attention to the expansionist ambitions of Siam itself. The result, we see, was a re-presentation of Siam as a national unit, conveying a unity in both space and time which, however, masked the processes of its own production.

Prior to these periods of assimilation, Yongyut (2007a, 32) writes of the historically “loose relationships” between southern city states (*mueang*) and Ayutthaya (the center of Siamese power until the mid-eighteenth century) and summarizes the errors in appealing to contemporary conceptions of Thai governance to understand past administrative capacities:

“Explaining that the center of the Siamese Kingdom was able to govern different city states securely since the period of Ayutthaya is a misunderstanding. It’s a limited perspective because it applies the frame of the national structure that has just emerged to explain the state of the past, which was not yet a nation.” (2007a, 33, my translation)

Similarly, prior to late-nineteenth century administrative reforms under King Chulalongkorn (the fifth monarch in the Chakri Dynasty, who ascended the throne in 1868), Baker and Pasuk (2009, 59) describe “Bangkok’s political hinterland [as] a patchwork of *mueang* [city states] tied to ministries by varying systems.” Concerning sites down the Malay peninsula, Baker and Pasuk write that in the Ayutthaya period—before that city’s

invasion by the Burmese in 1767 and the subsequent move of the Siamese capital to Bangkok—Nakhon Si Thammarat was made an outpost for the South, due to factors such as growing population and agricultural conditions favorable for high-value crops such as pepper. This strengthening of ties continued to increase after Burmese threats had subsided and the Siamese capital was moved to Bangkok in the late eighteenth century under Rama I, the beginning of the Chakri Dynasty. In consideration of Phatthalung, Yongyut (2007b) notes in particular that the power wielded by Ayutthaya over it was tenuous and uncertain, whereas that from nearby Nakhon Si Thammarat was much greater—in part a function of distance, though also evidence of the strength of Nakhon Si Thammarat’s local influence.

Nakhon Si Thammarat had long been the center of power for many *mueang* nearby, namely Chumphon, Chaiya (in present-day Surat Thani province), Phatthalung, and Songkhla (Yongyut 2007a). Similarly, as Grabowsky (1995, 5) writes, since the Ayutthaya period Siam had wielded substantial influence south of Bangkok, “as far as Songkhla, which would serve as the southernmost Thai-Buddhist outpost in the Malay-Muslim world.” Such close ties contrasted from those with the predominantly ethnically Malay provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat to the south of Songkhla (Grabowsky 1995).

In a collection of Thai-language encyclopedias entitled, *Encyclopedia of Thai Culture*, which were published in 1999 by a foundation within the Siam Commercial Bank, readers find a series of volumes for each of four regions—Central, North, Northeast, and South. The introduction to the set notes the purpose of the publication being to encourage young people, in particular, to reflect on being Thai nationals (“*khwam pen chat thai*”), as well as to learn about certain features of Thai art and culture deemed to be important. A focus on

preserving local forms of knowledge and ensuring that influences from foreign cultures do not interfere and disrupt/corrupt the Thai nation are also mentioned. Despite such highly political rhetoric, the volumes nevertheless contain contributions from well-known Thai scholars, and provide important background information.

The emergence, for instance, of the term “southern region”, or *phak tai* (*phak* = region, *tai* = south), is traced by Suthiwong et al. (1999): while usage of the term *phak*, whose meaning is ‘region’ in English, for administrative purposes would not emerge until 1915 (during the reign of the sixth monarch of the Chakri Dynasty), ‘south’ had long been in use as a geographic frame—certainly during the Ayutthaya Period (1351-1767), as chronicles cited by the authors indicate. In particular, they show that the term ‘*pak tai*’, with both long and short ‘a’ on the first word, were often used interchangeably to refer to the South long before the prefix, *phak*, or ‘region’ in contemporary terminology was in use. Although long-a *pak* translates into ‘mouth’ in Central Thai, Suthiwong (1999), in a different encyclopedia entry, cites historical linguistic analyses showing that the word is likely a borrowing from other Tai dialects, translating into ‘shore’ or ‘bank’—as in a riverbank (*fak fang*). One rather straightforward takeaway is that southern Thailand had long taken on a geographical reference to Ayutthaya and then to Bangkok after the Ayutthaya Period had ended.

Marked changes in degrees of direct political and administrative control extending from Bangkok outward took place shortly before the close of the nineteenth century: Thongchai (1994, 102) writes of the “modern mechanism of centralization”, whereby King Chulalongkorn dispatched officials from Bangkok to the provinces—the beginning of administration through the *thesaphiban* system, which, Thongchai is careful to point out,

translates into governance over territory. Thus, as Baker and Pasuk (2009, 79) describe, these transitions signaled a departure from a traditional system of “relations that structured the state [being] all personal ties” to a “new political unit ... defined by a territorial boundary.” Importantly, though, Thongchai comments that those sent to take up residence in the provinces were often relatives of or had close relations to the king. Under Chulalongkorn’s half-brother, Prince Damrong Ratchanuphap—whom Thongchai notes was “the craftsman of [centralization]” (1994, 103)—provinces were grouped as *monthons* (a Thai-ification of the Sanskrit *mandala*, meaning circle) for administrative purposes (Wyatt 2003). This process led to changes in such areas as revenue collection and judicial organization, and under centralization state revenues doubled (Wyatt 2003). Down the peninsula, south of Bangkok, were four *monthons* by 1915: Chumphon, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phuket and Pattani (Det 1989).¹⁰ The newly created Ministry of Interior assumed administrative reorganization of provinces, which were further territorially divided into districts, sub-districts, and villages (e.g., Vandergeest and Peluso 1995). By 1932 (the year in which Thailand transitioned from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy), as Suthiwong et al. (1999) write, the *monthon* system was dissolved, and various government bureaus and ministries established regional offices. For example, the position, ‘Director of Judges of the Court of Nakhon Si Thammarat Monthon’ (*athibodi phu phiphaksa monthon nakhon si thammarat*) was changed to ‘Southern Region Justice Commissioner’ (*kha luang yutthitham phak tai*), with responsibility to oversee courts throughout the South—within the former *monthons* of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Surat Thani, and Phuket. The office was sited in Songkhla. From this point on, Suthiwong et al. (1999) continue, the use of *phak tai* became widespread.

While administrative and policy organs clearly appeal to regional demarcations, as I will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, southern Thailand as a particular regional space, also registers widely among people. No doubt this likely has much to do with ‘visible’ distinctions such as use of the southern Thai dialect, which, although close to central Thai, carries different tone rules and has a number of vocabulary and syntax differences. However, in discussions below I will consider how the political economy of smallholder rubber, whose start was in provinces that would comprise the region, southern Thailand, also fuses into forms of regional recognition and consciousness, and how these in turn contribute to broadening our engagement with the topic of governance over commodity relations.

To reiterate, inasmuch as the production networks of which *chaosuan yang* in southern Thailand are a part orient us toward key themes of power and institutional embedding, I contend that more attention needs to be paid to the roles for—and, importantly, the constitution of—scale in economic geographers’ scholarship on production networks. Critically engaging with scales and regions thus facilitates studying rubber in terms of the political projects that have been instrumental in bringing this form of agriculture into rural livelihoods throughout Thailand, yet through differential geographies over time, shaping both identities of regions and regional identities (Paasi 2002) in the process.

Attending to these geo-histories demonstrates rubber’s involvement in different scalar projects since the turn of the twentieth century—from rather regional materializations to those broadly more national in scope. Through arguments to be developed empirically in subsequent chapters, I aim to show how these shifting and

contested contours provide perspectives into the constructions of regional identity and belonging. In turn, this helps to push the dimensions of how we think about economic governance, through a more spatially sensitive approach that considers the implications for interpretation toward economic and political outcomes. Re/integrating attention to regional histories and legacies into a situated study of rubber production—exploring the contents and configurations of expectations on the state conveyed by *chaosuan yang* and their allies—highlights the blending between polity and economy, the porous borders between government and governance.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Context

The research for this dissertation comes primarily from time spent in southern Nakhon Si Thammarat and northern Phatthalung provinces, where I conducted qualitative research and relied on mixed methods, such as one-on-one interviews, group discussions, and participant observation. With support from a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (DDRA) fellowship, I carried out field research in Thailand from April 2015 until July 2016. I then returned to Thailand for one month between June and July 2017 to touch base and reconnect with people I had met.¹¹ In neither case did I choose to employ the help of a language interpreter, and instead engaged with informants directly. As I had spent a number of years studying Thai, I felt confident that my language abilities would allow me to complete the tasks I had outlined in my research proposal.

I first began learning Thai while working as an English teacher in Surat Thani Province in 2007, and in the years that followed I continued studying independently. In 2009, before starting graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I enrolled in the Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute to study Thai and tested into the final year's class. I returned to Thailand in 2013 for a PA-ship/MS thesis research, during which time I also had opportunities to practice language skills. When I have not physically been in Thailand, I have maintained my capacity with Thai by reading newspapers and other publications (e.g. *Matichon*), viewing news clips online, etc.

The dialect in which I have been trained is Central Thai, spoken as the native language of about one quarter of the population in Bangkok and Thailand's Central Plains (Diller 2002). Thais in southern Thailand speak a dialect that is closely related to Central

Thai, although it carries important differences. These mainly concern tone shifts: Central Thai has five tones, the dialect spoken in Nakhon Si Thammarat has seven (Wilaisak 2013), but there are some vocabulary differences as well. For instance, in Central Thai *phut* means ‘to speak’, in Southern Thai the word is *laeng*. Despite these dialectical differences, people whom I interviewed directly were comfortable conversing in Central Thai, as it is the dialect used in schools, government offices, and so forth. There were certainly occasions in which I was a passive listener to conversations carried out between people exclusively in Southern Thai. Although these were difficult to comprehend fully, word-for-word, I was usually able to understand the gist and to ask others for clarification (in Central Thai) when needed.

As noted in the Introduction, I chose to conduct this research due to a series of demonstrations that had been staged in 2013 at a time when prices for natural rubber and oil palm had fallen off considerably. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 4, demonstrations over falling rubber prices occurred in several places throughout southern Thailand beginning in 2012 and gained momentum in 2013. The Khuan Nong Hong highway intersection and Ban Tun rail crossing, both in Cha-uat District and about ten kilometers apart, were blocked off by protesters in August and September 2013. In my dissertation proposal I presented three questions, which were motivated through my reading about the protests in Cha-uat in popular media outlets such as the online versions of *Matichon Sutsapada* and *Thai Rath*—in print, the former is a weekly news magazine, the latter a daily newspaper: (1) In what ways does rubber shape peoples’ senses of southern regional identities? (2) In turn, how do low rubber prices present a gravitas that extends beyond the immediacy of household incomes, in other words coming into conflict with

these identities? (3) Lastly, in what ways do these tensions relate to and configure broader for(u)ms of political contestation in Thailand?

Concerning the first and second questions above, I considered that rubber's longstanding presence shaping livelihoods and agricultural landscapes in southern Thailand perhaps also played a constitutive role in regional identities. Thus, I sought to explore possibilities to interpret the protests in Cha-uat not only as instrumental mobilizations about prices and politics on the national stage, but also as demonstrations grappling with questions of cultural belonging in the modern state. As the third question parenthetically suggests, I saw the protests in Cha-uat District as important in both helping to shed light on other political struggles Thailand, as well as serving as a venue effecting the organization of protests elsewhere, namely demonstrations held in Bangkok in late 2013 and throughout the first half of 2014. These latter events culminated in a coup d'état removing the administration of Yingluck Shinawatra and initiating rule by the Thai military. I proposed conducting research to see how the demonstrations in Cha-uat and then other rounds of demonstrations that followed rather shortly thereafter in Bangkok might be viewed as intimately interlinked demonstration processes, mobilizing on platforms of material hardship that dually brought a challenge directly to the administration of Yingluck Shinawatra and her party, *Phuea Thai* (meaning 'For Thais'). As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, there is much evidence to support the view that these demonstrations were related.

Thailand's political landscapes of late have exhibited notable geographic variation, especially when comparing the voting patterns of the southern provinces against those in the North and the Northeast: in the 2011 general elections, for instance (those which led

Yingluck to the office of Prime Minister), constituents in northern Thailand voted in thirty-five members of parliament (MPs) from the *Phuea Thai* Party and one Democrat Party MP; constituents in northeastern Thailand voted in one-hundred and four *Phuea Thai* MPs, four Democrats, and eighteen MPs from other parties; in the South, of fifty-three MP positions fifty went to the Democrats. During general elections in Thailand, each voter casts a ballot for a Member of Parliament (MP) who represents their jurisdiction in the province and is affiliated with a political party; the Prime Minister is then voted in by the majority party in Parliament.

As I will address in greater detail below, establishing the relationships between Cha-uat and Bangkok in the time leading up to the May 2014 coup presented very challenging research tasks, owing, for instance, to peoples' reticence to discuss how events a few years prior had related to the military taking charge. The relationships between rubber and identity, however, were often more accessible topics to discuss—although, as I infer, they were hardly absent of political content and significance. Frequently, for many people I met, the reluctance to engage with the rubber-price protests' political contexts appeared related to sentiments that events in which they had participated in Cha-uat would be misconstrued by me as political statements only, undercutting their very real concerns about the toll that low rubber prices were taking on household incomes. To note, by the time I began my fieldwork in April 2015 rubber prices had dropped by over a third of their levels during the protests in 2013; they would continue slipping throughout 2015 and into 2016. As I will show in Chapter 4, though, notions that the protests were driven through partisan political agendas were widespread at the time.

Concerns of misrepresentation had actually surfaced over two decades prior during

a round of protests staged in Thung Song District, about forty kilometers to the north of Cha-uat, by *chaosuan yang* similarly calling for price supports: at the time, the governor of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province had alleged that many of those participating had been paid to do so, an accusation which made those who had gathered feel both deeply insulted and that their concerns had been delegitimized (*Matichon*, February 19, 1990).

My quantitative background in economics notwithstanding, I appealed almost exclusively to qualitative, ethnographic methods to carry out this research. Qualifying the use of ethnography in human geography specifically, Herbert (2000, 555) comments that

“ethnography enables analyses of the important moments when macro and micro interpenetrate, when constraints and contingencies alternately pattern and perturb daily life. Such research is of undoubted significance to geographers interested in how landscapes are constructed and lived, the processes by which structures are made real in the everyday movements and contexts of human action.”

Herbert’s citation of studying cross-scale relationships, or perhaps tensions, through ethnographic approaches is especially relevant to my pursuits here, as I seek to understand how an arguably global phenomenon—rubber prices—is felt and interpreted ‘on the ground,’ by people growing and/or tapping rubber, in other words the labor those prices ostensibly reflect. Ethnographic methods were particularly important for me, as I was afforded opportunities move beyond the strictly production-oriented stories that people would tell about rubber, and thereby perceive how rubber provides windows into investigating political relationships more broadly. As I will show, such insights are enabled

both through rubber's own histories in Thailand as well as its extensive reach into rural livelihoods across the southern provinces.

I was based in Cha-uat for the duration of my research, and although I conducted my work primarily there and in surrounding districts in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung provinces, I did also manage to conduct some interviews well to the south of Cha-uat, in Phatthalung Province: through a chance encounter in November 2015 outside of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives offices in Bangkok, I met individuals from a village in Tamot District, in southern Phatthalung, whom I ended up visiting periodically in 2016. This group was working on initiatives in their village in Tamot to help *chaosuan yang* households cope with income shortfalls. One project involved petitioning the provincial government to provide rice provisions (to reduce the costs of household consumption); another sought to coordinate an informal cartel among villagers by encouraging the production, and then storage, of rubber sheets instead of selling latex each day. To my knowledge, this latter initiative never became established. The first, I was told, was not successful, as the type of rice provided by the provincial government was of an inferior quality that people did not want to eat—it was not clear to me whether they discarded the rice or ate it anyway.^a About rubber and rubber prices more generally, though, many of the conversations we had together reflected points brought up by people I interviewed in Cha-uat.

In early 2016 I also attended meetings convened in different places around southern Thailand that allowed people opportunities to voice their concerns about low rubber prices as well as to give their opinions on the means to address the problem. Attendees tended to

^a December 17, 2015, Tamot District

be mainly *chaosuan yang* and organizers of smallholder rubber growers and tappers advocacy groups who both lived nearby as well as those who had traveled from other provinces. Also in attendance, listening to concerns being aired, were representatives from government ministries, such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and the Rubber Authority of Thailand. I had opportunities to sit in on three of these meetings: January 2016, in Thung Song District (Nakhon Si Thammarat Province) at a public park which was followed two days later by another forum in the City District of Trang Province, and then at the end of March 2016 at a hotel in Thung Song. As I will illustrate below, the comments and topics that attendees brought up during these gatherings related to those I inferred from my own interviews with *chaosuan yang* in and around Cha-uat. As such, while knowledge gained from the latter encounters clearly conveys particular stories and perspectives that are situated, I nonetheless hold that these can lend insight more generally about how *chaosuan yang* not only negotiate their own circumstances, but in addition how they position local problems with respect to national and international issues—often through selective scalar narratives, as I will address in Chapter 6. On matters practical, the ethnographic methods (interviews, participant observation) I had proposed using for my research would require spending time in-place to establish relationships with individuals and to build trust with people in the community. Interviews were by and large semi-structured, meaning that when I met with informants there were pre-established topics central to the discussion (Crang and Cook 2007). Specific questions, however, would vary.

Although I chose to work without a research assistant, I relied heavily on connections and introductions in order to meet with various groups of people. As it turned out, the sibling of a (now former) UW-Madison PhD student from Thailand was conducting

a medical residency at the Cha-uat District Hospital when I began my research. Although she is originally from Ron Phibun District (just to the north of Cha-uat), many of her coworkers had grown up in Cha-uat and had extensive family networks in the district. The cousin of one coworker, for instance, had been the sub-district leader of Khuan Nong Hong for six years by May 2015, meaning that he had been in the position during the protests at the intersection nearby in 2013. I was introduced to him early on, and he then introduced me to *chaosuan yang* in the sub-district as well as a latex buyer a short distance down the road from the sub-district offices. Other sub-district leaders and village headpersons in and around Cha-uat similarly connected me with *chaosuan yang* in their respective locales. I met *chaosuan yang* at other latex-buying sites within Cha-uat as well, and introductions were made through the buyer (or manager, in the case of a large cooperative in Nang Long Sub-district), to whom I had introduced myself first and asked if s/he wouldn't mind me returning and speaking with some *chaosuan yang* who would go there regularly to sell latex in the morning hours, around 8 am.

I did not use a survey; however, across meetings with *chaosuan yang* I did ask basic questions of all participants, including information on the holder's plot size (if applicable—some people did not have plots of their own), whether the informant works on others' holdings, and additional sources of income. Depending on factors such as the length of time I had gotten to know someone and peoples' comfort speaking with me, participants discussed more complex and sensitive topics, e.g. those that related directly to the rubber price protests that had happened in 2013, the political changes that had transpired in their wake, and perceptions on the Thai government's relationships and responsibilities to smallholder rubber farmers. Thus, while the initial conversations provided opportunities to

collect basic information with which to sketch a profile of smallholder rubber economies in and around Cha-uat, it was through repeated encounters (including periods of participant observation) that I was able to delve into some of the weightier topics.

To note, while I depended to a great extent on interviews to build content relevant for my arguments, I also sought out opportunities to ‘participate’ in the daily rhythms of *chaosuan yang*. Taking a cue from Watson and Till (2010), on the ways in which participation during ethnography attends to the intersubjective nature of fieldwork where meanings and interpretations are negotiated between researcher and research participants, I spent time with people while they tapped rubber trees in the early hours of the morning, when they collected latex around four to five hours after tapping, and at the sites of intermediaries as well. Figure 2.1 is a photo of a small structure known as a *krathom*. This particular latex intermediary would provide palm-leaf cigarettes, instant coffee, and occasionally *krathom* leaves free of charge in the structure for *chaosuan yang* who came to sell their latex to him.¹²

As tapping is an acquired skill that requires practice, lest trees are damaged, I did not actually tap myself. However, several mornings in early 2016 I helped one *chaosuan yang* collect latex from around ten rai (1.6 ha) of trees. Interactions such as these provided critical opportunities to gain perspectives into the actual work involved in producing natural rubber. Additionally, they allowed time for more casual conversation as well as the chance to build relationships.



Figure 2.1: the *krathom* (photo taken by author, 20 May 2015, Cha-uat)

I left inclusion criteria quite broad and did not place many limitations on the participants I hoped to enroll, as I had stated in my IRB application prior to leaving for research. The only exclusions stated in my IRB were persons under the age of 18. This proved not to be a problem, as most people I had a chance to meet were in their 40s to 50s. Data from the most recent Census of Agriculture (2013) report that, of the close to 390,000 people in Nakhon Si Thammarat who are members of households with agricultural holdings, only about 19% of the age group 15-19 is involved in some form of agricultural work. Since school attendance through the secondary level is quite common, most, unsurprisingly, are considered 'not economically active' by the Census. Conversely, close to 90% of people aged 25 and over who are part of households with agricultural holdings are engaged in some form of agricultural work.

I also sought to meet with people not directly engaged in the smallholder rubber economy, and whose perspectives on the issues I was asking about might offer useful points of cross-comparison and/or contrast. Through the experience of living in Nakhon Si Thammarat for a long period of time, I did accomplish this task (e.g., meeting with sub-district leaders, village headpersons, business and shop owners, and market vendors). However, the term ‘directly involved’ often conveys a problematic dichotomy, as even people whose titles or occupations were not strictly or solely ‘*chaosuan yang*’ nonetheless had important connections to the rubber economy—one village headperson I met with frequently spent nights tapping his own plot of rubber in Chulaphon District, for instance. Some vendors I came to know, who work the daily evening markets around the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection, do not know how to tap rubber themselves, but they had inherited small rubber plots and receive shares of the income from the latex that others tap and sell.

It is difficult to overstate the extent to which rubber is deeply woven into the economic fabric of southern Thailand and plays a critical role in directing the overall economic tenor. A brief example is illustrative: while I lived in Cha-uat I rented a room in a house that belonged to an elderly woman who lived with one of her sons. Grandchildren often came by the house, one of whom had once studied abroad during high school in the United States and sometimes came by to practice speaking English with me while she was visiting with her grandmother. She told me that she had previously worked as a restaurant manager in Nakhon Si Thammarat city, during the period when rubber prices climbed high in 2010 and 2011. She recalled customers—without intending to convey judgment or insult, she said she could tell many were *chaosuan yang* by their dress and styles of speaking—arriving with rolls of cash, and tables were filled every night. Some customers

gave wait-staff 1,000 baht tips (around \$30 USD. Note that tipping is rare in Thailand, and when it does occur it is typically quite moderate compared to the US). This restaurant has since shut down, I learned, which she attributed to the fall in rubber prices as well as the overall slow pace of the economy.

As the protests in Cha-uat were an important reason behind my proposal to conduct research, I also aimed to meet with people considered to have been protest leaders (*kaennam*). At first this proved to be quite challenging, as people I interviewed often firmly stated that the protests did not have leaders, that villagers had merely gathered themselves in protest. Eventually, I did manage to meet with four individuals who were considered by others, and also considered themselves, to be *kaennam*. I met one individual after learning about the location of his residence from a sub-district leader and introducing myself directly. I met another leader through introductions from other *chaosuan yang* I had interviewed in Ban Tun Sub-district in Cha-uat District. A third had convened a conversation about low rubber prices at the Khuan Nong Hong marketplace one afternoon in September 2015, which I attended, and subsequently I had a chance to introduce myself. Finally, I met one *kaennam* from Phatthalung Province (who had traveled to Cha-uat at the time of the protests in 2013) through his cousin, whom I had gotten to know in Cha-uat. Aside from these peoples' own admission to having helped organize and lead protesters, reports in Thai media outlets identified them as protest leaders. While I did learn their full names, I promised anonymity when conducting interviews. To note, these individuals did not associate together as an organization or network during the time that I conducted my research, and their coordination at the time of the protests in 2013 appears to have been tenuous: for instance, one of these individuals spoke critically of another, remarking that

the latter's agreeing with Yingluck's cabinet to a resolution that guaranteed prices at 90 baht/kg. instead of 120 baht reflected "a lack of honesty and sincerity toward one another."^a

Lastly, I was able to connect with four individuals who have each served multiple terms as Members of Parliament and represent constituencies in southern Nakhon Si Thammarat and northern Phatthalung: from Nakhon Si Thammarat, Aphichat Karikan (whose electoral district includes Cha-uat), Witthaya Kaeopharadai, and Chinawon Bunyakiat. From Phatthalung, I met Niphit Intharasombat. Each conversation proceeded somewhat similarly, as we discussed topics that dealt with issues concerning economic burdens on local constituencies as well as the broader political transitions that had transpired in Thailand over 2013 and 2014. Importantly, each of these politicians stressed their own personal distance from the protests. However, they were sympathetic to the concerns raised by *chaosuan yang* at the time (e.g., *Prachatai*, September 18, 2013). During these interviews, while none of these politicians revealed himself (or other politicians, for that matter) to have been a linchpin in the rubber price protests, I was able to map out political relationships extending into and beyond these events through various means: these politicians discussed other, particularly influential politicians in southern Thailand, both those who have recently retired as well as those who they determined continue to hold more sway than other MPs; reading and talking in-person about political histories in southern Thailand revealed ways in which people who had previously joined with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), which had mobilized extensively in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Khun Yao 2001), continue to

^a December 3, 2015, Cha-uat District

take on activist roles and moreover have strong relationships with political establishments in the South. I discuss these intersections extensively in Chapter 4.

Beyond meeting with *chaosuan yang*, sub-district leaders, village headpersons, protest leaders, and parliamentary members for interviews (and participant observations in the case of *chaosuan yang*), the extended amount of time I spent in Thailand afforded opportunities to visit other sites germane to my research. I made a few trips to the Nakhon Si Thammarat and Songkhla Central Rubber Markets,¹³ learned about rubber's production network beyond the farmgate in rural southern Thailand by visiting a factory belonging to Sri Trang Agroindustry in Thung Song as well as meeting with a commodities trader dealing in rubber procurement at his firm's office in Singapore in April 2016. In addition, I collected data on farmer indebtedness from Cha-uat's three branches of the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives, land use data from the Cha-uat District Agricultural Office, as well as data on subsidies paid out by the Ron Phibun Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund (ORRAF) to support people cutting down old rubber plots and replanting with young saplings.

As I will discuss in the following chapters, the perspectives I gained through qualitative interviews, participant observation, attendance at meetings, as well as spending an extended period in a place where income from rubber has been and continues to be a mainstay allowed opportunities to observe and infer beyond an interview's direct Q and A—reactions, for instance, such as that from the *chaosuan yang* who had come one morning in early October 2015 to sell her latex and then walked away from the buying site muttering and frowning as she stared down at the paper receipt whose price read 36 baht/kg. In addition, I saw how price woes travel beyond rubber plots and latex-buying

sites, and into entertainment venues such as the shadow puppet, or *nang talung*, theater grounds. These experiences all helped me understand issues at stake as well as how problems and solutions are framed and envisioned, respectively. In the following chapters I will discuss content from these fieldwork encounters, and the *nang talung* will be the focus of Chapter 5. While some informants (namely the four MPs noted above) permitted me to report what they said along with their names, personal identifying information for all other informants has been omitted. This was a condition I stated in the oral consent process I used to recruit informants.

2.1 Context: an agricultural profile of Cha-uat District (and surroundings)

Like other districts in southern Thailand, Cha-uat has a lengthy history with rubber. However, the district's overall terrain is quite varied, and there is evidence of a mixed agricultural history. East of the highway where demonstrations had been staged in 2013, land is relatively flat and much of it used to be in wet-rice paddy; a great deal of this land has since been converted into rubber plots, however, as I learned. According to figures from Thailand's decennial Agricultural Census, which reports at the district level only, in 1993 there were over 140,000 *rai* (22,400 ha) of paddy and around 88,000 *rai* (14,080 ha) of rubber in Cha-uat.¹⁴ The three western sub-districts—Wang Ang, Khao Phra Thong, and Khuan Nong Hong—are mountainous and have longer histories of rubber cultivation than plots in the eastern sub-districts. As Table 2.1 below shows, the balance between rice and rubber had clearly shifted toward the latter two decades after the 1993 Census.

Sub-District	Rubber (<i>rai</i>)	Palm (<i>rai</i>)	Rice (<i>rai</i>)
Khao Phra Thong	27,773	295	535
Khuan Nong Hong	25,885	105	639
Ko Khan	15,147	245	458
Wang Ang	43,263	316	63
Ban Tun	14,135	4,182	317
Cha-uat Center	7,380	7,595	72
Tha Pracha	6,327	1,020	868
Tha Samet	10,022	400	201
Nang Long	16,169	288	294
Khon Hat	12,377	3,540	2,344
Khreng	13,667	6,577	1,543
Total	192,145	24,563	7,334

Table 2.1 Area of rubber, palm, and rice planted by sub-district in 2014. One *rai* = 0.16 hectares. Data provided from internal accounts at the Cha-uat District Agricultural Office (Source: Agricultural Office, Cha-uat District)

Although the concern of falling oil palm prices was also raised at the protests in Cha-uat in 2013—demonstrators calling for palm price guarantees of six baht per kilogram—my focus in this dissertation remains on rubber. Beyond the fact that rubber is more widely cultivated than oil palm in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung (in Cha-uat overall, at a level nearly eight times greater), agricultural histories in southern Thailand indicate that rubber has had a lengthier presence in the income composition of rural households (e.g., Phophan 2015). Importantly, as I was conducting research to learn more about the emergence of the demonstrations in 2013, many of the people I spoke with nearby the site of the demonstrations maintained rubber plots as their primary sources of income; some had palm supplements, but most, especially in Cha-uat’s western sub-districts of Khuan Nong Hong, Khao Phra Thong, and Wang Ang, had no land planted to palm at all, and household income came entirely from rubber. Among the reasons for not growing palm, informants often cited the need to have a larger plot of land to make planting it worthwhile:

during one conversation, the Khuan Nong Hong Sub-district leader and a few *chaosuan yang* told me that a minimum of roughly twenty *rai* of palm would be necessary.^a A middle-aged couple with a rubber plot in Chulaphon District told me they would plant palm if they had forty to fifty *rai* of land, but “[they] don’t have any place to plant it.”^b These comments make more sense if compared with earnings estimates for rubber.

In the house where I stayed during the majority of my field research, just outside of the Cha-uat District center and roughly ten kilometers southeast of the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection, one of the homeowner’s sons, a retired freight ship crew member, kept a small oil palm plot about one kilometer away for extra income. He and his son, who lived across the street with his own family, harvested palm kernels twice monthly, and estimated that the yield was roughly 100 kilograms per *rai*. Palm prices in 2015 and 2016 ranged between four and five baht (a buying point is located just past the house where I lived, which published the day’s price on a sign hanging out front), meaning that a *rai*’s harvest would yield between 400 and 500 baht, or 800 and 1,000 baht each month.

Earnings from rubber are quite high in comparison. While latex yields fluctuate throughout the year, many *chaosuan yang* I spoke with estimated that the annual average yield per *rai* is about two kilograms of dry rubber content.¹⁵ When *H. brasiliensis* trees bud and grow new leaves in May, yields are low; shortly before the dry spell in southern Thailand, in February and March, at which time the trees

^a May 19, 2015, Cha-uat District, sub-district head and *chaosuan yang*

^b January 19, 2016, Chulaphon District, *chaosuan yang*

defoliate, yields are much greater. *Chaosuan yang* cannot tap during this dry period and also must hold off when it rains due to potential bark damage. Moreover, after about three nights of consecutive tapping, people believe the trees need one night of rest. As such, while many *chaosuan yang* remarked that collecting rubber is advantageous in comparison with other forms of agriculture because there is income daily, it by no means comes every day.

Several mornings in February 2016, I worked with an informant in Cha-uat while she collected latex from ten *rai* of rubber that she taps but does not own. One morning, after we had finished emptying the collecting dishes into large blue canisters, we brought these to the nearby buying cooperative. The manager there weighed the total, 111.6 kg., and took a sample to determine the dry rubber content. This informant estimated the average on the plot to be 40%. On that day, February 16th, the latex price was about 33 baht/kg. The approximate total income would then have been $111.6 \text{ kg.} \times 40\% \times 33 \text{ baht/kg.} = 1,473 \text{ baht.}$ ^a Given an upper bound for palm income of around 10,000 baht per month for ten *rai*, a typical month's tapping rubber on a plot of the same size would yield over three times that amount. For a more 'average' month, when yields would be about 2 kg./*rai*, income would still be higher than palm on the order of a few thousand baht. The amount of labor required on rubber plots is quasi-daily and clearly greater than that required for a palm plot of the same size; however, it is important to note that for many people the two types of agriculture are not substitutable.

In the chapters below, I will incorporate information from interviews with over eighty *chaosuan yang*. I hazard to provide a precise number, as some of the conversations

^a February 16, 2016, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang* (Note: The plot's owner takes 60%, so this informant kept about 590 baht.)

involved groups of people—most often, a married couple. However, I did conduct single one-on-one interviews as well. From the people who reported it to me, the average rubber plot size was just under 18 *rai*, or just under 3 ha ($n = 65$, min. = 2 *rai*, max = 60 *rai*). Some of these individuals work exclusively on their own plots, some hire others to tap their plots, some tap their own plots as well as those of others, and some tap a portion of their plots and hire for the rest. These trends, especially plot sizes, conform to overall patterns in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung, as shown by the data in Figure 2.2 below.

2.1.1 A Note on Context 1: Socioeconomic

Over the course of my research, it became quite clear that the socioeconomic (class) context of Cha-uat and surroundings (as well as to the south in Phatthalung) was rather particular: it is common in southern Thailand yet not replicated seamlessly throughout all of the provinces. For instance, during research for my MS thesis (Shattuck 2013) I spoke with several people in provinces such as Chumphon, Surat Thani, and Ranong who had little physical interaction with the plots they owned; they held occupations such as civil servant positions and kept rubber plots as supplemental sources of income. They were often thus typically of somewhat higher means. Frequently, these landowners hired individuals who had come to Thailand from Myanmar—indeed, employment of people from neighboring countries on rubber plots in southern Thailand is widely acknowledged (see, for instance, Thailand Development Research Fund 2007).

During the period of research for this MS thesis, I also had a chance to interview ten individuals who had originally come from Myanmar, some of whom had been residing in Thailand for well over a decade. In Phang Nga Province, one person told me that the owner of the rubber plot resides some distance away, in Phuket Province, while he does all of the labor on the plot. In Cha-uat and surroundings, however, this set of circumstances tended not to be the case. While I did speak with some people who held civil service positions, the majority of those I met relied overwhelmingly on income from their own rubber trees and/or that earned from tapping in others' plots. I found that the practice of hiring foreign workers to maintain and tap plots was also quite uncommon in Cha-uat and nearby districts. Those who do hire told me that tappers are Thai; often, the two parties are related. The only foreign workers I had come close to meeting in Cha-uat were groups of people from Laos working in sheet-making facilities owned by latex intermediaries.

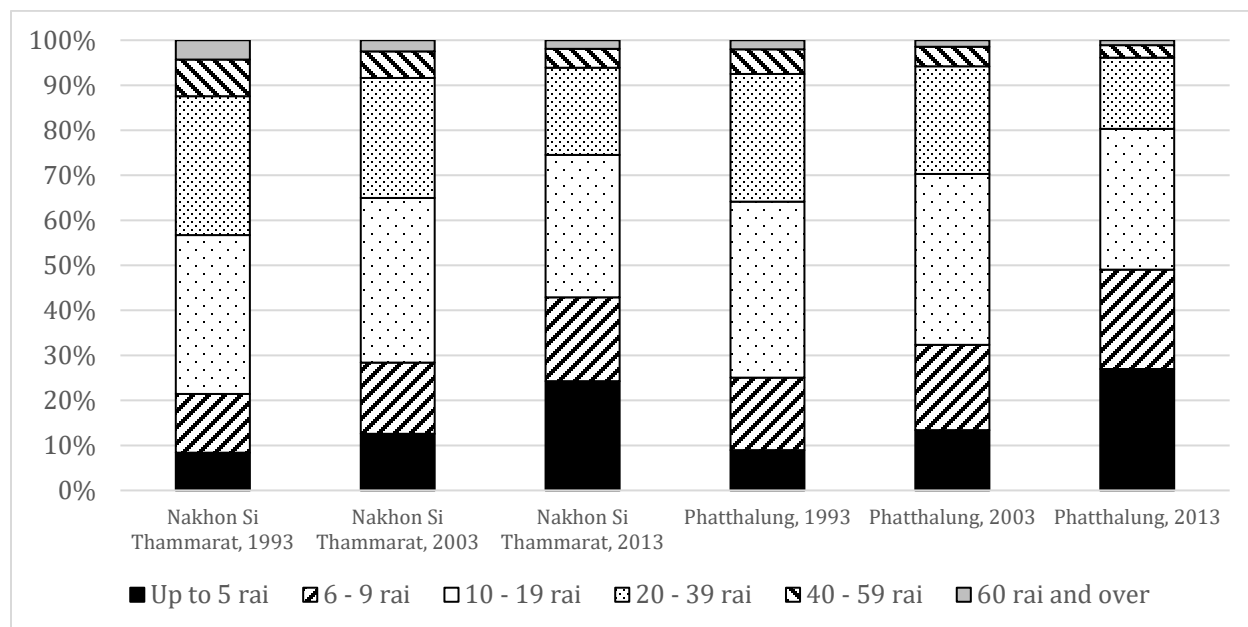


Figure 2.2: Shares of holders with rubber plots according to holding size in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung provinces. The total number of holders has increased between each census period,

while the average plot size has decreased. In Nakhon Si Thammarat, the total number of holders reported was 86,226 in 1993; 88,491 in 2003; and 116,707 in 2013. In Phatthalung, corresponding totals were 41,477; 48,552; and 59,181. (Data Source: 1993, 2003, and 2013 Agricultural Censuses carried out by the National Statistics Office (nso.go.th). 1 *rai* = 0.16 ha)

To note, in Figure 2.2 above, it appears that plot sizes overall have decreased over the years. This is an observation that resonates with my own experiences conducting fieldwork, as people I spoke with often related that they had inherited rubber plots from parents and/or in-laws. Considering such features of the sites where I worked, it is important to acknowledge that the arguments in this dissertation are in conversation with a particular socioeconomic context of Thailand's smallholding rubber economies; this may not necessarily be consistent with places elsewhere, both in Nakhon Si Thammarat as well as provinces further afield. During my conversations, beyond people identifying as *chaosuan yang*, they often also invoked the term, *chaoban*, as a means of describing oneself. *Chaoban* literally translates to 'villager' and connotes a particular set of socioeconomic circumstances (for instance, see Keyes (2012)): as was often conveyed to me, the concerns of *chaoban* and the policies that do (or do not) benefit them contrast with other groups such as intermediaries in cities. These particularities notwithstanding, the information provided by my informants is critical in highlighting perceptions on the intersections between producing a commodity crop with a global presence and senses of government accountability, both of which are in turn tied to the contours of a subnational region.

2.1.2 A Note on Context 2: Religious

Despite my noting that the majority of informants are situated within the particular socioeconomic context mentioned above, some readers may notice that in the following chapters I pay scant attention to the role of difference among interview informants, especially that played by religious affiliation, as I attend to addressing the main arguments outlined in the thesis above, in the Introduction. In what could appear to present an oversight that homogenizes informants, I did not decide to go into depth on how such factors steer the views of *chaosuan yang* as they negotiate low rubber prices. This is deliberate and has to do in large part with the rather muted extent to which religious difference in particular seems to shape such broad-based concerns in the parts of rural southern Thailand where I worked. Moreover, by peering into the ‘politics’ of rubber in light of contentious episodes over falling rubber prices and then the rounds of political unrest that followed in their aftermath, I must decide which points to accentuate throughout the four substantive chapters that follow, which, taken together, help to weave a cohesive story about the territorial scope of a global commodity—and more specifically, how personal experiences with rubber are brought into regional frames of shared meaning.

However, and with an eye toward identifying common themes among informants’ responses to low rubber prices later on, it is instructive to devote a brief discussion to the ways in which a significant and often visible form of difference such as religion actually appears to be subsumed, to some extent, into a plight common across wide swaths of rural southern Thailand—Muslim and Buddhist alike. As has sometimes been my experience while explaining the scope of my project to friends, colleagues, and others, a discussion on

issues pertaining to southern Thailand often conjures thoughts of bold differences between Muslim and Buddhist communities, specifically having to do with outright forms of conflict. The ongoing violence, since 2004, in southern Thailand's three border provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala—which are majority Muslim and Malay-speaking, incorporated in the early twentieth century into the territorial domain of Thailand (Siam at the time), when the presence of British and French in neighboring colonial possessions exerted pressure on the establishment of clearly defined borders (Thongchai 1994)—is a subject treated extensively by authors such as McCargo (2008).

While acknowledging that conflicts in the far south of Thailand—refracted through religious difference though clearly not explained by it—are present and have been ongoing for well over a decade is accurate, mapping this conception onto the region writ large, across fourteen provinces, actually masks over substantial variation. McCargo (e.g., 2005 and 2008), for instance, draws distinctions within southern Thailand, noting,

“[f]or many commentators, the large-looming politics of the “southern border” [with Malaysia] overshadow those of the rest of the region, obfuscating the more complex picture of a region characterized by considerable internal differentiation. Which “South” do we mean? The literature on the region is actually concerned with two overlapping but distinct subregions: the border provinces and the rest.” (2005, 22)

Moreover, later work (2008, 58) considers how tensions have built within the Malay-speaking Muslim-majority border provinces as a consequence of Buddhist “upper southerners” from provinces such as Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung, and Songkhla

being appointed to bureaucratic positions there. Whereas administrators from these ‘upper southern’ provinces use the southern Thai dialect as their native tongue, McCargo writes that many Malay-speaking citizens of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala prefer using central Thai.

In contrast to the demographic characteristics of these lower southern provinces, where between 70% to 80% of the population is Muslim (McCargo 2005), in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province the portion of the population that identifies as Muslim is only about 7% of the total, according to 2010 data from the National Statistics Office. While I do not have precise figures for Cha-uat District itself, or other districts nearby, from my own observations during the time that I spent conducting fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 I noticed that villages in the district were predominantly Buddhist; however, there were some Muslim-majority villages in a few sub-districts, particularly in close proximity to the Asia Highway that cuts through the district.

Although I conducted far fewer interviews with persons who identified as Muslim, particularly as I sought to connect with informants close to the two sites of protest in 2013, where communities were predominantly Buddhist, I did spend some time in May and July 2015 speaking with *chaosuan yang* in a Muslim village of Cha-uat’s Wang Ang Sub-district. This particular village, an elderly informant told me, had been established roughly fifty years prior after people had moved from other districts in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province to plant rubber.^a He had been born and raised in Tha Sala District, on the coast. Additionally, during periodic visits I made in 2016 to a village in southern Phatthalung’s Tamot District I was hosted in Muslim households. The population of that particular village,

^a May 7, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang* (retired)

I was told, was roughly half Buddhist and half Muslim. Through my experiences in both places, I learned that there was similarly widespread dependence on rubber as a source of household income, with trees tapped using labor primarily within the household itself. External sources of income were rather limited; for some these included planting and selling some vegetables such as galangal, lemongrass, and turmeric.

Unlike informants who identified as Buddhist, during the above encounters some people cited lessons from the Qur'an when speaking with me about contending with low rubber prices. One person emphasized that rubber prices do not have to be really high (as they had been some years earlier); rather, the government should make sure that there is "balance", in other words that state revenues are used appropriately to ensure that people have sufficient means to live.^a Using the Arabic word, *zakat* (distributing some of one's wealth for charitable purposes), he also brought teachings of Islam into our conversation on how the state ought to distribute its tax revenues.

This particular person did not specifically cite the regional dimensions of rubber that came to light in other interviews I held, something I would attribute to the timing of this interview within my field research (rather early on when I was still trying primarily to understand what exactly had happened and why during the price protests in 2013) as well as specific questions that I asked in the interview that day. However, as with informants I interviewed elsewhere and at other times, other similarities emerged: he told me, for instance, that he would not entertain abandoning rubber (on 5 *rai*) in favor of pursuing a different agricultural pursuit.

^a July 7, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*. Note that he used a Thai-ification of 'balance', "*balan*".

Moreover, while he did not tie rubber to place in ways that would surface in subsequent interviews, he nonetheless offered several comments conveying senses of regional coherence that he felt were distinctive of southern Thailand. For instance, as I had been curious about whether the term, *phak phuak*, meaning roughly in-group (see Chapter 4), had certain significance for people in southern Thailand, he held that it did. *Phak phuak*, or *mo rao* in the southern dialect as he said, is not the same as the northeast's *ban hao*, meaning 'our home.' He contended that southern people feel as though they're "*kan eng*", which means friendly among one another, and furthermore that if southern people are in other regions then they will feel close. He actually also offered that people in other regions tend to be more selfish than southerners. I followed up by asking him about whether or not religion played a part in these distinctions that he drew, but he told me that it did not.

To be sure, religious affiliation clearly has bearing on a host of lifestyle and day-to-day experiences for many people—festivals and holidays, whether or not one could be judged by others in their community for eating beef/pork, and so on—however, if these limited encounters (and they are indeed far from exhaustive research accounts) are notable insofar as they contrast from other depictions of Muslim and Buddhist life in southern Thailand, they also gesture toward the ways in which keeping and/or tapping small plots of rubber and relying on this income may cultivate particular solidarities forged through shared experiences. To maintain a focus on the narrative thread that ties individuals' own trials contending with low rubber prices to a broader regional problematic, the following chapters will attend to arguments discussed in the preceding chapter as well as the Introduction by paying attention mainly to the ways in which southern Thailand, the region, is discursively left intact.

The following chapter aims to illustrate these points in part by showing contrast with cases of rubber cultivation in southern Laos as well as in Phitsanulok, a province in northern Thailand. I begin the chapter with discussion of the narrative frames that I encountered through work in Cha-uat and surrounding areas, and then I proceed to discuss information gained through brief excursions in Laos and Phitsanulok. In anticipation of the narratives that are central to my discussions in Chapters 4 through 6, the chapter will conclude through directed discussion on the historical context of Thailand's administration over its rubber economies.

Chapter 3: (Regional) Relationship-building

The discussions across these four substantive chapters draw attention to the ways in which the practice of growing rubber is brought into conversation with ideas about belonging and regional identity in southern Thailand. As I ultimately aim to demonstrate, constructing—and conveying/performing—these relationships in turn imply—and defend—geographies of rubber cultivation in Thailand as belonging in (or perhaps to) the southern provinces. It is critical, however, to bear in mind that such personal-geographic connections to rubber are not ubiquitous; in Cha-uat and surroundings, these relationships are necessarily interwoven with specific histories and experiences that I bring to light in this dissertation. In this chapter, I will thus draw attention to the constructions that undergird such a rubber-region nexus.

Through the chapter's two sections, I contend that the particularly strong expressions about rubber's place in southern Thai livelihoods—the articulations as to rubber's regionalization—need to be understood in part in light of the active presence of the Thai state and state-led projects that have long been at work enabling the foundations that could engender these relationships. Importantly, such exercises in administration should not be read via senses of their altruism to a rural populace, i.e. by propagating a robust smallholding agricultural sector; the labors of *chaosuan yang*, in turn, have been key in generating steady streams of export earnings whose benefits to the state writ large have been noted in official parliamentary documents justifying funds to expand the country's smallholder rubber base. The following section will work through cases of description that

allude to measurably different contexts of peoples' interactions and experiences with a rubber economy.

3.1 Situated Relationships

Given the overall positive outlooks on rubber that I will soon highlight, it is important to note the range of scholarship documenting the variety of peoples' experiences with/being impacted by rubber, especially across Southeast Asia. A great deal of such work is devoted to rubber cultivation in terms of an event, revealing the adverse socioeconomic and environmental outcomes that result from planting—often framed in terms of incursions into landscapes and livelihoods. Indeed, rubber's entry into the agricultural economies in other parts of Thailand as well as elsewhere in Southeast Asia has often met with tension, if not outright opposition in some cases, well-documented cases including those of authors such as Baird (2010, 2011, 2014), Barney (2009), Friis et al. (2016), Mann (2009), Ziegler et al. (2009). On the other hand, other work more directly engages the situated meanings of rubber when and where it is planted, and moreover how these have been challenged and re-placed. Peluso (2012), for instance, draws on research conducted in West Kalimantan, Indonesia to discuss rubber's histories, showing how “specific environmental and social conditions ... were critical to [rubber's] identity or political connotation as socially and politically acceptable” (2012, 81-82). In earlier work (2009), she shows that not only had rubber been associated and drawn into racialized categories, i.e. aligning with communities of Chinese emigrants, but that over time and through forms

of violence, rubber became naturalized onto indigenous landscapes, articulating, thereby, the ways in which rubber is enrolled into processes of territory-making.

Sturgeon (2012) specifically considers processes of regionalization through rubber among Akha and Tai minority groups across the Chinese-Lao border. In particular, she discusses the associations between rubber and notions of quality and development and thus how, among Akha and Tai on either side of the border, “farmers from China [who planted rubber first] secured their place as ‘modern’ in contrast to those in Laos who were ‘backward’.” (2012, 82) As she further writes, though, those groups in Laos embraced planting rubber, as doing so meant higher incomes. As such, Sturgeon brings a conversation on rubber into addressing issues that pertain to the forging of regions that span nation states and which thereby importantly problematize oppositions such as those between ethnic majority (in China, Han) and minority groups.

Working with the Kantu’ indigenous group in Borneo, Dove (2011) discusses in detail the juxtaposition of rubber and swiddening (shifting agriculture) systems within these communities. He shows that while cash earnings from rubber have been important for part of households’ subsistence and consumption needs, engagement with rubber—the land on which it is planted and peoples’ labor inputs—is done “in surplus within the swidden system.” (152) As such, the yields derived from rubber could be inferred largely as functions of swidden systems’ own demands. Concisely, Dove observes that “rubber was never viewed as an “alternative” to swidden rice; the latter could not be dropped by doing more of the former—although the reverse was not impossible.” (2011, 161) Beyond the agricultural hierarchy discussed, Dove additionally highlights how belief systems and cultural norms that apply to swiddens, e.g. religious proscriptions on laboring during

certain time periods, are largely absent for rubber. Notably, he finds that Kantu' groups keeping rubber deem the land on which it is planted to be 'dead.' 'Dead' in this usage refers to senses of fixity in the land, a status divergent from the ever-changing swidden landscape (2011, 181). Thus, land planted to rubber is outside of particular social and ecological relations which dominate swidden systems.

As these accounts suggest, rubber has assumed different meanings depending on the contexts in which it has entered into and/or infringed on peoples' agricultural livelihoods. In Dove's (2011) work especially, rubber appears as an interface between indigenous groups and outside others, e.g. colonial and post-colonial states, as it is produced for cash sale. In my consideration here, *chaosuan yang* in southern Thailand appeal to histories of rubber to engage with the state, seeking to draw resources in rather than keeping the state at bay (e.g., as Walker (2012) argues based on research in northern Thailand). Such object-oriented analyses are by no means limited to rubber. Indeed, studies on goods which people consume directly and daily for sustenance at once exhibit important differences from rubber in terms of their materiality (in Thailand, as a commodity destined for export and transnational use (e.g. Kitti 2009)), yet also illustrate the ways in which objects become laden with particular forms of meaning. For example, in a consideration of factors underlying how and why social movements and moments of contentious politics emerge in the places and times they do, Simmons (2016) focuses on the particular grievances at play and distinguishes between their severity, on the one hand, and their meanings, on the other. Taking account of the latter is critical as, "threats to subsistence goods can be perceived not only as material threats but also as threats to community." (2016, 2) As Simmons shows throughout her work on water privatization in Bolivia and

rising corn tortilla prices in Mexico, the day-to-day interactions, or “quotidian communities”, surrounding these objects work toward meaning-making—and shaping the scope of struggle when their access is in question. She brings this term into conversation with Benedict Anderson’s widely cited work on imagined communities, highlighting the ways in which particular meanings function not only territorially, but also within cultural registers.

Given my focus in this dissertation, it is thus critical to consider the particular economic and political circumstances through which a smallholder rubber economy has taken hold in southern Thailand. In the following three sub-sections I present anecdotes that bring these contingencies to light, by illustrating divergent relationships and symbolic meanings conjured from peoples’ varying experiences with rubber: I begin in my principal research sites in southern Thailand, and then I segue into considering more skeptical outlooks on rubber encountered in southern Laos, before returning to consider some of the experiences of southern Thais planting rubber in Phitsanulok Province, in northern Thailand. In Phitsanulok, different meanings appear at times to have come to a head. In the second section of this chapter, I will seek to contextualize the content from the first sub-section below, by analyzing legacies of rubber in southern Thailand through the lens of institutionalized interventions of the Thai state in the latter half of the twentieth century.

3.1.1 อาชีพ ^๒aachîp/ N livelihood, living, occupation profession.

Haas, Mary. 1964. *Thai-English Student's Dictionary*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 618

Likely the most common word pair used by people I spoke with to describe how cultivation of rubber fits both into village economies as well as those concerned with southern Thailand, the region, more broadly, was ‘main livelihood’, or ‘*achip lak*’: for instance, “the southern region has rubber as its main livelihood”^a, one person responded when I asked whether falling rubber prices meant more problems for people in southern Thailand compared to those growing rubber in other Thai provinces. This subsection, its brevity notwithstanding, intends simply to draw attention to the ways in which many people I met while conducting research articulated their own relationships with rubber cultivation through terms emphasizing both reliance on and legacies with this form of agriculture. To note, such sentiments in Thailand are not unique to rubber in the southern provinces. As Rigg et al. (2018) identify in rural northeastern Thailand, for instance, one of the reasons for the persistence of smallholder rice plots—in contradiction to the projections of modernization theories—is a view, particularly among older informants consulted, that emphasizes identification as a rice farmer as well as an overall reluctance to stop rice cultivation entirely because of challenges such as drought.

As I have noted, in early 2016 meetings throughout southern Thailand were convened as a means to allow people opportunities to voice their concerns about low rubber prices and to give their opinions on the appropriate means of addressing the

^a June 19, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

problem. Attendees were both *chaosuan yang* who lived nearby as well as organizers of smallholder rubber growers and tappers interest and advocacy groups. Also in attendance, listening to concerns being aired, were representatives from government ministries, such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and the Rubber Authority of Thailand. I had opportunities to sit in on three of these meetings—January 2016, in Thung Song District; followed two days later by another forum in Trang Province’s City District; and then at the end of March 2016 in Thung Song District once again. At each of these events, I was able to observe first-hand the ways in which the context surrounding appeals for state assistance to intervene and alleviate burdens from low rubber prices is, in large part, constituted through identifications of rubber’s dimensions beyond income alone, and notably through overtones of regional significance. For instance, the meeting in Thung Song at the end of March 2016 was organized to address the concerns of *chaosuan yang* who are unable to receive forms of state assistance because their land titles were of a category that made them ineligible to register with the organizations administering aid. These are the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund (ORRAF) or the Rubber Estate Organization (REO), state agencies whose longstanding interventions into Thailand’s rubber economies I will address in the second section of this chapter.¹⁶

After a representative of the Rubber Authority of Thailand (the larger state agency into which the ORRAF and REO were enrolled in 2015) from Bangkok addressed those seated at the meeting in Thung Song using the Central Thai dialect, an individual affiliated with a coalition of *chaosuan yang* from Trang Province (to the southwest of Thung Song District) then took the podium. As he was speaking on the topic of state provision of benefits to those *chaosuan yang* whose titles over land holdings were not clear (and thus

ineligible for receipt of aid), he followed the speaker from Bangkok by using Central Thai. Shortly into his speech, though, a loud voice from the back rang out and interrupted him: “*laeng phasa tai!*”, or “speak in southern Thai!” (said in the southern dialect)^a The speaker switched, even though listeners in the room could perfectly understand Central Thai.

Another person in the audience got a turn to speak shortly thereafter and remarked, in southern Thai, that being a *chaosuan yang* is an “*achip*”, whose definition he emphasized through contrast, “it’s not a position nor a duty.”^b *Chaosuan yang* whom I interviewed in southern Thailand consistently appealed to *achip* to identify the role played by rubber in their particular communities, e.g. stating that rubber is the “*achip lak*”, or “the main livelihood.” *Achip* derives from the Pali, *ājivā*, which also translates into livelihood.¹⁷ The Pali language is central to scholarship and practice in Theravada Buddhism, and thus a distinction between *achip* and ‘job’ is significant in a country where close to 95 percent of the population identifies as Buddhist (The World Factbook 2018). Indeed, schoolbooks draw attention to the importance of *achip* in students’ own educational growth, and Buddhism is a core part of curricula. For instance, a book I received from a village school in Phatthalung Province, designed for use with students in grade 6 (ages 11-12), includes seven sections, and the third chapter is titled *Dharmic Principles*. In this chapter’s section on the Buddha’s teachings, students learn about the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths: suffering, causes of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path to end suffering. This fourth teaching has eight constituent parts (i.e. the Noble Eightfold Path, which is depicted by the Wheel of Dharma). The fifth of these, *The Right Living*, is described as follows: “leading an honest

^a March 30, 2016, Thung Song District, *chaosuan yang*

^b March 30, 2016, Thung Song District, *chaosuan yang*

livelihood (*achip*), not deceiving, and not doing things that cause harm to others.” (Phra Raphin and Phra Mahamanat 2016, 28, my translation) Thus, it is reasonable to infer that a language distinction, such as that voiced during the meeting in Thung Song above, is at least somewhat revealing of how people may convey/perform their experiences participating in the rubber economy.

Furthermore, during direct conversations, people often emphasized being at a loss for other income sources, e.g. “if I didn’t plant rubber, then what would I do?”^a One informant put this more dramatically: “if I didn’t tap rubber, I’d die”^b, and another remarked that “[we] eat with rubber”^c. On a brief return visit in July 2017, an informant whom I had first met during the primary period of my research in 2015 and 2016 told me that she had never entertained the idea of ceasing to grow rubber and switching to a different undertaking—of rubber, she said, it is the “first livelihood, last livelihood”, or “*achip raek achip sutthai*.”^d To be sure, this informant, as well as several others, also favorably compared rubber against what they thought could be suitable alternative land uses, namely fruit trees: reasons given showing preference for rubber included fruit spoiling and rubber yielding households a bit of income each day. Moreover, income from rubber is still relatively higher, even with lower prices (see the calculation in Chapter 2 above).

Themes of history and legacy were also prominent as media through which to convey more-than-personal relationships with rubber, which in turn speaks to the

^a June 18, 2015, Ron Phibun District, *chaosuan yang*

^b August 8, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^c September 6, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^d July 3, 2017, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

intersections between rubber and place: an individual remarked that her connection with rubber today “goes *all the way* back to [her] ancestors” (“*banphaburut loei*”) ^a. Other informants used words such as ‘grandparents’ (*‘pu ya ta yai*), ‘from the beginning’ (*‘tang tae doem*’), among others to articulate the amount of time that people had been growing rubber in a particular village, sub-district, or district. Venturing into her anatomy, another said, “tapping rubber is in [my] veins” ^b, telling me that she did not take any time to learn how to tap trees when she first started looking after her own plot. To be sure, these types of comments are clearly performative, if not sensationalized; nonetheless, their tones emphasize rubber as a mainstay and arguably a form of inheritance—as a type of livelihood which preceded these informants’ own lives.

Despite several sub-districts in the lowland areas of Cha-uat having lengthy histories of lowland rice cultivation, and specifically not rubber, households who had undertaken the laborious task of changing land from paddy to rubber plots within the past ten to twenty years nonetheless brought their own relationships with rubber in line with a broader southern, regional frame: in one low-lying sub-district of Cha-uat, for instance, an informant recalled that just over ten years prior villagers had mainly relied on paddy, but since then lots of rubber had been planted. She contrasted the practice of growing rubber in the Northeast, saying “not much is tapped [there]”, with the South, i.e. “it’s by all means the main [livelihood].” ^c Such comments bring forward senses in which rubber-as-livelihood is often construed and conveyed not only in terms of an historical, local contingency (e.g., parents to children), but also to an important extent conceptualized as configuring within a

^a July 30, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^b August 21, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^c August 31, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

broader, regional geography of southern Thailand. As I will next illustrate, in southern Laos a more antagonistic set of relationships is apparent.

3.1.2 Enclosures and wage labor

For many in Attapeu and Xekong Provinces, in southern Laos, I learned—through a brief excursion in the middle of June 2017 when I joined my advisor and a graduate student colleague—that rubber does not represent the sort of stability and guarantee of income that had been conveyed through interviews in southern Thailand. Across a number of villages, a similar story emerged: in the early 2000s Vietnamese companies (e.g. Hoang Anh Gia Lai and the Vietnam Rubber Group) were granted concessions to land by the Lao government on land that had mainly been deemed fallow or communal forest land, i.e. not in paddy, and had planted rubber. However, the land had clearly been used by villagers for swidden, grazing, non-timber forest product (NTFP) collection, and so on. Critical scholarship on these concessions in southern Laos, such as that from Baird (2011) and Kenney-Lazar (2012), situates their origins and consequences within Marxist frames of primitive accumulation, or what David Harvey (2003) referred to as ‘accumulation by dispossession’, to highlight these processes as ongoing and not as historical artefacts. These studies call attention in particular to how, despite the array of negative outcomes for villagers’ livelihoods, the Lao government frames concessions with appeals to developmental discourses.

One morning we spoke with a group of tappers (belonging to the Alak ethnic group) who had already collected latex and were waiting by the side of the road for a company

truck to come.^a They told us that they receive about \$0.16 per kilogram for wet latex (latex without accounting for the percentage of dry rubber) and remarked that the lower-bound payments made by the company are around \$0.11. By contrast, people I had interviewed in and around Cha-uat were receiving over \$0.40 per kilogram of wet latex during times of some of the lowest price points while I was carrying out research in 2015 and 2016. These tappers in Attapeu told us that no one has their own rubber plots; all rubber belongs to the company. Again, this contrasts by and large with my experiences in southern Thailand. Even in cases where people did not have their own rubber plots, and were hired to tap, wages were paid out according to a percentage share of total latex sales. That afternoon we met more people who had quite negative impressions about rubber's encroachment, namely that the companies had entered and took the land, leaving villagers with little to nothing—again a contrast, where smallholder tenure in Cha-uat and surroundings is quite the norm.

The following day we spoke with a woman who had just returned from collecting and selling latex. She conveyed to us that there is now no other work aside from tapping rubber, and that the little paddy land that remains is surrounded by rubber; there is no land left to plant other crops, she said. Another individual we met later in the afternoon at his house was clearly distraught about what had happened: he had grown crops on about 10 ha of land before the Vietnamese company came, he said, and then he was left with a little over 1 ha, on which he plants cassava. He had no interest in engaging in rubber cultivation or tapping. Clearly, concerns and senses of encroachment on livelihoods are rooted in land loss as well as absence of ownership over the rubber trees and their yields.

^a June 18, 2017, Attapeu Province

As we were interacting with the groups of people who had finished tapping, I thought about similarities to what I had encountered in Cha-uat: despite the hot weather, people wore trousers, rubber boots, long-sleeve shirts, and hats; having been awake the night before working in the dark, they were resting and chatting idly while waiting to deliver latex. On the other hand, beyond the work clothes and implements needed to tap that were familiar to me, the contexts giving rise to these morning moments in Attapeu and those in Cha-uat were clearly very different.

In an effort to contextualize and situate further what I learned through my fieldwork in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung provinces, I will proceed with the following anecdotes from brief visits to Phitsanulok Province in northern Thailand in 2013 and 2017. In two of the province's districts—Wang Thong in 2013 and Nakhon Thai in 2017—I met people who would consider themselves southern Thai, having grown up and spent most of their lives in provinces such as Nakhon Si Thammarat and Songkhla, before either moving to Phitsanulok full-time or spending parts of the year in the province. By considering the case of southern Thais and rubber outside of the southern Thailand, I hope to provide an additional point of contrast that highlights the ways in which narratives about livelihoods and dependency on rubber do not bear an essentialized relationship to place, but rather are emergent through particular historical-geographic circumstances. I hold that these are primarily due to the prevalence of—largely inherited—smallholder plots that provide households with the majority of their income needs.

3.1.3 “*khon tai khao mi nguen no*”

“Southern people have money, eh.”

July 20, 2017, said by my seat neighbor on a bus to Ban Yaeng Sub-District, Nakhon Thai District, Phitsanulok Province (northern Thailand)

Phitsanulok Province is located about 400 kilometers north of Bangkok. Rubber is a fairly recent entry into the agricultural economies in Phitsanulok, and since planting first started in the early 1990s, the amount of land under rubber has increased substantially, from under one thousand *rai* in 2003 (under 160 ha) to over 27,000 *rai* in 2013 (over 4,300 ha) (oae.go.th). The situation of rubber in Phitsanulok first got my attention in 2013, when I was conducting research for my MS thesis. In July of that year, I had seen an article online from the *Daily News*, a widely read newspaper in Thailand, reporting that the governor of the province joined police officials in opening up an operation called, “*Return the Forest to the Land.*”¹⁸ The group was investigating sections of a national forest reserve in Wang Thong District, after learning that investors from southern Thailand had begun illegally to develop over one thousand hectares of the forest into a rubber plantation. Twenty-nine people were arrested in total. Earlier, in May of that year, villagers in a sub-district of Wang Thong joined police and forestry officials to investigate a site where they believed southern Thais were developing a rubber plantation in the forest reserve (*Rubber Journal Asia*, May 12, 2013). They found that forest had been cut and land plowed; a rock garden (which attracted tourists) had been damaged. According to authorities, the rubber plantation could threaten local water supplies during the dry season (*Rubber Journal Asia*, May 12, 2013).

The rubber trees planted in these sites were clearly associated with (or responsible for) adverse environmental and economic impacts that resulted after planting. However, the story does not end there; readers of the *Daily News* column also learn that the planters were investors, or *nai thun* in Thai (*nai* = male honorific, *thun* = capital). I was in Phitsanulok shortly after these news stories were published. Traveling east from the city center along Route 12 of the Asia Highway Network, shops, restaurants, and roadside stands selling fruit spring up every kilometer or so on either side of the road. At one point, off to the left, a large banner tacked on the front side of a one-story building advertised varieties of southern style curry on sale inside. Well-known images of southern Thai shadow puppet characters (see Chapter 5 below) decorate the sign. The proprietors, as I found out over lunch, are originally from Songkhla Province and had moved to Phitsanulok some years ago.

Further down the road from the restaurant a nursery encompassing several hectares sells rubber saplings. Like other nurseries I saw in Wang Thong, the sign on the front advertised that the nursery sold trees of the “Surat breed”. This refers to trees that *chaosuan yang* in Surat Thani Province grow. I stopped in at the nursery during my stay and had a chance to speak with the owner, an elderly woman originally from Surat Thani herself. When I arrived, she was sitting on a bench over a pile of tree roots measuring about one foot each. With a knife she had stripped bark from the roots and set them aside to graft later on.

During our conversation she explained that she had come to Phitsanulok roughly seven years prior to start a rubber plantation, but she returns to Surat Thani periodically throughout the year to check on her rubber plots there. “Land became expensive in the

South”, she said, and she told me she could purchase comparatively quite a bit of land in Wang Thong. “People from the South first came to Wang Thong to plant rubber”, she continued, “because there's no more land left in the South, no more space. After the Southerners began their plantations here, local people followed”. For this reason, she decided to go into the business of selling rubber saplings. “Are the conditions in Phitsanulok good for growing rubber?”, I asked. “The weather and soil quality are fine, but the rubber quality is better in Surat”, she responded.

One informant I interviewed, a longtime resident of the district, expressed her feelings about southern people in Wang Thong—particularly the rubber investors—emphatically. She had been working on a road construction team and spoke with me while on her lunch break. “There’s so much!”, she exclaimed, when I asked her about rubber plantations there. “It [rubber] has caused lots of problems here”, she continued. “About eight years ago there was no rubber in Wang Thong, but now a lot of the forest has been destroyed.” “The trouble with this”, she said, “is that there has been much more flooding than in the past.” Forsyth and Walker (2008) discuss that such comments are reflective of widely accepted, and often very selective, popular narratives about the relationships between forest-clearing and the hydrological cycle—specifically that deforestation leads both to reduced local rainfall as well as the loss of a “forest sponge”, the latter potentially leading to sudden flash-flood events. In contrast to the story I was told here, though, Forsyth and Walker show that these narratives are politically charged, often targeting the farming practices of upland ethnic minority groups.

At a coffee shop near the nursery I spoke with a man who had lived in Wang Thong District his entire life. We eventually came around to talking about rubber in the district. He

considered the reasons that people from southern Thailand first came to plant to be threefold: firstly, they believe it is safer here than in the South. He was making reference to ongoing turmoil and conflicts between separatists and the Thai military contained in three of the country's southernmost provinces, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat.¹⁹ Secondly, land is cheaper in Wang Thong. Lastly, and related to the second point, land in the South has become scarce. Except for the first, the last two points align with those made by the nursery owner I spoke with. The first point, about safety, reflects a perspective that I heard often outside of the South, especially while conversing with people in northern or northeastern provinces. People warned of violence in the South, despite the fact that conflicts have rarely gone beyond the borders of the three provinces noted, and often remarked that Southerners in general were "hot-hearted" (*chai ron*), a Thai phrase meaning impatient, hasty, easily frustrated and irritated.

The man did not believe that there were many outright problems between northern and southern people in Wang Thong, but he was quick to offer his opinion of southern people: "They are more American-minded and think in terms of themselves first." This he contrasted with northern people and northern culture. "Southern Thais coming here ought to try and understand northern culture", he said, "but many of them do not or they fail to make a serious attempt". "What this means [concerning rubber]", he continued, "is that they carry their ideas about growing from the South and apply them in Wang Thong without regard for the local environment and the people living here". He also reasoned that planting rubber is a direct cause of damage to forests in Wang Thong.

Although moments of outright conflict, such as those that the news stories discussed above brought to light, are not explicit in these two informants' comments, it is crucial to

observe, particularly during the last conversation, how rubber itself enters into expressing difference. That is, in the process of explaining how people from the South ‘are like that’ whereas those of the North ‘are like this’, southern peoples’ deployment of certain growing practices forms a part of the explanation. Of course, this might come as little surprise, since many southerners went to Phitsanulok precisely to plant rubber.

In light of the ways in which informants in and around Cha-uat drew rubber into senses of regional belonging, and moreover mobilized these to challenge rubber’s cultivation in other Thai regions, the central topic of Chapter 6 below, what are we to make of the phenomenon wherein southerners themselves are the ones planting rubber outside of the South? To what extent does this dismantle the associations that people hold to obtain between rubber and Thailand’s South? As the news stories cited above indicate, the individuals planting rubber illegally in Phitsanulok were held to be investors, suggesting that they are different types of growers than the smallholders with plots under eight hectares which comprise the majority of Thailand’s growers (e.g. Parinya et al. 2002, Viswanathan 2008). This difference, I contend, is crucial to take into account when looking into the scope and content of these regional identity narratives.

As the quote at the beginning of this sub-section suggests, southerners who have come to plant rubber are often viewed as ‘having means’: on the bus ride this individual pointed to large houses on the sides of the road, which she said belonged to southerners. The prior day I had spoken with someone in the district center of Nakhon Thai.²⁰ This person said that there are many people from the South in Nakhon Thai, but they primarily live outside of the district center, in villages where they have planted rubber. Most of them “have means” (“*mi thana*”), she said, and most buy large plots, hundreds of *rai* in size.

However, they hire local people to look after the plot. She said that her neighbor is from Thung Song, in Nakhon Si Thammarat. He told her that in Phitsanulok latex yields are higher, but the amount of dry rubber content (DRC) is lower in comparison to the South. She didn't understand what he meant, exactly, as she does not have rubber holdings.

As I had learned from this individual and others that Ban Yaeng Sub-district in Nakhon Thai District was host to substantial rubber planting, in July 2017 I traveled there on a bus from the district center to see if I could learn something about southerners coming to plant rubber. I disembarked in the sub-district's main market area and learned from the vendor at a chicken and rice shop (I looked around but could not find any southern curry shops) that I would have to go a full twenty-five kilometers from the market, to a remote village, to connect with southerners who had come to plant rubber. Without any transport of my own, I decided to backtrack to Nakhon Thai and stop along the way, should I spot a place selling curry and/or a latex-buying site. Fortunately, I located the former.

The shop owner found it amusing that I used some phrases in the southern dialect with her. I ordered sour curry (*kaeng som*) and had a chance to sit and speak with her and explain why I was in Nakhon Thai—PhD research in southern Thailand on rubber, I'd heard that lots of people from southern Thailand had bought land to plant rubber in Nakhon Thai. She told me that her parents are both from Nakhon Si Thammarat, her father from Tha Sala District and her mother from Hua Sai District. They had come to plant thirty *rai* of rubber about ten years ago because land was inexpensive. She had joined them recently, within the past couple of months. Another customer came to eat about ten minutes after I had sat down, and he and the shop owner chatted a bit—in southern Thai. After a few minutes I joined in the conversation and explained to him as well that about my interest in rubber

and why I had come to Nakhon Thai. We spoke for a while in the restaurant, and then as the rain started, he offered to give me a lift back to Nakhon Thai center, as buses ran infrequently. However, we did not return to the district center immediately; he took me on a bit of a tour around Ban Yaeng first, on roads winding through thick plots of rubber, which made him remark more than a few times, “just like the South!” (“*muean phak tai loei*”). I learned that he is a lawyer in Bangkok, but he is originally from Na Bon District in Nakhon Si Thammarat. He had grown up in a household that grew rubber but had gone to Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok for his studies and went into a career in law. His wife is from the Northeast, so he said that in their house they only use the Central Thai dialect together with their children.

On the advice and invitation of another person from Nakhon Si Thammarat, who had come to Phitsanulok some years ago to plant rubber, he had decided to purchase 60 *rai* of rubber in Nakhon Thai. He transferred the money for the land purchase to the same person, but he did not bother to go himself to Phitsanulok to see what he had purchased. When he finally did come up to check on the plot, he found it was only 30 *rai*. He told me that this happens often, but he decided not to take any action against the individual who had tricked him, he explained, because the man is old. I also learned that the two are related through marriage. At any rate, he did not seem overly concerned and told me further that he has recently bought an additional 20 *rai*; however, the rubber on this plot is not yet ready for tapping. As he spends most of his time in Bangkok, he has a Burmese family live and work on his plot. When the rubber price is high the split is 60%-40%, but when it's low, he shares 50%-50%.²¹

Most of the rubber around here was planted by people from the South, he said, and some, but not many, locals also plant rubber. Furthermore, he maintained, if it hadn't been for Southerners planting first, then local people would not have followed suit. This person had some rather positive views on planting rubber in Phitsanulok: he told me, for instance, that rubber is beneficial for the land around Nakhon Thai. It's like a forest, so it has helped make the land less arid, he said. This view is quite opposite from the narrative of forest destruction cited in the *Daily News and Rubber Journal Asia* articles as well as the fact that, as Mann (2009) notes in a study on Chinese investment in rubber plantations in northern Laos, rubber can stress water tables since latex extraction leads to greater root uptake to replace supplies lost during tapping. Additionally, when leaves fall during the dry season in February, the soil has less surface area to trap dew, which adversely impacts other vegetation in the forest drawing on the dew during these dry periods for their water (Mann 2009). Moreover, the supposed environmental benefits of rubber are further questionable in consideration of the impacts of increased planting toward biodiversity, as authors such as Ahrends et al. (2015) and Ziegler et al. (2009) discuss. Concerning increasing cultivation in montane areas of Southeast Asia, Ziegler et al. suggest that establishing more forest reserves and enrolling farmers to practice forest preservation methods may curb biodiversity losses.²²

Given the low and uncertain rubber prices, I asked this Bangkok-based lawyer whether, in the future, he planned to continue planting rubber. His trees are years away from needing to be cut down, he said, but he reasoned that he would probably replant with rubber. He continued, rubber can be left alone; it does not require lots of active maintenance. This is actually a point that was brought up often by informants in southern

Thailand, who also cited the relative ease of looking after rubber in comparison with other forms of agriculture. After all, rubber is a perennial crop, meaning it does not need to be replanted each year.

The narratives that I will consider in the following chapters bring the practice of both growing and tapping rubber into a southern regional identity narrative more broadly. That, as I will show, the southern Thai geographies of rubber are cited—and, I would also contend, defended in light of falling prices—courses in tension with the above observations that, in Phitsanulok at least, southern Thais themselves are the ones spearheading rubber planting outside of the South. This complication, while important to take note of, also underscores a key socioeconomic dimension of the identity narratives I encountered through my primary fieldwork in southern Thailand: many, perhaps not all but certainly a fair number, of the southern planters in northern Thailand tend to have the financial means enabling them to invest in landholdings and furthermore are not the primary caretakers of their plots. This is not the experience of the majority of the people I had the chance engage with in southern Thailand. For the most part plots were inherited, and families maintain and tap their trees instead of hiring others to do these tasks. Some people I spoke with work on others' (often belonging to relatives) holdings as well as their own, while some work exclusively as hired tappers. In all cases, though, the people whom I interviewed are Thai. Conversely, as I learned through fieldwork for my Masters thesis in 2013 during interviews in provinces such as Chumphon, Surat Thani, and Ranong, like this individual in Nakhon Thai, many landowners hire workers from Myanmar, a topic I focused on in my master's thesis (Shattuck 2013).

3.1.4 Synthesis

The above anecdotes serve to provide points of contrast with the evidence that I present in the following chapters, showing, for instance, how issues involving rubber and southern transplants in northern Thailand do not directly speak to senses of regional belonging and identity. These points suggest that the narratives I consider below should be interpreted alongside the inflections of socioeconomic factors that differentiate the groups whom I met from others involved with rubber elsewhere. Importantly, through presentation of contrasting anecdotes, my intent has by no means been to romanticize peoples' engagements with rubber in and around Cha-uat District—to argue that rubber is laden with religious virtue, which it transmits to those who cultivate it. As the above evidence from Laos and Phitsanulok suggests, rubber's entry into and presence in agricultural livelihoods clearly renders senses of insecurity, uncertainty, and concern about the types of environmental and social harms that its cultivation can bring. Rather, during a period of widespread duress caused by low rubber prices, the information gained during the time in which I conducted my fieldwork pointed toward the ways in which many people have long relied on a smallholder rubber economy and have difficulty envisioning other options to meet household income needs. This dissertation is a story about rubber, but more specifically it is a study about the ways in which longstanding experiences with rubber, situated in a particular place, are enrolled as media of negotiation over positionality in a set of production relationships. Claiming that the Thai state, especially, is held through obligation to intervene becomes a key refrain.

3.2 Institutionalized, Regional Legacies of Rubber in Thailand

In addition to reasons I will elaborate in Chapter 4, it is not terribly surprising that protests over rubber prices were most active in Thailand's southern region, given that the agricultural economies of these provinces have long relied on cultivating rubber (points which were also emphasized through my own conversations with informants), of the species *Hevea brasiliensis*. Since *H. brasiliensis* was introduced to Thailand in the late nineteenth century, it has mostly been cultivated in the South as well as in provinces to the southeast of Bangkok; however, prior to the Second World War cultivation of rubber in southern Thailand was actually rather limited (Phopphan 2015). To note, the species is not endemic to Southeast Asia, never mind Thailand.

H. brasiliensis is one of ten species from the genus *Hevea* that evolved in the Brazilian Amazon. It is cultivated extensively for its latex, the key input used in manufacturing rubber (Clément-Demange et al. 2001), and histories of European exploits in the Amazon, colonial holdings, and twentieth-century industrial growth all help to explain the current distribution of *H. brasiliensis* worldwide. In 1876, Henry Wickham, a British naturalist, received orders from the British India Office to collect 70,000 seeds of *H. brasiliensis* from the Rio Tapajos region of the Upper Amazon to transport to the Kew Botanic Gardens outside London (e.g., Priyadarshan 2011). Of those seeds, fewer than 3,000 germinated, of which 1,911 were then sent to botanical gardens in Sri Lanka; further rounds of breeding and domestication were carried out in states of British Malaya, the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Sumatra, and Java in the 1880s (Priyadarshan 2011). Seedlings from the Wickham Sri Lanka collection were then distributed further afield, and the current

coverage in Southeast Asia is believed to have come from this original stock (Imle 1978, Simmonds 1989).

Although there is some dispute about how, exactly, rubber trees first arrived in Thailand at the end of the nineteenth century, there is consensus that Khosimbi Na Ranong, the governor of the Trang *monthon*, was largely responsible for introducing rubber to villagers in what is present-day Trang province (see Figure 1.8 above) (Duangphon 1997, Phinyo n.d., Rubber Research Institute of Thailand 2012a, Suwit et al. 2012).²³ Khosimbi was appointed governor in 1890, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V). During this period, territories neighboring the Siamese were colonized by either Great Britain or France (e.g. Laos in 1893), causing anxiety and leading Chulalongkorn to revamp the administrative system by dividing Siam into six *monthon* (Phinyo n.d.; see also Thongchai 1994). One of these was Phuket, on the southwest coast, which was an important source of tax revenue; however, the *monthon* seat itself was established in Trang—a strategic place from which to mobilize armed forces in an effort to keep the peace (Phinyo n.d.). In addition to being responsible for crime suppression and building up travel and communications infrastructure, Khosimbi is largely credited with promoting agricultural development projects (Duangphon 1997; Phinyo n.d.). At the time, many farmers in Trang were growing black pepper for export. However, large numbers had fallen into debt due to low prices, leading Khosimbi to request a loan from the government in Bangkok to use for agricultural development programs—e.g., encouraging farmers to plant betel nuts, coconuts and coffee, which he justified partially on the tax revenues that would result (Phinyo n.d.). When rubber was introduced, it was viewed as a way to ensure that rural incomes would not suffer too heavily when the prices of pepper, coffee, and nutmeg

dropped (Duangphon 1997), in other words as a means of diversifying agriculturally. At first, villagers were reported to have boiled rubber seeds to eat, rather than trying to plant them, as was the original intent of providing them; thus, a good deal of convincing had to be done (Duangphon 1997, Phinyo n.d.). When rubber began to take hold in Trang's agricultural economy in the early twentieth century, prices were high, and Duangphon (1997, 72, my translation) notes, "one could therefore refer to that time as the period of awakening to rubber. The villagers called it "the governor's rubber"."

Suwit et al. (2012) write that between 1917 and 1920 there were policies in place from the Thai government to have Chinese migrants, who had moved north from the Malay Peninsula, plant rubber along the route traveled by the railway from Hat Yai Junction down to the national border in order to keep in check pressures from the British. Reasons to support planting—on rather large holdings—among Chinese migrants in particular, Suwit et al. note, were due to their possessing knowhow about rubber, either from having once been owners of rubber plots themselves or having once been hired to work on others' rubber plots. Non-Chinese Thais planted later using seeds collected from the Chinese planters' holdings after noticing that these were successful (Suwit et al. 2012).

Although *H. brasiliensis* trees are noted to grow best within a five-degree margin of the equator, generally with an annual rainfall that ranges between 2,000 and 4,000 mm. (Rao and Vijayakumar 1992), rubber has more recently made substantial entry into the agricultural systems of what researchers such as Priyadarshan (2011, 144) refer to as "non-traditional rubber-growing areas" (see Table 3.1 below)—in Thailand, above 13 degrees latitude, or essentially to the north of Bangkok. Some researchers rightly attribute these expansions in large measure to institutional research efforts to breed tree clones that

foster improvements in yields, growth, disease resistance, and mitigate abiotic stresses such as drought or low temperatures (Clément-Demange et al. 2007, Priyadarshan 2011), while other work seems to downplay the role of new clones, especially in Thailand: based on fieldwork in northeastern Thailand's Bueng Kan Province, Songchai (2014), for instance, reports on his informants' recollections from the early 1980s at being surprised to find that rubber, without modifications, could be planted there. In Chapter 6, as I discuss responses to state-led efforts to extend rubber into northern and northeastern Thai provinces, I will attend to the differences in productivity (i.e. latex yields) that vary due to factors including not only distance north of the equator but also locally-specific constraints such as soil quality and altitude.

These geographical extensions notwithstanding, the concentration of rubber among both agricultural land uses as well as agricultural livelihoods is pronounced across many of Thailand's southern provinces. Data from the 1963 Agricultural Census carried out by the National Statistics Office show that rubber was planted in all fourteen southern provinces as well as the eastern provinces of Rayong, Chanthaburi, and Trat.²⁴ No provinces in the northeastern or northern regions of the country had reports of rubber counted in the Agricultural Census at the time. By the time of the 1993 Census, those growing rubber began to appear in some northern and northeastern provinces, but the numbers were still very small compared to those in southern provinces. By the 2013 Agricultural Census, however, the situation had changed markedly, and rubber had become a substantial part of the agricultural economies of all regions in Thailand (Table 3.1)—though, relative to other agricultural land uses, still small.

Region	Percentage of Agricultural Holdings Under Rubber Cultivation		
	1963	1993	2013
Central	6.3%	3.6%	8.2%
North	-	0.1%	4.4%
Northeast	-	0.5%	12.1%
South	47.3%	61.4%	71.2%

Table 3.1 The expansion of rubber in Thailand (Source: National Statistics Office, decennial Census of Agriculture (nso.go.th))

Beyond the sheer geographical differences across Thailand, it is also important to observe how the concentration of rubber in agricultural livelihoods (holdings planted to rubber as a proportion of total agricultural holdings) has increased markedly—although, the share of holdings within the central provinces did decrease in the thirty years between 1963 and 1993. In fact, data from Thailand’s population and agriculture census of 1947 indicate that the share of rubber across holdings in southern Thailand was less than half of that in 1963 (Registrar Division 1947): in this census, there was no unique entry for rubber; rather, it was grouped as an ‘other’ category, shared with fiber crops such as jute, and as such the 22% shown in the census across the southern provinces likely over-represents the amount of rubber actually planted. At the provincial level in 2013, five southern provinces were reported to have rubber holdings as a percentage of all agricultural holdings at over 80%, according to that year’s Census. While the share in Nakhon Si Thammarat was just over 60%, just above that of Rayong Province in Central Thailand, it was over 22% higher than that of Loei, a province in the Northeast with the highest number of rubber holdings as a share of all agricultural holdings.

Furthermore, recalling from Table 2.1, which shows the areas of rubber, oil palm, and rice broken down by sub-district in Cha-ua, the share of the area planted to rubber

ranges from 96% to 99% in the four sub-districts that form the mountainous western edge of the district, bordering Thung Song District and Trang Province. For the district as a whole, the share is comparatively lower, at 86% of all land under agriculture. These figures clearly do not account for other types of agricultural undertakings, such as fruit, so they may overstate actual shares. However, from my observations large-scale fruit planting was not a widespread activity; instead, households often kept fruit trees for personal consumption. Despite incidences of local variation—Nakhon Si Thammarat, as well as a number of other southern provinces, have extensive coastlines which, if not articulated into the tourism economy, often are host to other sorts of pursuits, such as aquaculture—the prevalence of decidedly regional narratives attending to rubber critically signals processes of framing, which in turn convey imperatives toward what ought to comprise appropriate governance.

It is important to acknowledge how the increasing concentration of rubber in agricultural livelihoods over the twentieth century could be attributed to the orchestration of state-led efforts. In the early 1950s, bodies within the Thai government began to take a significant interest in expanding the country's smallholder rubber economy. Especially after rubber became the second largest export after rice in 1955, the Thai government projected that rubber would provide sources of national income in the future (Kitti 2009). In his doctoral thesis, Wichit (1986) writes that Thailand incurred substantial debt during World War II, owing in part to the inability to export. After the war's end, the government sought to grow the economy through exports, and, owing to rubber's high postwar demand in industrialized nations, began to take substantial interest in supporting rubber cultivation.

Two state organizations were particularly instrumental in actively supporting the development of a smallholder rubber economy in Thailand, the Rubber Estate Organization (REO) and the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund (ORRAF).²⁵ The REO was established in 1949 on lands in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province that had largely been planted with rubber by Chinese immigrants, who were evicted less than a decade prior to the Estate's founding (Rubber Estate Organization 2009). This decision seems clearly to have been a change of course from roughly thirty years prior, when Chinese migrants in Songkhla Province were encouraged to plant rubber (e.g., Suwit et al. 2012). When the REO began operations it received a loan of 3.5 million baht, which it would begin paying back to the Finance Ministry in 1951, and had five main objectives—to produce and sell smoked rubber sheets; to produce and sell latex; to use up-to-date research in order to provide demonstrations as well as do research on planting through the establishment of experimental plots to produce high-yielding clones; to be a place of practice and learning about planting rubber; and to organize the distribution of high-yielding rubber varieties for the people (Wichit 1986). The REO became the center for production and knowledge-sharing of planting and techniques among smallholder rubber farmers in Nakhon Si Thammarat and neighboring provinces, and it played a significant role in expanding rubber cultivation among smallholders in nearby Chawang and Thung Song districts (Wichit 1986). The REO still maintains the objectives listed above, and has also played a crucial role in carrying out particular policy interventions, e.g. the Market Intervention Program to prop up rubber prices, which lasted from 1992 until 2002 (Rubber Estate Organization 2009).

For its part, the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund (ORRAF) was established in 1960, following the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund Act, and has maintained as its principal objectives the provision of financial assistance for replanting plots of underproducing rubber with high-yielding varieties, first-time planting in select cases, product development, and marketing (rubber.co.th). Since its start, the Fund's activities, including administrative tasks, have been financed largely from an export, or cess, tax on rubber, which is incurred at the time of export (rubber.co.th). Prior to the ORRAF's inception, villagers in southern Thailand had planted low-yielding rubber from seed, and realizing that it would be difficult to encourage people to switch to planting high-yielding clone (grafted) rubber, the cess was thus established (Kitti 2009). Tax earnings from the cess would in turn contribute to a build-up of funds to extend to growers, providing households with income to use during the approximately seven-year period from time of planting to first tapping (Kitti 2009). Kitti (2009) notes that although replanting was slow in Phatthalung and Songkhla Provinces during the first years of the ORRAF's operations, a large uptick occurred in decades following, such that by 1990 over one million *rai* had been replanted just in the two provinces. Data provided from the Office of Agricultural Economics show that in 1990 the rubber tree stock in Phatthalung and Songkhla combined was about 1.4 million *rai*.

The ORRAF started with six regional branch offices, spread among four southern provinces and one central province; branches expanded in 1968 to encompass nine provinces in the South and two in the East; not until the early 1990s was a branch opened outside of the South and Central Thailand—in the Northeast's Khon Kaen province (Ron Phibun Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund 2016). Information from an internal

document (Ron Phibun Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund 2016) provided by a district branch of the ORRAF, which is responsible for providing replanting aid to districts in the southern portion of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, summarizes that due to the successes of the ORRAF's work on providing replanting subsidies, the Fund had been unable at times to keep pace with new applications. The Thai government thus enlisted loans from the World Bank (WB) and the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) on three occasions. The first (50 million USD from the WB and 3.4 million GBP from the CDC) was intended for use to replant one million *rai* (160,000 ha) over a four-year period, 1977-1980. By the end of 1980, about 92% of this goal had been reached. Thereafter, a second loan was made (141.3 million USD from the WB, 15 million GBP from the CDC), with the aim of replanting 1.25 million *rai* over the period, 1982-1985, of which 96% was reached by the end of 1985. A third loan of 60 million USD from the WB and 10 million GBP from the CDC was made to finance replanting 1.25 million *rai* from 1987 to 1990. By the end of 1990, about 78% of this goal had been achieved. Following these three initiatives, a total of about five million *rai* had been replanted, a remarkable sum considering that by the time of the 1993 Census of Agriculture (carried out every ten years by the National Statistics Office), roughly nine million *rai* of rubber was planted in the southern and central regions combined—90% of this total was in the South.

By the close of the 1980s, important shifts in state interventions into the smallholder rubber economy began to emerge: while improving yields and farmgate incomes remained primary objectives, the geography of this outreach began to broaden, as parliamentary resolutions were passed to authorize financial support for rubber cultivation throughout Thailand, with the ORRAF implementing (Ron Phibun Office of the

Rubber Replanting Aid Fund 2016). State-driven experimental efforts (orchestrated by the Rubber Research Institute of Thailand) to extend rubber into the Northeast in particular had actually begun about ten years prior, in the late 1970s with experimental plots in Nong Khai, Surin, and Buriram Provinces (Badi 1985, Suchin et al. 2012). Summarizing secondary research, Suchin et al. (2012) note that individuals from the Northeast, who had spent time working on rubber plots in the South, had in fact experimented with planting rubber trees among a range of provinces in the Northeast dating as far back as the late 1950s. However, the authors contend that “the door to developing northeastern rubber was opened through the coordination of many [state agencies, such as the Rubber Research Institute, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Public Welfare, and the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund].” (2012, 19, my translation) The experimental plots in the Northeast totaled a mere 35 *rai* (5.6 ha) across the three sites (Badi 1985); nonetheless, yields were found to be comparable to those in the South and provinces to the southeast of Bangkok, thus encouraging more research into rubber cultivation in the “new rubber-planting areas of Thailand.” (Rubber Research Institute of Thailand 2012a, 13)

In 1989, Thai Parliament invoked Measure 21.2 of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund Act (1960), which states that those who have never before planted rubber—but wish to plant for the first time—may apply for subsidies from the ORRAF as long as the applicant had at least two *rai* (0.32 hectares) of land, and passed a resolution targeting 156,250 *rai* (25,000 ha) to be planted in the Northeast over a five-year period, 1989-1993. Subsidies for first-time planters across Thailand continued throughout the 1990s, and data from the Office of Agricultural Economics show the stock of planted rubber in Thailand increasing by

86% (approximately 866,500 ha) from 1990-2000, with over 59,000 ha planted in the Northeast and close to 700,000 ha planted in the South.²⁶

In the early 2000s, after the election of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who had enjoyed widespread electoral success among Thailand's rural northern and northeastern constituents (see Chapter 4 for more detailed discussion), the state focus on subsidizing rubber cultivation refined its geographical targets further and took a decidedly regional—and, importantly, non-southern—turn: in 2003, the “Program to Plant Rubber to Lift Incomes and Security for Farmers in the New Areas of Rubber Planting” was launched, which targeted one million *rai* (160,000 ha) to be planted in the North and the Northeast (National Economic and Social Advisory Council 2007). In documents, this is often referred to simply as the ‘One Million Rai Program’. The parliamentary resolution, on May 26, 2003, designated the ORRAF with responsibility for carrying out the Program, which was to be financed through a zero-interest loan of 1.44 billion baht from a public fund designated for agricultural assistance that the ORRAF would repay through cess tax revenues over a ten-year period, beginning from the time the trees started producing. Justification for carrying out the Program was on grounds that future global demands for natural rubber would continue to increase from countries such as China and India, while the amount of land planted to rubber in Thailand was constrained—in part due to a 1999 parliamentary decision that sought to cap the amount of land cultivated with rubber (Secretary of the Prime Minister's Cabinet 2003), which the May resolution terminated. Over the period 1996-2002, demand for natural rubber had outstripped supply, the resolution mentions, and while other countries in Southeast Asia (e.g. Viet Nam, Indonesia, and Malaysia) are also capable of planting, Thailand was held to have a relative advantage and could better

meet the demands of, especially, the Chinese economy, which was forecast to have import demands of 800,000 metric tons per year (Summary of Prime Minister's Cabinet Meeting, May 26, 2003). With an estimated additional output of 220,000 metric tons per year from the Program, additional cess revenues were forecast to range between 198 million and 308 million baht per year, with cess rates (export taxes) between 0.90 baht and 1.40 baht per kilogram depending on the rubber price (Summary of Prime Minister's Cabinet Meeting, May 26, 2003). As I will illustrate in Chapter 6, this particular program was often cited by *chaosuan yang* and others I met in 2015 and 2016 as the wellspring of currently low rubber price problems, an accusation worth noting in light of the large increases in rubber cultivation throughout Thailand since the early 2000s, including in the South.

Although some people I interviewed in Cha-uat and surrounding districts had not received regular assistance from ORRAF, something which was mostly attributed to the land on which rubber had been planted being under a type of land title classification—or even lacking any form of title—that made holders ineligible for subsidies, the ORRAF and REO nonetheless have a clear presence in rural southern Thailand and are very well-known agencies. In fact, people I spoke with often did not refer to these agencies using their full names; instead they simply used acronyms, “*so ko yo*” (ORRAF) and “*o so yo*” (REO). Moreover, staff from ORRAF occasionally run extension programs open to anyone interested: in August 2015, I sat in on one discussion outside of the Cha-uat District Office, in an outdoor meeting hall, where a representative from the Ron Phibun District ORRAF branch gave a presentation on ways families could increase and stabilize their income bases, e.g. by raising livestock and planting fruit.

The ORRAF and REO have been present in other capacities as well: beyond programming that targeted planting and replanting, there are additionally histories of various types of subsidy-based interventions, which have been passed through Parliament with the intention of helping *chaosuan yang* cope during periods of low rubber prices. Notably, in late 1991 a parliamentary resolution was passed that initiated “The Rubber Market Intervention Program”,²⁷ setting in motion a government-sponsored program, largely funded through loans, to purchase rubber at prices above local market prices that would last for a decade (Patthamawadi 2009, Pridi 2013). The Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund and the Rubber Estate Organization played key roles in administering finances and executing actual transactions at buying points with *chaosuan yang* (Patthamawadi 2009, Pridi 2013). Despite setting purchase prices above those in the Central Rubber Market in Hat Yai, analysts concur that the efforts were largely unsuccessful and inefficient, as there were noted instances of corruption and large debts were incurred (Patthamawadi 2009, Pridi 2013). Pridi (2013) writes that over the ten years of the Program’s duration buying prices ranged, from 4.7 baht above Hat Yai Central Rubber Market prices in 1997 to less than 1 baht per kilogram in 2000; moreover, in 2002, the Program’s purchase prices were actually lower than those in the Hat Yai Central Rubber Market. Participation in the Program was quite low, with just over 6% of all rubber produced in Thailand between 1992 and 2002 having been bought through government channels, a result which has been partly attributed to confusion among participants of the Program’s rules and regulations as well as a limit of rubber from two kilograms per *rai* per day (Pridi 2013). Lastly, both Patthamawadi (2009) and Pridi (2013) note that the

Program had very little impact on steering rubber prices more widely, i.e. those at which non-enrollees sold latex and rubber sheets.

Despite this policy's substantial limitations, both in terms of administrative efficiency as well as reaching numbers of *chaosuan yang*, I will highlight in subsequent chapters that senses of the need for a similar type of intervention and particularly a form of price assurance were nonetheless prominent—both at the time of protests in 2013 as well as during the time I conducted field research in 2015 and 2016. As I will discuss in further detail in the following chapter, by pulling from news reports from the early 1990s during which time rubber prices had also fallen, the legacies of appeals to the state for assistance provide important indicators into how people perceive of the mechanisms at work, and points of negotiation, in rubber markets.

Beyond such direct forms of intervention from the REO and ORRAF, though, the state has also been present in less obvious ways, through enabling market infrastructures in which *chaosuan yang* transact: as indicated briefly in the Introduction, Central Rubber Markets serve the important function of allowing intermediaries to set purchase prices. However, Central Rubber Markets have not always featured in Thailand's domestic rubber markets. The first, in Hat Yai, came into being in 1991 after the Deputy Prime Minister of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives had come up with a central marketing system—during which time *chaosuan yang* also contended with low rubber prices and called on the government for interventions (Suwit et al. 2012). It is widely noted among a number of Thai-language studies (e.g., Kitti 2009, Phonkiat 1994, Suwit et al. 2012) that in the past *chaosuan yang* had often faced a number of pressures from intermediaries, both mobile and in the village. These concerned such factors as rubber-sheet weight and quality

negotiations as well as price settlements, due both to asymmetric information as well as the low number of intermediaries relative to *chaosuan yang*—resulting from a lack of competition among the former, market conditions to which economists refer as monopsonistic competition. Authors such Suwit et al. (2012) maintain that the establishment of Central Rubber Markets has resulted in higher and more stable prices for *chaosuan yang*. Moreover, shortly after the beginning of the Central Rubber Market in Hat Yai, Somchit (1995) calculated that *chaosuan yang* selling directly into the Market (i.e., not transacting through intermediaries) faced per-kilogram price increases of close to 8%. While intermediaries are clearly still a central part of rubber marketing channels, as I observed through field research, the concrete actions taken by government ministries to develop marketing channels that aimed to improve the conditions under which *chaosuan yang* would transact (Phonkiat 1994, Suwit et al. 2012) should not be overlooked in light of how *chaosuan yang* themselves view their positionality among rubber markets and the state. Moreover, since 1991 Central Rubber Markets have successively been established in other locations of southern Thailand (Surat Thani in 1999, Nakhon Si Thammarat in 2001, Yala in 2008) as well as in the Northeast (Buriram and Nong Khai in 2009), and thus, “currently the central rubber marketing system has expanded its service to cover the country’s important land planted to rubber.” (Suwit et al. 2012, 45, my translation)

The above discussion intends principally to highlight the active and longstanding presence of state agencies in the smallholder rubber economy, a presence which, given rubber’s high rank in export earnings, would bridge the activity of *chaosuan yang* themselves with broader state interests. This nexus, I contend, helps to shed light on how people have perceived the legacies of—arguably supportive—administrative interventions

into the smallholder rubber economy. Such perceptions can be seen to comprise a key feature in the articulation of solutions to the widespread burdens felt by low rubber prices. Complementing these discursive angles, though, are the territorial accents that invoke senses of rubber's regional origins—and belonging—in Thailand. These claims appear to run in tension with rubber's own mobile histories and status as an exotic to Southeast Asia's agricultural landscapes, as well as the fact that rubber has also become a substantial part of the agricultural economies outside of the southern provinces.

Chapter 4: Beyond the Partisan Veil

As noted in Chapter 2, my decision to undertake field research primarily in Cha-uat District and surroundings was due to the substantial protests in August and early September 2013 that were staged over declining rubber and oil palm prices at two sites in the district, the Khuan Nong Hong highway intersection and the Ban Tun rail crossing (see Figure I.1, above in the Introduction). I chose not to designate a single village in Cha-uat or a nearby district from which to collect fieldnotes, a pool that would be representative of *the chaosuan yang* in southern Thailand. Instead, I sought to gather perspectives broadly on these events from sites nearby as well as from those which were rather distant from these protest sites: for instance, my research led me to Si Nakharin District, Phatthalung Province (about 60 km. away from the protest sites) to interview an individual who had been considered a leader at the demonstrations (and he told me as much)^a; some *chaosuan yang* I met in Tamot District, Phatthalung Province (about 90 km. away from the protest sites) contended that this particular leader had been sent by people in Yingluck's cabinet to shut down the protests at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection, by having the demonstrators agree to a lower price guarantee.^b In Ron Phibun District, bordering Cha-uat to the north, people laughed when I asked about the leader, due to the reputation of lawlessness that he and his kin have gained in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung Provinces over the past several decades.^c These divergent perspectives signal important complexities, or the ways in which these contests had brought together different types of people and interests.

^a November 18, 2015, Si Nakharin District

^b December 17, 2015, Tamot District

^c February 27, 2016, Ron Phibun District, *chaosuan yang*

I aimed to investigate how these events materialized and then, further, how they cohered within (and perhaps helped to foment) other large demonstrations in Bangkok, which emerged in late November 2013 and culminated in a coup d'état in May 2014 removing Yingluck Shinawatra from the Office of Prime Minister. However, my research was never based on a view that the contentious episodes in Cha-uat were merely a façade veiling a deeper set of partisan political struggles; rather, I also aimed to learn something about the 'place' of rubber for individuals and households whom I met, and thereby to understand the multivalent forms of politics at work at the time of the protests in Cha-uat, as well as in their aftermath when I was conducting research. The aims of this chapter are thus to discuss these events with an eye toward the complexity of their content, and in particular to set up a discussion of how they offer an entry into investigating the kind of political problem which low rubber prices come to be perceived as. I hold that the protests that surfaced in Cha-uat in 2013 should indeed be understood as a part of the broader shift of Thailand's political terrains in 2013 and 2014; however, they are precisely that—a part of this story. These events, as well as responses in their aftermath (see Chapter 5), reveal forms of political critique forged at the meeting points of collective senses both of regional belonging as well as those that the central government has been administrating through regional bias. At the same time, it is also necessary to continue to bear in mind how the protests themselves also signaled ways of renegotiating governance relationships over the production and exchange of a global commodity, a key theme in this dissertation. Insofar as they are political critiques, these concerns add important points of nuance when drawing inferences from observations of how Thailand's political polarizations have assumed regional definition.

In this chapter I will firstly address how the protests in Bangkok led by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) have been portrayed, correctly yet incompletely, as a contest between opposed partisan groups, with many people from southern Thailand who have for long voted for politicians from the Democrat Party allying and joining with the PDRC in Bangkok. I use the section that follows as a way to historicize these partisan alliances and also to offer, through a discussion on cultural resonance of the term, *phuak* (which translates roughly as close-knit in-group), that blends of local and regional identifications also help to contextualize and explain these partisan affinities. Following this I engage in a detailed discussion of the protests that took place at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection and the Ban Tun rail crossing in Cha-uat in August and September 2013. Beyond motivations to protest that sprang from falling rubber prices, I will further draw out their complexities by showing how these events were, to a degree, enabled through vibrant legacies of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). Despite the fact that the CPT has long since ended conflicts with government military and police, there continue to be both local forms of influence and mobilizing efforts among people who still consider themselves to be *sahai*, meaning 'comrades' in Thai.

In building the discussion below, I am encouraged by work from geographers such as Leitner et al. (2008) and Jessop et al. (2008), who emphasize the need to incorporate a consideration of multiple spatialities when tracing how contentious episodes unfold. For instance, Jessop et al. (2008) present a four-by-four heuristic matrix, composed of rows and columns labelled territory, place, scale, networks, not only to discuss what these features are in their own terms, but also to show how they are co-produced, as both 'structuring' and 'structured'. Interpreting the events that took place in Cha-uat as well as those in

Bangkok in months later requires giving attention, for instance, to the ways in which networks linking *sahai* with contemporary politicians and with *chaosuan yang* should be understood as co-implicated—or, as Leitner et al. (2008, 158) contend, “[i]t is not simply a question of the co-presence of the pertinent spatialities, but also how they shape one another, and thereby, the trajectory of contentious politics.” Ultimately, in this chapter I aim to consider not only how these episodes related to what occurred subsequently in Bangkok, but also how they offer clues into framing the types of political challenges that rubber presents both nationally and regionally.

4.1 Acknowledging Partisan Alliances

Before the May 2014 coup d’état, protests orchestrated by the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) had been staged for several months in different parts of Bangkok. The PDRC reflected a coalition of several groups who had been opposed to the political bodies associated with Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra (e.g., Kitti 2015, McCargo 2015, Nelson 2014, Prachak 2016, Suchit 2015). Leading massive rallies in public spaces such as Bangkok’s Lumpini Park, the *Bangkok Post* reported at the time that the PDRC, led by former Member of Parliament (and Deputy Prime Minister under Abhisit Vejjajiva, Prime Minister from 2008 to 2011) Suthep Thaugsuban, sought to “paralyse the Yingluck Shinawatra administration” (November 30, 2013). Prachak (2016, 474) writes of the diversity among the PDRC’s ranks, commenting on ex-Democrat Party politicians comprising the PDRC’s leadership, and notes further that “[w]hat united them was their common goal in toppling Yingluck and the rejection of majoritarian democracy.”

In this piece on political violence and review of the interruptions to electoral processes instigated by the PDRC and their allies in early 2014, Prachak (2016) traces the PDRC to an amnesty bill legislated suddenly by Yingluck's administration in November 2013, which would have granted pardons to all people—including, importantly, her exiled brother Thaksin Shinawatra—accused of political crimes (except for those related to *lèse-majesté*) since the early 2000s. Although motions to oppose Yingluck since her election to government in 2011 had surfaced, only after this particular piece of legislation were there sustained protests (Baker 2016). Additionally, while smaller 'flash mobs' had materialized shortly after the announcement of the amnesty bill, Baker (2016) writes that the composition of protest crowds shifted toward the end of November 2013, from young working professionals who joined demonstrations during their lunch breaks to permanent encampments at key sites throughout Bangkok.

Despite the amnesty bill eventually being halted, Prachak (2016) notes that Suthep Thaugsuban kept demonstrations going in Bangkok. Facing pressure, Yingluck's government dissolved parliament in early December 2013 and scheduled new elections for early 2014; however, these were opposed and later boycotted by the PDRC, especially in Thailand's southern provinces (McCargo 2015, Nelson 2014, Prachak 2016). McCargo (2015), in particular, notes that no ballots were cast at all in nine of southern Thailand's fourteen provinces.

Beyond remarking on the numbers of protesters occupying streets and public parks in Bangkok, scholarship on these events additionally highlights the provincial origins, in southern Thailand, of many of their participants: Prachak (2016), for instance, writes of Bangkok middle classes as well as people in support of the Democrat Party from southern

Thailand—Suthep himself is from Surat Thani. Comments McCargo (2014), “Suthep relied on upper southerners to provide core backing: they were the people who slept in tents at the rally sites in week-long rotations and served as the armed guards who provided “security” for the demonstrations ... Bangkok elites once again permitted hot-headed Southerners to do the establishment’s dirty work.” Given Thailand’s deeply divided political geographies, where southern Thais overwhelmingly vote in support of the Democrat Party while those in the North and Northeast mainly support Thaksin and later Yingluck, these discussions understandably situate such moments of opposition within a context of national political party splits (see also Kitti 2015 and Suchit 2015). Baker (2016) provides a more detailed description of southerners’ participation in the Bangkok demonstrations:

“Over a space of several weeks in early 2014, these sparse crowds were thickened by importing people from the democrat’s [*sic*] electoral stronghold in the south. At each of the protest sites appeared a tent city, mostly using one standard bivouac ... and a larger encampment appeared in Lumpini Park, much of it divided into areas for different provinces and districts from the south.” (Baker 2016, 392)

While such analyses on the political changes that occurred in Thailand in 2013 and 2014 attend to the ways in which the PDRC both mobilized people in protest against the administration of Yingluck Shinawatra for long stretches, severely disrupting electoral processes and laying the groundwork for the military’s seizure of power in May 2014 (e.g., Prachak 2016), it is less clear how the PDRC might have been able to marshal southern

support contingents—particularly by encouraging the establishment of provincial and district-level camps of the sort Baker describes—aside from identifying southerners' broad-based allegiances to the Democrat Party. In Section 4.3 below, I will show how such gestures, indicating the activation of entrenched partisan political affiliations, can be complemented and complicated by considering how the protests staged in Cha-uat District two months prior also arguably provided staging grounds for the subsequent protests in Bangkok, capitalizing on frustrations over declining rubber prices while interventions from Yingluck's administration were not forthcoming. However, I will firstly historicize southern Thais' broad-based alliances with the Democrat Party. Beyond linking episodes, my broad aims are to understand how increasingly consolidated votes for the Democrat Party across southern Thailand may also relate to the ways in which people portray their experiences with rubber and envision ways of the central government's attending to the difficulties imposed by volatile and falling rubber prices.

4.2 Toward Polarized Political Geographies

The 2013 protests in Cha-uat were not without precedents. In fact, protests and/or pressures to organize over rubber prices occurred intermittently, particularly in Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, in the early 1990s. As Sophon et al. (2014) summarize, such events at times made their way onto the floor of Thai Parliament for discussion. One set of protests in Thung Song District took place during the last two weeks of February 1990 and was covered almost daily in the *Matichon* newspaper, read across Thailand.²⁸ Protesters from Nakhon Si Thammarat and nearby provinces, joined by some student leaders from

Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok, called on the government (at the time under the leadership of Chatichai Choonhavan) to guarantee rubber prices. Moreover, they took to quite forceful statements and actions, including organizing a hunger strike that led some to be taken to the district hospital (*Matichon*, February 24, 1990). They also sent a letter to Chatichai Choonhavan using the blood of nine volunteers (*Matichon*, February 26, 1990). Similar to the events in Cha-uat in 2013, protesters' calls to alleviate the burdens of low rubber prices were framed squarely in terms of government accountability and responsibility.²⁹ One of the protest leaders argued that the government was unwilling to take action and intervene to support rubber prices in part because of the benefits politicians receive from large exporting firms, which make donations to political parties during election periods (*Matichon*, February 25, 1990). This protest leader further contended that these firms have business in all parts of the rubber industry; moreover, the companies are networked ("*sai yong yai*") with Singapore and Malaysia. Similar ideas of ties between politics and business as well as the outsized power of exporting firms came up during my interviews in and around Cha-uat District as well. I hold that these types of statements, while perhaps broadly construed, should not be discounted. At the very least, they reveal ways in which people frame the means to address rubber prices, i.e. through public channels. In line with what I will discuss below (as well as in Chapter 5), ideas that concerns have been ignored are also not without precedent: in early 1991, *chaosuan yang* were again preparing to protest in Thung Song, and a column in *Matichon* contended, "it must be acknowledged that the troubles resulting from low rubber prices have consistently been neglected by governments. This has caused feelings among the majority of

communities of *chaosuan yang* that the government is not sincere in addressing these problems.” (February 7, 1991, p. 8, my translation)

During the first decade of the 2000s, rubber prices were rather steady and generally trending upward, and I am unaware of any protest events during this period on par with the magnitude of those in Thung Song in 1990 and then in Cha-uat in 2013. Even during the period of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 and 2009, when rubber prices experienced a precipitous decline, I did not find reports of protests. However, after prices began seriously falling from their early 2011 peaks (around 170 baht/kilogram, or \$5.50 USD/kilogram), protest events started to become more numerous. To note, these events involved fewer demonstrators and did not entail road blockades like those at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection in 2013. In January 2012, for instance, about one hundred *chaosuan yang* gathered in Satun Province at an intersection in the provincial capital, trying to recruit others to join them in their pleas for government intervention to support rubber prices (*Thai Rath*, January 10, 2012). The protest’s leader announced that if Yingluck’s government did not respond to their demands, they would drive trucks carrying tanks of latex to Bangkok to empty in front of her house. A variation on this threat was actually followed through in nearby Trang Province’s capital city in August of that year. There, about one thousand *chaosuan yang* from the province’s ten districts gathered in the city to call for government assistance to alleviate the duress falling rubber prices were causing them (*Thai Rath*, August 20, 2012). They contended that their troubles were due to economic unfairness, in which farmers are at a disadvantage relative to people whose incomes derive from industry. A series of demands was directed at Yingluck’s government: a price floor, an increase in the number of rubber-buying shops in each district, and

keeping corruption in check by making sure “Red Shirt politicians and industrialists don’t take advantage of the budget [allocated to ensuring price stability].” (2012, my translation) The protesters gave the Prime Minister’s Office fifteen days to respond to their demands. Finally, they dumped two containers filled with liquid latex onto the street outside of the provincial courthouse. During those events there was clearly more at play than farm price grievances alone, as the comment on Red Shirts indicates.

The Red Shirts, officially called the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, formed in opposition to the September 2006 coup d’état that ousted Thaksin Shinawatra (Yingluck’s older brother) from the Office of Prime Minister. Thaksin had founded the *Thai Rak Thai* Party in 1998, and, although his earlier campaigns had been largely urban-focused, he “tried to capitalize” on rural discontent and developed a populist position, particularly over indebtedness, announcing in 2000 a moratorium on rural debt (Somchai 2006, 218). Walker (2012) notes that Thaksin’s popularity in Ban Tiam Village, in northern Thailand’s Chiang Mai Province, sprang from his support for local development programs, such as grants provided to the village to construct a community rice mill, as well as implementation of universal health coverage, costing patients a mere 30 baht (around \$1 USD) for most treatments. The Red Shirts’ base of support is composed mostly of people from the rural North and Northeast, as well as parts of Bangkok’s working classes (many of whom originally come from the rural North and Northeast).

In 2001, Thaksin campaigned against southerner Chuan Leekpai of the Democrat Party, who had served two terms as Prime Minister in the 1990s, and won. Elections for Parliament in 2001 resulted in the *Thai Rak Thai* Party gaining 248 seats, while the Democrat Party came in second place, with 128 seats. In Nakhon Si Thammarat, victors of

the province's ten voting jurisdictions were all with the Democrat Party. Four years later, during the 2005 election, the balance tipped to an even greater extent in the favor of *Thai Rak Thai*—375 seats against the Democrat Party's 96. Again, all ten seats for MPs in Nakhon Si Thammarat went to those candidates from the Democrat Party. Such was the case in forty-two out of the remaining forty-four voting jurisdictions in the southern provinces. In Narathiwat Province, three seats went to Democrats and one to a candidate from the *Chat Thai* Party; in Phang Nga one seat went to a Democrat and the other went to a candidate from *Thai Rak Thai*.

After Thaksin was elected the second time, he faced allegations including *lèse-majesté*, corruption, tax evasion, and, as Walker (2012, 191) contends, that “the Thaksin government's electoral mandate was [seen as] illegitimate because it had been bought from an unsophisticated and easily manipulated rural electorate.” Protests leading up to the coup had been staged by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or Yellow Shirts, an anti-Thaksin protest group founded in early 2006 and composed principally of people from Bangkok's middle classes as well as people from southern Thailand. After the coup in 2006, the Thai military appointed General Surayud Chulanont as interim Prime Minister, and the Constitutional Court of Thailand dissolved the *Thai Rak Thai* Party. In early 2008, Peoples' Power Party (PPP) candidate Samak Sundaravej was elected Prime Minister, yet Samak and the PPP were viewed by many as Thaksin's proxies (Walker 2012). In September 2008, the Constitutional Court ruled against Samak, alleging that his hosting two television cooking shows while serving in political office violated Thailand's 2007 constitution, forcing him to resign (e.g. Kitti 2009). PPP member Somchai Wongsawat was elected as Prime Minister by the National Assembly (Thailand's parliament) shortly thereafter.

Members of the PAD demonstrated, and in late November 2008 the group occupied Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport, leading to massive flight cancellations. Protests ended the day after the Peoples' Power Party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court in early December 2008 amid allegations that the party's deputy committed electoral fraud (Suchit 2015). Somchai was then removed from office. Following the siege, Chaovarat Chanweerakul, then Deputy Prime Minister, was installed as a caretaker prime minister until elections could be organized. In mid-December 2008 Democrat Abhisit Vejjajiva was elected Prime Minister. Given that prior electoral victories went to the *Thai Rak Thai* and the Peoples' Power Party, both having been dissolved by this point, it is rather curious that Democrat Abhisit would win this time around. However, Kitti (2009, 181), pointing to the splintered political allegiances in late 2008, notes that the breakaway Friends of Newin Group (led by former *Thai Rak Thai* cabinet minister Newin Chidchob) from the PPP after the latter's dissolution "paved the way" for the election of Abhisit Vejjajiva.

In the aftermath of the election, the Red Shirts contended that democracy in Thailand had been undermined, and that Abhisit came to power illegitimately in 2008 (Suchit 2015). From March to May 2010, they staged large-scale demonstrations in Bangkok, calling on Abhisit to hold new elections. The protests ended on May 19th in violent clashes between protesters and the Thai military, resulting in scores dead and thousands injured. In the introduction to a series in the online journal, *Cultural Anthropology*, Aulino et al. (2014) refer to the turbulent political climates in Thailand over the past several years as a "wheel of crisis", which they contend "has increased its rotational speed since the 1997 Asian economic collapse." While Aulino et al. acknowledge the central role of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in this tumult, they

additionally draw attention to the decades leading up to Thaksin's victory in the 2001 general elections over southern Democrat PM Chuan Leekpai, during which time Thailand experienced substantial economic growth.

Year-on-year average annual growth in real GDP between 1980 and 1995 was close to 8%; from 2000 to 2010 it was close to 4% (databank.worldbank.org). Aulino et al. remark on the shifts in Thailand's economic foundations from the provinces to Bangkok, such that, as Glassman (2003) argues, the effects of the 1997 crisis exhibited widely ranging geographies. Appealing to a framework of sub-national cores and peripheries, Glassman notes, for instance, that while Bangkok's core economy experienced the crisis directly, peripheral rural Thailand was expected to absorb unemployed internal migrant laborers returning to their home provinces. Aulino et al. (2014) comment on the dissatisfaction felt by many in Thailand over government efforts to recover from the crisis, and that Thaksin "capitalized on [these conditions]."

After the violence of May 2010, elections were eventually scheduled. The *Phuea Thai* Party, formed around the time of dissolution of the PPP, named Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's younger sister, as their candidate, and she won in the July 2011 general elections—265 parliamentary seats to the *Phuea Thai*, 159 to the Democrats. Provinces in Thailand's North and Northeast remained "Thaksinite strongholds" (Pasuk and Baker 2013, 614); moreover, these regions "had developed a similar attachment to the Thaksinite party across elections since 2001." (Pasuk and Baker 2013, 619) In contrast to the South, whose citizens comprised 14% of the nation's population in 2011, the combined population of the North and the Northeast was over 52% in 2011 (34% in the Northeast, 18% in the North) (nesdb.go.th). The number of seats in Thailand's parliament subsequently varies regionally:

in the 2011 election, the southern provinces together accounted for fifty-three seats out of a total 375. Certainly, then, targeted political campaigns at northern and northeastern voting constituencies could secure the Prime Minister's seat without (or with low) support from voters in Thailand's fourteen southern provinces.

In light of the rural-urban economic divisions in Thailand which both Aulino et al. (2014) and Glassman (2003) indicate, one is apt to raise the question of why voters in rural southern Thailand would not have joined in the push to elect *Thai Rak Thai* MPs to Parliament (and Thaksin to Prime Minister) in the elections of 2001 and 2005. Indeed, over the period 2000 to 2010, the average annual growth rate of real gross provincial products, aggregated at the level of the region, was 3.5% in the South, 3.7% in the North, and 4.2% in the Northeast; that of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province alone was a mere 1.8% on average per year (nesdb.go.th). Moreover, according to figures from the 2003 Agricultural Census conducted by Thailand's National Statistics Office, the majority of farmers in the South, the Northeast, and the North reported annual earnings from agricultural activities of no more than 50,000 baht—71%, 78%, and 73%, respectively. In Nakhon Si Thammarat Province itself, the total was 80%. However, aggregate macroeconomic growth indicators and reports from statistical surveys could hardly serve as comprehensive measures to gauge people's political leanings, in particular why southern constituencies have voted overwhelmingly for the Democrat Party since the early 1990s, in contrast to those in other parts of Thailand. Various scholars, both Thai and non, have sought to explain the particular successes of the Democrat Party in southern Thailand.

In his extensive treatment of the very question as to why the Democrat Party has held such sway, in the text, *Performing Political Identity: The Democrat Party in Southern*

Thailand, Askew (2008) offers insights, many of which were reflected during my own interviews with people in and around Cha-uaat, highlighting the importance of cultural ideals in configuring electoral prospects. Drawing from research conducted in Songkhla Province, Askew writes, “politics can be viewed as “sociodrama,” and the symbolic competition that is central to this process invariably involves the manipulation of cultural categories, for the obvious purposes of claiming legitimacy and undermining opponents’ claims.” (2008, 11) Although problematizing essentialized depictions and characterizations of southern Thai people and culture, and thereby contesting culturalist explanations behind the Democrat Party’s maintaining a hold in southern elections, Askew nonetheless comments on the crucial, instrumental functions of southern culture for politicians’ pursuits. It is worth quoting him at length:

“Through symbols attaching themselves to place and to trustful relationships, people in southern Thailand, as elsewhere, constantly objectify their identities in order to position themselves in certain situations, individually and collectively. Southerners claim that they are distinctive because they are highly conscious of their honor, and are incorruptible, plain speaking and truthful, unconditionally loyal to *phuak* [a close-knit network, an in-group], and that they are canny political analysts. In turn, to make themselves “legible,” politicians attempt to harness and magnify the power of these symbols and identifications at multiple levels.” (Askew 2008, 16)

Throughout, Askew remarks on the ways in which Democrat Party candidates position themselves as embodying a particular, longstanding ideology, or *udomkan* in Thai, and subsequently that “[n]on-Democrat politicians are invariably portrayed as weak in their fundamental commitment to party and ideology (*udomkan*)” (3). In campaigns, then, he shows how Democrat politicians would contrast the party oppositional to a corrupt other, in particular—during the time of his research in 2004 and 2005—Thaksin and candidates campaigning with the *Thai Rak Thai* in Songkhla Province. As a concept itself, the *udomkan* of the Democrat Party is difficult to put into precise wording, as Askew shows—“ordinary supporters in Songkhla have difficulty explaining just what this *udomkan* is” (2008, 295)—however, he nonetheless remarks on its centrality for the Democrat Party in securing its electoral dominance for southern constituencies.

One of the more tangible elements that Askew discusses (see also McCargo 2005 and Charun 2004), and which came through during my own interviews, was the influence held to originate from former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, of Trang Province (which neighbors Nakhon Si Thammarat). Chuan served two terms as prime minister in the 1990s, from 1992 to 1995 and then again from 1997 until Thaksin Shinawatra was elected in 2001. Askew contends that “Chuan’s particular significance to the south ... is based on a symbolism that articulates with the particular blend of paradigms—individualism, egalitarianism, fierce collective loyalty, and assertiveness—that southerners habitually attribute to their ideal selves.” (300) Notably, Askew points to Chuan’s visible embodiment of *udomkan*—in apparent contrast to Thaksin and the *Thai Rak Thai*. In photographs included in *Performing Political Identity*, Askew draws attention to the ways in which Democrat MP candidates would appeal to associations with Chuan during campaigns in

Songkhla Province in 2004 and 2005, namely by placing Chuan's photo next to that of the candidate in question on campaign billboards.

McCargo (2005), in the piece, "Southern Thai Politics: a preliminary overview", discusses Chuan's successful electoral outcomes through his association with former Prime Minister Prem Tinnasulanond from Songkhla Province. Charun (2004) elaborates:

"The political displays of southerners' voting have been linked to notions that there is an inseparable connection with the Democrat Party to the point that it has become a display of localism or regionalism. ... Vote-seeking policies emphasized, "support Chuan Leekpai for Prime Minister, vote Democrat and lift up the team/lift up the region."" (2004, 15, my translation)

McCargo (2005) further emphasizes these solidarities through discussion of the land reform scandal in 1995, which involved Suthep Thaugsuban and turned many Thai voters away from the Democrat Party in other regions except for the South (see also Charun (2004)).³⁰ In his treatment of trends in voters' attachments to particular political parties (as opposed to individuals, who have been apt to switch parties before elections), Hicken (2013) regards southern voters' longstanding attachments to the Democrat Party as an exception rather than the rule in consideration of electoral outcomes across Thailand.

Arguably, though, another theme in Askew's text addresses more specifically the formations of political power in southern Thailand: the concept of *phuak* or *phakphuak* (see also Sarup 2009). *Phuak*, Askew (2008, 22-23) writes, "refers to a particular type of bonded or purposive social collectivity ... [it] has a highly inclusive resonance when articulated by

[its] members.” (22-23) For instance, in discussing the roles of vote canvassers, or *hua khanaen*, being particularly crucial in rural areas to garner support for candidates they appeal to local networks and strong relationships, e.g. “*phakphuak* [roughly, in-group] solidarities” (Askew 2008, 245). Suthiwong (2001), in an historical account of sources of influence at village levels in southern Thailand, remarks on the importance of one’s being considered “a wide person—a big person”, signifying one to whom other people show deference. Suthiwong additionally writes of the role that large familial and friendship networks play in leading to someone being considered as such.

Beyond Askew’s observations, the *phuak* concept, in particular as it denotes a sense of place-based belonging, is widely viewed as having substantial resonance in and for people of southern Thailand. In early 2015, not one year after the Thai military had seized power, Thai scholar Nithi Iaosiwong published an article in the journal, *Matichon Online*, entitled, “Southern Thais’ Phuak and the Democrat Party” (February 16, 2015). Nithi, who is in agreement with Askew about Democrat politicians’ relying on southern Thai identity ideals for political gain, relates construction of this particular regional identity (*attalak*) to the construction of *phuak*. He holds that for southern Thailand the latter carries particularly strong meaning, more so, he contends, than the translated equivalents in other regions, such as the Northeast’s “our home” (“*ban hao*”). This is not due to any essential characteristic or disposition held to belong to southern Thai people themselves, he contends, but rather is rooted in different histories and geographies. “One responsibility of identity”, Nithi writes, “is construction of *phuak*.” Seeing *phuak* thus as a construction, he draws this out with reference both to an earlier, more direct entry of southern villagers into circuits of capitalist exchange (through engaging in export agriculture such as rubber)

and even to the organization of rural homes—in the South homes tend to be more spread apart from one another, he writes. The latter would have fostered characteristics of individualism to a greater extent and thus, “when facing changes of the modern era, *phuaks* were quickly forged because individuals on their own would not have had bargaining power in Thailand’s modern era.” (my translation) Strong ties with the Democrat Party, he continues, can be understood in light of this sense of bargaining power.

In agreement with Askew’s position, and echoing Charun (2004), Nithi remarks that southern Thai identity is a critical instrument used by the Democrat Party for its successes throughout southern Thailand: “It’s such that southern people feel that the Democrat Party is just another type of identity for southerners.” (Nithi 2015, my translation) Perhaps bearing some resonance with discussions in recent literature on regional identity more broadly (e.g. Cresswell 2013), Nithi also contends, “even if “identity” is not something real, one cannot deny that when it is something people generally attach onto, it is likely to have an effect on people’s conduct and it connects people as a lasting group.” (my translation)

This is also a point McCargo (2005) raises: in his review of work addressing depictions of identity and culture in southern Thailand, a discussion in which he engages to offer some thoughts on political leanings in the South, McCargo at once critiques accounts that seem to support notions of rather fixed, essentialized characteristics, contending, “[o]verreliance on cultural explanations of political behavior clearly involves serious analytical dangers.” (2005, 27) On the other hand, he continues, “it is not possible simply to discount received ideas about “regional characteristics” as mere stereotyping, since—accurate or not—such images may serve to inform and even partly to shape the character of politics in the South.” (2005, 28)

Notable about Nithi's arguments is the way in which he draws out the particular implications of *phuak* in and for the South, as he discusses an identity construct that is itself embedded in wider socioeconomic contexts of historical changes in Thailand—not essentialized traits of southerners themselves, in other words. In fact, to distinguish *phuak* as the focus of this piece from *phuak* overall (whose use to convey sense of group belonging, he notes, is found throughout Thailand), Nithi employs the term, “new type of *phuak*”. Here, I do not aim to evaluate the extent to which Nithi's inferences on *phuak* formations in southern Thailand have arisen as a result, for instance, of early articulation into capitalist relations; nor do I intend to weigh the relative importance of *phuak* in southern Thailand against its usage in other regions of Thailand. Rather, these remarks and observations on the resonance of *phuak* in southern Thailand are critical to consider insofar as people in southern Thailand themselves would embrace and operationalize the *phuak* concept in conjunction with shared senses of regional belonging and justification for partisan alliances.

Indeed, as the following interview excerpts demonstrate, conceptions of *phuak* linked with regional identity are not merely analytical points in the literature on southern Thai (political) culture. The word came up often throughout my interviews during fieldwork in 2015 and 2016. For instance, during a group conversation at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection with roughly five people who are vendors in the daily evening markets (but who also have rubber smallholdings), we talked about whether, after the demonstrations had subsided there in 2013, anyone had traveled to Bangkok to join in the demonstrations being led by Suthep Thaugsuban.^a One person laughed and responded

^a October 27, 2015, Cha-uaat District

emphatically, “Oh yes, yes!” Regarding Suthep, another explained their decision to participate, “he’s from the same place as we are, we’re all southerners.” The first person then continued,

“the same region, [we’re all of] the South, the same region. It doesn’t matter if we’re from Nakhon [Si Thammarat], Phatthalung, Songkhla, we’re in the same *phakphuak* because we’re in the South.”

I asked for a bit of clarification, and she responded by emphasizing language: “when you meet someone and you speak [with them] in the southern language, they’ll love [it/you].” She and others added that *phakphuak* might extend to people from Prachuap Khiri Khan (the southernmost province of the region, Central Thailand) as well; although they then agreed that most people there speak Central Thai, so the province is like an “in-between area.” “But we speak only southern Thai with each other”, she then remarked.

One *chaosuan yang* in Nang Long Sub-district, with whom I spent a considerable amount of time in February 2016 (e.g., helping her to collect latex in the mornings), admitted one day that while she had voted for Chuan Leekpai in the 1990s, when Thaksin campaigned she voted *Thai Rak Thai*. As noted above, votes for *Thai Rak Thai* (Thaksin) throughout southern Thailand were substantially in the minority. Concerning reasons behind her prior votes for Chuan, though, she said, “southern Thai people have to elect southerners.”^a She then commented that during Abhisit Vejjajiva’s run for prime minister,

^a February 15, 2016, Cha-uat District. Note that there is technically a degree of inconsistency here, as the candidate who campaigned against Thaksin in 2005 was born and raised in Surat Thani Province. Nonetheless, her explanation gesturing at regional solidarities is worth noting.

her relatives and neighbors liked him because, despite his not coming from southern Thailand, he was associated with Chuan (in the senses that Askew and others address above).

On a few occasions I spoke with a village headperson in the Khao Phra Thong Sub-district of Cha-uat, who made similar remarks. As a village headperson, she is also a vote canvasser (*hua khanaen*) for multi-term Democrat MP Aphichat Karikan. Aphichat represents the voting area of which Cha-uat is a part. I asked whether there was ever any difficulty in persuading people in her village to cast votes for Aphichat. No, “it’s so easy”, she said.^a As to why villagers continue to vote for the Democrat Party candidate as opposed to others, she said voting Democrat is like a belief (“*khwam chuea*”), and further, “southern Thais don’t toss each other aside.” A challenger to Aphichat’s seat would also likely be local (or from southern Thailand at the very least), yet her comments strike a performative tone that emphasizes regional congruence with the Democrat Party.

In the 2011 general election, when Yingluck was elected as Prime Minister, Aphichat ran against Anant Khlangchan (of the *Chat Thai Phattana* Party), which, in comparison with elections in other districts of southern Thailand, resulted in a closer finish: 52,444 votes against 25,048. To an outside observer, this must have seemed like a landslide victory for the Aphichat, the Democrat candidate, to be sure, but in each of the other eight voting jurisdictions the runner-up to the Democrat winner received noticeably fewer votes—a mere 5% of the Democrat candidate’s votes in the eighth jurisdiction and 12% in the fifth. This village headperson recalled that at the time villagers liked Anant; however, “he was with the wrong party.” Over dinner one night in Tamot District, Phatthalung Province, one

^a May 18, 2016, Cha-uat District

of my hosts was of the mind that *phakphuak* has a lot to do with why southern people vote for Democrats; this goes back to Chuan Leekpai, he said.^a

A different village headperson, in Ban Cha-uat Sub-district (Chulaphon District), commented that Aphichat Karikan's success as a long-running MP in Nakhon Si Thammarat owed in part to his relationship to famous past politicians in the province, e.g. "he's Chamni's [Sakdiset] junior."^b Furthermore, he held that peoples' votes in his village and others nearby have less to do with a candidate's particular policy positions and promises. During Thaksin's campaigns he couldn't recall there being a *Thai Rak Thai* candidate running for the MP seat in the jurisdiction (there was, Akhom Suannop, who campaigned with the *Thai Rak Thai* in both the 2001 and 2005 elections and received a mere 18% and 23% of the Democrat vote, respectively, in the voting jurisdiction of which Chulaphon is a part).

Importantly, though, this individual also conveyed an ambivalence that I heard often: "Thaksin's running [of the country] ... well, there were advantages." Such a sentiment was not uncommon: other informants often remarked that when Yingluck was Prime Minister the rubber prices were much higher than they were at the time of my research, e.g. "Yingluck made the rubber price go up."^c Another said that they ate better when Yingluck was the Prime Minister.^d A village-level latex buyer in Cha-uat said of Yingluck, "she might be skilled, but she's corrupt."^e As the village headperson from Khao Phra Thong said, "deep down, [she and other village headpersons and sub-district leaders (*kamnan*)] like Thaksin",

^a January 26, 2016, Tamot District, *chaosuan yang*

^b May 26, 2016, Chulaphon District

^c May 13, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^d October 15, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^e July 2, 2015, Cha-uat District, Latex Intermediary

in light of the better state of the Thai economy during his time in office compared with the current administration of Prayut Chan-ocha.^a However, she then discussed how it was a problem that, during lead-ups to the general elections in 2001 and 2005, Thaksin was not concerned to be engaged with villagers in southern Thailand: “Thaksin never came [here]”, she said, and recalled that in the South he had only campaigned in Hat Yai, and maybe Phuket as well—centers of business and tourism. Indeed, while I conducted research for my MS thesis in 2013 in Thailand, I had often heard phrases such as, “*samrap Thaksin mai mi phak tai*”, or “for Thaksin there is no South.”

Drawing both from scholarship addressing political identities in southern Thailand as well as the ways in which people narrated, to me during interviews, reasons that the Democrat Party sweeps votes across constituencies, it is clear that solidarities such as those reflected through the *phuak* concept register and resonate broadly, in turn elevating the role of collective senses of regional belonging in configuring political consciousness. These discussions help to situate and demystify the polarized political geographies displayed in elections since Thaksin’s entering office in 2001—crucially, many people feel that they/southerners more generally have been edged out of national political discourses. At the same time, I do not contend that these political outcomes should be interpreted as having produced entrenched and uncomplicated partisan affiliations, which could then simply be activated at particularly critical political moments—such as in the months leading up to the coup d’état in May 2014. Rather, I have drawn attention to *phuak* relationships in particular because of the ways in which these conjure strong geographical imaginaries—both local and regional—and in turn have been drawn into the construction

^a May 18, 2016, Cha-uaat District

of political solidarities as well. I will conclude this section by briefly considering these foundations; in Section 4.3 I will incorporate them into a discussion of the supports underlying the protests in Cha-uat in 2013.

The building blocks of solidarity

Importantly, it should be acknowledged that the Democrat Party has not always maintained regional dominance, i.e. since the constitutional monarchy was established in 1932. Prior to Chuan Leekpai's campaigns in the 1990s, elections in Nakhon Si Thammarat oscillated between the Democrats displaying a clear majority in parliamentary seats (all nine were filled by Democrats in 1983 and 1986), to Democrats being in the slight minority (three out of eight in 1979 and four out of nine in 1988). Similar election results appeared in neighboring Trang and Phatthalung Provinces—although no Democrats were elected in Phatthalung in 1988. In a recently published political ethnography, Thammasat University professor Anuson Unno (2017) contends that the personal popularity of Chamni Sakdiset, a multi-term MP from Nakhon Si Thammarat Province and one whom the village headperson cited above recognized as wielding influence on Aphichat Karikan's eventual political successes, outweighed party affiliation for quite some time. Although Chamni eventually joined ranks with the Democrats, Anuson writes that his popularity early on (in the 1970s and 1980s) owed more to his personal record and reputation, namely as someone who had been a student leader in the uprising of October 14, 1973 (which led to the end of a military dictatorship).

Through ethnographic research in a district just to the east of Cha-uat, Anuson reports from older informants that people favored Chamni because of this personal history,

and they viewed him as someone fighting for justice and the wellbeing of the poor. After the October 6, 1976 massacre at Thammasat University,³¹ Chamni went into the forest, or *khao pa*—a euphemism for one’s joining up with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) (Anuson 2017). After a few years, Anuson notes that Chamni ‘left the forest’ and then ran unsuccessfully for parliament on a few occasions in the 1980s but was then elected as a candidate with the Progressive Party along with Witthaya Kaeopharadai and Sutham Saengprathum in 1988. The three politicians gained substantial popularity as a group throughout Nakhon Si Thammarat,³² and they again won in the September 1992 elections. Sarup (2009, 310, my translation), drawing from interviews he conducted earlier, in 2001, cites information provided by an elderly informant in Cha-uat’s Ko Khan Sub-District (Mai Siap Village) who commented on Chamni’s being “the flesh and blood [*“lueat nuea chuea khai”*] of people around Mai Siap Village who had once gone into the forest. He [Chamni] has had an opportunity to be on the national political path until this day.” In the 1992 elections, the remainder of Nakhon Si Thammarat’s six parliamentary seats went to Democrat Party candidates. Anuson contends that although other jurisdictions in the province had voted strongly Democrat since 1986, the reason that the party did not sweep the entire province in the 1988 and 1992 elections was because the party “could not insert itself into the area of “Chamni-Witthaya-Sutham”.” (Anuson 2017, 90, my translation) In subsequent elections, then, the Democrat Party brought these three into their ranks, instead of sending other candidates to compete against them. During a one-on-one interview with me in early 2016,^a Witthaya Kaeopharadai—who became a key PDRC leader in 2013 and 2014 (e.g., *Independent News Network* 2014)—credited Chamni Sakdiset for

^a January 10, 2016, Nakhon Si Thammarat City District

his own decision to enter politics. He attributed this to Chamni's reputation and involvement in fighting the right-wing military dictatorship in the 1970s—justification which is not a little ironic, given Withthaya's own role in the ascendance of a government ruled by the military since 2014.

In December 2015, Aphichat Karikan sat with me for an interview at his home in Cha-uat.^a When I asked him why people in Cha-uat protested falling rubber prices in 2013, even though they had not done so during other times in the past when prices had fluctuated, he responded by saying that Cha-uat had once been “a sensitive area” and a “red zone” for more than thirty years. Furthermore, he remarked on the CPT's influence in the South and commented, “the subconscious mind is still in the next generation, to struggle with government officials.” Aphichat additionally maintained that the demonstrations in Cha-uat were “a political issue”, a demonstration against the Yingluck administration itself. He continued, “I think it's a political negotiation.” A short while later, though, he emphasized his own distance from the evolution of the demonstrations in Cha-uat:

Aphichat: When they have a demonstration, all of the VIPs, the key men of the [Democrat] Party, they have power to set the crisis. They have power to set the crisis.

Shattuck: The price crisis?

^a December 23, 2015, Cha-uat District. Given that Aphichat had long taught English in a Phatthalung City school, we conversed in English for much of the interview. Thus, these excerpts are not translated from Thai.

Aphichat: The demonstrations. They will back the demonstrations. I think, I think they will back the demonstrations. But, I am MP here, I didn't know because the big brother is behind me.

Shattuck: Oh, I see.

Aphichat: Uhh! There is some big brother!

Shattuck: Like Suthep, or other people?

Aphichat: In the South, Suthep [Thaugsuban], Thawon [Senniam], umm Chamni [Sakdiset], Witthaya [Kaeopharadai]. They have influence and they could manage or arrange the demonstration in the area at the time.

Aphichat then described how, after protests had subsided in Cha-uat, the demonstrations moved to Bangkok, to join with Suthep Thaugsuban. A key question to emerge from Witthaya's description of a past leading him into politics, the continuing favorable view of Chamni among villagers that Anuson (2017) encountered through fieldwork, and Aphichat's comments on inherited lessons and legacies is, what prior activity of the CPT could additionally reveal about the contentious episodes in Cha-uat in 2013, which in turn intersects with partisan-political leanings. On the other hand, CPT legacies, important as they might be for understanding the emergence of solidarities with the Democrat Party and moments of contemporary political mobilization, ought not to be inferred in isolation from the broader context of the widespread and multigenerational participation in the smallholder rubber economy facing price troughs and lackluster response from an administration felt broadly to represent other regions' interests. In the following section, which addresses the protests in Cha-uat in more detail before returning

to a consideration of the CPT's legacies, I thus investigate how considering such political-economic constellations helps to decenter the work of partisan identities elaborated in this section from narratives of political change in 2013 and 2014, opening up clearer pathways into enquiring about the politics in/of rubber itself in southern Thailand.

4.3 The Paths of Protest

At the time of the protests at the Khuan Nong Hong highway intersection and the Ban Tun rail crossing, the Thai media referred to those who had gathered as “rubber mobs” (“*mop yang*”), which mainly comprised *chaosuan yang* who blocked access along these major road and rail corridors, respectively. Thousands from Cha-uat and surrounding districts as well as southern provinces further afield gathered to call for the national government to step in and set up price floors of 120 baht per kilogram for Grade 3 unsmoked rubber sheets. The roadblocks were reported to have “paralyzed” the traffic (*Thai Rath*, August 23, 2013) for weeks.

For Khuan Nong Hong especially, a highway intersection formed by the north-south Asia Highway (which travels down into Malaysia) and by a smaller, though no less important route that provides a key transport connection between Nakhon Si Thammarat City in the east with Krabi City in the west, a number of people commented to me on the location's geographical significance for the South as a whole, acknowledging the widespread participation of those from outside of southern Nakhon Si Thammarat Province and northern Phatthalung Province. For instance, early on in my field research in 2015, one informant referred to the intersection as a “central point”, or “*chut klang*” in Thai

for people from around southern Thailand.^a One *chaosuan yang* similarly remarked on it being a center or middle-point, “*pen sun klang*.”^b Another *chaosuan yang* believed large protests had happened there because of it being a highway intersection, where a protest would call attention and put pressure on the government.^c One soldier, part of a security detail for a visit by former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to the main temple in Khao Phra Thong Sub-district (a few kilometers to the south of the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection), commented on the geography of Khuan Nong Hong’s roadways as making it a strategic location for a large protest: “it’s hard to avoid”, he said, or “*liao yak*” and further remarked that many people from other provinces, such as Krabi and Trang, as well as sites further afield in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung had come to join in protest at the time in 2013.^d The financial tolls of the protests were estimated to be steep. In an interview with the *Thai Rath* newspaper, the administrator of the State Railway of Thailand estimated a daily loss of around 4 million baht (\$125,000 USD) since the protests had begun the week earlier, on account of the closures in Ban Tun (*Thai Rath*, September 3, 2013). The spokesperson for the Thai Transportation and Logistics Association cited an increased cost of 15 million baht (close to \$500,000 USD), as trucks transporting goods had to plan detours in excess of three hours in order to avoid the protests at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection (*Thai Rath*, September 3, 2013).

Around the time of the blockades staged in Cha-uat, groups of *chaosuan yang* in northern and northeastern provinces also gathered in protest; however, these

^a April 26, 2015, Cha-uat District, sub-district headperson

^b September 10, 2015, Chulaphon District

^c July 27, 2015, Pa Phayom District

^d May 25, 2015, Cha-uat District

demonstrations were smaller and relatively short-lived by comparison. Plans were in place there to partake in nationwide road closures scheduled for early September, but people eventually backed away from doing so and agreed instead to government assistance in the form of fixed payments per *rai* of land planted to rubber: 2,520 baht per *rai* (roughly \$500 USD per hectare) for up to 25 *rai* (*Thai Rath*, August 29, 2013). However, many in southern Thailand were not so easily swayed. For example, on September 15th, less than one week after the government had agreed to this per-*rai* subsidy, demonstrations continued in Cha-uat as protesters repeated their calls for the 120 baht per kilogram price guarantee (*Thai Rath*, September 16, 2013). On September 16th violence broke out with the police, which resulted in the burning of eleven police vehicles (*Thai Rath*, September 17, 2013), after teargas was deployed to clear demonstrators from the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection. Demonstration leaders had also been arrested then; however, about two weeks later they were let go of police custody and demonstrators agreed to open the roadway—conditional on the government agreeing within a seven-day period to guarantee rubber prices at 100 baht and oil prices at six baht, or else another round of protests would take place (*Thai Rath*, September 28, 2013).

In late September, protest numbers had dwindled at the Khuan Nong Hong intersection, yet mock coffins of both Yingluck and Thaksin Shinawatra were burned on the highway median (Figure 4.1).³³ One of the protest leaders, who had played an instrumental role in shutting down the Ban Tun rail crossing and sat with me for extended interviews on two occasions, presented a series of five demands (*Thai Rath*, September 25, 2013): (1) a price guarantee of 100 baht per kg. for unsmoked rubber sheets, which would take care of *chaosuan yang* whose plots lack land titles [and therefore would not be eligible for the per-

rai subsidy noted above]; (2) the government not pressing charges against protesters; (3) the government ceasing to use force to intimidate protesters; (4) the governor of Nakhon Si Thammarat Province ceasing to deploy the force of a law designed to mitigate so-called public hazards in the protest areas;³⁴ and (5) the government responding to the above four demands within seven days, or else the group will raise the level of protests in Prachuap Khiri Khan [about 450 km. north of Cha-uat]. To note, although protests staged by *chaosuan yang* in Bang Saphan District, Prachuap Khiri Khan Province had been taking place simultaneously, the numbers were much lower, around 350 people in early September (*Thai Rath*, September 5, 2013). This leader, in an interview at his home in Ban Tun, told me that he spent around twenty days total at the protests in Prachuap Khiri Khan prior to joining student groups protesting in Bangkok on November 3rd.^a



Figure 4.1 Mock cremation. (Photo: *Thai Rath*, September 25, 2013)

That the demonstrations in Cha-uat intersected with broader political concerns was picked up widely in Thai media at the time, and these events should indeed be understood as cohering within a larger framework of Thailand's polarized political landscapes, as

^a October 22, 2015, Cha-uat District

discussed in the previous section. Importantly, over 2012 and 2013 the Thai government (under the leadership of Yingluck) had in place a generous rice subsidy program, pledging farmers a guarantee of 15,000 baht per metric ton, well above market prices at the time.³⁵ The announcement of this program in 2011 was seen as instrumental in helping Yingluck secure a win in the general elections from rural voters in the North and the Northeast (e.g., *New York Times*, February 7, 2013), where a great deal of Thailand's rice is grown.

Although there is also some paddy in southern Thailand, whose holders were likewise entitled to the subsidy, might southerners, especially the many *chaosuan yang* throughout southern Thailand's fourteen provinces, have felt slighted or neglected by policies whose targets were de facto regionally defined? Former Bangkok Post editor Veera Prateepchaikul thinks so. In an article entitled, "Colour divide hampering rubber price talks", Veera argues that low rubber prices were not the most critical concern reflected in protests over falling rubber prices; rather, "[i]t is the government's attitude toward the southern rubber planters which may be influenced by the colour-coded political divide." By this is meant the Red Shirt-Yellow Shirt splits discussed in the previous section. It is worth citing Veera at length (*Bangkok Post*, September 2, 2013):

"[w]hile the government can dig deep into the coffers to support rice farmers with the full knowledge that it will have to bear a huge loss of up to 100 billion baht and the grim prospect there may not be enough space in warehouses to store the new rice, it appears the same government is reluctant to set aside, say, 20-30 billion baht, to help shore up the rubber price. ... Apparently, the rubber price issue has become

more complicated because it has been politicised by both sides of the colour-coded political divide, especially with the biased attitude towards the protestors.”

Similar to these comments, articles in the weekly news publication, *Matichon Sutsapda*, also identified political angles at the time of the demonstrations in Cha-uat. One column (Salaya 2013) contended, “although there are many factors that lead to low rubber prices, the current protests in the South calling for price guarantees have been viewed by the [Yingluck] government as a “political matter”” (11, my translation), signaling accusations that the concerns of *chaosuan yang* themselves were not actually organizing and driving the demonstrations. The piece discusses the rice pledging program through terms suggesting political favoritism: “there are questions that continue to come back to the government: why is it that the rice purchasing program isn’t based somewhat on the world market prices, and further, when will it end, this program which does not require rice farmers to pay anything back?” (11, my translation) To be sure, the material implications on rural households of such differential treatment should be treated as significant in building an interpretation of why and how frustrations accumulated and manifested into protest in southern Thailand in 2012 and 2013.

In early October 2013, the protest leader cited above presented three questions to Yingluck’s cabinet after the passage of seven days without a response to the series of demands (*Thai Rath*, October 3, 2013): firstly, he asked why the government was willing to support the prices of other agricultural goods such as rice, and “as such there are questions about selectivity and the dissatisfaction of *chaosuan yang*, especially in the southern region, who feel that the government is thinking toward votes more than rights.” (my translation)

Secondly, the leader criticized the *per-rai* subsidy, noting that it does not help those *chaosuan yang* who lack land titles to their rubber plots as well as those who tap on others' plots and receive percentage shares of daily income. Thirdly, related to the first question, he emphasized that a price support was the only appropriate solution at the time, as it would extend to all groups of *chaosuan yang* and not create divisions. Finally, he again noted a plan to increase the level of protests that were happening in Prachuap Khiri Khan.

Throughout the episodes in Cha-uat, Democrat Party MPs representing electoral constituencies that included Cha-uat and districts nearby made their opinions known. As one might expect, they broadcast positions downplaying their explicit involvement, likely in order to maintain perceptions that road and rail closings were purely related to households' economic troubles. On August 25, 2013 for instance, six Democrat MPs from Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung and Songkhla provinces had met in Cha-uat's district center to discuss solutions in order to have the road closures come to a stop. They all agreed that the Yingluck government should respond fully to the protesters' demands—a list of eight measures including a 120 baht/kg. price guarantee for unsmoked rubber sheets, six baht/kg. price guarantee for palm nuts, and not pressing charges against those who had been involved in conflicts with police two days prior. The newspaper, *Thai Rath*, quoted Chinawon Bunyakiat (*Thai Rath* August 25, 2013), an MP from Nakhon Si Thammarat's seventh jurisdiction, as saying:

“the government needs to demonstrate a sincere willingness in solving the problem. Just because rubber farmers in the southern region are not the main support base [of the Yingluck government] doesn't mean the government shouldn't see the

importance like it has for rice farmers, who had only gone out in protest two days and then received assistance. I would like to warn the government that a situation like this could strangle it.” (my translation)

Politicians were also reported to have entered the demonstration spaces themselves. An online article from the news publication, *Prachatai* (September 18, 2013), for instance, reports that Phatthalung MP Niphit Intharasombat and Nakhon Si Thammarat MPs Witthaya Kaeopharadai, Thepthai Senphong, and Dr. Aphichat Karikan met with protesters at Khuan Nong Hong not only to “visit and give encouragement”, but also to urge the protesters to open up the protest site to more journalists, “since at that time the news being reported on the protests was from the side of the government, and presented only one side. As such, [these MPs] wanted to open the area to journalists in order to have news from both sides.” (my translation)

When I sat with him for an interview in January 2016 at the Democrat Party headquarters in Phatthalung City, Niphit Intharasombat echoed the points made by Chinawon Bunyakiat and Veera Prateepchaikul above, yet he drew on more examples to illustrate what appears to be a familiar theme.^a Niphit has long been an MP representing Phatthalung Province’s northern districts that border Cha-uat (i.e., Pa Phayom, Khuan Khanun, Si Banphot, Si Nakharin), and he served as Minister of Culture in Abhisit Vejjajiva’s cabinet. He did not put blame directly on the Yingluck administration for the decline in rubber prices, commenting on unfavorable world market conditions overall, but suggested

^a January 18, 2016

reasons as to why *chaosuan yang* in southern Thailand protested in 2013. It is worth quoting the conversation at some length:

Niphit: It also has to do with the understanding of the people. Southern people believe that they stand opposite to the government of Yingluck. If the government announces measures, the [southern] people won't accept them.

Shattuck: Why is it like this, that southern people....?

Niphit: Well, as I've said, [they think], 'why did the Democrats make the [rubber] price go up to one-eighty? Why did Yingluck [make it drop] to sixty, seventy? They're really different. Is Yingluck squeezing the people in the region that does rubber? Is she doing something [to us]?' During the time of the rice policy, the government guaranteed each grain of rice. The government lost seven-hundred billion [baht], and they still dared [to carry out the program]. But for rubber, why didn't they dare [to do anything]? They didn't do anything.

Shattuck: So, [southern people] felt slighted/neglected?

Niphit: Yes, they thought like that. They thought, 'hey, why did they spend seven-hundred billion on rice, but they wouldn't accept thirty or forty billion on rubber?' Southern people, they see clearly that the government chose what it wanted to do. For example, the roads in the South are the worst in the country. I've been to the Northeast before and saw excellent roads.

Although many people I interviewed in and around Cha-uat District discussed neither their participation nor the emergence of demonstrations at the Khuan Nong Hong

Intersection in August and September 2013 specifically through terms that pinpointed the rice subsidy program, senses were nonetheless widespread that the steep declines in rubber prices should warrant a government response of some sort. On the other hand, some did make mention of the subsidy as catalyst, leading to feelings that Yingluck's administration was playing regional favoritism. One of the principal leaders of the demonstrations at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection (not the individual I cited above) related to me in an interview that rubber farmers went out to protest in August 2013 in part because they felt like "the mistress", due to their not receiving the same treatment as rice farmers.^a Such an expression, common in colloquial settings, conjures a metaphor of familial dynamics that compares the relative importance of women in the husband's (i.e., government's) life.

This comparison actually emerged rather frequently: in response to my asking why he thinks that members of the Democrat Party enjoy such success among southern voters in parliamentary elections, one individual (a civil servant who has a plot of rubber but does not tap himself) commented that when someone like Thaksin or Yingluck is in office, all of the focus is on the North and the Northeast; southern people then feel as though they are "the mistress's kid."^b He then brought up the fact that the southern provinces have fewer seats in parliament than the North and the Northeast. Shortly before offering this general comment about regional-political favoritism, though, he had cited a specific example that made him feel "slighted/neglected" ("*noi chai*"), resonating with Niphit's closing comments above: on railroad tracks, this individual asked why the North and the Northeast have two

^a October 17, 2015, Cha-uat District

^b December 13, 2015, Cha-uat District

tracks (one for each direction) while the South only has a single line. Having taken several train trips myself from Cha-uat station to Bangkok and back, a journey which is supposed to take around fourteen hours each way, but which usually results in upwards of twenty, his comment resonated with my own experiences. However, his point was likely hardly made with concern solely to shortcomings in the transportation infrastructure.

In and around Cha-uat, recognition that the demonstrations at Khuan Nong Hong and Ban Tun related to agendas beyond agricultural commodity prices alone came up consistently during conversations that I had with a range of people over the course of my research. In particular, people identified the political threads (or for some, foundations) that wove into (underlay) the price protests. Among informants, such as *chaosuan yang*, the term, political (or *kanmueang* in Thai), was most often invoked in quite a straightforward manner, namely as a reference to Democrat MPs and the perception that events in Cha-uat must have been forerunners to the protests in Bangkok. At one village-level latex-buying site in Cha-uat, the buyer in charge (an intermediary, who buys latex directly from smallholders and then sells it to a processing factory nearby) explained that he had joined the demonstrations at the highway intersection nearby because he supported calls for higher rubber prices.^a Such comments are of little surprise—his profits result from a small deduction he takes out of the day’s rubber price—however, he continued, “these were also about politics” and, linking episodes, remarked further, “the coup started from right here”, referring to the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection nearby. Such was also the sense of one of the key demonstration leaders at this intersection: he commented, “they left from here and

^a May 20, 2015, Cha-uat District

went all the way up to Bangkok.”^a The manager of a latex-buying cooperative elsewhere in Cha-uat District confirmed that many members of the cooperative went to join the protests at the highway intersection, but he then remarked, “It was also a political game.”^b With reference to calls for the 120 baht per kilogram price guarantee, this individual then shook his head and said, “that can’t be”, implying that such a price was substantially higher than what would have been a reasonable floor to alleviate the financial difficulties of smallholder rubber-farming households, and must therefore have been a provocation from Democrat politicians. Indeed, during the time in which I conducted field research for this study, informants generally cited prices ranging from around 60 baht to 90 baht per kilogram for latex as sufficient to meet their households’ income needs.

A sub-district leader in Cha-uat, who had been opposed to the road and rail closures, told me, “I felt that politicians got involved”, although she was unspecific in describing how, exactly, they might have been.^c However, one individual in Chulaphon District’s Na Mo Bun Sub-district (which borders Khuan Nong Hong Sub-district) drew this out in more detail: during the first ten days or so, he recalled, there were only villagers demonstrating, but then the politicians came—meaning Democrat MPs.^d He spoke specifically of material support, and particularly food: rice, water and canned fish were sent in by the politicians as donations, he held, the villagers not knowing who, exactly, had been the donors, only that these items must have been the work of politicians. Curries to go with rice, he continued, were provided locally; however, he distinctly remembered the sacks of rice that were

^a July 22, 2015, Cha-uat District

^b September 30, 2015, Cha-uat District

^c March 3, 2016, Cha-uat District

^d January 19, 2016, Chulaphon District, former latex intermediary

delivered.

Of course, some more than others claimed that the demonstrations in Cha-uat began innocent of the interference and influence of southern Democrat politicians: people who had been adamantly opposed to the demonstrations since their inception tended to be of the mindset that they were necessarily political (in a partisan sense) from that point: Yongyot Kaeokhiao from Chian Yai district in Nakhon Si Thammarat, who is the head of the ‘National Organization of Sub-District Leaders and Village Headpersons’ and noted sympathizer with the Red Shirts, emphasized in a telephone conversation with me that the demonstrations at Khuan Nong Hong were political from the get-go, “organized” by Democrat politicians, he said.^a He did agree that villagers went out to the intersection by themselves and sought higher rubber prices, but that “deep down” Democrat politicians were setting things up and directing. Quite early in my research, another individual, who had formerly worked in Nakhon Si Thammarat’s provincial administration, commented to me that it was the politicians who pushed the agenda of the 120 baht per kilogram price guarantee, as a challenge to the Yingluck administration.^b When I responded that I had heard from several people that *chaosuan yang* themselves were behind the demonstrations, he countered by saying, “villagers need leaders” and further “[Democrat] agents were behind everything”, with falling rubber prices functioning as a means to organize people to have them eventually go up to protest in Bangkok, he contended.

On the road entering Khao Phra Thong Sub-District a few kilometers to the south of the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection, which opens onto the same highway, a sub-district

^a December 8, 2015

^b June 2, 2015, Cha-uat District

leader also conveyed connections between Cha-uat and Bangkok; his co-worker sitting across the table referred to the former, using English, as the “Khuan Nong Hong model”, and continued, “Khuan Nong Hong was the first place.”^a Both individuals recalled that many hundreds of people from the sub-district had travelled to Bangkok to protest; there were even large coach buses, parked along the highway and waiting to drive people the ten or so hours up to Bangkok.

Importantly, such linkages were also made known more broadly, in media outlets. For instance, as reported online in the *Thai Rath* newspaper on October 29, 2013, information released by a police major general found that the student group, The Network of Students Reforming Thailand, which comprised a key faction of what would eventually become the PDRC was connected to the groups protesting rubber prices in Prachuap Khiri Khan: “the people who are behind [both] are the same group, protesting against the Amnesty Bill as well as the Preah Vihear decision.”³⁶ (my translation) This particular article does not name the people who were ‘behind the scenes’, and neither did I become aware of the precise chains that linked the student groups to the protesting *chaosuan yang*. Nevertheless, through interviews, one of the principal protest leaders from Cha-uat told me that he had joined to protest with the Ramkhamhaeng University students in Bangkok in early November 2013. The leader of the student network, Uthai Yotmani, had been a student at Ramkhamhaeng. In an interview with *Manager Weekend*, a conservative anti-Thaksin news media outlet, Uthai remarked that he had long been active in politics and had led a group of students to join in the protests at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection

^a July 14, 2015, Cha-uat District

(*Manager Weekend*, October 19, 2013). In the same interview, he also notes that *chaosuan yang* from Khuan Nong Hong had joined his group's demonstrations in Bangkok.

Although it frustrated me that I could not discern who, exactly (if anyone), had been the lynchpin holding together/weaving together the anxieties of *chaosuan yang* facing declining rubber prices and a conservative political establishment that would soon be on the move to galvanize a movement working to challenge the Yingluck Shinawatra administration in Bangkok, I believe that this gap actually reveals something noteworthy about the politics of rubber for *chaosuan yang* more broadly, who may have felt that their concerns had been coopted and/or displaced years after the events had happened. A number of people I met told me that the protests had both positive and negative points, namely that they attracted a great deal of attention but did not result in any measured improvement in rubber prices, respectively. For instance, one person said, "in the end nothing came of them,"^a another that they were "without substance/usefulness" ("*rai sara*").^b In addition, while the acknowledgement of political influence and intervention was widespread, people also wanted to make clear that they, their neighbors, and family members had been active in charting their own participation in the demonstrations. For instance, unprompted, one *chaosuan yang* affirmed that when her husband went to join at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection "no one came to give out money [for protesting]," perhaps anxious that my learning about this participation would immediately be misconstrued.^c Whether someone was paid off is clearly not something that I would be able to verify either way, yet comments such as these do gesture toward senses that the protests

^a June 18, 2015, Ron Phibun District, *chaosuan yang*

^b July 8, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^c August 21, 2015, Cha-uat District

were perceived—in retrospect—not only to have been partisan vehicles to mobilize in anticipation of Bangkok. In the same conversation, this person commented to me that a price floor provided by the government was ‘imperative’ (*“khuān thi sut loei”*) and offered that a guarantee of at least 40 - 50 baht per kilogram for latex cup lumps would be necessary (which would mean around 80 baht for liquid latex—markedly lower than the equivalent called for in 2013, i.e. 120 baht/kg. for smoked sheets).

A different protest leader at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection (who had been briefly arrested and detained in September 2013 because of his role in the protests) stated, on a brief return visit in 2017, of having been in contact with groups that would establish themselves as the PDRC.^a To note, although he had been guarded about such associations when he had first agreed to sit for interviews in 2015, this comfort in divulging such information likely owes to his later becoming an ardent—and open—critic of the military government as well as Suthep Thaugsuban, whom he personally believes to have been the main player ushering in the coup. He held that the PDRC long had plans to remove Yingluck from office, and that the protests at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection were organized as a way to start this process.³⁷ However, he remarked, “[The politicians] saw that it had to come from the people.” He continued that *chaosuan yang* there were supportive of the protests for reasons actually related to falling rubber prices; furthermore, no one expected a coup to happen, nor did they want one, he contended.

Another informant interviewed, who does not have any rubber plots and stated that he had wanted nothing to do with the protests in 2013, maintained, nonetheless, that owing to the reputation he had gained as an organizer throughout southern Thailand—

^a July 9, 2017, Cha-uat District

including periods in the past collaborating with such organizations as the Assembly of the Poor³⁸—he was contacted by two people, who would become PDRC members.^a They approached him at his home in Cha-uat’s Wang Ang Sub-District (a mountainous area on the western edge of the district) and asked him to be a leader at the rubber price protests which were to take place; he also said that Thawon Senniam (former MP from Songkhla Province and one of the key leaders of the PDRC) had phoned him to ask for advice. He, however, declined to get involved in any way.

Crucially, both informants additionally brought up the CPT’s legacies in and around Cha-uat, although neither was old enough to have joined ranks with the CPT during its heyday of mobilization in the 1970s and early 1980s. Although the CPT has long since ended its armed struggle with government military and police, people who were once affiliated with the CPT continue to identify as *sahai* (comrades). In fact, the informant cited in the preceding paragraph related that *sahai* networks are crucial for any form of rural mobilization in Thailand; he said, “if there aren’t *sahai* there won’t be force behind the scenes.” He also commented that villagers align with former *sahai* due to shared experiences—“*sahai* love one another,” he commented. According to this informant, Chamni Sakdiset (see discussion of Anuson (2017) above), who was born and grew up near to where the rubber price demonstrations had taken place, was a big contributor to funding construction of the Ao Si Muang Monument (Figure 4.2), which was erected to pay tribute to *sahai* who had been killed in battles against military and police in the 1970s and 1980s in Cha-uat and nearby districts. To recall, Aphichat Karikan considered Chamni to be one of the ‘big brothers’ or ‘VIPs’ of the Democrat Party. Aside from being an historical

^a July 12, 2017, Pa Phayom District

marker that hosts an event around August 8th each year (the day in 1965 that the CPT began in armed resistance against the Thai state), Ao Si Muang also serves as a place for regular, monthly, community meetings.



Figure 4.2 Left: Ao Si Muang Monument decorated to commemorate August 8, 1965. Right: Rubber blankets hills surrounding the monument. (photos by author, 2015)

In addition to substantial involvement in northern and northeastern provinces (e.g., Bowie 1997, Hung and Baird 2017, Keyes 2014), the CPT had also been very active—and actively involved in armed combat against military and police—in many parts of southern Thailand during the 1970s and 1980s, including in Cha-uat and surrounding districts of Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung, and Trang Provinces. In *Rituals of National Loyalty: An anthropology of the state and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand*, Bowie (1997) reviews three commonly held perspectives explaining the rise of the CPT in postwar Thailand, in particular as the party’s mobilizations appealed to rural populations: resentment toward the US military presence in Thailand at the time of wars in Indochina; increased levels of Thai military counterinsurgency in rural areas; and misguided, inefficient, and intrusive rural development projects. Additionally, she cites the founder of the Village Scout

Movement (an initiative led by the Border Patrol Police—a division of the National Police Department—that enrolled villagers throughout the 1970s to participate in counterinsurgency efforts), who saw systemic political and economic problems in the Thai countryside as foundational to the rise of the CPT.

Similarly, various authors trace the ascendance of the CPT in southern Thailand specifically to historical circumstances of the early twentieth century, during which time resistance against greater degrees of control exerted by a strengthening central government and administrative system in Bangkok started to take shape—these became the foundation for forms of localized mobilization that would eventually intersect with the CPT. Porinya (2007), for instance, writes of the difficulties imposed on communities after the initiation of a poll tax at the end of the nineteenth century; those who lacked the means to procure money often resorted to stealing animals such as cows and water buffaloes. Uprisings in northern and northeastern Thailand at the time did have an influence on thinking in the South, Porinya continues, and in 1917 “assemblies of bandits” formed in Phatthalung’s Khuan Khanun District, which borders Cha-uaat to the southeast. Porinya writes, “the situation of resistance against the state ... aside from it being a way to resist the collection of taxes, was also a way of “helping oneself” due to economic pressures.” (2007, 9, my translation) Similarly, Sarup (2009) remarks that these administrative changes—including increasing control over labor—led to more self-reliance as well as reliance on familial ties among villagers. As for the consequences of ‘banditry’, he notes, “the apparatus of the state, which came from outside, likely viewed this as the emergence of banditry, to the point that it had to establish specific crime suppression units.” (2009, 332, my translation) The inability and/or refusal to pay poll taxes, Sarup comments, caused some

people to flee lowland areas and find refuge in the mountains, i.e. in the Banthat Mountain Range which forms administrative borders between provinces such as Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung in the east with Trang and Satun in the west, and runs through the western edge of Cha-uat District (Khuan Nong Hong, Khao Phra Thong, and Wang Ang Sub-districts). Sarup highlights growing alliances with the CPT, and Charun (2010), likewise writing of the ‘assemblies of bandits’ culture, comments on the way in which this provided foundations for the CPT’s gaining momentum throughout southern Thailand, or “on the base of the assemblies of bandits society that had a culture of resisting state officials and mixed with the Marxist ideology of the CPT.” (2010, 170, my translation) In the collection of memoirs of first-hand experiences participating with the CPT in Phatthalung, Trang, and Satun provinces entitled, *On Banthat Way* (Khun Yao 2001), an introductory chapter discusses how the CPT’s growing interest in and inroads more extensively into Phatthalung in the early 1950s focused on recruiting and reaching out to farmers—of paddy, fruit, rubber, field crops, etc.—commenting further on the party’s aims of connecting with communities of paddy farmers in the northern part of the province (close to Cha-uat), who had both long experienced isolation from administrative centers due to underdeveloped transportation infrastructure as well as demonstrated rather antagonistic relationships with state officials.

In sum, it is crucial to note that the CPT was particularly strong in a part of southern Thailand, which, decades later, would again host struggles mounting challenges to groups within the central Thai state. Recent histories of conflict have clearly registered broadly in peoples’ consciousness, as informants commented often that the reason protests over falling rubber prices had gained momentum at Khuan Nong Hong was because it had once

been ‘red land’ (i.e. CPT land as people such as MP Aphichat Karikan, above, opined). As the editors of “On Banthat Way” contend and observe in the text’s closing chapter,

“It cannot be denied that the struggles of the CPT have created a large political awakening among people ... At least 60 per-cent of the people in some villages had once gone into the forest to fight against the state official.” (Khun Yao 2001, 778, my translation)

Recognition that *sahai* played an instrumental role in organizing and executing the protests over falling rubber prices in Cha-uat was widespread among interview informants. The protest leader cited above additionally related in an interview that *sahai* certainly mobilized people, especially in the hillier areas to the west of the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection, he said.^a “They have their ways of organizing”, he continued, and commented that they are effective in doing so. Moreover, he thought that another of the protest leaders at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection, a man now in his 60s, had been involved with the CPT in some capacity in the past. He used the term, “*naeo ruam*”, which means ‘ally’. He was of the mind that this relationship likely enabled connections with *sahai* in the area. A *chaosuan yang* from Phatthalung Province whom I had met several times over the course of my fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 told me during a conversation at the end of June 2017 that *sahai* had no doubt had a role in organizing villagers into protest at Khuan Nong Hong in 2013; they are “skilled” and they “shape people”, he said, by imparting lessons about philosophy, resistance and speaking out to their children, grandchildren, nieces and

^a July 9, 2017, Cha-uat District

nephews.^a While growing up in rural Phatthalung Province, he said he was with his parents ‘in the forest’; everyone in his village had been ‘in the forest’, he said.

Over the course of field research in 2015 and 2016, several individuals who had once been active with the CPT, and still considered themselves to be *sahai* contributed valuable information during interviews about local histories, the unfolding of rubber price demonstrations in Cha-uat, as well as their own experiences participating in the smallholder rubber economy. I also made frequent visits to Ao Si Muang Memorial to speak with *sahai* who regularly spend time at the monument performing maintenance, providing information to occasional visitors, and so on. One individual, who offered information during interviews on several occasions, lives in Khao Phra Thong Sub-district, just to the south of Khuan Nong Hong Sub-district. She and her husband are both in their mid-60s and have a rubber plot which they tap themselves.^b During one conversation, she related her story about having grown up in nearby Chulaphon District, before coming to Khao Phra Thong when she was around the age of fourteen. Her brother had been shot and killed by the Thai military in 1977, and she started being active with the CPT two years later; she stopped involvement in the armed struggle in 1983. She commented that *sahai*, like herself, had helped out to an extent during the demonstrations over prices at Khuan Nong Hong in August 2013, though she maintained that it was the *chaosuan yang* who initiated the protests and kept them going. Concerning the specific ways or methods in which *sahai* helped, she said that they played supportive roles, such as preparing food for demonstrators—this is something that, as a result of my conversations with other *sahai*,

^a June 28, 2017, Surat Thani City

^b May 29, 2015, Cha-uat District

could signal a partial admission of having more of an organizational role. Finally, she said that she took the stage twice during the demonstrations at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection. Importantly, though, this individual was very critical of how the demonstrations in Khuan Nong Hong unfolded and developed: during one interview, she told me that she did not travel up to Bangkok to join with the protests there; furthermore, politicians were certainly involved in the demonstrations in Cha-uat, she said, and that they “took advantage”, or “*chuai okat*”, in Thai.^a In fact, the phrase, *chuai okat*, arose rather frequently during my conversations with many people. In the wake of protests and political shifts in 2013 and 2014, followed by rubber prices continuing to slump under the administration of Prayut Chan-ocha, such perceptions are not terribly surprising.

Around two months after this particular conversation, I went to the Ao Si Mueang Monument to observe the events taking place in remembrance of August 8th. While speaking with one individual whose parents had been active with the CPT, I posed a question about the roles of *sahai* in the demonstrations at Khuan Nong Hong in 2013.^b She responded, “well they joined in.” However, she made clear that *sahai* were not manipulating and putting actors into play from behind the scenes, as my question had implied. On the other hand, she also said that the history of the CPT in this area made possible the assembly at Khuan Nong Hong. As alluded to above, despite the protests in Cha-uat having registered as part and parcel of a broader spectrum of political mobilization in 2013 and 2014, these events additionally reveal the continuing impressions of particular resistance histories brought out through *sahai* groups.

^a July 21, 2015, Cha-uat District

^b August 7, 2015, Chulaphon District

To emphasize, while favorable conditions signaling histories of resistance may have been important to activating *sahai* legacies, we should not overlook the presence and proximity of rubber itself, speaking to points made by scholars such as Jessop et al. (2008) and Leitner et al. (2008) about the number of spatial ‘threads’ that weave into initiating and sustaining moments of contentious episodes. Actively engaging with this complexity furthermore eschews simplistic, unidimensional explanations of what 2013’s protests in Cha-uat accomplished and thus what sorts of entrenched partisan alliances they must have reified. Instead, we understand the importance of acknowledging how they were crisscrossed with many strings of nuance.



Figure 4.3 Looking south from the roof of a structure erected at the Ao Si Mueang Monument. Hills in the background (around two km. distant) are blanketed with rubber. (Photo by author, no date)

As is visible to the visitor to Ao Si Mueang, plots of rubber surround the monument (Figure 4.3), and people who live nearby and regularly spend time at the monument are overwhelmingly reliant on income from rubber, as I learned. Lest we doubt that these are

recent holdings, Sarup (2009) notes that, from the period 1957 until around 1973, both the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund (see Chapter 3 for description) and the Bank For Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives had established themselves in Cha-uat District and surroundings; furthermore, this was a period during which a great deal of rubber as well as fruit trees were planted, following substantial migration into the Banthat Mountains by former rice farmers from lowland districts in Nakhon Si Thammarat (e.g. those to the east of Cha-uat). This was shortly before conflicts would emerge between the CPT and Thai military and police. Through an in-depth discussion of the protests that took place in Cha-uat District in 2013 as constituting part of the fabric of political mobilization in 2013 and 2014, the discussion presented here illustrates how emergent moments of contestation in one form resonate, both temporally and spatially, with other forms. In the following, concluding section of this chapter I will summarize main themes discussed in the preceding three sections and comment on the ways in which they may help us better understand the political questions and challenges that rubber poses for many in southern Thailand.

4.4 Synthesis

As recent scholarship on Thai politics aptly illustrates, individuals long affiliated with the Democrat Party comprised PDRC leadership, and voters in southern Thailand overwhelmingly support the Democrats at the polls and during protests. The protests in late 2013 and 2014 across Bangkok, which eventually led to a coup d'état ousting Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, are reasonably portrayed in the literature as reflecting these trends. With such forms of re-presentation I do not take issue. However, it should be clear

from discussion in the preceding section that I do not contend people in and around Cha-
uat District had succumbed to false consciousness, in other words that they merely
followed the calls of political elites to become the workforce of the PDRC's demonstrations
in Bangkok. Rather, I hold that a more complex interpretation of these contentious
moments is made available if they are brought into conversation with other forms of
struggle at the time. While the latter, on Cha-uat District's roads and railways, were no
doubt demonstrably political in their content—even if one follows the belief that they were
primarily villager-orchestrated and led from the beginning—the type of politics on display
during those episodes troubles an argument based around unproblematized partisan
affinities with the Democrat Party. As Sections 4.2 and 4.3 show, there are critical histories
gesturing to the continued resonance of past struggles to consider in order to evaluate such
affinities in the first place as well as to appreciate how these legacies continue to be
operational(ized).

Additionally, as I have brought to light the ways in which protests at the Khuan
Nong Hong intersection and the Ban Tun rail crossing were formative in their own right
toward the contentious episodes in Bangkok, I also wish to problematize a view that the
protests in Cha-uat were entirely the work of maneuvers to fuel the growth of a coalition
that would establish itself as the PDRC in late November 2013 to challenge the legitimacy
of the Yingluck Shinawatra government. Clearly, taking account of concerns surrounding
the material grievances that attend to the widespread and longstanding smallholder rubber
economy in southern Thailand is also central when assessing the arcs of these weeks-long
road and rail blockades in rural southern Thailand. To return to a central theme in this
dissertation, governance, the discussions in this chapter point to the prominence of

collective senses anchored in regional frames, in particular as these relate with notions that the widespread gravity experienced from rubber markets in turmoil has been discounted. Departing from these events in 2013 and 2014, though by no means leaving them behind, the following two chapters will engage more directly with questions that pertain precisely to this theme as well as the types of political problems and challenges facing *chaosuan yang* and others who engage with rubber economies in southern Thailand.

Chapter 5: From Highways to Performance Venues: Shifts in Forms of Contestation

The transition, in late May 2014, from a democratically elected government under the leadership of Yingluck Shinawatra to one ruled by the military's National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), under army chief General Prayut Chan-ocha, ushered substantial changes into the everyday lives of Thai citizens. Perhaps the most widely recognized was the imposition of several new laws as well as greater and stricter enforcement of those already in place: the NCPO has substantially curbed free speech and deployed measures, not experienced since the 1970s, to quiet dissent, e.g. by detaining and arresting hundreds of people, all under the name of maintaining order and security (Sopranzetti 2016). In addition, severe charges pursued under Thailand's *lèse-majesté* laws (prohibiting criticism of the royal family) have grown substantially (e.g. Haberkorn 2016, McCargo 2017, Sopranzetti 2016). Section 44 of the country's interim constitution, a very broadly worded measure which provides the military with a range of executive powers, prohibits protests—the Section's twelfth part states that political assemblies of five or more persons are subject to imprisonment and/or fines.

For many in rural southern Thailand, there has been one important continuity between the waning months of Yingluck's government and the first few years of Prayut's: Bangkok's attitudes toward rubber prices; the average annual price in 2015, as calculated by the Office of Agricultural Economics, was close to that of 2004 (about 30 baht lower than the average for 2013). Under both Yingluck's as well as Prayut's administrations, rubber

farmers' pleas for state assistance have been met with rather accusatory responses stressing market logics and the need for personal accountability and responsibility.

This relatively brief chapter serves to bring to light the staying senses among people that Bangkok continues to neglect concerns that have arisen in the wake of low rubber prices. Firstly, I review the responses of Yingluck's administration to the situation of falling rubber prices in 2013. I then discuss how feelings of marginalization since the price protests between August and October 2013 have carried over into the era of administration by NCPO through one venue less contentious than a protest space, though nonetheless configuring an important for(u)m of critique: the shadow play, or *nang talung* in Thai. The *nang talung* is perhaps one of the more recognizable venues in southern Thailand in which political and social issues intersect with entertainment, and the recent work of one performer in particular, Banyat Suwanwaenthong (who goes by the stage name Nong Diao), has become immensely popular for performances that feature interactions between Ai Phunkaeo, one of the play's recurring clown characters, and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, whose voice Mr. Banyat imitates with remarkable precision. In this chapter, I draw from an excerpt of one of Nong Diao's *nang talung* performances as an example to show that such a venue not only functions as one important for critique, but in addition re-presents shared experiences of difficulty springing from low rubber prices on a familiar, collective stage (or, more specifically, on a screen). Thus, I contend that through venues such as the *nang talung*, and especially the symbolism conveyed through the clowns and their antics, low rubber prices and perceptions of inadequate interventions from Bangkok reveal themselves as problems fundamentally of regional distance (in senses both social and geographic) and marginalization more broadly.

5.1 “*mai laeng loei rueang yang*”

“He [Prayut] doesn’t speak at all about rubber!”^a

As discussed in the previous chapter, there was little respite from the financial stresses caused by slumping rubber prices in the months (and years) that followed the political protests that took place in Bangkok between 2013 and 2014, which culminated in the coup d’état and allowed the military to seize control of the government. Overall, national economic performance was lackluster—real GDP did expand by 2.8% between 2014 and 2015; however, from 2011 to 2012 it had risen by over 7% (WDI Indicators)—and prices for certain agricultural commodities continued to fall off markedly. Month-to-month average rubber prices experienced several periods of sharp decline: monthly averages dropped by over 10% between August and September 2014, between June and July 2015, and between August and September 2015. The monthly average price for Grade 3 unsmoked sheets in December 2015 was 36.4 baht, close to a drop of 23 baht from May 2014 (oae.go.th).

As the comment from the *chaosuan yang* at the beginning of this section attests, there were senses among people with whom I had the opportunity to speak that, despite substantial political changes having taken place, the wellbeing of southern Thais continued to be left in the lurch. In January 2015, the leader of a network of *chaosuan yang* in Trang Province alleged that the government was not concerned about the economic hardships rubber farmers had been experiencing, thus prompting plans to stage a rally in the

^a January 19, 2016, Chulaphon District, *chaosuan yang*. She was speaking about Prayut Chan-ocha in the aftermath of the 2014 coup d’état.

provincial capital; it was then reported that Prayut disagreed with the demands from southern rubber groups for price supports (*Bangkok Post*, January 28, 2015). He was quoted as saying, “They [rubber growers] should think hard about whether people in other occupations such as motorcycle taxi drivers and vendors are suffering hardship like them and why don’t they demand the same from government.”

Nonetheless, as a means of addressing low rubber prices, many of my informants were in broad agreement across interviews that responsibility should lie with the national government to intervene in some way and alleviate the problems exacted on *chaosuan yang* and their families. During research conducted at around the same time as my own, Andriesse and Puntita (2018) found similar sentiments, concerning perceptions of how to address low rubber prices and where the responsibility to do so should lie, among *chaosuan yang* they interviewed in Nakhon Si Thammarat’s Bang Khan and Muang Districts.

One person I met provided the following comment on price supports, “It’s absolutely the right thing to do!” His emphasis, what I have translated as ‘absolutely’, was actually enunciated through the term, “strongly”, or “*yang raeng*” in Thai. The term, *yang raeng*, is used very often in the South, and in other parts of Thailand is often associated with southern speakers. This individual commented that the government ought to guarantee latex prices at between 70 to 80 baht/kg.^a Common forms of justification for price supports were along the lines of the following: “[the government] really has to help ... it’s a matter of [us] making a living.”^b Simply ‘making a living’ actually masks the emphasis; this informant

^a September 2, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^b August 21, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

used the term, “*pak thong*”, which best translates to ‘livelihood’—*pak* means ‘mouth’, *thong* means ‘stomach.’

Although longer term policy programming regarding rubber in Thailand is not entirely straightforward, there is some evidence to suggest that branches of the government are aiming for reductions in the amount of land planted to rubber. However, these are not regionally delimited. In 2015 an initiative was launched by the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation targeting rubber eradication from areas where it had been planted illegally, in national forests and national parks, to the tune of four million *rai* (640,000 ha). The owners of these illicit holdings were determined to be land investors for the most part (not smallholder *chaosuan yang*, in other words), and while the objectives of the eradication program were largely set within frames of environmental conservation, the Director of the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation also remarked in a statement, “importantly, this will ensure that rubber from the outside doesn’t come into the system; it will improve the currently low rubber prices.” (*Thai Rath*, May 5, 2015, my translation) With a broader outlook, however, is state support for alternatives to rubber. For instance, the Rubber Authority of Thailand released an announcement at the end of 2015 stating that *chaosuan yang* applying for public assistance to cut down and replace old plots of rubber (trees which have stopped producing latex) would receive support either to replant with high-yielding varieties of rubber and/or “other perennial crops which have economic importance” (Luetwirot 2015, 1, my translation). Examples given for alternative tree crops are durian, mangosteen, rambutan, teak, oil palm, etc.

Aside from such efforts to curb the amount of rubber produced within Thailand, during the price slump the military government under Prayut Chan-ocha made modest efforts aimed at providing assistance, such as a temporary 42-baht per kilogram price guarantee for up to 150 kilograms of latex as well as a 1,500 baht per-*rai* subsidy for up to fifteen *rai* (the latter was passed in December 2015). Of these policies, though, several *chaosuan yang* were critical, relating comments to me such as, “We’ll have used it up in three mornings [after only three days of tapping and collecting latex],”^a and “we’ll have used it up in a month.”^b

An additional point of concern that was often raised about these types of subsidies is that they extended only to holders with clearly defined ‘documented rights’ (*ekasan sit* in Thai) to land use, who in turn had to register with the Rubber Authority of Thailand to receive the payments. This expansive rights category ranges from title deeds that signify direct land ownership to permissions for use and access only. The latter, while enabling one to undertake activities such as agriculture, prohibit the sale or purchase of the land itself (explanations of different types are available on Thailand’s Department of Lands website, dol.go.th). From my interviews in both Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung provinces, I learned that a great deal of land planted to rubber—especially that in hillier areas—falls entirely outside of this ‘documented rights’ category, which makes the holders ineligible to enroll in subsidy programs where registration is required. Such conditions thus help to explain why calls specifically for interventions into rubber prices would be quite prevalent among many *chaosuan yang*. Moreover, as one village

^a February 10, 2016, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^b January 19, 2016, Chulaphon District, *chaosuan yang*

headperson/*chaosuan yang* explained to me, the government must attend to the price of rubber; per-rai subsidies, he said, would not help those hired to tap on others' plots.^a

Taking account of these rather muted public responses to low rubber prices, in this chapter I will consider how senses that the concerns of southern *chaosuan yang* had been discounted at the time of the price protests continued to hold after Prayut took office. *Nang talung* performances, I contend, make available one forum where such senses can coalesce, in turn resonating within broader forms of consciousness. Throughout the time that I conducted research in and around Cha-uat, recordings of Nong Diao's performances were played widely. Van drivers especially, running routes between Cha-uat and Hat Yai or Cha-uat and Nakhon Si Thammarat, liked to play them as entertainment (ostensibly for the passengers) on the vehicles' DVD players. There is a great deal of material from Nong Diao's shows available online, e.g. on YouTube and Facebook, as fans of his work often post video clips taken during performances. A YouTube search of 'Nong Diao *nang talung*' in Thai yields close to 10,000 videos; the most popular videos have been viewed around one million times. Moreover, Nong Diao was performing fairly regularly across southern Thailand throughout my fieldwork in 2015 and 2016. Advertisements for his shows, such as the image shown in Figure 5.1, were posted along highways as well as smaller roads inside districts and sub-districts.

^a September 16, 2015, Chulaphon District. The 1,500 baht per-rai subsidy passed at the end of 2015 actually included a provision that, in the event plot owners hired tappers, a share of the payment ought to go to the latter.



Figure 5.1 Poster advertising a Nong Diao performance in Chulaphon District on May 18, 2016. (Photo by Author, taken along the Asia Highway, May 15, 2016)

I had an opportunity to attend one of Nong Diao’s performances in May 2016 outside of a sub-district administrative center in Chulaphon District, where I crossed paths with several *chaosuan yang* I had previously interviewed. However, I did not have the opportunity to record the dialog or the visuals. Thus, for the evidence in this chapter I will consider an excerpt from a different performance. To note, though, the type of banter and humor that I saw during the show in Chulaphon District was quite similar to that which I present below—including Nong Diao’s impersonations of Prayut Chan-ocha.

5.2 Region and the *nang talung*

Gestures to shadow puppetry among southern Thais often transcend the theater grounds themselves. For instance, car owners might affix stickers of one or more of the clowns on their bumpers or back windshields. Additionally, clowns made appearances during the rubber-price protests in Cha-uat in 2013 (Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2 Left: *Ai Theng*, one of the recurring clowns in shadow puppet theater is pictured saying he does not want anything to do with provincial or national government officials; instead, he just wants a decent rubber price. The banner was hung from a vehicle forming part of the demonstration blockade (*Khom Chat Luek*, August 28, 2013, p. 1). Right: One of the demonstrators gathered in Khuan Nong Hong holds up a sign (yellow, third from left) with *Ai Theng* calling for a price guarantee of 120 baht. On close inspection, it is clear that *Ai Theng* is wearing a headlamp, which is part of the gear *chaosuan yang* use to tap rubber late at night/in the early hours of the morning (*Matichon Sutsapada*, August 30, 2013, p. 11).

The broader, cultural, significance of the *nang talung* is arguably suited to a discussion that draws on the scholarship of geographers considering the continued salience and grip of subnational regions. Among the many themes addressed by scholarship on *nang talung*, the artform's particular attachment to and association with southern Thailand is often

emphasized. Vandergeest and Paritta (1993, 308), for instance, contend that “[b]y self-consciously constructing a “Southern Thai” shadowplay, performers and local intellectuals contribute to the construction of a self-consciousness about a regional and national identity, that is, a Southern Thai identity.” As I will discuss below, the recent performances of Nong Diao help to articulate experiences which are readily identifiable with wide audiences.

An extensive treatment of *nang talung* plots and themes is beyond the scope of this chapter, and as such my focus here will be on the engagements between the clowns—caricatures of southern Thai rural villagers—and individuals representing the government in Bangkok. *Nang talung* performances are widely noted to serve functions beyond entertainment alone, and are regarded as especially critical in providing forums for political critique in rural southern Thailand (e.g., Day and Weiss 2014, Dowsey-Magog 2002, Johnson 2006, Phitthaya 2004, Vandergeest 1993, Vandergeest and Paritta 1993). Attending to changes in twentieth-century Thai history, Vandergeest (1993), for instance, highlights how shadow plays open venues for village forms of opposition and contestation, a discussion he situates in relation to processes of modernization, constructions of national belonging, and reconstructions of morality within a nationalist frame. As Johnson (2006) discusses, the clowns, whose characters are largely based on actual people, are socially proximate to audience members in rural southern Thailand, for instance through class similarities and use of the southern Thai dialect. Though bringing to bear forms of political critique, it is important to keep in mind that the clowns’ roles are not ones of dismantling state and society altogether. As Johnson (2006) writes, for example, while clowns may

humorously mispronounce Buddhist scripts, Buddhism itself is never interrogated or problematized. Thus, he continues,

“[t]he humorous behaviour of the *tua tolok* [clowns] reaffirms an ideal social order while simultaneously critiquing it. Through his bawdy jokes and behaviour the clown made visible the fissures and cracks within society and produces room for possibilities for negotiating with official discourses and ideologies.” (2006, 166)

In this way, one might interpret the clowns' roles as straddling a line between critique and society's ideal form; the clowns could perhaps be understood as prying and probing, yet not tearing down. In the discussion below, I will demonstrate how the antics of the clown, Ai Phunkaeo, in dealing with Prayut Chan-ocha can be interpreted in part as a critique against the treatment of southern Thailand's rubber farmers through top-down recommendations of sufficiency, self-reliance, and market logics.³⁹

Nong Diao's impressions of Prayut Chan-ocha in dialog with Ai Phunkaeo became widely popular throughout southern Thailand in 2015, and Thai press outlets reported rather extensively on the performances in October 2015. An online article entitled, “Behind the Curtain of Nong Diao's Shadow Plays, One Who Perfectly Imitates the Prime Minister”, in the Thai-language *Thai Rath* newspaper (October 29, 2015, my translation) begins, “It's become a clip that summons laughs from across all of Thailand.” Nong Diao's *nang talung* troupe receives requests to give performances across Thailand, interestingly enough including in the North and Northeast, and is the highest paid of all *nang talung* performance outfits—a standard temple performance commands at least 45,000 baht per

night; performances in other regions command upwards of 100,000 baht per night (*Manager Online*, October 21, 2015).

A segment on the talk show, *This Morning's Talk* (“*rueang lao chao ni*”), on the widely-viewed Channel 3, featured excerpts of Nong Diao’s performances and also included comments from Mr. Banyat during an interview with a reporter. One of the show’s hosts comments that the form Nong Diao likes to take is to have Prayut chat with villagers, particularly Ai Phunkaeo, whom he describes as provincial and lacking complex understanding of economic and political issues. Ai Phunkaeo’s provincial and village character is emphasized through his exchanges with Prayut, the latter not only the self-appointed head of the Thai government, but also one from the center of power in Bangkok. For instance, in one of the segments featured Prayut asks Phunkaeo if he has been educated and then goes on to have him to spell his name in English. Phunkaeo, shaking and visibly intimidated by Prayut, replies, “P-A-UN, Phun, K-A-AEO, Kao”, citing -un and -aeo as single letters. Prayut then asks, sarcastically, whether Phunkaeo’s school English lessons also included the letter ‘un’.

In an excerpt from the interview with Mr. Banyat the reporter asks, “if you had the opportunity to meet with the Prime Minister, what would you say?” Mr. Banyat responds that he would thank Prayut for his role in preserving local southern culture. He also says, “the shadow puppet character that I bring in to speak with the prime minister is a villager, who wants to ask about the economy and other matters. It’s a form of teasing in which neither side understands the other; the prime minister can’t understand Southern Thai.” Gaps in communication with, and distance from, figures representing the central state are central in *nang talung* humor—returning to Johnson (2006, 150), “[t]he subversive

potential presented in the act of shadow play clowning arises from the clown’s magically powerful persona and his intimate associations with rural Thai audiences—an association that no other figure in the shadow play is privy to.” In what follows, for illustrative purposes I will consider a specific example from one of Nong Diao’s *nang talung* performances, in which dialog underscores both the lack of comprehension and social distance between Phunkaeo and Prayut. As will be seen, this extends beyond language alone. This particular segment (Figure 5.3) was uploaded in early November 2015 by a YouTube user who notes in the comments section under the clip that the segment was filmed at a temple in Ron Phibun District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province.

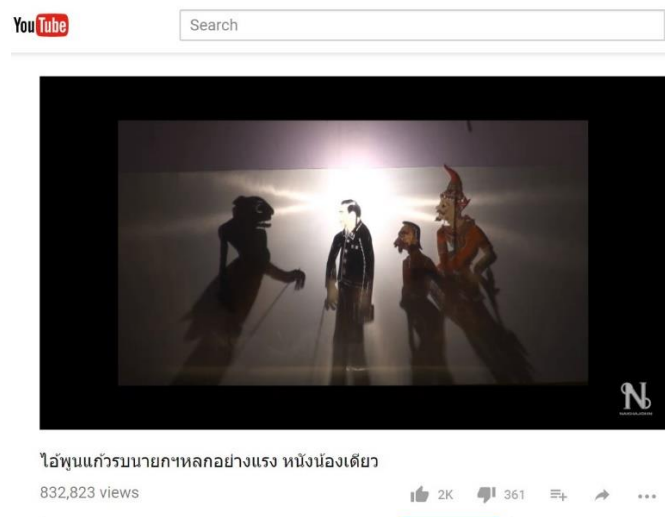


Figure 5.3: Screenshot of a clip from one of Nong Diao’s performances in Ron Phibun District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. The caption reads, “Ai Phunkaeo annoys the Prime Minister. Very Funny [written in the Southern Thai dialect]. Nong Diao Shadow Play” Ai Phunkaeo is on the left, Prayut is in the center.

The scene opens with a conversation between Phunkaeo and Piakpret, another of the characters from southern Thailand although not one of the clowns. Piakpret tells Phunkaeo to suppose he is Prayut: what would Phunkaeo say if he met with Prayut in

Bangkok? Phunkaeo proceeds, in Central Thai with a southern accent, to talk about the poor state of the economy, mentioning low rubber prices as well, stressing that the government needs to provide assistance. After speaking, Piakpret responds in a voice mimicking Prayut's terse and gruff manner of speaking, "if you can't live here, then move", to which the audience erupts in cheers and laughter. Piakpret goes on (in Prayut's voice) to blame villagers for always complaining about little things and says that villagers need to take responsibility: "everything has to come up from the village; family is important." After a humorous musical interlude that plays with the words to the NCPO's anthem, "Return Happiness to Thailand,"⁴⁰ Prayut himself enters the stage, again to cheers from the audience. Phunkaeo, trembling, then announces that now they are in trouble. A few minutes pass in which Prayut introduces himself and discusses the large issues that the NCPO is addressing, e.g. corruption. The economy will improve within five years, he says. A few minutes pass before Prayut calls out, "Whoever was mimicking me, that isn't right. Who did it? Huh?! Who?!" He turns to Phunkaeo, "Why did you mock me, huh?! What's your name?" Phunkaeo (who was not the one mocking Prayut) tries to respond but is trembling too much and cannot form the words to say his own name. Prayut continues to ask, and finally Phunkaeo enunciates.

The conversation proceeds similarly to that which was featured on the morning talk show—Prayut asks about Phunkaeo's education, Phunkaeo then spells his name in English incorrectly. The dialog then switches abruptly into an exchange about Prayut's administration.

Prayut: Mr. Phunkaeo.

Phunkaao: Yes.

Prayut: Is there anything about the NCPO's governing of the country that you like?

Phunkaao: I like the peace and order.

Prayut: Is it peaceful enough?

Phunkaao: Yes, you can see it from the markets. Before they used to be crowded, it was hard to walk through. But now it's quiet, only the vendors remain. [audience laughs]

Prayut: Quiet like that, is it good?

Phunkaao: Yes, but don't let it go on too long. [audience laughs]

Phunkaao continues to tell Prayut about his financial problems, saying that Prayut does not understand and that people are poor across the country. Prayut responds by saying that Thai people need to take more responsibility for their actions:

Prayut: I know that people are poor and are suffering financial hardship. People need to live within their means. A bird can make a nest and live just fine. But when Thai people become poor they wonder where it comes from. It happens because of the government? No, it happens because of you. Each house, each home. Are you living sufficiently? You buy three or four cars to go where? Can you drive them all at the same time? Can you pay them off in time? Why would you buy three or four cars?

The exchange continues and Prayut further tells Phunkaeo to eat within his means, to avoid having things which are too expensive. Phunkaeo pushes back, asking how one could possibly eat curry without adding shrimp paste (a staple in most Thai curries, especially southern curries):

Prayut: Whatever is expensive, don't eat it, don't go out and buy it. You should plant it around your house. If you have land, you can do a lot. Use these resources as an opportunity. If you don't do anything with unused land, nothing will come of it. Right? Plant things on your land. Whatever's expensive, just plant it. Understand?

Phunkaeo: Right now pork is expensive.

Prayut: Why don't you plant it? [audience laughs]

Phunkaeo: Hmm. And in what country do they plant pork?

Prayut: From this point on, each household should raise a pig for eating. One pig per household. If you raise one pig for the household, you don't have to go out and buy.

Phunkaeo: But each time we make curry we use a kilogram of pork.

Prayut: Just cut off however much you need and bandage the rest. [audience laughs]

Phunkaeo: That would fool the pig; it would walk around with a bare bottom.

Prayut: Whatever is expensive, don't go out and buy it. Plant it around your house. Understand?

Phunkaeo: When we tried to plant, you came along and cut it all down.

Prayut: What's that?

Phunkaeo: *Krathom*.⁴¹ [audience laughs] It's more expensive than lime leaves. It doesn't matter which government, who's the prime minister, all of them plough up

the *krathom* trees. I don't know why. Or how *krathom* roots creep into the government's houses. [audience laughs and cheers] You don't need to disapprove. It's not only people who've chewed *krathom* leaves who are in prison; those cheering also go to jail [audience laughs and cheers]. They go and chew *krathom* leaves someplace else, they'll get arrested for sure. [audience laughs]

Prayut: *Krathom* isn't good for you, don't you know that? Don't forget that when you eat *krathom* it's bad for your health. Southern people have been eating lots of *krathom* for a long time. I know that in the past people also used to chew it. But why eat it, huh? Why is it good? What does it help? You can't live if you don't chew *krathom*? You don't have to chew it; just quit.

Phunkaao: You can say that, but I'm addicted. [audience laughs] If you were hooked on smoking, and you tried to do as you said just now, how could you live?

Prayut: Why couldn't you live without chewing *krathom*? Would you die? Huh? Would you die?

Phunkaao: I wouldn't die, but I wouldn't feel all that well. [audience laughs]

Prayut: Malaysia has said that Thailand is entering ASEAN, and other countries won't accept *krathom*. The South has lots of *krathom*. In the North we've stopped opium already. The South has to figure out *krathom*; it can't be in the South any longer. Malaysia has said that if southern Thailand still has *krathom*, then it won't associate with us. It won't be our ally. It won't trade with us.

Phunkaao: Oh, Malaysia will plant lots. Malaysia is smart. It'll wait and watch the Thais first. You wait and see, Malaysia will sell us *krathom* at ten baht per leaf.

Prayut: Hmm, Malaysia has its own plan.

Phunkaao: Oh, you're dumb! [audience laughs]

Prayut: Huh? What'd you say just then?

Phunkaao: I just said it once then. Up to you if you catch it or not. [audience laughs]

In the final part quoted, the humor is in Prayut's failing to understand a word Phunkaao uses, *bloe*, which means dumb or stupid in the southern dialect—in Central Thai the word is *ngo*. However, more general forms of misunderstanding are present throughout the exchange, highlighted for instance by the discrepancy between something that is a part of daily life for many in rural southern Thailand (chewing *krathom* leaves) and the prime minister's (central government's) command approach, treating *krathom* as a drug problem. *Krathom* is a mild stimulant and is used primarily when people are working, speaking with friends in the mornings, and so forth. Critically (and echoing actual comments the Prime Minister has made), prior to this bit Prayut stresses self-sufficiency as a way for villagers to help themselves—and not to rely on government aid.⁴² In particular, Prayut advocates that people plant other things besides rubber—for instance expensive crops like pigs! This comment likely resonates because Prayut is known to be out of touch with the workings of the (southern) Thai countryside and turns to advocating a model of self-reliance for villagers to alleviate their financial duress. In early January 2016, for example, as rubber prices plummeted and preparations throughout the South were being made to organize discussions (not protests) in meeting halls, during which times farmers would have opportunities to air concerns directly to representatives from offices such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and the Rubber Authority of Thailand, Prayut was interviewed (*Khao Sot*, reported in *Prachathai*, January 7, 2016) about the situation of low

rubber prices. Responding to the interviewer's comment that rubber farmers are under stress on account of the low prices, the article quotes Prayut,

“If they can't go on like this any longer, they'll have to adapt, they'll have to change their behavior. They need to plant things in addition to rubber in order to help themselves. ... And who had them plant so much rubber? If they plant [rubber] in moderate amounts, they could plant something else for income, to take care of expenses instead of [relying on] the rubber price, which has declined. Like in many places today, planting strawberries in the rubber plot and planting [export quality, expensive] bananas.” (my translation)

Under humid tropical conditions, planting strawberries might sound similar to a suggestion to plant pigs. A few days after Prayut's comments, former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai was cited (*Thai Rath*, January 9, 2016) as agreeing with Prayut that rubber farmers should plant other crops in addition to rubber, but his suggestions were more in tune with southern Thailand's humid tropical climate: planting star gooseberry (*S. androgynous*), mangosteen (*G. mangostana*), bitter bean (*P. speciose*), and Jenkol (*A. pauciflorum*) trees at the ends of rubber plots; raising ducks and chickens. Beyond Prayut's suggestions on what to plant, though, his question on who bears responsibility for the high level of rubber planted in southern Thailand seems to overlook the decades-long forms of direct financial and technical assistance provided by state offices (e.g., the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund and the Rubber Estate Organization. See Chapter 3) to support the growth of smallholder rubber economies.

5.3 Synthesis

Toward the end of the longer exchange above, concerning *krathom* leaves, the references to this ‘problem’ are framed squarely in regional terms, and furthermore the South’s failure of addressing it is contrasted by Prayut to opium in northern Thailand. Of course, it should be acknowledged that perhaps the biophysical requirements of the *krathom* plants (*Mitragyna speciosa*) match the climatic conditions of many of the southern provinces especially, given the species’ endemic range is noted to be in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health 2018), and therefore, much like rubber for most of the twentieth century, the plants had limited geographies of cultivation and consumption. However, it should also be noted that a regionalized identification with *krathom* has been projected onto southern Thailand by Bangkok/interpreted by people in southern Thailand. Thus, while rubber forms a part of the exchange between Phunkaeo and Prayut (implicitly, as Phunkaeo does not cite rubber directly in the passages presented above), concerns attending more broadly to friction and misunderstanding structure the dialog. Crucially, though, these concerns are performed through the well-known caricatures of rural southern Thais themselves, the *tua tolok*.

Given the strict laws on political gatherings under the NCPO, some people who spoke with me were of the opinion that the main reason protests were not happening during periods when rubber prices had sunk to roughly half their levels compared to those the time of the road and rail closures in August and September 2013 was precisely because of the interim constitution’s prohibitions under Section 44. One individual, who used to be a village-level latex intermediary, told me that if this law had not been in place, then there

certainly would have been protests; moreover, he added that Prayut’s government often appeals to the *lèse-majesté* laws, even in cases whose circumstances have nothing to do with the monarchy.^a One of the protest leaders from 2013 told me something similar (although he just used the word ‘law’, “*kotmai*”).^b Anant Khlangchan, the individual who had campaigned in 2011 against Aphichat Karikan to be MP, was a bit more skeptical: he said that the lack of protests was due to Section 44 in addition to the absence of Democrat MPs originally supporting mobilization.^c Witthaya Kaeopharadai, by contrast, was more hopeful: *chaosuan yang* were not protesting then because “deep down they still believed [in the government]” (“*yang chuea luek luek*”).^d Regardless of the precise reasons behind the reasons that there were no demonstrations in 2015 and 2016 (most likely some combination of the above), senses were nonetheless common among *chaosuan yang* I met that, concerning household wellbeing, circumstances had not improved since the transition to government by the NCPO, and that policy interventions ought to have been carried out.

Clearly, inferring from snippets of a *nang talung* performance could hardly constitute an exhaustive explanation of southern Thai regional-political consciousness. However, I present this case as an illustrative example to show how the widespread popularity which Nong Diao’s work has garnered, owing in large measure to the exchanges involving Prayut, nonetheless demonstrates powerful relations with viewers who feel that particular problems afflicting themselves, their neighbors, and, arguably, southern Thailand more broadly continue to be overlooked and discounted. Thus, although strict

^a November 22, 2015, Cha-uat District

^b October 17, 2015, Cha-uat District

^c March 8, 2016, Cha-uat District

^d January 10, 2016, Nakhon Si Thammarat City District

prohibitions on expressing opposition had been imposed since the NCPO took office, forms of negotiation and critique were ongoing. Beyond noting the wide reception to Nong Diao's work merely because his performances often take place in rural southern Thailand, ergo jokes about rubber register with the audience, his performances additionally reveal an array of themes that take on regional resonance. Seeking to understand the roots of these themes more comprehensively leads to the final substantive chapter, which will return to engaging directly with questions that concern the regional meanings (and the anchors thus conjured) of rubber in southern Thailand. In turn, these speak to a problematic of rubber's gradual re-territorialization through key interventions of the Thai state. Traveling with the conceptual frames sketched in the Introduction, the chapter focuses on the scalar narratives and scale frames surrounding rubber.

Chapter 6: Conveying and constructing rubber's scales in Thailand

Chapter 5 addresses forms of resonance among shadow puppetry and people in southern Thailand through the performance venue specifically, but Johnson (2006) reminds us that shadow puppet imagery in southern Thailand often makes its way to places outside of the *nang talung* theater grounds (also clear in Figure 5.2 above). In January 2016, I traveled to a meeting organized by networks of *chaosuan yang* at the Rubber Authority of Thailand's (formerly Office of Rubber Replanting Aid Fund) offices in Trang City. In early 2016, organized gatherings at ORRAF offices were forums that provided opportunities for people to engage directly with representatives from government offices such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives and voice concerns as well as opinions on what assistance measures ought to be undertaken by the government. Outside of the meeting hall were signs strung between trees, emphasizing the duress felt by *chaosuan yang* due to the low rubber prices—and by implication southern Thai people. Figure 6.1 is an example. In large lettering on top the sign reads, "rubber", and below, "is the breath of life of southern Thai people". In the lower right-hand corner, Ai Theng, another of the clowns from shadow puppet performances, exclaims in the southern dialect, "a deep sigh!"



Figure 6.1 “Rubber is the breath of life for southern people—a deep sigh!”
(Photo by author, January 12, 2016, Trang City)

Clearly exhibiting some of the points that scholarship on the *nang talung* in southern Thailand discusses (e.g., Day and Weiss 2014, Dowsey-Magog 2002, Johnson 2006, Phitthaya 2004, Vandergeest 1993, Vandergeest and Paritta 1993), concerning the openings for clowns to voice critiques and criticisms from rural southern Thailand, the poster also implies that rubber fundamentally coheres with the region, southern Thailand, itself.

This chapter, revisiting points first brought up in Chapter 3, will focus on the implications of this correspondence toward economic governance over the experiences of *chaosuan yang* articulated into circuits of global capital and finance. However, it departs from acknowledging the presence of firm, collective, regional solidarities and senses of marginalization outlined in Chapters 4 and 5. As a rhetorical device, I will develop the term, ‘scalar translations’, to highlight selective inferences about the scales of rubber’s cultivation. While the term, frame, might be a more apt descriptor of the actual processes by which many people conceptualize the geographic dimensions surrounding the problem of low rubber prices, by ‘translation’ I specifically intend to highlight the ways in which

such framing devices rely on selective readings or interpretations of the actual scales through which rubber prices faced by *chaosuan yang* are determined: in key ways decoupling low rubber prices from a much larger story of substantial, multi-national increases in rubber cultivation and production since the early 2000s (for a recent update see Mann's contribution to the January 2016 print edition of National Geographic), the calculus of a number of informants who met with me during my research concerning current price woes is rather inwardly focused, and points in large measure to past policy moves by the Thai government, and in particular under the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra in the mid-2000s, to promote rubber cultivation into northern and northeastern provinces. Although such measures certainly helped to expand the amount of land planted to rubber in Thailand, during interviews people often related these as transmissions (and transgressions) of something belonging in/to southern Thailand to places beyond the region's borders. Moreover, these shifts were emphasized as factors underlying the current slump in rubber prices. I contend that via such 'translations' of the scales through which rubber prices are determined, the problems brought on by low prices are construed fundamentally as ones resulting from—what are perceived to be—errant policies of the central government. In other words, these too are translated and perceived as a shortcoming in government itself.

As introduced in Chapter 1, intersections between region and senses of ownership over rubber could be productively put into conversation with points brought up in the politics of scale literature. As Kurtz (2002, 255) writes, for instance, "it is important to move beyond the limited notion of scale as an analytical category, and to situate geographic and political scales in the realm of social experience." Recalling the ways in which scale is

defined, e.g. through sets of “socio-spatial power choreographies” (Swyngedouw 2004, 132), the purpose of this chapter is to move beyond the ways in which people bring rubber into describing—to borrow from Vidal de la Blache—the ‘genre de vie’ of Thailand’s rural South, and to consider how rubber’s territorial histories lend to defining and defending the scale of rubber cultivation within Thailand. Following Kurtz (2003), I will consider scale frames and their idioms and demonstrate in particular how the narratives tying rubber to region select out from more global stories of cultivation and trade to convey a decidedly Thai story about rubber and thereby the reasons underlying the state of depressed prices at the time. In the following section of the chapter, I will consider content from informal interviews, in which I again highlight not only emphases on rubber’s importance for household income needs; in addition, I attend to the clearly geographic narratives that *chaosuan yang* deploy in discussions about rubber. I then show how such alignments with rubber in turn work to challenge rubber cultivation that has occurred outside of the South, yet within Thailand, as ‘out of place’.

6.1 Legacies and Qualities

Given the steep declines in rubber prices that had occurred, through my research I aimed to explore whether people envisioned a future of continuing to cultivate rubber. Would they consider using their land differently (e.g., planting oil palm and/or fruit) if prices continued to decline and/or experience abrupt changes as they have in recent years? While there are certainly practical considerations at play here—for instance, planting rubber is an investment of time and financial resources (despite forms of state assistance

such as those discussed in Chapter 3), as trees take upwards of six or seven years in the ground before they can be tapped—themes of history and legacy were also quite prominent in explanations of a more-than-personal or individual connection to rubber (see Section 3.1.1). One informant—a man in his late 30s who had inherited just under two hectares of rubber from his parents in law when he married—was asked to discuss whether he had ever considered not keeping rubber, especially when it came time to cut the trees, sell the wood, and either replant or repurpose the land. He replied that he had never thought of stopping rubber entirely, and, unprompted, said that he could not simply stop because his parents and grandparents also grew rubber, and therefore, “I have to do it.”^a Similarly, Andriesse and Puntita (2018) found that informants growing rubber in Nakhon Si Thammarat’s Bang Khan and Mueang Districts were not deciding to abandon rubber in favor of a different kind of agricultural undertaking, one village headperson remarking to them that he expected the next generation in the village also to engage in rubber cultivation (2018, 95).

During a group interview with five individuals who have rubber plots of their own but are also vendors in daily food markets, one person remarked that rubber “is in every region [in Thailand]”, with another following quickly thereafter, “however, since long ago rubber has been the economic crop of the South.” This latter individual then explained that rubber farmers in northeastern Thailand “haven’t done it for as long as we have; we’ve done it since our ancestors ... it’s been passed down for a long time.”^b

^a September 2, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^b October 27, 2015, Cha-uat District, market vendor/owner of rubber smallholding

These bits of conversation are instructive in signaling how people employ decidedly place-based rhetoric to articulate their own experiences and relations with rubber—past, present, and future.⁴³ In this sense, a clearly performative element is at work drawing rubber into place. Important as this may be on its own, and I hold that it is, considering how such comments are also fundamentally materially situated is instructive and provides openings into apprehending the foundations beneath a rubber-region nexus. As I have noted prior to this point, critical factors such as experience, levels of non-agricultural job training, financial assets, or the ways in which rubber is deeply embedded in local economies should clearly not be overlooked when asking whether systemic changes in agricultural undertakings throughout a large national sub-region might take place. For example, outside of a village meeting in nearby Chulaphon district, a couple in their mid-60s who had been growing their own rubber plot of 26 rai for over thirty years, which they tap largely themselves, stressed that people in their community “are dependent on rubber” and said they personally have not thought to stop planting rubber and switch to something else. Unlike rubber, fruit does not have a market like rubber does, they said, and in addition, “[we’re] already old,” as they emphasized both the large amount of effort and time they have expended in planting and maintaining the plot, as well as that which would be required to make a switch.^a

Responding that he had never thought of giving up rubber, partly because “one needs a large amount of land” if a switch is to be made worthwhile, a *chaosuan yang* who came to sell the latex he had collected from his nine *rai* of rubber in nearby Pa Phayom District, Phatthalung Province, at a buying cooperative in Cha-uat also invoked the term

^a September 11, 2015, *chaosuan yang*

'ban rao' to stress (his perception) of the necessity of continuing to keep a rubber holding instead of shifting to some other agricultural undertaking.^a *'Ban rao'* translates literally into “our home”, but it carries strong connotations of broader senses of belonging. Despite raising pigs and keeping some mangosteen and longkong (fruit) trees around his house, income from his rubber plot and that which he earns by working on others' plots are his main sources, he told me.

Widely appended to comments on personal and family histories with rubber during interviews was widespread acknowledgement of rubber's once limited range of cultivation (see Table 3.1, above in Chapter 3). As I was told on numerous occasions by *chaosuan yang* and others (e.g., local government officials such as district administrators and sub-district headpersons), rubber was once planted only in southern Thailand. On most occasions, when these observations (or, more accurately, contentions) were related to me, the national context was left implicit through use simply of the phrase “in the southern region”, or “*nai phak tai*”^b in Thai. The contrast to a statement such as this, sometimes made explicit but often not, is that currently rubber is grown throughout the country.

An owner of a rubber sapling nursery related to me that, while a portion of his sales, which had once been to farmers in the Northeast, have slowed significantly in recent years in the wake of falling rubber prices, overall business had “declined only a little.”^c As for orders from farmers in Cha-uat District and surrounding areas, there had been no change, he said, and commented further, “One has to plant rubber in the southern region”, again leaving the national frame implicit through the phrase, “*phak tai*.” His spouse chimed in,

^a October 2, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^b e.g., July 27, 2015, Cha-uat District, Secondary school English teacher/owner of rubber smallholding

^c February 23, 2016, Cha-uat District, Owner of rubber sapling nursery

saying that this area (Cha-uat District) is suited to rubber, so people plant it. Both agreed that weather and land conditions are better in the South compared to elsewhere.

Beyond identifying past territorial domains of rubber, associations alleging quality differences also work toward presenting certain geographic imaginaries about rubber. For example, one *chaosuan yang* noted that in northeastern provinces, “only a little rubber flows” (“*yang ok noi*”) when trees are tapped.^a Another, that “the percent is low”, meaning that the amount of dry rubber per volume of latex is greater in southern provinces by comparison. This individual estimated 25% in the Northeast compared to between 35% and 40% for plots in his village in Cha-uat District.^b Two others used the words, “*mai sombun*”, in commenting on the quality of rubber produced in the Northeast, a phrase that translates roughly into ‘incomplete’, ‘imperfect’, or ‘flawed’.^c A latex intermediary, who told me that he buys latex from four to five other villagers and then sells this larger volume onto another intermediary, remarked that while there is great deal of rubber in the Northeast, “they can’t compete against the South!”^d

As for claims to southern rubber’s higher quality, many informants attributed the reasons to their biophysical surroundings. For instance, one *chaosuan yang*, whom I got to know well, commented to me that he had never entertained the idea of stopping to cultivate rubber (either to switch land use or to leave agriculture entirely), although he had once had a tent rental business (for temple festivals, weddings, funerals, etc.) as a supplementary source of income. He pointed to the “weather conditions” being suitable for

^a October 8, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

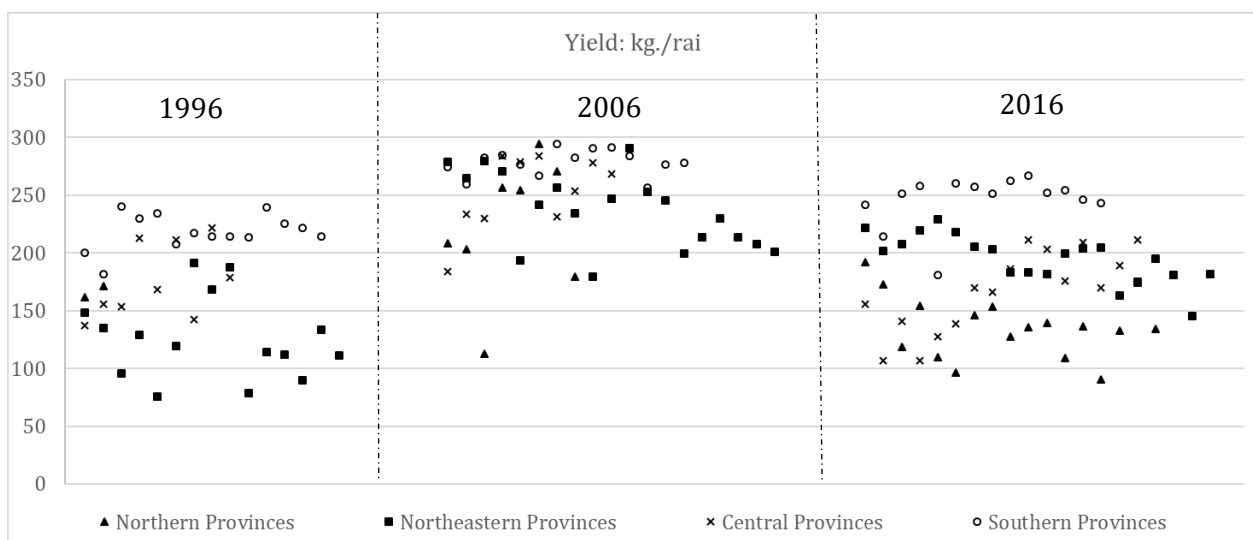
^b July 5, 2017, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^c September 10, 2015, Chulaphon District, *chaosuan yang*

^d February 4, 2016, Cha-uat District, Latex intermediary

rubber and remarked further that a different type of agriculture would not give him, in Thai, “*phon*”, a term encompassing simultaneously concepts of yields, good returns, outputs, and so forth.^a His position, on never entertaining the thought of ceasing to engage in rubber cultivation, was a consistent one among his neighbors, he held.

There is some degree of truth behind these comments—contentions that rubber planted in southern provinces is, on average, more productive compared with provinces in other regions. The data plotted in Figure 6.2 gesture toward this, but the information is much too broad to be able to offer any conclusive evidence for individual differences. For instance, a calculation of yields-by-province—a standard data item published by the Office of Agricultural Economics—necessarily masks over local differences. Aside from issues such as allocation of labor time to rubber versus other activities, weather-related factors also affect tapping potential. For instance, *chaosuan yang* do not tap at the time it rains due to the risk of tree damage.



^a June 5, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

Figure 6.2 Average yields by province in three years. Each data point represents one province and is coded according to region (North, Northeast, Central, South). Yields are calculated through dividing output (in metric tons) by area of harvestable tree stock (in *rai*).
Data Source: Thailand Office of Agricultural Economics (oae.go.th)

Research produced through government organizations often divides Thai rubber into two categories, “original rubber-planting sites” and “new rubber-planting sites” (e.g., Kannika and Naphawan 2011, Phitsamai et al. 2011, Rubber Research Institute of Thailand 2012b, Suchin et al. 2012). ‘Original’ sites refer to southern and eastern provinces; ‘new’ sites to those in northern and northeastern provinces. Planting rubber in ‘new’ sites involves challenges relating to such factors as those concerning rainfall and soil quality, and some estimates put latex yields at between 80% and 90% of yields from rubber planted in the ‘original’ sites (Kannika and Naphawan 2011).

While articles in such publications as the *Rubber Journal (Warasan Yang Phara)*, which is published through the Rubber Research Institute of Thailand, frequently include reports that recommend tree clones engineered toward particular ends like productivity and/or coping with environmental stresses—e.g., Kannika and Naphawan (2011)’s piece on “408”, a new clone developed by the Rubber Research Institute of Thailand and recommended for plots in the ‘new’ sites—whether or not planters adopt such recommendations is a different matter. To recall, the rubber sapling nursery owner who conveyed to me that rubber must be planted in the South, had once fulfilled shipments of saplings to the Northeast. However, he only raises two types of clones, “251”, developed by the Rubber Research Institute of Thailand, and RRIM 600, developed by the Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia in the mid-1930s to improve latex production (lgm.gov.my). Both are planted extensively in Cha-uaat District and surroundings: one *chaosuan yang* from

Pa Phayom District nearby in Phatthalung Province considered RRIM 600 to be a “standard” (“*mattrathan*”); he finds that the latex flow is more dependable than other varieties and the bark is not too thick, meaning it can be tapped more easily. Most of his fourteen *rai* of rubber are planted with it, he told me.^a A researcher at the Rubber Research Center in Hat Yai City told me that the breed is “rather hardy”, meaning it can withstand various types of environmental stresses, e.g. colder temperatures and dry spells.^b

Drawing comparisons, a report published by the Rubber Research Institute of Thailand (2012b), shows that yields from RRIM 600 planted in the “original” sites were found to be 171 kg./rai/year in the first year of tapping, peaking at 349 kg./rai/year in the sixth year of tapping, giving an average over ten years of 297 kg./rai/year. In the “new” sites, yields in the first tapping year were found to be 177 kg./rai/year, again peaking in the sixth year at 340 kg./rai/year, and averaging 263 kg./rai/year over the ten-year period. As noted in these summaries, the number of tapping days varies: in the “original” sites, tapping occurred on 129 +/- 7 days; in the “new” sites, tapping occurred on 108 +/- 8 days. Such data do seem to support the contentions among *chaosuan yang* in Cha-uat and nearby—‘original’ sites—that productivity in the South is higher compared to that in the ‘new’ sites of the North and the Northeast. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind such research findings relating that “because rubber is able to adjust itself well to different environmental conditions, it is possible to plant rubber in almost every province of Thailand.” (Rubber Research Institute of Thailand 2012, 39, my translation) In this light,

^a October 31, 2015, Pa Phayom District, *chaosuan yang*

^b December 16, 2015, Hat Yai, Researcher at the Rubber Research Center

remarks on rubber's geographical suitability might indicate rather political statements, inasmuch as they are framed as agronomic observations.

Although I spent less time in Cha-uat's eastern sub-districts where land is flatter and has traditionally been used for paddy, fishing, and hunting small game (i.e., Khreng Sub-District), *chaosuan yang* I had the opportunity to interview also remarked on centrality of rubber, notwithstanding the fact that it had only begun to be planted roughly ten years prior: one *chaosuan yang* said rubber was "the main income" for the village, and said her family would not consider stopping to cultivate rubber—they would have no income otherwise, a practical consideration indeed.^a Shortly after I arrived in Cha-uat in April 2015, I spent an afternoon helping to spread fertilizer on this particular family's rubber plot in Khreng Sub-District. After we had finished, the plot's owner told me that this particular site was prone to flooding, and on a few occasions their trees had died, causing the family to need to replant with new saplings. This family's neighbor related a similar story: while he used to plant rice, he had since changed his land over to rubber—with a loan provided by the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives stipulating the planting of rubber, and not palm.^b

Despite local cases of obstacles to planting rubber, it is instructive to note how such differences in rubber's suitability become subsumed into wider regional imaginaries. I contend that these maneuvers are particularly significant, as they reveal a unique context through which people may both conceive of and portray low and unstable rubber prices as well as conceptualize solutions to improve them: as I will discuss in the following sections,

^a September 7, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^b September 7, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

regional imaginaries are further enrolled into contentions of state-driven mismanagement of rubber and for the necessity, thereby, for state-led interventions. To emphasize, though, the senses through which people express obligations to continue planting rubber and/or to continue tapping despite low prices should not be divorced from the material properties of this form of agriculture itself. Unlike an annual, such as grains or vegetables, rubber trees are in the ground for decades before they are felled, and a decision is then to be made as to whether to replant or to switch agricultural activities. Thus, a ‘momentary’ price decline such as that experienced in 2015 and 2016 is most likely weighed in the context of *H. brasiliensis* trees’ rather long tenure on a particular agricultural landscape. Nonetheless, these ‘moments’ of hardship do serve as important bases conjuring forms of critique that speak to broader political terrains and domains.

6.2 “Yang Phak Tai” (or, “Southern Rubber”): Claims to Rubber’s (Thai) Origins

Of note in images such as that in Figure 6.1 (depicting one of the clowns from shadow puppet performances ‘sighing’ in response to the statement, ‘Rubber is the breath of life for southern people’) and comments that emphasize rubber as a livelihood mainstay (such as those in Section 3.1.1) are the clear references to, and connections forged between, rubber and place. These are signaled through invoking the term, the southern region (*phak tai*), directly. Citing the region came through especially strongly, though, in comments identifying an extension of rubber within Thailand, particularly ‘from’ the South and ‘into’ northern and northeastern provinces. In line with others’ comments above, a leader of one sub-district in Cha-uat told me that she had been starkly opposed to the highway and rail

closures in 2013, but she also contended that the amount of rubber planted in Thailand ought to be reduced and then commented, “before, it was only the South that had [rubber].”^a More emphatically, a man in his mid-60s who had begun planting rubber in the western, mountainous part of Cha-uat after clashes between the Communist Party of Thailand and Thai military and police had subsided said, “[planting rubber in the Northeast] conflicts with the livelihood (*yaeng achip*) of people in the southern region ... southern peoples’ livelihood is rubber.”^b Shortly before saying this, he commented that in the past planting supports had only been given out in the South.⁴⁴ To note, his criticisms were not targeted at northeastern planters themselves; rather, his emphasis on state policies came through in the phrasing, ‘conflicts with the livelihood.’ Moreover, these comments were offered without me asking about the geographic expansion of state support: I had opened our conversation asking about his own experiences receiving replanting subsidies in the past, and in turn he reflected on how policies have changed over the years: twenty to twenty-five years ago, he said, the ORRAF had only provided subsidies to replant with rubber; within the past decade or so, planting support also includes fruit and timber trees. As for these options, however, like others he noted how rubber compares favorably: “Rubber still has a market”, but he then followed this by stating that “The government is not looking for new markets [for rubber].”

As such commentary suggests, the perception that growth in rubber cultivation outside of the South—yet still within Thailand—is, perhaps counterintuitively, intrusive was widespread among interview informants in 2015 and 2016. Rubber’s agricultural

^a March 3, 2016, Cha-uat District, Sub-district headperson

^b May 19, 2016, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

presence outside of the South provided grounds for concerns that there needs to be some re-management of land under rubber cultivation. Outside of a latex-buying cooperative in Cha-uat, I conversed with a *chaosuan yang* about how he envisioned ways for rubber prices to improve. He replied that there was too much land planted to rubber in Thailand, and he used English terminology to speak of the issue: “supply-demand”, he said, and followed by talking of rubber in terms of its “zone [using a Thai pronunciation of the English word].”^a The use of the second term, zone, to convey senses of rubber’s suitable geographies within Thailand arose with notable consistency across interviews, and was invoked to reinforce the sense that rubber planted in other regions is often ‘misplaced.’

Of critical note, however, are the intersections between comments on zoning and those on the policy maneuvers by prior government administrations in supporting, and promoting, north- and northeastward expansion of rubber, particularly under that of Thaksin Shinawatra in the early to mid-2000s. “The government has failed”, an individual who had only started planting rubber himself in the early 1990s said. He continued by saying that the government needs to make “zones” (like the individual above, using the English word) for different types of agriculture.^b

After remarking that the demonstrations which had taken place at the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection a few years earlier were necessary as a means to attract the government’s attention and exert pressure for assistance, an assistant to a village headperson in Cha-uat’s Khuan Nong Hong Sub-district reflected at some length about past policies pertaining to rubber. For instance, he criticized the state of low-end rubber

^a October 2, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

^b December 13, 2015, Cha-uat District, Army officer/owner of a rubber smallholding

processing industry in Thailand (meaning exports that end up with little value-added content). “The market is oversupplied [with rubber]”, he continued, and remarked that Thaksin’s policies promoting rubber throughout Thailand are a large part of why the market was in its present state. In line with others, he similarly concluded that “zoning” is needed to ensure that the market is not oversupplied.^a What ‘zoning’ rubber would precisely entail was seldom spelled out in interviews. However, as a suggestion toward senses of appropriate policymaking, zoning conveys ideas that rubber ought to be exclusive to particular domains of cultivation within Thailand, and additionally that material solutions to low rubber prices can be envisioned through measures internal to Thailand itself.

In describing the vectors of rubber’s movements in Thailand, from the South to other regions, an individual in Chulaphon District, a *chaosuan yang* in her early 40s who does not have a plot of her own but is hired by relatives to tap, noted that in the past people from the Northeast had come to the South to work as tappers (something that is widely documented; see Alton et al (2005) and Uraiwan (2013) for example), and then “they took [rubber] from here [to plant] there.”^b She commented further that rubber used to be in the South only, but because that is no longer the case, “it’s made the price go down.” During one group interview with *chaosuan yang*, although the informants did not pinpoint policies as much, suspecting that people in the Northeast had started planting rubber because prices were climbing, they nonetheless said, “[people in the Northeast] took southern

^a July 15, 2015, Cha-uat District, assistant to village headperson/*chaosuan yang*

^b September 10, 2015, Chulaphon District, *chaosuan yang*

breeds and planted them there.”^a To recall, one of the most common ‘breeds’ planted is RRIM 600, which was developed in Malaysia.

The principal reference point in comments identifying prior policies is the “Program to Plant Rubber to Lift Incomes and Security for Farmers in the New Areas of Rubber Planting”, which I discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. To summarize briefly, in 2003 (about two years into Thaksin Shinawatra’s first term as Prime Minister), 1.44 billion baht (roughly 34.6 million USD) was authorized to be directed to the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives to carry out the Program, in which one million *rai* (160,000 ha) of rubber was to be planted in the North and the Northeast. This effort, often referred to simply as the ‘One Million *Rai* Program’ therefore had a decidedly regional focus—and, critically, outside of southern Thailand. Although policies and programs to support rubber planting in the North and the Northeast had been carried out prior to this (and prior to Thaksin’s administration), planters in other regions had remained eligible to receive planting subsidies. For instance, one in the early 1990s, which was funded in part by the World Bank, aimed for a 25,000 ha expansion in the area of rubber cultivation by providing farmers throughout Thailand who had never before planted rubber with planting materials and income subsidies, the latter to support households during the trees’ approximately seven-year gestation period before tapping can start. In 1997, under the administration of Chuan Leekpai a proposal was made to expand land planted to rubber by 32,000 ha over a five-year period, 80% of which was targeted for the Northeast and the remaining 20% for the South and East.

^a August 8, 2015, Cha-uat District, *chaosuan yang*

To be sure, a target of one million *rai* is rather large in comparison to other state-backed initiatives such as those mentioned above, and perhaps the sheer magnitude of the Program inspired strong reactions. As discussed in Chapter 1, though, global rubber prices are not driven merely by supply side factors, Thai output or otherwise, so it is unlikely that the low prices in 2015 and 2016 can be attributed specifically (and solely) to these policies. Nonetheless, the references to Thaksin's administration should not be overlooked; such perceptions on their own terms are significant and signal the ways in which people (m)align non-southern rubber cultivation with Thaksin's broader approaches to campaigning and governing—senses that I discuss in greater depth in Chapter 4. Additionally, it is important to observe that during the majority of interviews, when informants cited rubber planting in the Northeast and elsewhere, outside of southern Thailand, it was not the people there, i.e. the *chaosuan yang*, themselves who were portrayed negatively; rather, the state is held to have mismanaged (southern) Thai rubber, and moreover to have politically marginalized—by neglecting to address falling rubber prices—southern Thai people. Discussion of interview excerpts below will clarify these points.

6.3 Passing the Baht

While I have addressed some of the ways in which rubber is produced and marketed, I have thus far only briefly alluded to the ways in which the state enrolls *chaosuan yang* into these transactions. Notably, the majority of rubber produced in Thailand is exported. For instance, data from the Rubber Authority of Thailand show that

over the four-month period, from September to December 2015, just over 15% of rubber made into minimally processed forms that include, among other products, concentrated latex and smoked sheets (latex coagulated with acidic additives, ironed into sheets, and then smoked to remove water content) was used in domestic industries inside of Thailand. The rest was exported. Although the cess tax, crucial for the ORRAF's operating budget (see Chapter 3), is levied at the port, the fees are actually incurred by smallholder rubber farmers themselves: a manager at a factory belonging to Sri Trang Agroindustry (a large rubber exporting firm whose 2015 revenues totaled over 61 billion baht) related that when the factory where he is employed makes bids into Central Rubber Markets, Sri Trang's Singapore offices designate and relay a bid price based on one-month forwards from the Singapore Commodity Exchange, which staff at that factory will then use to make a bid to procure physical products such as smoked rubber sheets. Firstly, however, the factory reduces the bid amount by around five baht per kilogram to account not only for a portion of operating costs (e.g. transportation) but also cess fees.^a

While the venues in which smallholder rubber farmers trade differ slightly—e.g., some are members of agricultural cooperatives which buy latex to turn into sheets, others sell latex to independent buyers at the village-level who then sell on—as I learned through fieldwork, the bid prices struck in these rubber markets do set the tenor for village-level rubber prices (see Chapter 1). For example, on May 20, 2015 I spoke with one village-level latex buyer in Cha-uat District, who showed me the site, rubberthai.com, on his smartphone. The site was administered by the Rubber Authority of Thailand and showed prices in the Central Rubber Markets. This individual used it to determine his daily buy-

^a April 28, 2016, Hat Yai, factory manager for Sri Trang Agroindustry

price for farmers coming to sell latex in the morning. On that particular day, he was buying liquid latex at 54 baht per kilogram, while the latex price at the Central Rubber Market in Nakhon Si Thammarat was 56.5 baht per kilogram. Each morning, after *chaosuan yang* stop coming to sell (around 10:00 am), he drives his pick-up truck equipped with a large metal tank in the back, and by then filled with liquid latex, a short distance to a sheet-making factory, whose owner will then process latex deliveries from several intermediaries nearby into smoked sheets, which he will eventually take to sell at the same market. In Singapore, the one-month forwards price for smoked rubber sheets on May 20th was around 63.1 baht per kilogram, and the smoked rubber sheets settlement price in local Thai markets was 58.42 baht per kilogram. I was told that the mark-up between latex and smoked sheets is due to the latter's having been processed and thus able to be warehoused. The point to take note of in this brief example is that there are price deductions at each step, and the per-kilogram difference between the forwards price in Singapore and that in the central rubber market was several baht.

Chaosuan yang are well aware that they are the ones who incur these cess fees. Those in the South have done so over several decades, and for most of the twentieth century cess collections were for the most part returned to farmers, in-kind, for long limited to the places in which extension from the ORRAF was provided (discussed in Chapter 3). As the number of ORRAF sites grew across Thailand and policies promoting wider participation among rural households in smallholder cultivation took shape at the close of the twentieth century and in the early 2000s, the distribution of these payments in-kind were also reflected in new geographies of rubber. To be sure, smallholders in northeastern Thailand planting rubber for the first time would similarly incur cess fees like

their southern counterparts; however, as illustrated in the following section, there are palpable senses that southern Thais' labor, embodied in accumulated cess payments, has been misappropriated in pushing for an extension of rubber elsewhere.

6.4 Intrusions through Extensions

*“Our fourteen southern provinces were full [of rubber] ... in the Northeast they planted after [us] ... **our** ORRAF spread southern rubber [there].”^a*

To reiterate, the perception that growth in rubber cultivation outside of the South—yet still within Thailand—is a large contributing factor to falling prices was common among interview informants. For instance, speaking with a village-level latex buyer who had come to sell to a larger intermediary (equipped with a semi that makes daily deliveries to latex factories), I asked whether he thought rubber prices would improve in the near future. He shook his head, no, and explained that the problem was the government planting millions of *rai* in the Northeast. “The Northeast is full [of rubber] already!”, and continued, rubber is also in Laos and in China.^b As noted previously, northeastern Thailand, and to a lesser extent northern Thailand, have experienced substantial growth in rubber, and in 2016 together comprised close to 28% of Thailand’s total rubber tree stock. However, increased supplies—in Thailand as well as outside of it—are only a part of the explanation behind prices falling off from peaks in early 2011, other contributors owing to a host of concrete supply-demand factors as well as the activity in futures exchanges, as discussed in Chapter

^a July 22, 2015, Cha-uat District, Demonstration leader at the time of the Khuan Nong Hong Intersection blockade/*chaosuan yang*. Emphasis added.

^b February 5, 2016, Cha-uat District, Latex Intermediary

1. Moreover, putting the Million *Rai* Program into a bit of an historical perspective (i.e. not viewing it as an isolated burst of new cultivation in Thailand), from 1996 to 2006 the area of rubber cultivated in the Northeast increased by 1.3 million *rai*, about 215,700 *rai* in the North, close to 700,000 *rai* in the central provinces, and over 2 million *rai* in the South. All or most of this additional stock would have been producing by 2013.

In the discussion that follows, I draw from interviews with two individuals, whose contents speak to the actions of the Thai state in the recent past as committing a form of agri-trespass. The focal point in both cases is the Million Rai Program, perceived as an intrusion across the former boundaries of Thailand's rubber economy. Both individuals are affiliated with networks organized to bring concerns to branches of the government, in particular the Rubber Authority of Thailand, and present cases for forms of public assistance for smallholder rubber farmers in such forums as the meetings I attended in Thung Song and Trang: 'The Network of Thai Rubber and Oil Palm Farmers' (Individual A), while the second individual is associated with 'The Society of Rubber Tappers and Smallholder Rubber Farmers' (Individual B). Note that I have reported information from the first individual, Individual A, a leader at the demonstrations in 2013 in Cha-uat, in Chapter 4.

During the interview with Individual A at his home (August 18, 2015), he spoke critically of the three governmental organizations (ORRAF, REO, Rubber Research Institute) that have been key players in growing Thailand's rubber economy. Specifically, he remarked that these organizations have pushed only a narrow set of objectives, aimed at promoting rubber cultivation and raw materials production at the expense of developing

industry to process raw materials into more value-added goods. He linked these to senses of dependence on rubber:

“As more rubber was planted, the ORRAF sought to support planting, support planting. The ORRAF only supported planting, and there was money, even money to plant on empty land. They only supported planting. And as for the REO, the REO hasn’t done any marketing in other countries. They’ve only focused on exporting. And then the Rubber Research Institute hasn’t researched products. The government can research, but it hasn’t supported manufacturing ... Therefore, the rubber plot has almost become the complete lifeblood of rubber farmers. If one plants vegetables or rice, there isn’t any profit. Sometimes it’s a matter of lacking water, or not having an irrigation system. Since doing rice doesn’t yield any profits, people plant rubber. They changed all the land to be rubber.”

He held, as did many other *chaosuan yang* I spoke with, that a higher domestic use of rubber within Thailand would lead to more stable rubber prices—an oft-cited example were vehicle tires: *Why should Thai rubber be exported to China only to come back into Thailand as tires?*, many wondered, and thought the government should nurture manufacturing in these industries. I then asked him why, in his opinion, the protests staged at both a railroad crossing and a highway intersection in 2013 had occurred when they did, noting that in the past rubber prices had also been volatile without protests materializing.⁴⁵ His response is telling:

“The problem, the way I saw it, it was because of the failings of the *Phuea Thai* government that expanded the land planted to rubber by one million *rai*, ninety million saplings, in the Northeast in 2004. ... One million *rai* in '04. Come to '13, the rubber has entered its ninth year. The day that there was a decision in Parliament, in 2004 when *Phuea Thai* announced an expansion in the area of planted rubber by one million *rai* in the Northeast, I denounced it. I denounced it from that day on. I knew that that strategy was one that would ruin our brothers and sisters in the South.”⁴⁶

The ‘ruin’ he cites refers to the rubber price decline since 2012. At the end of March 2016, in Thung Song District, I listened as he addressed a room at a conference organized to provide a forum for people to air concerns over availability of public aid and attended by rubber farmers from Nakhon Si Thammarat and nearby provinces as well as a representative of the Rubber Authority of Thailand from Bangkok. His position had not changed from seven months prior when we spoke: “rubber is a cultural crop”, he began, and then mentioned the Million *Rai* Program, arguing, “it’s ruined the lives of our rubber-farming brothers and sisters in the South.”⁴⁷

I spoke with the second individual in Thung Song District, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province, on February 6, 2016. Similar to Individual A, he connected the currently low rubber prices to the Million *Rai* Program. However, his criticism of the Program’s financing points more directly to a sense that rubber was removed and displaced from its once southern Thai domains. Responding to my question about why prices had fallen in recent years, he said,

“A large factor? You have to think about it a little bit. Thai rubber started in the South. Southerners do rubber as a *livelihood* [emphasis: he uses the word, *achip* (see Section 3.1.1)]. During the later time of the Thaksin government, I don’t know through what means exactly, but the rubber price went higher. It went really high, up to one-hundred eighty. When the rubber price gets up to one-hundred eighty, southern people are happy. The Thaksin government passed a policy to expand rubber planting into the North, the Northeast, the East. Maybe it was ten million [rai]? Many millions at that time. In regards to planting in the North, the Northeast, and the East, you have to ask, ‘where did the budget for planting come from?’ The budget that would expand the land in the North, the Northeast, and the East came from cess taxes. The cess is a tax that came from people who call the South home. From 1961 to 2001, a full forty years they’d paid. If, when you expand the land ... into the North, the Northeast ... which the southern people have always earned a living from ... if you expand into the North, the Northeast, the East, I’m not against it. But when you expand you find that, find that rubber overflows the market. We see that rubber has already overflowed the market. In reality, though, the lifestyles of the North, the Northeast, the East aren’t suited [to rubber]. The land hasn’t been restored.”⁴⁸

This excerpt from Individual B moves among different subjects somewhat rapidly and, like that of Individual A, contains a few noteworthy mis-recollections: firstly, the rubber price climbed close to two-hundred baht during the end of Abhisit Vejjajiva’s

administration and the beginning of Yingluck Shinawatra's, not during her brother Thaksin's administration. Individual A's conflating both Thaksin's and Yingluck's parties—as *Phuea Thai* (Yingluck)—seems to suggest some sense of regional antagonism that persisted across administrations. Individual B had overstated by tenfold the One Million *Rai* Program's ambitions. However, it is worth taking note of the sense in which rubber's cultivation outside of the South in turn is perceived as an intrusion *into* the South—especially in conjunction with perceptions that rubber planted in Thailand has led to massive surpluses, thus depressing prices. While Individual A's comments speak more generally to southern peoples' livelihoods suffering as a result of increased rubber planting elsewhere, Individual B contextualizes this harm in terms that suggest benefits to other Thais happen at the direct financial expense of southerners' current and past labors. The implication in both is that state policies supporting a smallholder rubber base, while remaining rather consistent in content, have of late been geographically errant.

6.5 Synthesis

I would be remiss if I did not reflect on how the comments offered in the preceding section in some ways speak to arguments in literature that broadly fits under the heading, tree tenure. In his Masters thesis, republished as a book, Baird's (2009) study on dipterocarp resin harvesting practices among Brao communities in northeastern Cambodia points not only to the complex tenure arrangements in place within communities and individuals exercising use rights over the trees—Baird refers to these as “limited private tenure” (2009, 183), a combination of individual use rights with common pool approaches

that makes for an uneasy fit within any one of Eleanor Ostrom's tenure typologies—but also the ways in which labor, in ways akin to the sentiments expressed above, critically configures these relationships: “It is therefore this investment of labour [tappers carving holes from which to harvest resins] that legitimises the ownership of wood resin trees in Brao society.” (2009, 158) Importantly, Baird draws comparisons among Brao experiences to those elsewhere in Southeast Asia, including in the southern Thai province of Satun, to illustrate these processes of individual-community negotiation that enable and/or constrain access. The comments offered in the preceding section, particularly those from Individual B, certainly call attention to the intersections between ownership and labor investment; however, beyond inferring from individuals' own proprietary senses, there are also those which clearly ‘scale up’ to cite tensions centering on a regional-national axis.

In 2013, when global rubber production was at 10.3 million ha plus, the amount of rubber in Thailand's North and Northeast combined was a little over 472,000 ha, and that in the South about 1.8 million ha (oae.go.th). The One Million *Rai* Program initiated in the mid-2000s may have set in motion broader trends of re-territorializing rubber,⁴⁹ but the addition of one million *rai* of rubber (160,000 ha) under this policy appears to be a fraction of the total changes in area planted: from 2005 to 2015, the change in the area of harvestable tree stock was about 1.3 million ha (8.27 million *rai*) across the country, a sum that breaks down into 103,400 ha in the North, 171,200 ha in the central provinces, 457,600 ha in the Northeast, and 592,000 ha in the South. To be sure, the amount of rubber planted in Thailand has experienced a considerable uptick during the past decade plus, and much of this has indeed occurred outside of southern Thailand, in whose provinces rubber was planted for most of the twentieth century. Given these ‘supply realities’, through this

chapter I have aimed to ground the conceptual discussions developed in Chapter 1, by drawing attention to the discursive mechanisms that not only associate rubber and the region, southern Thailand, but moreover deploy these relationships into contesting the processes that have enabled and led to rubber's cultivation in other Thai regions, particularly in the Northeast.

Such contentions, I argue, can be seen as instances of 'translation.' In Chapter 1 I discussed the multi-scalar processes driving the determination of rubber prices struck in 'global' financial centers, such as the Singapore Commodity Exchange, which are then transposed with little modification to the latex-purchasing points throughout rural southern Thailand. Despite the fact that *chaosuan yang* are aware of these trans-national processes that steer the prices they perceive directly, the considerably nation-centered narratives attending to rubber and rubber prices often deployed in conversation bespeak an active resistance via re-framing to the logic of these mechanisms. As cases of 'translation', such frames identify the extensive planting of rubber in northeastern Thai provinces especially as a key culprit behind falling prices, despite the rather large amount of evidence that reasons for falling rubber prices in recent years involve a number of factors, which includes, but is not limited to, increased latex output. Given the rather heavy-handed criticisms placed on the maneuvers by Thaksin Shinawatra's administration in the early 2000s (and the increased rubber-planting these policies then spurred), these cases should moreover be seen as translating ostensibly economic concerns into what are clearly political tensions, namely a critique on perceptions of regionally demarcated administrative bias. Bearing some similarity to Kurtz's (2003) discussion concerning scale frames, i.e. the relationship between the scales of experience and those of problem-solving,

what I have brought to light in this chapter in particular highlights the idiomatic processes of inclusion, whereby individualized experiences are perceived to be subsumed into a regional problematic, which thereby identifies the responsibilities and governance capacities of the Thai state—as both enabling solutions while having caused problems to materialize in the first place. Clearly, ongoing political concerns surrounding rubber in southern Thailand relate to the contentious moments of demonstration in 2013 and 2014; however, they are not entirely reducible to them. The following, concluding chapter draws together points made over the course of the preceding four substantive chapters and assesses the implications of this Thai story of participation in the market for a globalized commodity toward how we consider questions of governance.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In the introduction to this dissertation, I stated my aims of arguing that southern Thailand's rubber economy was both a key actor in fomenting the political changes that would take place in 2014 and, additionally, a basis on which regional identities have been forged and conveyed to challenge extant forms of economic governance over the relations of production and exchange of natural rubber. To make this argument, I proposed a conceptual framework that critically engaged with scholarship on global production networks and complemented these analytical perspectives with consideration of scale and regional studies, thus moving beyond the *sine qua non* mechanisms of price determination discussed in the first part of Chapter 1. The methodology that I developed offered that these relationships are suited to investigation through ethnographic methods, which include, but are not limited to, interviews with a range of different types of individuals as well as participant observation.

I thus began the substantive portion of my dissertation with Chapter 3, where I discussed the ways in which many people in southern Thailand convey their experiences with rubber, in conversation with geographically rooted legacies passing from one generation onto the next. To emphasize these points, I brought in contrasting evidence from hired rubber tappers in southern Laos working for a Vietnamese company that had planted rubber through land concessions granted by the Lao government, as well as the case of southern Thais planting rubber in Phitsanulok Province. The former example draws attention to the roles that ownership and local histories play. The latter is distinct from many smallholders' experiences in southern Thailand due to rubber cultivation coming

across primarily as investment rather than as the basis of livelihoods for rural household security and wellbeing. Crucially, the senses of inheritance I encountered in southern Thailand are more than rhetorical articulations: they are in part informed through the active presence and interventions of the Thai state, which for long had been rather limited geographically. Through Chapters 4 and 5, I aimed to bring these articulations into conversation with the incidence of falling rubber prices in recent years, in particular by exploring the substance and significance of expressed forms of dissatisfaction and frustration. In both of these chapters, while the venues and methods of expression differ sharply, similar themes of distance and marginalization are apparent, as challenges to the governance relations over natural rubber production and exchange in Thailand simultaneously speak to wider domains of political struggle. At times, for instance in Chapter 5, it appeared that rubber exited the conversation, or was at least sidelined. Rather than implying two different tensions—one regional-political and the other concerning rubber prices—understanding how rubber intersects with region, the rubber-region nexus, underscores how these tensions are interrelated. In the final substantive chapter, Chapter 6, I more directly linked the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 1 to address the ‘translations’ at work in framing the scales through which rubber is produced and prices determined. By focusing specifically on changes to the domestic production geographies, and bearing in mind the Thai government’s longstanding interest in cultivating cohorts of smallholder rubber farmers, of *chaosuan yang*, it is clear that the administrative organs of the state more broadly are perceived to have faltered. This raises questions that concern domains well beyond rubber markets alone.

In all chapters, the presence of the subnational region looms large, and the narrative arc of the dissertation depends on (a) identifying that territorialized, regional identifications with rubber as a form of agriculture are present in southern Thailand, and then (b) drawing out how regional frames have been at work in recent political struggles—both outright and rather confrontational (i.e., at the Khuan Nong Hong intersection and Ban Tun rail crossing, among other sites, in 2013) as well as in ways taking heed of strict prohibitions on assembly during the post-coup era (i.e., through performance venues and at organized meetings and conferences). Returning to conceptual points raised in Chapter 1, it is important to acknowledge that the economic circumstances of *chaosuan yang* are in key ways informed through the global production networks of which they are a part, particularly as a result of what transpires in centers of finance such as the Singapore Commodity Exchange. Keeping this observation in mind helps to accentuate the contents of frictions as well as claims for state-led interventions elaborated in the substantive chapters above: the sense that global capital to some extent falls away or is decentered, although is not neglected entirely, allows for greater conceptual and analytical breadth when grappling with the complex dynamics of articulation into global production networks.

Speaking to points raised in the second chapter, on methodology, a grounded, ethnographic study such as this one enables consideration of the ‘interpenetration of the micro and the macro’, to paraphrase Herbert (2000, 555), to apprehend peoples’ actual interpretations of, as well as responses to, transnationally networked economic processes. In so doing, not only are the roles of different actors in the production network, e.g. the Thai state, drawn out; additionally, critical attention is brought to appreciating regions, scales, and geographical imaginaries in a twenty-first century global economy—a

productive endeavor given that these topics frame core scholarship across a broad set of research interests in many subareas of human geography.

By this point in the dissertation, I have made remarks in support of the aims outlined in the Introduction. However, I have certainly not exhausted the scope of study on pressing issues that concern southern Thailand's rubber economies. I will thus devote the rest of this conclusion to mentioning the limitations of my work as well as identifying opportunities to extend these projects into future research directions. Firstly, while I selected Cha-uat District as my principal research site because of the substantial road and rail blockades that had happened in 2013, intending thereby to draw attention to the relationships across episodes of protest and political contest, my project evolved to engage with a broader set of issues attending to smallholder rubber production in southern Thailand. On the one hand, this is an extension beyond the original set of objectives I had established when proposing research, enabling my telling a story that squarely engages with the regionalized politics of rubber in Thailand. On the other, though, broadening my perspective means that I have left some details underdeveloped. Prominent among these are the precise role and scope of certain CPT *sahai* in perhaps facilitating the demonstrations to take shape in Cha-uat and develop to a point that they served in part as staging grounds for the PDRC's mobilizations in Bangkok. While I was able to confirm that certain demonstration leaders in Cha-uat had been in communication with members of the group that would become the PDRC, and that *sahai* are held to be instrumental in terms of organizational capacity, identification of the individuals that (may have) linked frustrated

chaosuan yang with pre-PDRC support remains as a gap in this project. To note, while many *sahai* I spoke with were supportive of the demonstrations in 2013 as sending a direct message to the prime minister that peoples' household incomes were in jeopardy, they often lamented the involvement (or intrusions) of politicians and maintained that the demonstrations had begun innocent of such influence (or interference). However, it is likely that others, *sahai* and their allies, may have harbored hopes closer to those of the PDRC itself.

For instance, on the Thai-language Wikipedia page's entry on the PDRC a number of prominent members are listed, ranging from leaders such as Suthep Thaugsuban and Witthaya Kaeopharadai to several political activists, artists, media personalities, and others (th.wikipedia.org/wiki/กปปส. Note that the English-language version of the page does not include this list.). During my brief return trip to Cha-uat in July 2017, I was chatting with two friends at the couple's convenience store in Cha-uat's district center, when both mentioned the name of one individual from Ron Phibun District, whose name is included in the political activist category, as having been an advisor for protest leaders at Khuan Nong Hong, so they believed. In addition, they also thought he and Chamni Sakdiset had once been together 'in the forest.' After that conversation, in the evening, I visited the Ao Si Muang Monument in Chulaphon District, where a number of *sahai* were casually chatting while others kicked around a takraw (a ball made of rattan). I asked about the individual mentioned by my friends, whether he ever visits the Monument, and one *sahai* told me that he does, though infrequently. The following day I spoke with another *sahai/chaosuan yang* at his home, whom I had met during the course of work in 2015 and 2016 and who had

been involved in active combat during the 1970s in Cha-uat. He said that this PDRC member had been an ally of the CPT in the cities but held he had never been 'in the forest.'

Future work could explore these linkages in more detail, not only for the sake of understanding more completely what had transpired in Cha-uat in August and September 2013, but also to analyze how past movements of opposition carry legacies that continue to materialize, although differentially, in the present. Specifically, it would be instructive to look at how these histories engage with the formation of contemporary political alliances, regionally (the North and the Northeast were both home to substantial CPT activity and are also the main support bases of the 'Red Shirts') as well as locally: some of the *sahai* I had spoken with were, at best, ambivalent about the Democrat Party.

A second limitation and opportunity for further work concerns the theme of agrarian change more broadly in Thailand, a topic that would certainly contribute to furthering conversations on global production networks, given Thailand's substantial share of global rubber production and exports and southern Thailand's role within. While I have drawn attention to the reluctance of people to change agricultural undertakings, in part, as I infer, due to the materiality of rubber itself, broad-based agrarian change nonetheless remains a key theme to consider here. In the Northeast, this topic occupies the studies of Jonathan Rigg and colleagues—e.g. Rigg et al. (2012), Rigg et al. (2016), and Rigg et al. (2018)—which consider the persistence of smallholder rice farming and the slow pace toward agrarian transitions that lead to larger landholdings and growing numbers of people breaking ties with agriculture entirely. Similarly, I have identified staying senses of reliance on the products from smallholder rubber. However, I focus on a window of time in which substantial political changes transpired, changes which were bound up in protests

and, in their aftermath, of calls for intervention through policy channels to lift rubber prices. Within this contested climate, I experienced, through a number of forums, the ways in which people convey the problems that broadly attend to the phenomenon of low rubber prices, and how forms of negotiation yield perspective into apprehending questions of economic governance, and, fundamentally, how the malleability of scale-in-governance ought to be considered closely. Given the 'momentary' nature of this project, it is therefore difficult for me to speculate about larger questions concerning agrarian changes (or stasis) in rural southern Thailand, beyond the arguments conveyed to me by *chaosuan yang* concerning their futures. Revisit studies such as Rigg et al. (2012) are encouraging, as they identify the insights to be gained from returning to former research sites many years later.

Importantly, most of the *chaosuan yang* I interviewed were over 30 years old, many of them far older than that, and the theme of their unwillingness to abandon rubber because of low prices was prominent, which, as I have discussed, owes to considerations such as land availability, agricultural knowhow, market access, and the labor requirements to make such a change. Often, peoples' children were young and in school or, in the case of older *chaosuan yang*, had moved away and were engaged in non-agricultural work. Considering subsequent generations' outlooks on continuing to keep rubber thus clearly presents an opportunity for further research. However, I suspect that the conclusions drawn from such an investigation could be rather murky: as I learned from one *chaosuan yang* family in Tha Pracha Sub-district of Cha-uat, rubber has served as a safety net in recent years. The parents in this family were both in their late 60s when I met them in 2015, and three years prior one of their sons, his wife, and their two small children had returned from living in Phuket Province. Their son had lost his waged job in a painting

business and had returned to tap rubber on the parents' plot. His wife took a position teaching in the kindergarten about a kilometer from the home.

As the above chapters attend to the cultural and economic identifications with rubber and negotiations with the Thai state, future work could explore the tensions between this set of relationships and the material realities of continuing to keep rubber plots, i.e. the almost daily labor requirement that largely precludes work in other places and sectors. An additional perspective to consider is how people will respond to state agencies' encouragements to diversify agriculturally, in light of low prices, often providing opportunities for *chaosuan yang* to acquire low-interest loans: a pamphlet I picked up in August 2015 at a presentation organized at the Cha-uat District Office by the Office of the Rubber Replanting Aid Fund's Ron Phibun office had the title, "Agricultural Training Document: *the program to support loans for smallholder rubber farmers to carry out supplementary livelihoods*", and included information on undertaking agricultural activities ranging from vegetables to raising livestock and aquaculture. To this end, more work could be done in the vein of institutional ethnography along with continued empirical attention to the steps people take (or do not) to shift gradually away from a reliance on rubber. Although further directions and opportunities for supplementary work remain, through the above chapters that comprise this dissertation I have sought to develop insights into a contemporary set of concerns among *chaosuan yang* in southern Thailand by considering the roles of history and geography in forging the regional 'cast', in two senses of this term, that shapes the arcs, narrative and otherwise, of economic and political relationships.

End Notes

¹ Latex is left to harden in cups attached to trees after tapping. Some *chaosuan yang* told me they sell *khi yang* if their trees produce small amounts of latex after tapping and/or the frequency of collecting latex is deemed not worth the time/effort.

² Government operated auction sites for buying and selling rubber. Physical deliveries are made, graded for quality and sold according to the particular rubber product's price that day—determined through company bids. Central Rubber Markets do not have a long history in Thailand: the first was established in 1991 in Hat Yai, in Surat Thani in 1999, and in Nakhon Si Thammarat in 2001 (Sommat et al. 2014). Central Rubber Markets were established with the dual aims of lowering transactions costs as well as increasing competition among intermediaries—and thus leading to fairer prices (Patthamawadi 2009).

³ Some people I spoke with in Khuan Nong Hong even contended that the 120-baht price guarantee called for at the demonstrations in 2013 was actually the work of intermediaries (pho kha khon klang), such as large companies that own rubber-sheet smoking facilities—not the local latex buyers, they told me. Indeed, as I have noted, most *chaosuan yang* named prices under 100 baht per kilogram for latex as those that would be sufficient to meet their households' income needs.

⁴ Agricultural futures are specified products (e.g., Grade 3 Ribbed Smoked Rubber Sheets) traded in an exchange (as opposed to between two parties), whose contract fulfilment takes place at some point in the future (James 2016). As James (2016, 5) concisely summarizes, “a futures contract is therefore a bet on the future spot price”.

⁵ In a report published through the consulting firm, Accenture, global downstream demands for natural rubber are estimated to be 75% for automotive uses (tires, belts, insulators, gaskets, etc.); 13% for medical uses (examination gloves, syringes, catheters, etc.); 9% for manufacturing uses (conveyer belts, hoses, etc.); and around 8% for consumer goods (clothing and apparel, sports equipment, etc.) (Kose et al. 2014).

⁶ Global supply and demand quantities are estimated as a set of simultaneous equations, where each takes account of a number of factors thought to influence natural rubber output and consumption. Given the global focus of this study, it is interesting to take note of some of the authors' Thai-centric data choices: to account for exchange rates in the demand model (holding all else constant, when the importing country's currency value increases relative to that of the exporting country, the importer is able to purchase more quantity) they use a vector of the exchange rate between Chinese Yuan Thai Baht. In the supply model, rainfall and area of cultivation both rely on Thai data only. Suratwadee et al. justify these choices on account of Thailand's role as leading producer in the global market. According to 2013 FAO data that I gathered, the authors are correct; however, Thailand's share was just over 30% of the world total. To be sure, modelers need to be cognizant about the number of variables they choose to include relative to the total number of data observations; on the other hand, omitted variables are liable to influence estimates so long as they remain outside of the model.

⁷ Although, Phelps et al. (2018) are suspicious of the extent of these promises.

⁸ In Section 1.2 above, some *chaosuan yang* networks take on names that group additional provinces into southern Thailand, notably Prachuap Khiri Khan and Phetchaburi, which are south of Bangkok but administratively considered part of central Thailand.

⁹ Paasi (2002, 140, original emphasis) distinguishes the two as such: “the *identity of a region* refers to those features of nature, culture and inhabitants that distinguish or, in fact, can be *used* in the discourses of science, politics, cultural activism or economics to distinguish a region from others. ... they are expressions of power in delimiting, naming and symbolising space and groups of people. On the other hand, we may distinguish the *regional identity* (or regional consciousness) of the inhabitants, i.e. their identification with their region. ... this identification can be based on natural or cultural elements that have been classified, often stereotypically, by regional activists, institutions or organisations as constituents of the identity of the region.”

¹⁰ Note that Satun province, on the border with Malaysia, joined the Phuket *monthon* after the Anglo-Siamese Treaty in 1909 ceded territories to Britain, thereby setting national borders that still obtain in Thailand today (Baker and Pasuk 2009).

¹¹ Information used in a brief anecdote comparing the experiences of people impacted by recent agricultural transformations to rubber in southern Laos was gathered in the summer of 2017 with funding from the Henry Luce Foundation Hawai'i-Wisconsin Faculty/Student Collaborative Research Fellowship for research in Southeast Asia.

- ¹² *Krathom* (*Mitragyna speciosa*) is a tropical evergreen that grows well in southern Thailand, whose leaves many rural villagers chew daily. Chewing *krathom* leaves releases a mild stimulant.
- ¹³ Government operated auction sites for buying and selling rubber. Physical deliveries are made, graded for quality and sold according to the particular rubber product's price that day—determined through company bids. Central Rubber Markets do not have a long history in Thailand: the first was established in 1991 in Hat Yai, in Surat Thani in 1999, and in Nakhon Si Thammarat in 2001 (Sommat et al. 2014).
- ¹⁴ A land measurement unit. 1 *rai* = 0.16 hectares.
- ¹⁵ Latex contains a large amount of water, so buyers pay based on the dry rubber content, which through my interviews in and around Cha-uat I learned is usually between 35% and 40% per kilogram
- ¹⁶ In 2015 and 2016, the Thai government passed rather modest measures, a one-time subsidy to farmers of 1,500 baht per *rai* (9,375 baht per ha) as well as a price guarantee of 42 baht per kilogram for latex. Absence of land titles on land planted to rubber is a widespread problem in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Phatthalung, which for many people narrows the scope of types of state assistance deemed helpful to market interventions that establish a price floor.
- ¹⁷ Definition provided by *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*. Available at dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali.
- ¹⁸ “พ่อแม่เมืองสองแควเดินทางจับกุมผู้บุกรุกป่า”, dailynews.co.th/Content/regional/171825
- ¹⁹ In *Tearing Apart the Land*, McCargo (2008) notes that while histories of violence in Thailand's three southernmost, predominantly Muslim and Malay-speaking border provinces date back decades, there had been an upsurge since the early 2000s, after a period of relative calm, following on Thaksin Shinawatra's policies of increasing securitization in these provinces.
- ²⁰ I had gone first to the center to see if I would be able to connect with either people from southern Thailand and/or individuals from Nakhon Thai who would be able to comment on the situation of rubber planting that had gone on there. My adviser had alerted me in a phone conversation some weeks before that Nakhon Thai had a fair amount of southern curry restaurants, similar to what I found in Wang Thong some years before, so I figured that would be a good place to start.
- ²¹ To my knowledge, the share rates in Cha-uat were not adjusted according to price level.
- ²² On threats to bird diversity as a result of rubber plantations, see Round (1988).
- ²³ After administrative reforms in the late nineteenth century, provinces throughout Thailand (officially named Siam at the time) were grouped as *monthons* (a Thai-ification of the Sanskrit mandala, meaning circle) for administrative purposes (Wyatt 2003)
- ²⁴ “The 1963 Census of Agriculture covered farm operations of individuals, whether or not they were heads of households, as well as those of partnerships, limited companies, co-operatives, state enterprises, and other juristic persons.” (7)
- ²⁵ As of 2015, both organizations, as well as the Rubber Research Institute of Thailand, were brought under the administration of a new organization, the Rubber Authority of Thailand (raot.co.th).
- ²⁶ While these figures include new plantings as a result of government subsidies, they also cover new planting undertaken independently, without financial support from the state.
- ²⁷ โครงการแทรกแซงตลาดยางพารา
- ²⁸ *Matichon* is now a weekly news publication.
- ²⁹ To note, although protesters similarly called on government intervention during these episodes, the narratives were slightly different from those in Cha-uat in 2013. Namely, they justified government intervention by alleging that large rubber-exporting firms in Thailand wielded high levels of influence, both over rubber markets and over Thai politicians broadly (*Matichon*, February 17, 1990). As seen from the discussion of 2013's protests below, though, calls for intervention did not seek to specify causes of low prices.
- ³⁰ In 1995, during the administration of Chuan Leekpai, a land reform program concerning the so po ko (ส.ป.ก.) classification (land intended for poor farmers, to be used for agricultural purposes only and not able to be sold), was embroiled in corruption when Suthep Thaugsuban, then the deputy prime minister of agriculture, had issued deeds to wealthy families in Phuket Province, causing the government to shut down as a result (e.g. Shenon 1995).
- ³¹ Student protests at Thammasat University, staged in opposition to the return of Thanom Kittikahon, a former military dictator who was ousted in 1973, turned into a massacre when police, military and paramilitary forces blocked exits and opened fire onto the students, amid allegations that the latter were allied with the communists and after they had been accused with *lèse-majesté* charges. See Thongchai (2002).

³² Anuson describes phenomenon through the Thai term, *tit hu* (ติดหู), which literally translates into “attach to the ears.”

³³ A similar demonstration had actually been carried out decades earlier, during protests staged in Thung Sog District over low rubber prices. Protesters had burned figures of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan and his minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives.

³⁴ พ.ร.บ.บรรเทาและป้องกันสาธารณภัย

³⁵ To put this figure into perspective, data published through Thailand’s Office of Agricultural Economics show that one- and two-month world market forwards prices settled on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange ranged from slightly under 10,000 baht per metric ton to slightly over 11,000 baht per metric ton from December 2012 to December 2013.

³⁶ A dispute over ownership of the Preah Vihear Temple and grounds on the border between Thailand and Cambodia. At the time when the dispute first surfaced, in 2008, the People’s Power Party was in office, and PAD (Yellow Shirts) supporters protested a decision by the Party’s foreign minister supporting Cambodia’s claim over the temple (Strate 2013).

³⁷ Even though the PDRC would not be established by that title until the end of November 2013, this individual, like many others, referred to the political interventions at the time of the Cha-uat protests using the term, PDRC.

³⁸ A broad-based NGO working across Thailand that formed to oppose negative impacts on communities, both rural and urban, resulting, for instance, from large-scale development projects, such as the Pak Mun Dam—completed in 1994 in the northeast’s Ubon Ratchathani province. Although some communities in southern Thailand had affiliated with the Assembly of the Poor in the 1990s, levels of engagement were much higher and more active elsewhere in Thailand, which this informant also recalled. See Missingham (2003) for a detailed account of the NGO.

³⁹ My sincere gratitude goes to Sanita Wongyongsin, who helped me interpret the exchange between Ai Phunkaeo and Prayut in the shadow play excerpt, particularly the portions in Southern Thai, by transcribing sections and translating between the Southern and Central Thai dialects.

⁴⁰ e.g. [youtube.com/watch?v=xLYSBVmoPhY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLYSBVmoPhY)

⁴¹ Although Thailand does have laws prohibiting the possession and consumption of krathom, enforcement has varied. In 2015, however, there were many reports of police and military cutting down krathom plots and arresting the planters.

⁴² Self-sufficiency is actually quite a bit more political than is let on here. The late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (reigned from 1946 – 2016) developed principles that came to be known widely as Sufficiency Economy (*setthakit pho phiang*)—a loosely organized set of practices based on principles of Buddhist Economics that stresses virtue and moderation rather than accumulation.

⁴³ See also Shattuck (2018)

⁴⁴ Although planters in Thailand’s eastern provinces have also long received replanting subsidies as well, he did not mention this.

⁴⁵ Informant A was also one of the key demonstration leaders in 2013, and our conversations also engaged with issues that related to these events’ background and aftermath.

⁴⁶ *Phuea Thai* is actually the name of Yingluck Shinawatra’s Party, whereas *Thai Rak Thai* was the party of her brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was Prime Minister at the time of the Million Rai Program.

⁴⁷ At the same meeting, this individual also spoke of rubber as an *achip* as distinct a typical job. See Chapter 3.

⁴⁸ At the time of the parliamentary decisions to initiate the Million Rai Program, the Prime Minister’s cabinet circulated a letter to various state agencies indicating that one of the benefits of expanding cultivated area of rubber would be “creating good environmental conditions as well as increasing the country’s green land.” (Surachai 2003)

⁴⁹ According to Chambon et al. (2016), slightly under 40% of rubber holdings surveyed in northern and northeastern Thailand had obtained ORRAF support to plant.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Newspapers and Online Media Content

Thai Rath [Last Accessed: June 4, 2018]

January 10, 2012. “Satun Rubber Mobs Combine with Songkhla, Threaten to Advance to the Prime Minister’s House” [มีอบสวนยางสตูลรวมตัวสงขลา ชูบุกถึงบ้านนายกฯ] thairath.co.th/content/region/229469.

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August 25, 2013. “Mob increases by 5,000. Riot police withdraw.” [มีอบขยายครั้งหมื่น ตร.ปราบจลาจลถอนตัว] thairath.co.th/content/region/365733

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Appendix B: Source of Figure 1.7

รับซื้ออย่างแสนดี

**ราคาสูงกว่าตลาด
จ่อเปิดรับ.แปรรูป**

กรม.เคาะมาตรการช่วยเหลือชาวสวนยาง สั่ง
8 กระทรวงรับซื้ออย่าง 1 แสนตันโดยตรงจาก
เกษตรกร ป้อนเข้าสู่โรงงานผลิต ♦ ย้ำต่อหน้า 14

รับซื้ออย่าง □ ต่อจากหน้า 1

โดยไม่ผ่านตลาด ระบุราคารับซื้อสูงกว่า
ท้องตลาด แต่ไม่เปิดเบ็ดเตล็ดตลาด เฉลี่ย
12 น.ค.เริ่มลงพื้นที่สำรวจเป็นแห่งแรก สึกทั้ง
เคหะเปิดโรงงานแปรรูปยาง ๗๑ แห่งทั่ว
ประเทศในปี ๖๖ หรือมีมูลค่าเฉลี่ย “พ.อ.ฉัตร
เฉลิม” นั่งประธานบอร์ด กษท. เกษกรวอนลด
การผลิตยาง-ปลูกพืชอื่นทดแทน คุมเกณฑ์
รับพื้นที่ วางแผนเพิ่มใช้ยาง ๒๐,๕๑๗ ล้าน
ไร่-ซ่อมถนนทั่วประเทศ ๓๖.๖ ล้านตาราง
เมตร ด้านเครือข่ายเกษตรกรชาวสวนยางภาค
ใต้เสนอ ๖ ข้อเสนอแก้ปัญหายาง เชื้อราเหี่ยว
แก้ได้ภายใน ๖๐ วัน ที่กระบี่ชี้ประกันราคา
กค.๕๖ ๕๐ บาทภายใน 1๕ วัน ไม่เช่นนั้นผู้
จะดับทุเรียนไทย

○ คง"ฉัตรเฉลิม"ป.บ.อรัญคัย.
เมื่อวันที่ 12 น.ค. ที่ทำเนียบรัฐบาล
พ.อ.ศ.สรรเสริญ แก้วกำเนิด โฆษกประจำสำนัก
นายกรัฐมนตรี แถลงภายหลังการประชุมคณะ
รัฐมนตรี (ครม.) ว่า ที่ประชุม ครม. มีมติแจ้ง
ตั้งประธานกรรมการและกรรมการผู้ทรง
คุณวุฒิในคณะกรรมการการยางแห่งประเทศไทย (กยท.) จำนวน 8 คน ดังนี้ 1.พ.อ.ฉัตร
เฉลิม เฉลิมสุข เป็นประธานกรรมการ ๒.นาย
ประสิทธิ์ หนึ่งเดชะ ผู้แทนเกษตรกรชาวสวน
ยาง ๓.นายสังข์วัน พงษ์น้อย ผู้แทนเกษตรกร
ชาวสวนยาง ๔.นายเสวี จิตต์เกษม ผู้แทน
เกษตรกรชาวสวนยาง ๕.นายธีรพงษ์ ดันดี
เพชรภรณ์ ผู้แทนสถาบันเกษตรกรชาวสวน
ยาง ๖.นายสาธิต ด้วง ผู้แทนสถาบันเกษตรกร

ชาวสวนยาง ๗.นายธนวรรณ พลวิชัย ผู้
ประกอบการกิจการยางที่มีความเชี่ยวชาญด้าน
กบ และ ๘.นายพิชัย ภิรมย์พันธุ์ ผู้แทน
ผู้ประกอบการยางที่มีความเชี่ยวชาญด้านการ
ผลิตอุตสาหกรรมยาง ซึ่งขณะนี้อยู่รอดมี
ตัวแล้ว

○ รับซื้อโดยตรงแสนดี
พ.อ.ศ.สรรเสริญ กล่าวอีกว่า จากการ
สำรวจความต้องการใช้ยางพาราของ 8
กระทรวง ประกอบด้วย กระทรวงคมนาคม
กระทรวงมหาดไทย กระทรวงศึกษาธิการ
กระทรวงสาธารณสุข กระทรวงกลาโหม
กระทรวงอุตสาหกรรม กระทรวงพาณิชย์ และ
กระทรวงเกษตรและสหกรณ์ มีทั้งสิ้นประมาณ
1 แสนตัน โดยจะมีการรับซื้อยางพาราโดยตรง
จากเกษตรกร และนำเข้าสู่กระบวนการผลิต
ของโรงงาน ทั้งนี้ งบประมาณที่จะซื้อยางจะใช้
งบประมาณที่กระทรวงฯ ที่ต้องการใช้ยางพาราเป็นหลัก
หากไม่พออาจใช้งบประมาณกลางฉุกเฉินเป็น
บางส่วน และแม้ว่า ๖ เดือนข้างหน้าก่อนจะเปิด
การซื้อยางจะมียางออกมา 8 แสนตัน แต่
การซื้อ 1 แสนตันของรัฐบาลเป็นการซื้อใน
พื้นที่ ทำให้สามารถรับซื้อยางได้ทั้งหมด ซึ่งวิธี
เช่นนี้ถือเป็นการแก้ตลาด และจะทำให้ราคา
ยางในตลาดสูงขึ้น

○ เปิดรับ.แปรรูปยางพารา
พ.อ.ศ.สรรเสริญ กล่าวอีกว่า ส่วน
กระทรวงอุตสาหกรรม คาดว่าในปี ๒๕๖๖ จะ
เปิดโรงงานที่แจ้งความประสงค์ไว้ ๖๐ โรงงาน
เพื่อรับผลผลิตของหมักดีเซลที่ได้ ส่วนโรงงาน
ที่แจ้งดำเนินการแล้วได้ขออนุมัติมี ๖ โรงงาน

ซื้อเพื่อเพิ่มสต็อก นอกจากนี้นายกรัฐมนตรีได้
กำชับว่าความต้องการของตลาดมีน้อยกว่าผล
การผลิต จึงมีนโยบายให้เกษตรกรชาวสวนยางลด
การผลิต และเปลี่ยนไปปลูกพืชชนิดอื่นทดแทน
ส่วนการจ่ายเงิน 1,5๐๐ บาทต่อไร่สำหรับ
ที่ไม่มีเอกสารสิทธิในการเพาะปลูกจะแล้ว
เสร็จในเดือน น.ค.นี้ ซึ่งจะให้กองทุนหมู่บ้าน
เข้าไปดูแล

○ รับซื้อส่งผลิต-ไม่ผ่านตลาด
พ.อ.ประยุทธ์ จันทร์โอชา นาย
กรัฐมนตรีและหัวหน้า คสช. กล่าวภายหลังเป็น
ประธานการประชุม ครม. ถึงการแก้ปัญหาการ
ยางสดว่า ขณะนี้ได้พูดคุยถึงการลดและ
การรับซื้อผลิตกับที่สำรับรูป การนำแต่ยาง
ไม่พื้ต้น ซึ่งเป็นวิธีการที่คิดว่าเพิ่มราคาโดยไม่
จุดมุ่งหมาย แล้วต้องเก็บเข้าคลังและนำ
เหมือนเดิม ซึ่งในส่วนที่รัฐบาลและคสช.รับซื้อ
จะนำเข้าสู่การผลิตตามผลวิจัยให้เกิดมาตรฐาน
โดยไม่ผ่านตลาด แต่ต้องเชื่อมโยงกับเอสเอ็มอี
ในการนำไปผลิต ซึ่งการรับซื้อยางจะรับซื้อใน
ราคาส่วนเกินเพื่อให้เกษตรกรพออยู่ได้ และ
ทุนผู้ประกอบการไปสู่การผลิต ทั้งนี้ ยางที่ทั้ง
8 กระทรวงรับซื้อนั้นมีราคาสูงกว่าตลาดไม่
เป็นราคาที่เกษตรกรพออยู่ได้ แล้วนำไปส่ง
โรงงานผลิต ไม่ใช่การมีกีดกันออกจากสต็อก
โดยรัฐบาลจะยังไม่เก็บค่ายางแต่ให้ผลิตไป
ก่อน เมื่อขายของได้ให้นำมาใช้หนี้เพื่อให้เกิด
การหมุนเวียน

○ เล็งดึงยางในสต็อกมาใช้
พ.อ.ประยุทธ์ กล่าวว่า หากแนวทาง
นี้สำเร็จมีความต้องการใช้ยางในการผลิตมาก
ขึ้น ส่งผลให้ต้องไปเอาจากยางในสต็อกออกมา
ใช้ได้ อย่างไรก็ตามในส่วนของการรับซื้อของ
ประมาณ 1 แสนตันนั้น รัฐบาลและ คสช.ก็
ต้องดูงบประมาณและกำลังการผลิตด้วย ซึ่ง
ขณะนี้เป็นการบรรเทาปัญหาในช่วง ๖ เดือน
ก่อนฤดูปิดกรีดยาง ทั้งนี้ ราคาที่รัฐบาลและ
คสช.จะรับซื้อนั้นจะสูงกว่าราคาตลาดแต่อย่าง
และต้องไม่เปิดเบ็ดเตล็ดตลาด ตนกำลังทำให้
เกิดความชัดเจนจะมีได้ต้นทำใน ส่วนราคา
น้ำมันที่ดึงลงอย่างชัดเจน ส่งผลกระทบต่อ
ราคาขางนั้น การบริหารจัดการในระยะยาว
รัฐบาลจะนำขางกว่า 4.7 ล้านตันที่อยู่ในคลัง
มาใช้ในประเทศให้มากขึ้น 5๐% ซึ่งวันเมื่อ

ให้รัฐบาลแก้ไขราคาขางพาราคดค่า โดยนาย ซิโยคม กล่าวว่า ขณะนี้ราคากุ้งแห้งแค่ 22 บาท เศษขาง 12 บาท เกษตรกรชาวสวนขาง กำลังเดือดร้อนถึงขีดสุดแล้ว จึงต้องออกมาเรียกร้องไปยังรัฐบาลให้ช่วยเหลือตามข้อเรียกร้องดังนี้

1.ประกันราคากุ้งโลกไว้ละ 60 บาท ภายในเวลา 15 วัน เพราะปัจจุบันราคางุ้งต่ำกว่าทุน 2.เอชชางไปทั่วภาค โดยให้กระทรวงคมนาคม และให้ อบจ.ทั่วประเทศเป็นผู้ดำเนินการทั้งนี้ 3.สนับสนุนเอกชนตั้งโรงงานผลิตขางรถยนต์ และสินค้าที่ผลิตด้วยขางโดยรัฐบาล เข้าไปส่งเสริมด้านเงินทุน 4.เร่งสนับสนุนรับรองมาตรฐานสินค้าที่ผลิตจากขางพาราของกลุ่มเกษตรกร โดยให้มหาวิทยาลัยตรวจสอบ และออก มอก.รับรอง ทั้งนี้ ขอให้เกษตรกรได้เร่งแก้ไขปัญหโดยเร็วที่สุด

○ “ถาวร” เปิดบ้านถกแกนนำ

เมื่อเวลา 10.00 น. วันเดียวกัน ที่บ้านพักถาวร เสาน้อย อ.ดีด ส.ส.ประชาธิปัตย์ ภาคมะลฑลนบิบิโน ด.ควนลัง อ.หาดใหญ่ จ.สงขลา ได้เปิดบ้านต้อนรับแกนนำเกษตรกรชาวสวนขางในพื้นที่ จ.สงขลา และร่วมประชุมหารือแนวทางการแก้ไขปัญหาขางพาราคดค่า เพื่อรวบรวมข้อมูลทั้งหมดส่งต่อไปยังรัฐบาลเพื่อหาแนวทางแก้ไขโดยเร่งด่วน โดยนายถาวร กล่าวว่า วันนี้จะเดินทางลงพื้นที่ไปดูโรงงานขางระดับท้องถิ่น ในพื้นที่ หมู่ 2 ด.โลกม่วง อ.คลองหอยโข่ง จ.สงขลา จากนั้นจะเข้าไปดูการรับซื้อขางในตลาดกลางขางพารา ด.คลองสรี อ.หาดใหญ่ จ.สงขลา ก่อนจะนำข้อมูลของทุกฝ่ายที่ได้มาเพื่อสรุปข้อมูลแนวทางทั้งหมด เพื่อทำหนังสือส่งต่อให้รัฐบาลทางช่วยเหลือที่นึ่งเกษตรกรชาวสวนขางที่

เดือดร้อนอย่างเร่งด่วนต่อไป

○ ร้องนายกฯใช้อำนาจม.44

เมื่อเวลา 13.00 น. ที่หน้าศาลากลาง จ.สงขลา ได้มีชาวสวนขางจำนวนประมาณ 300 คน เดินทางมาชุมนุม เพื่อยื่นหนังสือให้รัฐบาลช่วยเหลือจากขางพาราคดค่า โดยผ่านนายทรงพล สวาสดิ์ธรรม ผวจ.สงขลา โดยมีศาสตราจารย์ดร.ทวารประมาณ 50 นาย สุนัขรักษาความปลอดภัย ทั้งนี้ ผู้ว่าฯได้เชิญเกษตรกรชาวสวนขางที่มาร่วมชุมนุม พร้อมกับมีตัวแทนมหาวิทยาลัยสงขลานครินทร์(นอ.) ตัวแทนการนิคมอุตสาหกรรมภาคใต้ (จลุง) นายทรงพล ผู้ว่าฯ นายอนุวัติ อามัด สนช.นายสุรพล จารุพงศ์ ผู้ตรวจราชการกระทรวงเกษตรและสหกรณ์ และหน่วยงานราชการที่เกี่ยวข้องเข้าร่วมพูดคุยกับเกษตรกรเกี่ยวกับแนวทางการแก้ปัญหาขางพาราในระชยะยาว และการนำขางพาราแปรรูปเป็นผลิตภัณฑ์

รายงานข่าวแจ้งว่า นายชัชวาลย์ ทองแท้ ประธานสหพันธ์เกษตรกร จ.สงขลา ได้ยื่นหนังสือให้ พล.อ.ประยุทธ์ จันทร์โอชา นายกฯ ผ่านนายทรงพล ขอเรียกร้องให้แก้ไขอำนาจ ม.44 ตรวจสอบสวนกักตุนขางพาราเป็นการเร่งด่วน สงสัยว่ามีกลุ่มบุคคลบางกลุ่มแทรกแซง บิดเบือนตลาดขางพารา เกิดความเสียหายต่อเกษตรกร หากพบว่ามีการกระทำผิดให้ถือว่ากลุ่มบุคคลหรือบุคคลนั้นเป็นอาชญากรเศรษฐกิจ ฟ้องดำเนินคดีเด็ดขาด.