

Report on Participation in [Overseas Field Trip, Thailand]

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During our field trip to Thailand, we participated in several academic presentation workshops at Thammasat and Chulalongkorn Universities and visited a variety of locations, including several farms and food processing facilities. I would like to focus on two specific locations that left a strong impression on me.

Sunsweet Corn Processing Facility (Feb 14): Sunsweet runs their own farm, but also procures produce from local farmers through the practice of contract farming. The farmers are guaranteed a specific price for their crops well in advance of the harvest, and Sunsweet also provides them with training as well as uncomplicated access to finances. For this purpose, the company runs a demonstration and experimental farm in cooperation with several Thai universities. They are also developing an integrated crop-monitoring system that allows farmers to log the status of their crops as well as access weather information and training resources, while the company gains an overview of their status. Even though it was only mentioned briefly, I was particularly impressed by the ambitiousness underlying this digital project. Contact between the farmers and Sunsweet company is established and handled by a dedicated intermediary, who also handles the loans given to the farmers. The contracts are renewed and adjusted every year. According to the Sunsweet representative, the company currently has business relationships with over 20,000 contract farming families.

Harmony Life Organic Farm (Feb 19): When we arrived at the farm, we were first given an introduction about its history and operations. It was founded by a Japanese entrepreneur with the goal to produce healthy food following the principles of organic agriculture, and its products are sold in Thailand as well as abroad. We were then shown parts of the farm, including the compost production site, the plant nursery, the water reservoir and the fields. After the tour, we enjoyed a meal made with produce from the farm. Our guide indicated that the neighboring farmers, while curious about organic farming, are still weary of its complicated procedures, and the bigger issue seems to be that they cannot afford to pay the recurring fees for having their farm licensed, and for the time being, organic farming and the access to foreign markets for organic produce remain inaccessible for most farmers in Thailand. The farm also receives visitors and offers workshops regarding organic farming practices such as fermentation composting as well as harvesting experiences and cooking classes. This visit provided a good case example for possible applications of touristic development regarding agriculture as well as an example for the transplantation of organic farming practices from one country to another.

Concluding Observations: The general theme that I observed at a lot of the locations we visited was that certain practices and notions such as farming procedures and food safety standards by and large seem to be driven by non-Thai factors, i.e. the desire to access markets outside of Thailand. This is reflected in how the farming and production practices seem to primarily follow foreign requirements, rather than Thai preferences. One of the most identifiably unique »Thai« ways of operating was the special broker-farmer relationship between Sunsweet and its contractors. The social role of such brokers also came up in other locations that we visited during our trip, and some of the lectures we attended implied that other countries in the ASEAN region employ similar roles to facilitate business. I think that if other ASEAN countries such as Laos or Cambodia follow a similar development trajectory as Thailand, the »Thai« way of managing contract farmers, such as demonstrated by Sunsweet, could be transported quite well into those economies, and it may provide a better and more environmentally sound alternative to giant monocrop farms.

This trip has been very rewarding, as it has provided me with many inspirations and ideas for my own field work as well as new viewpoints from which to consider my research. My observations may serve me well in my future research, and I may also find it useful for my future fieldwork.