

Sites of Resistance:

Hmong Vernacular Space in the Context of the Thai Royal “Hill-Tribe” Project

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Cultural frameworks that differ from the dominant culture often set marginalized groups in an uneasy relationship with those in power. This is true for the Hmong in Thailand, where unprecedented development initiatives have prompted rapid economic growth and social change over the last 45-years. The primary goals of these development efforts have been modernization, improved quality of life and preservation of natural resources. One of these efforts, the Northern Thailand Royal Projects, was established to teach minorities technical, self-sufficient and environment-friendly agriculture, irrigation, forestry, and fish farming. Using data collected in Thailand in 2007 and 2008, this comparative study of Hmong villages of Khun Klang, Pa Nok Kok, and Huay Luk, employs an analytical framework combining concepts of “culture core-periphery” and “systems-of-activities/systems-of-settings” to explore cultural and spatial transformations within these settlements, as they have become Royal Project sites. Data include Royal Project archival materials, as well as aerial photographs augmented by documentation of the currently existing physical environment of each village, interviews with village residents and extensive observations of everyday village life. Framed in the discourse of development and amelioration of poverty, the Royal “Hill-Tribe” Project reflects a “paternalism of improvement” intended to transform Hmong highlanders from shifting cultivators, who practiced slash-and burn farming and grew opium poppies, to stationary cash-crop farmers. Comparative analysis of these case-study villages illustrates that to varying degrees these development efforts have enabled resistance to assimilation by allowing Hmong to maintain distinct communities, preserve Hmong vernacular space, and maintain several core Hmong cultural characteristics considered unpalatable to the dominant Thai culture.