

## CHAPTER V

### OBJECTS AND COALITIONS, AN EXAMINATION OF POWER IN LABELING AND SPACE

Discourse coalitions and consumer groups come together around the meanings and values of certified network objects. These actors develop practices which through repetition shape and stabilize unique agricultural commodity networks. This chapter will detail the formation of these objects and explain how they are practiced by actor coalitions and consumers. Next, the emergence of certified network spaces will be explained as a consequence of discourse coalitions coming together to establish markets and the desire of consumers to participate in them. Finally, the communicative role of discursive network objects, such as labeling and dedicated market spaces will be explained as the points of passage between consumers and retailers.

#### **5.1 Objects, practice and coalitions**

The types of certified agricultural networks already identified in this dissertation are corporate networks such as Swift Farms, Inc. and River Kwai, Inc, government sponsored networks such as those in Doi Saket, San Kamphaeng, Saraphi, and the Royal Project Foundation, NGO based networks such as MCC and ISAC, and private networks such as the San Sai farm group. For the purposes of this analysis, only networks marketing directly to Chiang Mai will be considered. These are either locally certified or certified using the Thai governmental standards of “Safety Vegetable” or GAP. The meanings and values behind these certifications can be represented by objects which are generally displayed as labels, placards, and signs. These objects are used to communicate to potential consumers the qualities of the agricultural practices used to produce products available from these networks.

GAP and “Safety Vegetable” certification reproduce networks of many scales and markets. GAP is currently replacing the “Safety Vegetable” pesticide reduced regulation throughout Northern Thailand. It is likely that within the next few

years all “Safety Vegetable” certified farmers will be GAP certified. The largest producer of GAP and “Safety Vegetable” is RPF. They have the largest scale operation for collection and redistribution that any other pesticide reduced distributor in Northern Thailand. RPF vegetables can be found in hypermarkets, supermarkets, fresh markets, and at RPF retail locations. GAP and “Safety Vegetable” certification produce the market spaces of RPF, providing RPF customers the assurance of buying produce grown and distributed within regulated guidelines. GAP and “Safety Vegetable” networks are also overseen by *amphoe* offices of agricultural extension. GAP and “Safety Vegetable” certified farm groups can be found in all of the *amphoes* surrounding Chiang Mai.

Consumers searching for specific values and meanings represented by certifications such as “Safety Vegetable” and GAP find market venues offering vegetables with these certifications. The venues were established by assemblers and/or retailers who established producer-retailer networks based on the same sets of values and meanings. The process, so clearly seen in local community and fresh markets, becomes obscured in neoliberal venues such as supermarkets and hypermarkets.

Vegetables have been grouped into three main classifications for the purposes of understanding their importance to farmers and consumers; these are local vegetables, Chinese vegetables, and introduced vegetables. The sales of these vegetables are directed toward different consumer groups based on income and market venue. Chinese vegetables are popular among farmers as an easy to grow cash crop. The varieties are standardized, the seeds are easily obtained, the growing methods are well known and the market in Thailand is well established. Introduced vegetables are relatively new to the Northern Thai farmer. The market for Introduced vegetables is not as developed as that for Chinese vegetables, but the farm gate price is much higher. Like Chinese vegetables, introduced vegetables need many chemical inputs, such as pesticides and fertilizer. However, as the Thai middle class expands, so does the market for introduced vegetable. Local vegetables are also being grown for the expanding urban market. The name itself is misleading, as the term “local vegetables” is used by Thai to simply describe for foreigners the hundreds of different plants, fruits, and herbs used in *Lanna* cooking.

Northern Thai people have a strong preference for vegetables specific to their region. The influence of local vegetables, typically not found in western style supermarkets and hypermarkets, can be easily overlooked in Thai studies. Appendix B provides a list of the most common local *Lanna* vegetables available at Muang Mai wholesale market, all of the fresh markets in and around Chiang Mai, and MCC and ISAC community markets. In the past, most local vegetables were harvested from “the fence, the field, or the forest.” *Lanna* people say that these vegetables were sown by the birds and available for everyone. However, with increasing urbanization, the reduction of rice fields and the preponderance of walled parcels of land, access to local vegetables has been severely reduced. The survey found that 87.5% of the respondents purchase local vegetables at least once a week. Clearly, *Lanna* people enjoy eating local, *Lanna* vegetables.

Northern Thai people consume introduced vegetables too. This survey found that over 70% of respondents purchase introduced vegetables at least once a week. (Figure 5.1) In fact, well over half of the respondents make a trip several times a week for fresh vegetables of all kinds. Most of these trips are to fresh and community markets. The survey demonstrates that fresh vegetables are a very important part of the diet of northern Thai people.

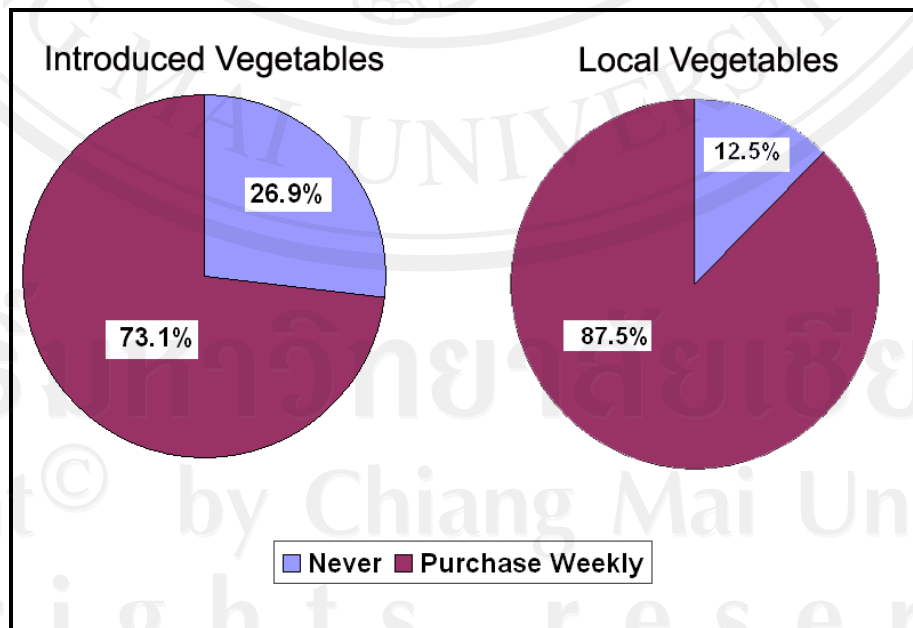


Figure 5.1 Frequency of vegetable purchase

Local vegetables are mostly obtained by Northern Thai consumers at fresh and community markets. Recently, some local vegetables have been classified as “economic” vegetables by the Management Center for Clean Vegetable (MCS), a marketing group established at Rajaphat University in *Amphoe* Mae Rim, Chiang Mai province. This classification is given to local vegetables grown commercially. The list does not include local vegetables grown commercially by RPF farmers. Local vegetables named on the MCS list may be found at TOPS, Rimping, Carrefour and Tesco-Lotus. The longer list of local vegetables, described in the appendices, are mostly produced in small gardens, farmers’ rice fields, or gathered from open spaces. These are assembled and brought directly to fresh markets or to Muang Mai for redistribution to fresh markets. The scale of production currently prevents them from being offered by larger retailers. Unfortunately, recent reports indicate that some assemblers and distributors of local vegetables have been using formalin, a form of formaldehyde, to preserve the freshness of local vegetables.

Local vegetables available at MCC and ISAC are gathered by member farmers and brought to the market for sale. These vegetables have the additional quality of being spatially certified. It is not likely that any pesticide or chemical fertilizer was used to increase the production of non-commercial local vegetables. The farmers selling these vegetables take them from gardens or fields where pesticide control measures are practiced. The local vegetable provides a unique opportunity for farmers linking themselves with the certification regimes of community markets. Local vegetable, as representative of *Lanna* culture, demonstrates the largest of the discourse coalitions, being *Lanna* people. They are looking for a market venue offering the foods they want to eat. Certification of safety offers a further incentive to purchase at a particular market. ISAC and MCC community markets have found this market and linked it to their message.

Certified vegetable production in Chiang Mai demonstrates the link between certification with a change in livelihood of vegetable farmers. Discourse coalitions established between the producer and retailer are directly bound through personal relations, personal satisfaction, and personal gain. The networks formed are closed and fixed for definite periods of time. New farm entrants must wait for 3 months to a year before they can be certified. Assemblers make annual contracts for exclusive

rights to sell certified commodities. Certification allows the farmer to enter into new markets bringing higher returns per yield, an increased standard of living, and an overall healthier lifestyle. Marketplace data explains the apparent discrepancies between the numerous reports of Thailand's expanding "organic" market and the actual availability of certified produce available for consumers. Too much credit is given to the size and growth of the organic vegetable markets in Thailand. Most certified agricultural discourse coalitions found in the study of Chiang Mai, excepting RPF, are small scale and local. There is very little organic produce available in the markets as defined by international standards. GAP and "Safety Vegetable" regulations allow for the use of pesticides, allowing farmers to use chemicals with certain restrictions, amounts, and periods of application. As noted earlier, internationally certified organic vegetables are grown almost exclusively for export only

My research took an in-depth look at the GAP certified San Sai farmer group organized by Khun Pak Sod. Her operation demonstrates a closed certified vegetable commodity network from the producer to the consumer. (Figure 5.2)

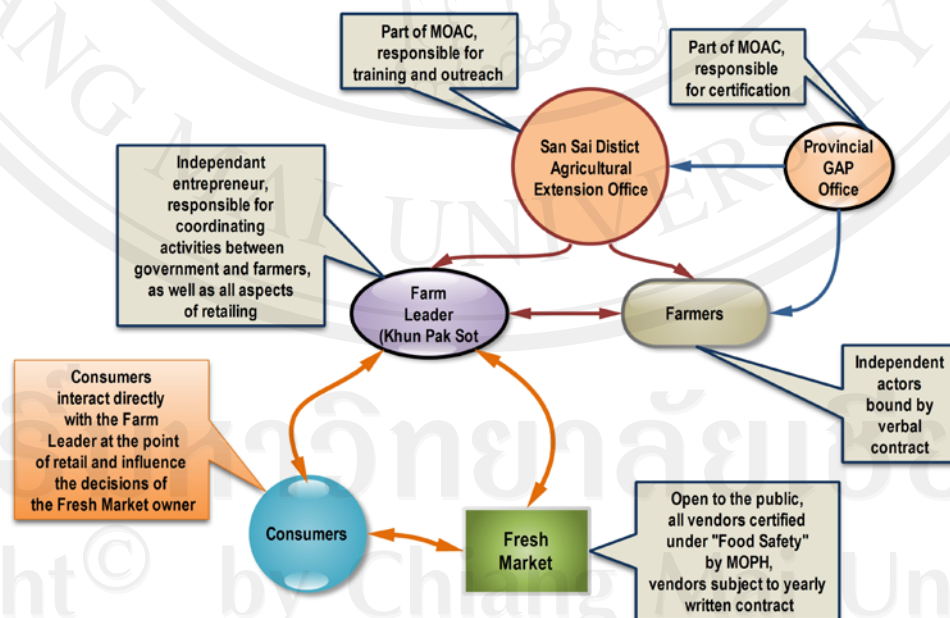


Figure 5.2 San Sai Farmer Group Commodity Network



Without certification, the vegetables produced by the San Sai farmer group would have no special meaning to the consumer. Their vegetables would be bought solely on the merits of the qualities of appearance, freshness (How long since the vegetables were harvested), and the charismatic sales ability of Khun Pak Sod and her employees. Successful assemblers such as Khun Pak Sod sell directly from fresh market stalls. (Figure 5.3) Her personal label, displaying the government logo for “Safety Vegetable”, additional labeling for those vegetables produced under GAP certification, and the signs above her produce stall are the communicative objects within her commodity network. Her labels and signs notify potential customers that the vegetables for sale at their market tables possess unique qualities certified by both GAP and Safety Vegetable. Consumers wanting these qualities will purchase Khun Pak Sod’s vegetables at higher prices than for non-certified vegetables at the same market.

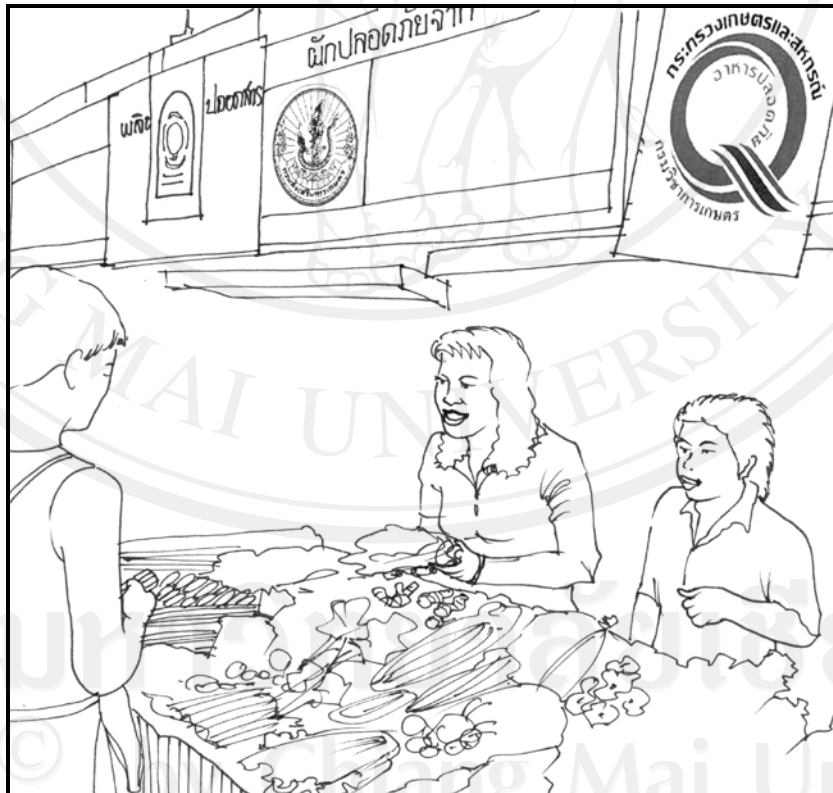


Figure 5.3 Khun Pak Sod and her daughter selling certified vegetables at Thanin Market

Khun Pak Sod began organizing her network about 14 years ago when she began studying pesticide reduced and organic agriculture at Mae Jo University and through outreach programs sponsored by RPF. This demonstrates the beginning of her network, starting with two educational actors disseminating knowledge to a key organizer. Once Khun Pak Sod understood the qualities of certified vegetables and assessed the market potential as demonstrated by RPF, she began her own vegetable market at Thanin Market as a reseller of RPF vegetables, expanding her network to include producers and retail space.

After a few years of selling RPF vegetables Khun Pak Sod realized that she could make more income by organizing a farm group under her own label. She brought together 12 farmers who already had experience working with Mae Jo University. With the help of professors at Mae Jo University and Chiang Mai University, and trainers from RPF and the San Sai office of Agricultural Extension, she was able to train her farm group to grow vegetables in accordance with the production processes specified by the “Safety Vegetable” program. Khun Pak Sod was certified by MOAC and was allowed to create her own independent label incorporating the government logo for “Safety Vegetable”. She also brought her sister into the business to expand her retail operation. Khun Pak Sod offered her farmers fixed contacts for production thereby assuring their long-term commitment to her commodity network. The farm gate price will not vary no matter how low market prices change, though they may rise if the retail price is high. The farmers have agreed not to opt out of the contract and accept the security of a guaranteed income. The few farmers who have broken the contract are rejected from the group and are no longer offered contracts for their vegetables. In general, her farmers received a price well over regular wholesale or community market prices. Khun Pak Sod’s ability to offer her farmers consistently higher prices is because she selects vegetables that receive high prices in her market. For example, in 2008 Khun Pak Sod selected a variety of kale called *kanna hong kong*, popular for its good taste and high market value. The higher market price of the kale allowed Khun Pak Sod to pay her farmers more money. Her farmers benefit through market research directed at growing GAP certified, high-priced varieties.

This example demonstrates how Khun Pak Sod was able to put into action all of the objects necessary for the production of “Safety Vegetable”. Her network consisted of actors for information, production, certification, marketing and consumption. Each of these groups of actors, excluding consumers, represents discourse coalitions organized around GAP, “Safety Vegetable”, or a combination of both certification standards. Consumers can find Khun Pak Sod’s network through labeling and other representative communication of the meanings and values behind both sets of standards. The repletion of certified practice on the part of all of the actors stabilized her network into a successful operation. Today, Khu Pak Sod and her sister have certified the San Sai farm group under GAP regulations and certification. Her sister is also part of the GAP certificating process and can label all vegetables grown under GAP with the government logo.

The San Sai Farm group’s story is filled with the complexity and commitment involved in organizing a certified commodity network. Khun Pak Sod acts as both assembler and farm leader, training her farmers in proper regulatory processes and establishing a market for their vegetables. She also received training for both “Safety Vegetable” and GAP regulations by the San Sai agricultural extension office for proper production process which was disseminated to the entire farm group. Negotiations had to be made between retailer and farmers to guarantee production for market, thereby formally establishing the vertical linkages of the commodity network between producer and seller. The retail network node was established by making a contract with the owner of the fresh market to rent table space. Provisions had to be made for daily pick-up and delivery, and people had to be hired to assist in washing, packaging, placement, and sales. Labels, logos, and signs were made to inform customers that her vegetables conformed to “Safety Vegetable” standard. In the past, Khun Pak Sod made an agreement with both RPF and ISAC to retail their vegetables to increase her product line. She found that ISAC’s products were not compatible with her particular commodity network. However, RPF products, produced under the same set of regulations, added the respect and legitimacy of the RPF label to her market and gave her access to vegetables that her farmers could not produce, helping to establish the final node of the marketing network, the point of transaction between retailer and customer.



While Kun Pak Sod's story demonstrates the organization of discourse collations around official standards, the story of ISAC is demonstrative of the successful development of an agricultural commodity network around locally certified standards. ISAC, and its relationship with its certifying body, NOSA, is an example of the discourse of social relationships, described by Raymond Williams as "lived experience." These experiences constitute institutions and social formations, creating "structures of feeling," including elements of daily life, local knowledge, traditions and unique practices (Thrift, 1996: 258). ISAC's network role extends beyond training farmers in NOSA regulations or marketing certified products, ISAC is also involved in community development and empowerment. The community approach has been articulated into local safe vegetable regulations leading to the establishment of local regulatory institutions, a process which will be detailed as an example of translation in the next chapter. An analysis of ISAC helps to imagine how complex and often tacit Thai experiences contributes to the establishment of accepted regulations capable of completing commodity networks.

Experience, tradition, local knowledge, and historical practice direct the trajectories of objects constituting the certification standards of NOSA. These objects are outside of the imagination of national and international agricultural processes (Thrift 258), having been established within the context of *Lanna* culture. Local organic regulations become institutionalized by NOSA and transformed into a commodity networks, aggregating the experiences of local actors into unique translations of dominant discourse (Harvey, 2001: 163, 199). ISAC's community market is an example of the certified vegetable commodity network brought together by discourse coalitions of consumer safety, community culture and environmental concern. However, my research found that NOSA certification claims to be completely pesticide free. NOSA certified vegetables are marketed through ISAC. The market is tightly controlled, vegetables are not sold into conventional or supermarkets or hypermarkets. Most of the vegetables sold at ISAC are classified as local vegetable and are desired by the local community. Only a few products grown outside of Chiang Mai under international organic regulations and sold at supermarkets are "organic."

ISAC is given credibility by consumers as being organic because its certifying body, NOSA, has its origins in a local discourse coalition of concern consumers. This is not to say that ISAC's consumers represent a true coalition, but that the network itself was sponsored by a group of consumers desiring locally produced, organic produce. ISAC's network resembles, in large part, the network developed by Khun Pak Sod. ISAC's founder, Chomchuan Boonrahong, organized ISAC in 1991. ISAC was initially supported through the efforts of Northnet which helped to facilitate interactions between ISAC and interested farm groups, which were established in 1993. The establishment of NOSA in 1994 provided ISAC's organizers with codified, organic standards. As network objects, NOSA standards could be disseminated to farmer groups, establishing discourse coalitions stabilized through practice. The coordinators of ISAC established relationships with many other NGOs in Chiang Mai, as well as greater Thailand including the Alternative Agriculture, and the Assembly of the Poor, the Pesticide Legal Action Network Thailand (PLANT), and the Chiang Mai Federation of Sustainable Agriculture Producers and Consumers for a Sustainable Agriculture Community. The result of these efforts was the formal establishment of ISAC in 2001 (Chomchuan Boonrahong, 2008). Funding provided by OXFAM allowed ISAC to establish a community market in Chiang Mai and offer secure price supports to many of its farmers. Working with these coalitions, ISAC has expanded its marketing into many other locations throughout Chiang Mai. (Table 5.1)

Network objects and the discourse coalitions associated with them are essential to ISAC's success. ISAC markets more than a message of organic production processes, but also messages of community development, *Lanna* values, and self sufficiency. By receiving outside funding, ISAC's revenue stream is also dependent on the acceptance of network objects by larger institutions. These objects have value, being the points of passage for institutional funding. ISAC's commodity network differs from the private network of Khun Pak Sod by embracing and relying on benevolent organizations and the efforts of similarly aligned discourse coalitions, such as Northnet and the Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN), for political and organization support to maintain their charter and legal status in Thailand.

AAN is another discourse coalition established in 1984 to promote sustainable agricultural development in Thailand through a coalition of NGOs and Thai organizations. Today, the AAN serves as an umbrella organization over of 85 different organizations working toward alternative agriculture (Ellis et al., 2006). AAN embraces many different coalitions, ranging from those supporting sustainable, pesticide free agricultural to organizations specifically promoting the export of internationally certified agricultural products. Alternative agriculture in Thailand is not limited to a specific agricultural practice, it mingles livelihood with lifestyle, culture, and quality of life. Thailand's alternative agricultural networks prompted sustainability, intertwine the concept of sustainable agriculture with ideas of community empowerment, biodiversity, and cultural preservation. Several alternative agricultural groups emerged at this time throughout Thailand. AAN supported the formation of Greenet in 1994 as a farm cooperative to support socially and environmentally responsible agricultural business in Central Thailand. Greenet has grown to be a major cooperative supplier of organic produce in Bangkok.

ACT and Greenet had their historical antecedents in the establishment of Thailand's national historic policies. In 1997, the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESDP) brought the concepts of sustainable agricultural, sufficiency economy, biodiversity and environmental protection into the sights of government policy (Boonchit Wichayayuth and Natenuj Sununtha, 1998; Chomchuan Boonrahong, 2008). In 1998 the Thai government initiated the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) program under the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC) to promote food safety. Continued efforts to promote food safety and quality were drafted into the 9<sup>th</sup> NESDP, written for 2002-2006, stating that "The sufficiency economy philosophy will be followed as a shared value of the Thai people, guiding the transformation to a new national management system based on efficiency, quality of life, and sustainability objectives" (Somsri Songpol, 2005; TISC, 2004: 36).

In 2002 the MOAC established the Organic Crops Institute and approved the Organic Thailand logo. This certification has been discontinued and reportedly no longer effectively monitored for quality (Vitoon Panyakul, 1998). In 2003 the DOA established the National Bureau of Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards

(ACFS). ACFS is Thailand's national certifying accreditation authority over all organic certifying bodies. ACFS drafted the National Standards for Organic Agriculture regulating all processing, labeling and product sale. These standards, based on Codex Alimentarius<sup>29</sup> and IFOAM standards, are used to accredit organic standards certifying bodies in Thailand. In 2004, ACFS accredited ACT, which had been sponsored in large part by Greenet, working with the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC) (Ellis et al., 2006: 15). The Thai government declaring in 2003 that Thailand would become "The kitchen of the world" and that Thai food products are "safe, wholesome, and quality guaranteed by the Thai government" (Somsri Songpol, 2005: 36).

According to the ACT website (<http://eng.actorganic-cert.or.th>), AAN established the Alternative Agriculture Certification Thailand (ACT) in 1995. The goal of ACT at that time was to differentiate between farm producers practicing pesticide free and chemical free products from those farmers producing under "Safety Vegetable," a standard meaning pesticide reduced, as well as other labels, established by the government as "hygienic" and unregulated labels used by some producers to mislead consumers. ACT saw its mission as one of educating consumers about alternative agricultural products, supporting sustainable agriculture, building consumer confidence, and to providing its own labeling for safe agriculture standards as specified by IFOAM. In 1998 ACT shifted its mission to the certification of organic agriculture only. It changed its name to Organic Agriculture Certification Thailand, retaining its original acronym (ACT) and the standards were revised to Organic Agriculture Standards. ACT developed certification services and inspection, began consumer awareness campaigns in Thailand and began promoting Thai organic produce in foreign markets.

Greenet Cooperative is a key actor in central Thailand's organic agricultural community. In a 2006 interview with Greenet director, Michael Commons, I learned that Greenet is an agricultural cooperative and marketer of organic products under "fair trade" agreements. However, Greenet does have limits to its scale of operation

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<sup>29</sup> The Codex Alimentarius Commission, established in 1963 by the FAO and WHO, maintains the Codex Alimentarius, a collection of internationally recognized standards, codes of practice, and guidelines relating to food safety.



and is not able to assist operations that can not meet the minimum requirements of canners or retailers. In 2000 Greenet established the Earthnet Foundation “to promote and support initiatives related to production, processing, marketing and consumption of organic food, natural products and ecological handicrafts.” The role of the Earthnet Foundation is to specifically develop complete commodity chains by connecting agricultural producers to distributors, canners, food processors and retailers. Greenet and Earthnet represent Thailand’s lead proponents for NGO based establishment of internationally certified, organic networks.

It appears that the NGOs supporting safe agriculture around Bangkok tend to collaborate more closely with the national ideas of the MOAC, seeking to promote globally integrated farming systems and using techniques associated with a agri-business style of organic agriculture. Alternately, the policies of NGOs supporting safe agriculture in Chiang Mai are more autonomous, supporting the overall aims of organic agriculture as a sustainable livelihood, and do not support the globalization of Northern Thai farms. The question of whether these institutions are acting as a form of resistance against neoliberal markets or act in collaboration with global markets and regulatory regimes is part of this study. Are Thailand’s certifying bodies autonomous, and to what degree does community culture, globalization, or state powers shape safe vegetable commodity networks? Neoliberal, globalizing agendas use “the state’s capacity to project its influence and secure its objectives by mobilizing knowledge and power resources from influential non-governmental partners and stakeholders” (Jessop, 2000: 75). All NGO sponsored certifying bodies support organic, chemical free production, biodiversity, environmental and social issues. My research asks who they support? How far do they go? Who is excluded?

Policies promoting fair trade and sustainable livelihoods do not integrate well with free trade, globalization, and social acceptance. Driven by the appearance of and desire for foreign markets, the Thai government has tasked MOAC to expand organic production throughout Thailand. The persistent trajectory of MOAC discourse, embedded in ideas of market competition, free trade, technical solutions, has projected itself onto the northern landscape in the form of technical assistance, farming promotions, and a strong marketing campaign to solidify the assurance of the GAP label as the one and only authentic, safe, and trustworthy symbol in Thailand.



Unfortunately, as this investigation will show, the impact of Bangkok's industrial discourse does not come with community development or marketing solutions. Instead, it disrupts the integrity of the already established discourse of community culture while breaking alliances, establishing doubt in the minds of the consumer, creating uncertainty with the farmers, and in the end, leaving behind only confusion and disorder when the funding allocations are exhausted. MOAC technical solutions are not building communities, creating marketing outlets, or providing long term solutions. MOAC brings with it ideas of consumerism for the Northern Thai consumer and the illusion of large profits for the farmer. When seen as trajectories, MOAC sets its sights on global markets, economic development and national interests while most local, Northern Thai NGOs and community actors embrace, to some extent, the ideals of community culture and local livelihood.

The different paths of regulatory discourse have led to different interpretations of organic certification in Thailand and the establishment of multiple, and often conflicting discourse coalitions, ranging from fully globalized to completely localize. These are: formal international certification (such as River Kwai and Swift Co., Ltd.), national organic certification (such as Greennet Cooperative and Doi Kham), certification as GAP, hygienic, "Safety Vegetable," and pesticide free through MOAC extension offices, the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), and locally accepted by reputation. Agricultural producers are separated by certifying bodies and are marketed under different regulatory regimes. Certifications and their regulatory regimes constitute commodity networks made of coalitions of actors with like-minded dispositions. Agricultural production using processes unique regulatory standards, the certification of those standards, and associated labeling provide producers access to specific markets. Price, safety, environmental and social concerns are negotiated at the marketplace.

Problems relating to certification are generally cost, scale, access, practice and livelihood. International certification is too expensive for a single farmer. To access these markets a farmer must accept a contract from a larger corporation and grow specific crops in accordance to strict practice. A farmer must have sufficient land and be willing to grow a single cash crop. Thai farmer will probably not be able to grow a wide range of vegetables for personal consumptions. Nationally

certification through GAP is accessible to more farmers through cooperatives sponsored by MOAC agricultural extension, the Multiple Cropping Center of Chiang Mai University (MCC), and highland farmers through RFP. The problem with most Thai certifications, as noted by the UN Trade and Development Board (UNCTAD) report is that verification of certified agricultural production practices is inconsistent, consumer confidence is lacking, and that the income gained through higher retail prices at marketing venues may not translate into higher prices paid to farmers (UNCTAD, 2007).

Table 5.1 Examples of organic certifications in Thailand

Organization	Certification Name	Standard
ACT	ACT	ACFS, IFOAM, International Recognition
MOPH	Health for All	Pesticide Reduced
MOPH	Food Safety	Pesticide Reduced
MOAC	Organic Thailand	ACFS
NOSA	NOSA	Chemical Free, Locally accepted
Royal Project Foundation	<i>Pak Plod Pai Jak San</i> <i>Pis</i> and Organic Thailand, GAP	ACFS and Pesticide Reduced
Santi Asoke	No certification	Chemical Free, locally accepted
International Certifiers	BCS and GmbH (EU), Soil Association (UK), IMO (Switzerland and Germany), OMIC (Japan), Skal (Netherlands), USDA (USA)	Internationally accepted organic standards for export.

The Northnet Foundation was established during 1990 to 1992 as an umbrella group of 8 Northern Thai community organizations. Northnet set up several committees to evaluate many aspects of Northern Thai farm life, including production, consumption and financial needs, environmental and health concerns, leading to the organization of various village producer groups and the Chiang Mai Consumers Association, established in 1993. The following year saw the establishment of the Northern Organic Standards Association, whose mission is to train and oversee Northern Thai farmers in the production of locally certified organic produce. NOSA is unique in that their founding goal is not international or even national acceptance, but rather to strive to engender community acceptance and participation throughout Northern Thailand. This notion of community acceptance is in contrast to the Organic Agriculture Certification Thailand (ACT), whose focus is national acceptance and international acceptance of their certification. That same year also saw the establishment of the Chiang Mai Organic Producers Association (Boonrahong Chomchuan, 2008).

## **5.2 Labeling as power**

Organically certified and “safe” vegetable certifications are found to be important factors contributing to the purchasing decisions of many consumers. They are used by retailers to influence consumer spending through the trust and confidence gained by assuring safety and quality, as well as appealing to intangible values such as free trade, environmental responsibility and social responsibility (Cloke et al., 2006; Vandergeest, 2006; Vitoon Panyakul, 2002). Certifications are non-human objects making up the actor-network of organic vegetable commodity networks, along with coalitions of assemblers, retailers, and consumers brought together by the marketing of vegetables produced by farmers certified under different sets of pesticide free and pesticide reduced regulations. These networks are developed through complex, interpersonal relationships made between farmers, certifiers, assemblers, retailers and consumer. This chapter will describe how discourse coalitions (as storylines, ideologies, dispositions, objectives, or beliefs) bring organic vegetable markets together. Consumers respond to the different meanings ascribed by certifying logos. They are used by retailers as marketing devices to communicate complex meanings

and social values. Farmers use specific agricultural practices to objectify meanings and social values into their vegetables through regulations qualified by a certification body. The meanings and social values become the foundation on which organic vegetable commodity network is organized. As part of the larger picture of the agrarian transition in South-east Asia, certification of agricultural production processes related to the use of pesticides becomes the means through which farm groups gain access to the more lucrative markets for pesticide free and reduced vegetables.

Unique vegetable commodity networks emerge through strategies based on discourse coalitions established by the acceptance of different vegetable certifications (Forsyth, 2003:37; Law, 1991). Logos are used to inform the consumer of pesticide regulations practiced by the farmers. Logos are representations of agricultural processes which allow retailers to satisfy the needs of customers seeking these attributes. Certification communicates the undesirable product qualities which may not be obvious through casual inspection. The consumer is assured of the absence of unobservable or intangible characteristics, such as the amount of chemical residues remaining on the vegetable, or the detrimental affects to the environment though planting methods and production processes, as well as social problems caused by unfair labor and management practices. Vegetable farmers have found that consumers are willing to pay a premium for this knowledge and have changed their practices to fit different regulatory standards to acquire consumer confidence, a fact verified by the results of my research (Vitoon Panyakul, 2001: 29). These standards are made known to consumers at the marketplace by various logos representing the certifying bodies that inspect and certify farm practices (Vitoon Panyakul, 1998: 22). Certification substantiates the meanings and social values endorsed by regulated agricultural processes. Common certifications used in Northern Thailand are ACT-IFOAM, GAP, "Safety Vegetable", NOSA, and MCC and various international certifications used by farms operated by Swift Company and River Kwae in the Chiang Rai and Chiang Dao for export production and sales to Bangkok markets. The latter are outside the parameters of my investigation but are mentioned because they exemplify the reproduction of international standards, as do ACT-IFOAM regulations.

The consumer survey initiated by the research shows that consumers have little confidence in supermarkets or the farmers. (Table 5.2) Consumers under 50 have little trust in farmers. When asked about farmer's use of pesticide, 70% of the respondents said they believed that farmers used too much. Consumer apprehension about pesticide use was also observed in a 1996 survey in Chiang Mai with similar result (Chakrapand Wongburanvart. 1996: section 2-53). Consumers are clearly worried about the use of pesticides and do not trust supermarkets or farmers to be responsible for the health interests of consumers. Certified labeling helps consumers overcome these concerns. Interestingly, consumers over 50 tended to trust the farmer, but as the research will show, these consumers tend to purchase at community markets and have a more personal relationship with the farmer. Consumers also claim to accept the increased price of certified vegetables, with only 14% of those surveyed claiming that certified vegetables are too expensive to buy while 60% claim that the price is acceptable. However, evidence shows that consumer purchasing habits do not support their assurance of price acceptability. Almost 70% of all customers surveyed buy vegetables at the low priced, fresh markets without regard to certification. (Figure 4.2)



Table 5.2 Trust in Farmer/Market

Trust the Farmer				
	Over 18	30 to 39	40 to 49	Over 50
Trust	39%	32%	43%	60%
Not Sure	12%	7%	8%	12%
Not Trust	49%	60%	48%	29%
Trust the Supermarket				
	Over 18	30 to 39	40 to 49	Over 50
Trust	31%	28%	32%	32%
Not Sure	12%	17%	11%	16%
Not Trust	58%	55%	57%	52%

Generally all of the vegetables are presented at any of the market venues are displayed as safe, clean, and fresh. Certified vegetables are displayed in an exclusive section marked by a sign stating a particular certification scheme. In all but the community markets, certified vegetables are wrapped in packages labeled with official logos; package labeling provides an additional layer of customer assurance (Allen et al., 1998: 90; Massey, 2005: 85). Labeling of packages, spaces, or both signals a body of discourse representing the vegetables to the consumer. The label and the logo are points of entry for consumer coalitions to enter.

Chiang Mai consumers appear to find GAP, “Safety Vegetable” and NOSA certifications acceptable. My research demonstrates that Chiang Mai consumers of all ages trust logos. This trust tends to increase with age. When asked about “government logos,” all age groups responded favorably and understood that logos showing the official symbol (Figure 1.7) can be trusted. The Doi Kham logo was generally trusted by those over 30, though it appears that consumers under 30 are not sure what the Doi Kham logo represents. “Safety Vegetable”, the oldest of the

certifications, is generally well trusted by all age groups. (Table 5.3) Certified vegetable consumers place their trust in the label. Certification logos overcome the mistrust consumers have in the supermarkets, hypermarkets, and farmers. This demonstrates that within neoliberal networks relations form between consumer and logo, not between the consumer and the market. For example, health conscious consumers will buy Doi Kham labeled products at hypermarkets, supermarkets, or fresh markets if they are available.

Table 5.3 Trust in logos

Trust Government Logo			
Under 30	30 to 39	40 to 49	Over 50
<b>59%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>80%</b>
20%	28%	32%	17%
20%	22%	11%	20%
Trust Doi Kham			
Under 30	30 to 39	40 to 49	Over 50
<b>41%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>77%</b>
35%	19%	27%	11%
24%	18%	11%	12%
Trust “Safety Vegetable”			
Under 30	30 to 39	40 to 49	Over50
<b>61%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>60%</b>
20%	29%	18%	26%
18%	17%	20%	14%

Site inspections were conducted at the supermarkets and hypermarkets to determine which assemblers delivered certified vegetables to these venues. (Appendix D) Supermarkets were found to have far more choices of certified vegetables than hypermarkets. However, many of the labels identifying vegetables in supermarket were misleading. Of the eleven non-certificated vegetable labels found in this survey, seven made a claim of being “safe vegetables” or of using organic methods. Of the twelve certified vegetables identified, only one label represented a certified farm group in Chiang Mai. In fact, there is very little government certified produce in

supermarkets or hypermarkets, not grown by RPF farmers, from farm groups near Chiang Mai. RPF is the leading supplier of certified vegetables in Chiang Mai, marketed either directly under the Doi Kham label or wholesaled to retailers for repackaging under proprietary labels. The largest independent suppliers of certified vegetables in Chiang Mai, were Pak Doctor, Future Farm and Thai Organic Farm are located in Prathum Thani, Chiang Rai, and Ratchaburi provinces, respectively. Vegetables labeled “Queen’s Project” are grown by an independent operator working with Her Majesties royal project in *Amphoe* Chiang Dao, located in the northern part of Chiang Mai province. Another independent operator selling to large retailers in Chiang Mai, “Q Farm,” is located in nearby *Amphoe* Hang Dong. However, this commercial operation does not qualify as a small vegetable farmer. Rimping Supermarket goes as far as to import United States Department of Agriculture certified leafy salads from Mexico and the United States.

The only locally certified vegetables found in this research sold by small farmers around Chiang Mai in large retail venues come from the Mae Ping farm group organized by MCC. Of the supermarkets and hypermarkets sampled, only Carrefour carries Mae Ping farm group vegetables. This farm group draws its membership from MCC participating farmers. Group members using the MCC logo are required to identify the location of their farm and provide a contact phone number on their label. The Mae Ping farm group can achieve the scale necessary for commercial retail markets by combining their vegetable production. The Mae Ping farm group is particularly interesting because it is an example of certification by reputation. MCC has no authority to grant certification under ACFS nor does it have any standardized, codified regulations. The public accepts MCC farmers because they are aware of the high standards of management maintained by MCC researchers and staff.

Patterns of consumer purchasing habits can be observed after categorizing consumer responses by age and venue. (Figure 5.4) The first pattern shows consumer preference for market venue. Younger people frequent supermarkets and hypermarkets. Hypermarkets appear to be particularly attractive to consumers under 30 years of age. This venue offers many shopping amenities, an air conditioned environment, and the attractive appeal of Western modernism reinforced by prime-time television advertisement. The 30 to 40 year old group appears to prefer

supermarkets and fresh markets. They are generally married with families. They are attracted to the convenience of the supermarkets as similar groups are around the world. However, the 30 to 40 year olds also found in at the fresh markets where they may purchase a cornucopia of local vegetables. The 40 to 50 year old group tends to prefer the fresh and community markets. The convenience of supermarkets and hypermarkets does not seem to be as appealing to age groups of families with grown children. Lastly, the over 50 year old group predominates at the community markets. This group has a clear preference for certified, fresh produce. Their age may make them more alert to the dangers of chemical and pesticide use in uncertified vegetables, as well as more leisure time in their schedules to shop at the limited hours of community markets. (Table 5.5)

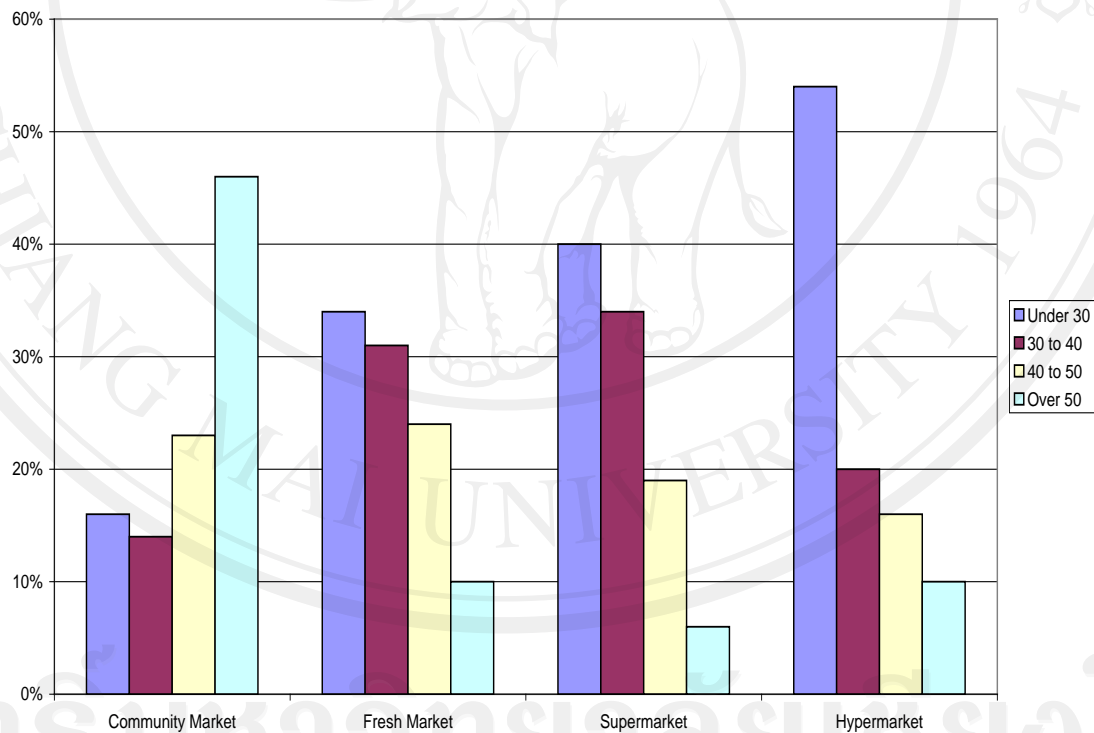


Figure 5.4 Respondents and venue



Table 5.4 Shopping hours at markets in Chiang Mai

Market	Time	Days
Tesco-Lotus	9:00-10:30	Daily
Tesco-Lotus Express	24 hours	Daily
Carrefour	9:00 – 9:00	Daily
Tops	10:00 – 9:00	Daily
Rimping	10:00 – 9:00	Daily
Fresh Market	6:00 – 8:00	Daily
MCC	6:00 – 1:00	Wednesday and Saturday
ISAC	6:00-10:00	Wednesday and Saturday

A different pattern emerged when consumers less than 50 year of age were asked specifically where they purchased vegetables. (Figure 5.5) For this group, fresh markets predominate in vegetable sales in Chiang Mai, followed by the community markets. Supermarkets do not appeal to most vegetable consumers in Chiang Mai. This can be explained by many reasons. First, supermarkets and hypermarkets are almost always more expensive than the fresh markets, often by a factor of two. (Figure 5.6) This is not the case for sale items, which are not consistently priced low. Second, supermarkets and hypermarkets do not have the same selection of local vegetables as the fresh and community markets.

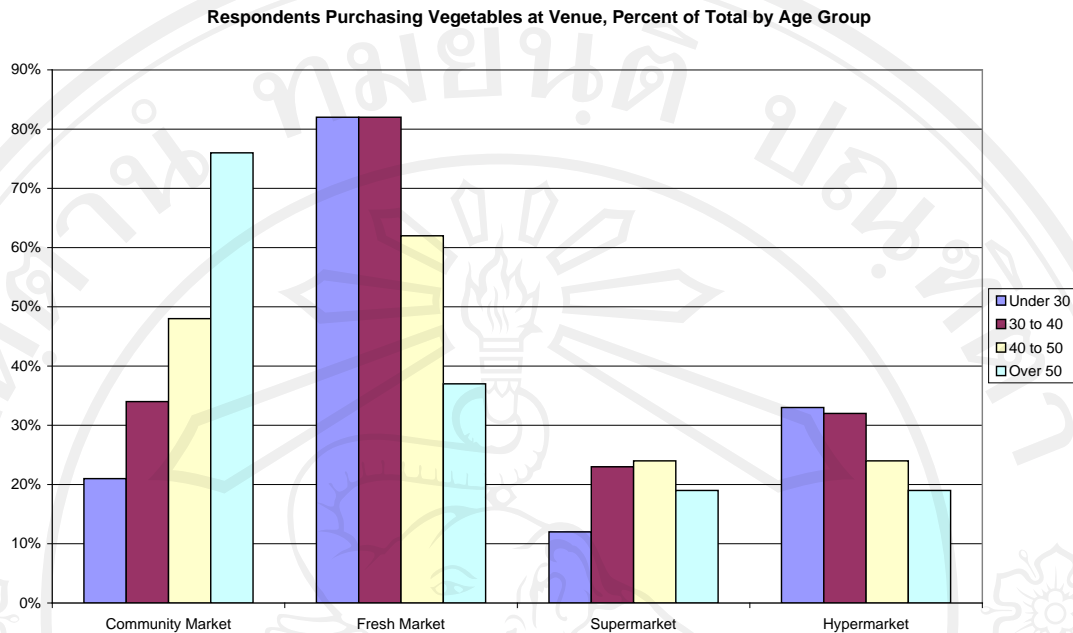


Figure 5.5 Location of vegetable purchases by age

The pricing power of labels can be illustrated by Khun Pak Sod's network. She was able to bring customers to her vegetable stall by marketing only "Safety Vegetable" certified vegetables produced by the San Sai farm group and certified wholesale vegetables bought from RPF. Most of the time the vegetables grown by her farmers and RPF differed, as San Sai farmers, located in the valley, produced lowland vegetables while RPF farmers produced vegetables grown at higher elevations. This marketing strategy allowed her to market the widest range possible of certified, pesticide reduced vegetables. Khun Pak Sod was also allowed to place her label with the government logo on RPF vegetables because they were equivalent. Consumers were unaware that some vegetables sold with RPF or "Safety Vegetable" labeling were exactly the same, though the price for the RPF vegetable would often be double. The price difference reflected RPF's wholesale pricing structure for pre-packaged, RPF labeled and unpackaged, unlabeled GAP certified vegetables. This also demonstrates that while consumers surveyed showed little difference in acceptance of different labels, they are in fact willing to pay a higher price for the RPF label.

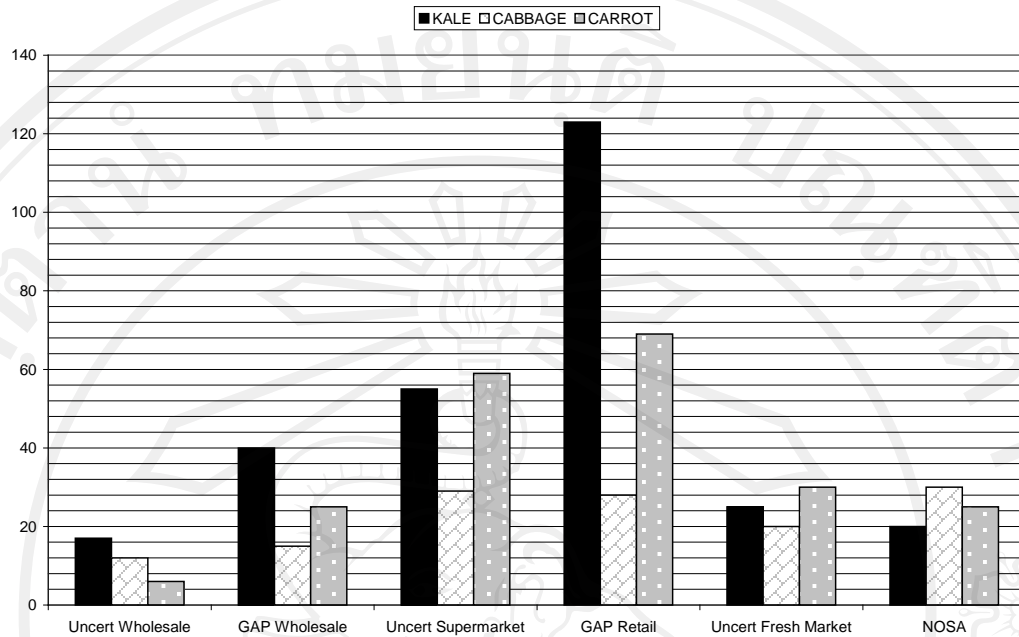


Figure 5.6 Comparative vegetable prices in Chiang Mai, September 3, 2008

Price plays an important role in the decision to grow and market vegetables under a certified, regulatory regime. The label, and consumer awareness of the agricultural production process used in producing vegetables is essential in gaining higher prices. Certified vegetables must compete with non-certified vegetables in the larger retail market. Consumers must weigh their ideological desire to buy a certified product against the price of similar, uncertified products. Changes in farm gate price, determined by consumer demand, can disrupt discourse coalitions by driving farmers to seek higher prices for their produce. If the farm gate price falls too low, farmers will opt out of the certified market and may return to conventional farming.

The wholesale price is generally more than double the farm gate price. This can be observed by looking at the prices of RPF vegetables. Figure 4.12 shows the prices of kale, cabbage, and carrots, these being the only three vegetables sharing all of the certifications on that day, at each of the retail market venues examined by my research as well as the wholesale prices at RPF and the uncertified wholesale price at Muang Mai. In all three cases the wholesale price for uncertified vegetables is far below the certified prices of each venue. This is the lowest price offered by assemblers to retailers. RPF wholesale price, labeled “Doi Kham No Label,” is the

price charged by RPF for unwrapped, unlabeled, certified vegetables offered to certified retailers. Unwrapped and unlabeled vegetable will be repackaged under a different name and equivalent certified labeling. RPF maintains higher prices for certified vegetables by controlling the supply through its pricing policy for upland farmers. Often, upland farmers will break their contracts with RPF if they can get higher prices at Muang Mai. RPF pays premium prices on a first-come first-served basis. Collection centers will offer lower prices for vegetables as RPF reaches its quota. This minimizes RPF losses when supply far exceeds demand. Eventually, RPF will offer prices below conventional vegetable wholesale prices. When this happens farmers will not sell to RPF and turn to other market venues, such as Muang Mai. However, most of the time upland farmers following RPF planting guidelines will receive higher compensation for their vegetables.

The members of the San Sai farm group are offered a fixed contract for their vegetables. The price will not vary no matter how high or low market prices change. Their farmers have agreed not to opt out of the contract and accept the security of a guaranteed income. The few farmers who have broken the contract are rejected from the group and are no longer offered contracts for their vegetables. Of the vegetables examined during this survey, only kale was available from the San Sai farm group. They received a price well over regular wholesale or community market prices because. As previously mentioned, the kale variety grown by San Sai farmers, *kanna hong kong*, has a high market value. Farmer groups can increase their revenue by growing high-priced varieties.

MCC and ISAC farmers received prices many times above the farm gate price for uncertified vegetables. By selling directly to the public, community market farmers receive prices equivalent to the retail price of uncertified vegetables. Farmers are encouraged to keep their prices about the same as those at the fresh market to stay competitive. The directors of the community markets give farmers space either free-of-charge or at nominal fees, reducing their overhead to only transportation costs.

### 5.3 Certified space

There are four major hypermarket<sup>30</sup> chains in the city of Chiang Mai; these are Tesco-Lotus, Carrefour, Big C, and Macro (a membership store). This investigation looked specifically at Tesco-Lotus and Carrefour, these being representative of hypermarkets in general and yet each expressing different and conflicting corporate ideologies. Tesco-Lotus is widely known throughout Northern Thailand for its competitive tactics against local fresh markets (Kasem Supamart, 2008; Nation, 2007). Tesco-Lotus has become even more aggressive by locating smaller versions of the Tesco-Lotus chain adjacent to fresh markets in Chiang Mai, named Tesco-Lotus Express. These locations are small grocery stores selling a selection of fresh produce. The Tesco-Lotus Express locations are being developed rapidly, with at least five new stores constructed since the beginning of my research in 2006. In contrast, Carrefour has only one retail outlet in Chiang Mai. Tesco-Lotus and Carrefour demonstrate different concerns of environmental and social issues. Tesco-Lotus is frequently targeted by organizations such as Greenpeace for its promotion of unhealthy products and is currently on Greenpeace's ([www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org)) black list for GMO products. In contrast, Carrefour is rarely criticized by consumer advocacy groups and is even promoted by Greenpeace for its attention to environmental concerns. (Table 5.4) My field investigation uncovered that these ideologies influence farmers' access to retail space under different regulatory scheme.

<sup>30</sup> I used the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a point of reference for the different market venues in this investigation because the definitions have a good fit. According to the USDA, a hypermarket is, "The largest supermarket format, typically 150,000 square feet or more of floor space. General merchandise accounts for 40 percent of sales, while food and nonfood grocery products represent 60 percent of sales" (USDA, 2007).



Table 5.5 Greenpeace GMO certification 2005

GMO Green List	GMO Black List
Green net	Tesco-Lotus
Lemon Farm	Makro
Carrefour	
Big C Supercenter	
Tops Supermarket	

Source: (GreenPeace, 2005)

The regulatory discourse, communicated through certification and labeling, is limited to consumers by a market's choice of producers (or assemblers representing them). In general, both Tesco and Tesco-Express offer uncertified and RPF (Doi Kham<sup>31</sup>) vegetables. Carrefour offers a much larger variety of vegetables from GAP and "Safety Vegetable" distributors, as well as vegetables grown by farmers in cooperation with MCC. This evidence suggests that Carrefour offers greater access to a wider number of farmers growing pesticide reduced vegetables. (Table 5.6)

<sup>31</sup> Doi Kham and RPF will be used interchangeably in this chapter. Doi Kham is the official logo of vegetables marketed by the Royal Project Foundation. Tesco-Lotus also sells vegetables purchased unpackaged from RPF foundation and repackages them in their own label stating "Safety Vegetable."

Table 5.6 Hypermarkets and Supermarkets

<b>Carrefour</b>	Uncertified	“Safety Vegetable”	Doi Kham	GAP	MCC
<b>Tesco-Lotus</b>	Uncertified	“Safety Vegetable”	Doi Kham	GAP	
<b>Tops Market</b>	Uncertified	“Safety Vegetable”	Doi Kham	GAP	Intl Certifications
<b>Rimping</b>	Uncertified	“Safety Vegetable”	Doi Kham	GAP	Intl Certifications

There are only two supermarket<sup>32</sup> chains in Chiang Mai. Tops Market is a national supermarket chain with three locations inside Chiang Mai and a fourth location in nearby Mae Rim. Rimping Supermarket is a local chain with three locations located inside the city of Chiang Mai. Both markets offer a wide assortment of food products and vegetables. They are set up as “Western-style” supermarkets with organized aisles lined with shelves holding processed and packaged food products and electronic checkout lanes. Rimping Supermarket presents itself as a premium market place selling to the foreign expatriates and the upper income Thai consumers. Rimping Supermarket advertises itself with a message of quality, cleanliness, and local charm. Likewise, Tops Market sells to expatriates and middle to upper income Thais. Tops Market advertises the concept of “Freshness” to its customers.

Both Rimping Supermarket and Tops Market sell Doi Kham, “Safety Vegetable”, GAP, and internationally certified vegetables, such as vegetables certified by Soil Association and Bio-ecert. Both markets also participate in labeling practices where uncertified vegetables are cut, cleaned, and neatly packaged in wrappers with name branding stating that the vegetables are clean, fresh, and safe. These packages do not carry government certified or logos of informally certified farm groups. It is

<sup>32</sup> The USDA defines supermarkets as large scale grocery stores selling “a general line of food products, such as canned and frozen foods; fresh fruits and vegetables; fresh and prepared meats, fish, and poultry; and nonfood grocery products” (USDA, 2007)

therefore the consumer's responsibility to read the label carefully and look for the official logo.

There are many fresh markets<sup>33</sup> located throughout Chiang Mai. I will use the term “fresh market” to describe open-air, non-air-conditioned markets, usually placed under one roof where multiple, independent sellers market vegetable and other commodities directly to the public. These are often referred to as “wet-markets” in literature describing Asian open-market places because they are often “wet” inside. (Aree Wiboonpongse and Songsak Sriboonchitta, 2004; Somchai Phatharathananunth, 2006) They are also noted as having “no stringent food safety requirements, not very high quality requirements, no social issues” (Somsri Songpol, 2005: 34). These assertions come from the perspective of researchers situated in neoliberal outlooks attempting to dominate the discourse. Diminishing the health and safety of fresh markets is a strategy often used by corporate food networks not subject to local acceptance, local values, and local control. Corporate advertising wants customers to believe that everything inside the walls of a western market is clean, fresh and healthy while everything inside an open market is subject to scrutiny and doubt. Fresh markets abound in Thailand. In a May 2008 press release, the Internal Trade Department director-general Yanyong Phuangrach noted that there are 2,847 wet (sic) market operators earning between Bt50-60 billion annually (1.4 to 1.7 billion US dollars at 35 baht/dollar) in Thailand (Methawee, 2008). Fresh markets constitute a significant share of the fresh vegetable market in Chiang Mai. Of these, only Nong Hoi and Thanin markets offer certified produce. The certified vegetable section at Nong Hoi is operated by two different vendors, one supported by ISAC and the other by a “Safety Vegetable” certified farm group in Saraphi. This market stand is not open every day of the week.

Khun Pak Sod and her sister are the only two operators selling RPF, “Safety Vegetable” and GAP certified vegetables daily in Thanin Market. My research focused on the Thanin fresh market because of the long standing presence of two certified sellers. By the end of my field work another fresh markets began selling

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<sup>33</sup> The USDA defines these as “specialized food stores” (USDA, 2007).

certified products daily.<sup>34</sup> Contrary to the opinion that fresh markets do not have stringent safety requirements, Thanin is also unique by being Chiang Mai's most highly rated fresh market by the Ministry of Public Health. Currently all vegetable sellers operating at the market are listed as "Gold Label" under the "Good Food, Clean Taste" program.

Of the supermarkets and hypermarkets, only Tops Market can boast of this particular level of certification. Both Thanin and Nong Hoi fresh markets have official displays of the "Food Safety" program (Figure 4.6) throughout their market areas. This type of certification will be referred to as "spatial labeling", meaning that the entire space represents a particular kind of certification. Each of the four main retail venues advertises a unique set of messages to their customers. They create consumer spaces of cleanliness, healthiness, convenience, quality and safety. (Appendix E) Slogans and mission statements are used by retailers to send specific messages to their customers. These statements form a "spatial labeling" within the retailer's venue. Spatial labeling defines an understanding between consumers and retailers stating that commodities within the retailers' market possess certain qualities. Spatial labeling provides the consumer with messages about certification, social responsibility, safety, cleanliness, and freshness of the products being sold. In the community markets, vegetables are sold in bulk or with minimal packaging without labels. Spatial labeling provides a way for consumers to know that all of the vegetables within the community market are organic or pesticide free. Similarly, supermarkets and hypermarkets sell certified and uncertified vegetables in the same produce section. In this case, consumers entering into these market spaces are assured of particular level of food cleanliness as certified by the government. Though many Chiang Mai residents may not know it, Tops supermarket and these two fresh markets maintain equivalent health and safety standards as certified by the Food Safety program.

Since 2001, ISAC has operated a community market located inside the center of the city near a Tesco-Lotus market. (Figure 5.7) Vegetables sold at ISAC

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<sup>34</sup> On March 30, 2009 the Ruamchok Fresh Market in the San Sai amphoe was recognized by the government for providing GAP vegetables. A few vendors are now RPF resellers.



are certified by NOSA. ISAC does not market vegetables from RPF or from any other farm group outside of its farm group. Farmers working with ISAC may sell their vegetables in other markets but not with any label associated with ISAC or NOSA. ISAC is essentially a closed agricultural commodity network. ISAC farmers sell their vegetables in bulk without packaging or labels. They market directly to the public, making a direct connection from producer to consumer. (Figure 40) ISAC's satellite locations outside of colleges, hospitals, and institutions provide its farmers to sell directly to the public seven days a week. ISAC's flexible farmers also grow cash crops other than vegetables, including organic rice, soybeans, oranges and garlic.

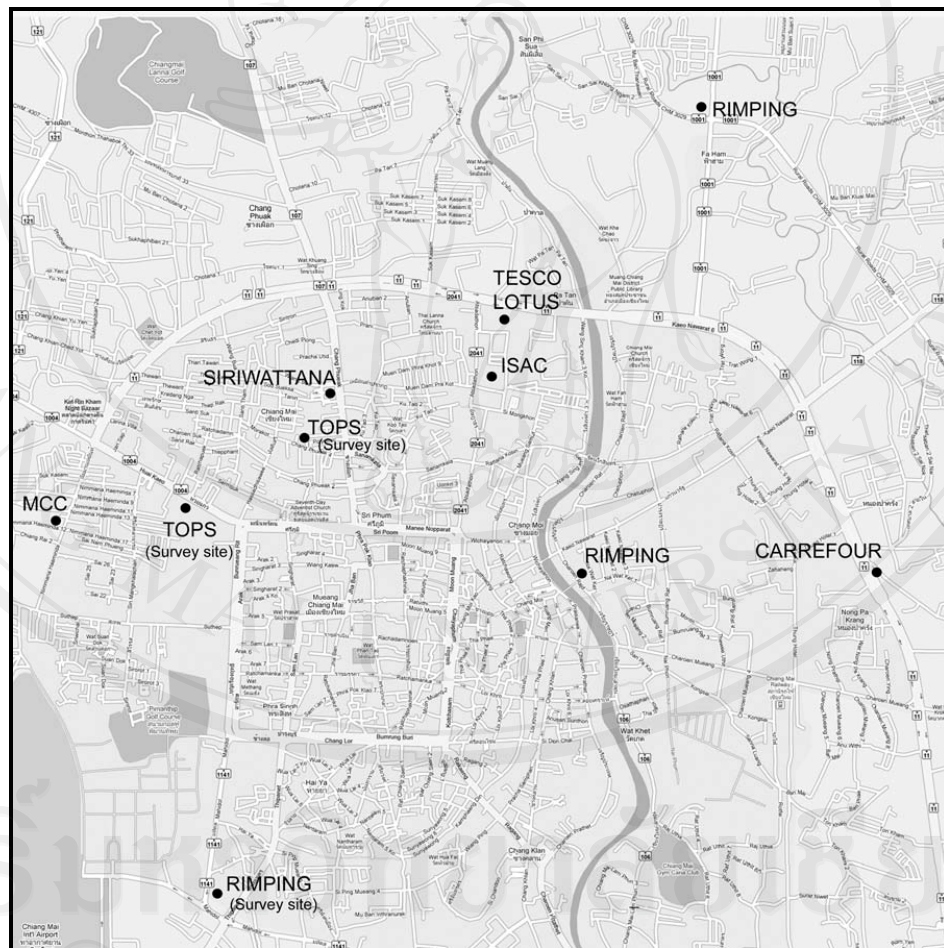


Figure 5.7 The market venues

ISAC's market also represents a case of spatial labeling. The retail space becomes symbolic through the values ascribed by certifications and the meanings



associated with the institutions granting them (Arntsen, 2003: 82-83; Lefebvre, 1999: 38-39, 311). Consumers entering into the area controlled by ISAC are assured that all of the vegetables sold are produced under the standards developed and certified by NOSA. ISAC's certification comes through local standards codified by NOSA. These standards were developed using a community rights approach taken by many members of Northern Thai civil society. Regulations were developed to fit the needs of Northern Thai farmers. Northnet used local knowledge, participatory research, historical precedents and traditional *Lanna* practice to codify its organic standards (Thiprad Maneelert, 1999). Local standards and certification demonstrate the shortcomings of national and international policies and regulations to address the unique circumstances of Northern Thai farmers (Anan Ganjanapan, 2000: 14-15; Santita Ganjanapan, 1997: 254). Within this space, ISAC projects to its customers a message of biodiversity, environmentalism, sufficiency and community culture, particularly in reference to *Lanna* lifestyle, foods, and values.

Both ISAC and MCC sponsored community markets are accepted as being safe, healthy, and pesticide free. The consumer survey used in this research showed that over 40% purchase vegetables at either of these two community markets. (Figure 21) Consumers trust in the reputation of ISAC and MCC as competent to oversee and authenticate, hence to certify, their farmer members. The commodity networks established by ISAC and MCC demonstrate how the "social body of the community" can become "the context for the construction of new channels for the flow of power (Agrawal, 2005: 21). They have developed multiple strategies deployed by actors to change the way "systems of domination" control certified commodity networks through translation (Thrift, 1997: 291). The completed commodity network establishes local authority for their regulatory standards. Community support is attributed to the strength of community culture on the part of the customer and farming practices based on sufficiency economy and community culture by the farmers. (Figure 5.8)



Figure 5.8 ISAC farmers selling directly to the public

MCC, located on the grounds of Chiang Mai University, provides a certified community market for its farm group. It is open on Wednesdays and Saturdays, the same as ISAC, and offers pesticide free products. MCC's spatial labeling is far more complex than ISAC's community market. MCC fresh market sells vegetables under a variety of certifications, including vegetables from RPF. Until recently, none of the vegetables sold at MCC community market carried labels, although vegetable sold at MCC's daily retail market, adjacent to the community market, are wrapped and marked with the MCC logo. Members of MCC's farm group are actively involved with ongoing research and study of Chiang Mai University. Farms are frequented by students and researchers, often several times a month, compared to the annual inspections given by government certification boards. (Figure 5.9) Some of MCC's farmers are GAP certified, particularly those located in *Amphoe Saraphi*. However, most of MCC's farmers do not have official government certification. MCC's broad farmer base allows it to market a wide variety of vegetables. This is in contrast to ISAC, which maintains rigid policies regarding issues of fair trade and biodiversity;

refusing to accept certain farming practices, such as the use of nets and certain fertilizers.

Consumers trust MCC to maintain a socially accepted standard of food safety, however diversified, within the confines of the community market. This idea complicates the meaning of local certification. Compared to NOSA, MCC has no single set of codified set of regulations, vegetables may be produced under GAP, “Safety Vegetable”, or experimental processes using IPM or pesticide reduced techniques. There are no messages of social responsibility, bio-diversity, or *Lanna* culture. Instead, there is the implied message that the foods available are grown locally under processes understood to be healthy. Given the success of MCC’s market, the message is working.



Figure 5.9 MCC student researcher inspects a farm site in Mae Rim

Problems may occur through the conflict of meanings represented by different certifications in markets with multiple labeling as well as within spaces defined by spatial labeling. For example, early in the development of safe vegetable production and certification in Chiang Mai, Khun Pak Sod was approached by the newly organized ISAC group to market NOSA certified vegetables. Unlike RPF,

ISAC only offered prepackaged vegetables for sale at prices higher than those of the San Sai Farmer group. Unlike RPF, ISAC's vegetable competed directly with Khun Pak Sod's farmers. Also, the logo of the newly organized NOSA was largely unknown; customers did not understand the difference between NOSA "organic" and "Safety Vegetable." There was also a conflict with labeling and presentation. ISAC did not want its vegetables associated with the "Safety Vegetable" and requested separate table space beneath a sign provided by ISAC. RPF took issue with ISAC's sign, claiming that it did not have a "professional" appearance. RPF threatened to stop selling to Khun Pak Sod unless she removed the ISAC sign. She attempted to accommodate both parties, as her objective was to have a diversified organic vegetable market appealing to as many customers as possible. She placed ISAC vegetables on a separate table space but removed their sign. However, ISAC's higher prices and customer's lack of knowledge limited the sale of those vegetables.

The final decision to stop selling ISAC vegetables came from ISAC's pre-packaging to verify chain of custody. NOSA wanted assurance that the products it certified had a chain of custody. To prevent any form of market deception, ISAC packaged its vegetables in heat-sealed, airtight plastic bags. While this assured chain of custody, it also prevented the vegetables from getting air. After two days the vegetables turned yellow and could not be sold. Khun Pak Sod insisted that she be allowed to open the bags to wash, trim, and maintain the vegetables, ISAC refused and Khun Pak Sod discontinued selling their products. This story demonstrates how both conflicts with the meanings of labels, as well as the spaces identified by specific certifications, can come into conflict. It is interesting to compare the problems faced by Khun Pak Sod and the ability of the MCC community market to have multiple certifications. It may be that the absence of specific labels removes the power of individual certifications to infringe on one another. This case can also be compared to the multiple certifications offered at super markets and hypermarkets. In those cases, certified distributors are offered specific shelf space. Their labels compete within the larger space of a conventional market. The meanings and power of these labels are spatially segregated, each product of competing certified, agricultural network are individually labeled and presented to the consumer as unique, discursive objects.



My research uncovered multiple instances of the problem of consumer deception. Though I have already discussed the problem of deception as implied by a label, this example will illustrate deception in the guise of spatial labeling. I found a vender adjacent to Khun Pak Sod displaying the GAP logo above her produce and marking all of her vegetables with a non-government label, was not selling any certified produce at all. This vendor had originally sold one certified vegetable from a relative, who had given her the sign. She hung the sign over all of the vegetables, which may give the impression that all of the produce was GAP certified. The sign remains, though she no longer sells the certified vegetable. Her label implies that there is something special about the vegetable, though the only special quality is the packaging and label. This is a deceptive use of spatial labeling.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

Discourse coalitions form around objects emerging from regulations practiced by certified agricultural networks. The examples provided in this chapter show that the networks form gradually by the accumulation of different coalitions, each responsible for enacting its performance to shape and stabilize the network. The acceptance and promotion of the regulations to be practiced by Northern Thai farmers brings certification to their produce, allow the farmers access to markets by providing consumers with knowledge about the production process qualities of each vegetable product. Field research verifies that farmers gain both economic and social benefits using agricultural production processes aligned to the discursive objectives of consumers and retailers. However, my research concludes that while it is possible for farmers to gain access to the certified markets, the opportunities for participation are limited and available only through close association with community organizations or small enterprises.

It is doubtful that any of the community markets would exist without external monetary support and additional “in-kind” subsidy such as rent-free marketing location and office space. The private sector operates on personal relationships between farmer and retailer. These relationships are fragile and can be disrupted by market downturns, relocation, illness, death, or other major life events.



Even farmers belonging exclusively to community markets, such as MCC, may turn away from certified farming due to hardship or misfortune.

Labeling is a symbolic representation of the objects of certification. The label allows the network to communicate with consumers. The label gains power through the meanings, processes, and social values represented by it. It provides a point of passage where the consumer enters into the certified agricultural commodity network. Consumers may, however, be part of several different networks all competing in an open market. Labels also demonstrate power through pricing. It has been demonstrated that consumers will pay more for exactly the same product represented by competing labels. Labels may also be misused because of their communicative and pricing power of labels. There are many deceptive practices used in labeling to misrepresent a non-certified product as having the similar meanings and values as certified products.

The idea of spatial labeling was introduced to explain how a market space can come to represent different kinds of certifications. Spaces may be certified under meanings and networks, or may enclose only one specific commodity network. Spatial labeling may have products without individual labeling or with many different labels. In the later case, the power of networks represented by the labels may contend with each other to dominate a space, in which case they will probably be segregated into separate areas. When labels are not present, multiple certifications may coexist as long as consumers consider them to be equivalent.