

## CHAPTER VI

### TRANSLATION AND PERMEABILITY AT NETWORK BOUNDARIES

Where do the boundaries of the multiple coalitions of organic production in Chiang Mai mingle and merge? Extending from the farmers' fields to the marketplace, the agricultural commodity networks have physical extent, but non-physical, discursive boundaries form along borders circumscribing networks of organic regulations and agricultural practice. This chapter will follow the formation of NOSA and demonstrate the influence of competing and complimentary networks on the codification of NOSA's standards, the development of the commodity network managed by ISAC. It will explain that initiative and change occurs where ideas meet, mingle, contest, and react. Ideas will be examined as objects, being vehicles of power carrying the possibility of contention as well as the means for transformation across network boundaries. Each object permeating beyond its borders will translate and internalized as something new, the synthesis of what it was and what it becomes. Organic regulations emerge as a summation in progress of many translations, rethought, adapted, and situated within a commodity network.

Often the politics, economics and ideologies of the organic vegetable market makes strange bedfellows. The discursive boundaries enclosing certified and non-certified organic practice become hybridized through the meanings, processes, perceptions, and negotiations between all actors involved. The interplay of competing discourses creates tentative descriptions and labels for various commodities while positioning the certifying body into a spatial gradient of retailer and consumer acceptability. This space is physical as well as conceptual, manifested by various criteria into physical retail locations. Through the use of multiple strategies, some farmer's may find their vegetable marketed under multiple perceptions of organic, safe, and even conventionality, usually under different labels used by competing retailers. Understanding hybridized, discursive boundaries may help explain how vegetables grown with nearly identical processes and in similar locations become transformed into unique products through differing regulatory strategies.

### 6.1 Translating external objects

Actor network theory and the concept of translation, as developed by Bruno Latour and Timothy Forsyth, brings insight into the role of objects of discourse in geographic studies. As a method of analysis it allows for a spatial understanding of ideas and beliefs interacting along network borders. Forsyth calls his application of actor-network theory “critical political ecology.” His fundamental insights come from exploring the interactions of networks along the boundaries where they intersect and convolute. Ideas and concepts of different networks merge at the borders; discourse is apprehended and translated into new formations, creating new objects to be mobilized into action. Forsyth finds his inspiration in the work of Bruno Latour whose work takes us into a highly imaginative realm of understanding human relations as translations of discourse used by two or more actor-networks as means to an end. Latour’s conception of networks is presented as collectives of practice constantly being displaced by interaction, translation, acceptance, and mobilization.

Framing my research into actor-networks brought to light the dynamics of power relationships. The light illuminates network objects casting shadows, creating shades of variation on the landscape. We focus the light, directing it to this activity or that. We see ourselves all those whom are cited, we focus on various shapes as units of analyses. Beneath our gaze lay the discourse and practice hidden in the shadows, underlying the networks and power as seen from our perspective and illumination. Contention and compromise are found on the boundaries where networks meet. Objects bounded by networks, such as the various certification bodies in my study, are compositions of production processes, regulations, and consumer perceptions, being contingent and permeated by multiple powers and discourse. Objects hybridized by translation, such as organic regulations, local knowledge, community culture, and neoliberalism can be evaluated as facts arising from the conditions creating them (Forsyth, 2003: 90). They are co-productions; socially bound, though fluid, capable of crossing the borders of networks of different scales and powers.

Many problems emerge from translation. Regulatory agencies and their certifying bodies exist in networks of unequal power relations between certifying bodies. There is the problem of market domination of powerful transnational corporation into the national economic sphere. There is also a problem concerning

sovereignty rights in the establishment of a national discourse over organic agricultural practice based on local acceptance and experience. Conflicting translations leads to domination of one set of standards over another. Large retailers have the ability, through scale of consumption, to decide which standards will be accepted (Marsden and Murdoch, 2006; Raynolds, 2004). Political action groups, lobbyists and activist have the ability to draw public attention to specific concerns and sway consumer demand for specific regulatory characteristics. The processes detailed in organic regulations become institutionalized facts based on the presumptions of the dominant actors, resulting in conflicting local, national, and global standards. (Forsyth, 2003: 88-91).

Small-scale farmers in Chiang Mai, Northern Thailand, practice several different organic or safe farming practices. These standards are based on local organic regulations, international standards, and GAP guidelines. Each one has an official certifying body and codified set of agricultural processes. Some of the standards originated in Thailand, but others have a global reach, originating in other sovereigns and competing for world-wide acceptance in the global food commodity network. Agricultural regulations represent highly complex, social-political discourse constituted by agreements, coalitions, and advocacy from farmers, retailers, consumers, worker's rights groups and environmental factions. The regulations are the foundation on which the certified commodity networks emerge. The term "originate" is a misnomer as it implies that the ideas emerged "*sui generis*" in some place at some time. This is not the case. The regulations examined in this study are the result of multiple translations, acceptances, mobilizations and displacements of actors' understandings of the meaning of organic agriculture.

Throughout this study I will look specifically at three different organic regulations practiced in Thailand to demonstrate how the meaning of organic has been displaced and set into practice. IFOAM is global in its reach, seeking to establish a single, regulatory standard for farmers around the world. IFOAM is ambitious in its enterprise and reductive in its outlook. As a federation of organic growers, IFOAM is tasked to establish organic standards suitable for everyone, but how can this be? Massive translation and compromise produces a statistical mean, suitable for the most while unattainable by the rest. IFOAM's definition of organic is absolutist, no

pesticide or chemicals allowed unless they can be proved to be organic and no residues, only regulated organic production processes. IFOAM's conception of organic protects the land, the water, the air, and the food supply (Poisot, 2003). Thailand's GAP<sup>35</sup> regulations mainly focus on farm safety and food security. By doing so GAP renders the meaning of organic regulations into something called "food safety." Pesticides may be used, as well as other chemical inputs in a regulated production process. GAP does not try to protect the land, the air, or the water, only agricultural products which must have no more than a minimum level of residue. GAP is directed toward consumer concerns about food toxicity and safety. NOSA's organic regulations are oriented to the farmer and the consumer. NOSA's agricultural regulations are an attempt to use the best of IFOAM while competing against GAP in the domestic market. Following the development of NOSA demonstrates how objects contest and commingle and permeate boundaries between the local, the national and the global.

Certified agriculture enters into a commodity network in Thailand through recognized farm groups. Farmers are organized by many levels of external power, each with a set of objectives unique to organization. The scale of the organization influences the sense of community perceived by the farmer. As with other actors, farmers were categorized by the strategies (regulatory processes of production) they deployed to gain access to the market. These strategies allow the farmers to form relationships with the other actors constituting the network. The point of contact between the farmer and the market is an interface between the boundaries of two network actors. It may take the form of an actual market stall, an assembly warehouse, or a scheduled, farm gate pick-up. The interface establishes the connection between the field and the market. All of actors responsible for constituting the regulations, certifications, instructions and market spaces on the one side, and the farmers with their certified vegetables on the other side, converge on this point.

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<sup>35</sup> The FAO has developed an extensive set of guidelines concerning GAP. They cover all attributes of safe and secure farm practices, including sustainability, biodiversity, fair trade and social accountability (Poisot, 2003). These issues are not covered by GAP Thailand, in which the focus is on food security.



This analysis of how organic regulations influence farmers in Northern Thailand acknowledges that there is no perfect theory to explain what role government and other social organization have on the practice of farmers or to explain the influence of the decisions of those farmers on the world around them. Using actor-network theory this research can situate actors along network borders, examining the exchanges of discourse as boundary interactions, analyzing the mechanisms for exchange or exclusion. The development of NOSA's regulation can be placed in an actor-network framework of power, initiative, objects, translation and displacement along the boundaries of discursive realms.

Before NOSA, IFOAM had already been making inroads into the development of organic agriculture in Thailand through workshops conducted in Bangkok. The first of these was held in 1993 (Thiprad Maneelert, 1999). Leaders from the four main regions of Thailand, the north, the south, the northeast, and central regions were invited to participate in groundbreaking work to introduce international organic practice to Thailand. It was followed by another meeting expanded to agricultural leaders, farmers, and university researchers. Members of the newly formed Northnet attended both of those meetings, deliberated as to how IFOAM's regulations could be implemented in Northern Thailand. At the same time, leaders from the Alternative Action Network (AAN) also attended the meeting. AAN leaders would create ACT and Greenet in Bangkok, following IFOAM's regulations explicitly. These leaders were consumer oriented, looking at both the domestic and export potential for organic agriculture. The leadership from Chiang Mai, who would soon form Northnet, took a farmer oriented approach, and found that IFOAM did not hold all of their answers.

The story of NOSA can be evaluated using actor-networks and translation. The actors, other than the human actors already mentioned, also include the international organic regulations<sup>36</sup> and the regulations already developed by the

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<sup>36</sup> The committee review organic regulations Sweden (KRAV), Vermont Organic Farmer of USA (VOF), Nova Scotia Organic Growers Association of Canada (NOGAS), Independent Organic Inspectors Association in Minnesota, USA (IOIA), The Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA), Japan Organic Standards (JAL), Regulations developed by Northnet, Chiang Mai, Thailand, Royal Project's development of Safety Vegetable standards directed through Chiang Mai University,

government for non-organic, pesticide reduced agricultural process called “Safety Vegetable.” A study group was initiated by members of Northnet with the purpose of creating a commodity network of actors, such as a local regulatory framework, an educational body, certified producers, and a marketplace. Objects from similar networks contributed to the development of regulations standards through translation of objects. The objects (regulations) of corresponding, international organic networks were translated into processes acceptable to local farmers, as were the regulations of the national government. The study group, which would develop into NOSA, learned that the concept of organic had multiple meanings in Thai culture. There were different levels of tolerance of what is acceptable as safe or as pesticide free. Some aspects of international organic regulations did not address issues of local importance, such as the use of nets and mechanical devices that not only kill insects and pests, but are harmful to the overall biodiversity of a farm. International regulations also have requirements regarding buffer zones for farmers whose fields are contiguous to conventional farmers using pesticides.

Small farmers rejected the buffer zone because their fields were too small to accommodate them and that the start-up cost and fees for certification were excessive relative to their income. There was doubt about the efficacy of buffer zones in limiting pesticide overspray, especially in the many windy, narrow valleys in Chiang Mai province. The group found that the public accepted the government’s “Safety Vegetable” program, claiming to be only pesticide reduced. They realized that the public would have to be educated about the dangers of pesticide reduced production practices as compared to more stringent, pesticide free production practices. Standards developed for NOSA are the translated external network objects, or hybrid concepts, supporting pesticide free practices and environmental safety.

The leadership of NOSA looked to formulate organic standards to meet the needs of Northern Thai farmers. The project was coordinated by a local community leader at the Chiang Mai Medical School. Her support group decided to make the needs of the farmer central in their pursuit of organic agriculture. She obtained financial support through a special program funded through the Canadian consulate

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Standards being developed by Ministry of Agriculture, Thailand, and many processes under development by individual farm groups in Thailand.

for local farm support and from the Thailand Research Fund. NOSA organizers brought together organic regulations from around the world to find what could work in Northern Thailand. The regulations investigated by the innovators founding NOSA can be considered as a group of related objects, held together by collations of actors supporting different agricultural processes. Individual objects were brought into the emerging NOSA network along the interfacing boundaries, to be further analyzed for their applicability to Northern Thai markets and agriculture by NOSA investigators. NOSA opened its discursive position to be receptive to new ideas and translated them into new regulations. Two conferences were held in Chiang Mai to discuss, debate, and decide which agricultural processes would be chosen.

All positions were discussed; including GAP which was already being practiced by highland farmers, as well as farmers associated with Chiang Mai and Mae Jo universities. Practical applications of regulated, organic agricultural processes were demonstrated by the Mae Tha farm group in *Amphoe* Ma On. They had been using internationally certified organic production processes for export for over 15 years. At the conclusion of NOSA's final conference the delegates concluded that NOSA regulations would reject the use of pesticides, differentiating it from GAP. The conference also rejected certain parts of IFOAM, those that could not be attained by small farmers because of either expense or practicality. The rules secured from external organic regulation became mobilized into a new, local standard of organic production processes.

NOSA translated the regulations of others into a set of standards suitable for Northern Thai farmers, amplifying some and reducing others, establishing its regulations in 2001. Its innovators developed ISAC for purposes of training farmers in organic agricultural processes and for marketing the products. Its activities closely mirror those of ACT and Greennet except in scale. ISAC was to specifically approach small farmers. ISAC also rejected the export oriented approach. They had decided on developing local production for local consumption. The decision for producing completely pesticide free products for local consumption was two fold. First, the experience with Greennet demonstrated that farmers must produce at a sufficient scale to enter into international markets thereby excluding most small

farmers. Second, ISAC determined that there was a market for completely pesticide free produce. RPF, their largest competitor, could not make this claim.

Farmers currently certified under NOSA are taught to practice pesticide-free, not pesticide reduced farming. However, by rejecting the adoption of IFOAM certification, NOSA certified organic products were not acceptable as organic for mainstream, neoliberal international markets. The latter point demonstrates the power of dominant discourse. For IFOAM, translation occurs from the top down; the problems faced by local farmers do not permeate upward into the international. Without accommodation, NOSA farmers are disqualified from international certification. International regulations, whether intentionally or not, are biased against the small farmers. The problem of dominant discourse in the neoliberal markets of certified, organic vegetables is even more exclusive when you consider that IFOAM is not accepted by many of the largest retailers who accept. IFOAM is only one large network in a global network of certifying bodies and commodity

Networks are held in place by the discourse infused within them. Objects residing inside networks are referential, being the assumptions and beliefs of the actors within the network. The network places a reference on these objects and incorporates them into various truth statements, further displacing the object. Other networks apprehend the object into other truths. Actors and objects form a relationship whereby different networks see objects differently. Therefore objects can be apprehended in many ways through many understandings, utilities, and perceptions. NOSA, operating in Chiang Mai, established its truth regarding organic processes, as had ACT through IFOAM in Bangkok. NOSA's truths differed from those of "Safety Vegetable" or ACT as they were directed toward different recipients with local requirements. RPF's "Safety Vegetable" could be used by the most number of farmers and deliver a product considered safe and non-toxic to the consumer. The "Safety Vegetable" standards were written for inclusion and consumer safety. ACT was able to qualify exporters to merchandise to international market through Greenet, while NOSA could provide a process for small farmers concerned about the long-term quality of their land satisfy the needs of a small group of consumers concerned about residues and environmental safety.



Objects located near the boundaries of similar networks may be apprehended, are translated, adapted, and mobilized from one to another. Objects situated at the boundaries of networks may be seen similarly enough by actors in other networks to either pass directly or undergo transformation. Objects are identified and accepted along points of passage, which may be key individuals, seminars, government meetings, or any place where ideas may be exchanged. When two networks converge at a boundary and make an exchange, the accepted object is translated independently within the perspective of the receiving network. Displacements occur in the references of the receiving network to accommodate the perspectives of the discourse within the object (Latour, 1999: 89,194). This concept can be applied to the organic and safe networks arising in Thailand where the public presented with multiple truths about safe and organic agriculture. New regulated commodity networks and markets emerged for certified vegetables. Certified agricultural commodity networks became extended into new practices as regulations became displaced by translation and performance.

The establishment of different regulations and their certifying bodies in Thailand was the result of many historical events. NOSA's regulations were an attempt to frame the community culture and sufficiency economy into a practical discourse leading to the formation of supporting discourse coalitions, such as ISAC. The regulations formed network objects with causality and meaning, shaping the contexts under which Northern Thai farmers practiced agricultural production processes. NOSA crossed over multiple scales of power and association to become translated, through time, in Chiang Mai. Multiple network objects, such as regulations, crossing through boundaries of multiple scales, from the global to the local, contributed to the formation of an organic agricultural commodity network under NOSA's regulations. From a larger perspective, the development of local organic standards in Northern Thailand provides insight into the larger agrarian question.

Local participation and acceptance of organic standards contrary to those under global auspices may be described as a counter discourse. IFOAM objectives, though honorable, are dominated by the need to produce for global economy. Agricultural production processes are driven by scales requiring greater accumulation

of capital resources. Participation in global markets is a political response to balance of trade issues resulting from imbalances of capital accumulation. ISAC, acting as a discourse coalition, promotes the local consumption and sale of pesticide free produce in Chiang Mai. This policy was developed to protect the farm groups within the commodity network from the negative effects of global cyclical economic cycles, national and international regulations that would force changes to local practice, and to promote the cultivation of local vegetables and cultivars adapted to Chiang Mai's climate. Since organic agriculture is specifically about a production processes, the translation of global discourse by local organic networks may bring disruptive practices leading to unwanted displacements in the farm community. The introduction of crops such as cauliflower or broccoli may bring along problems associated with pests and disease not associated with local vegetables. Various rules, such as delimitations concerning overspray, or the encouragement of the use of non-discriminatory insect traps may be counter to principles of biodiversity. ISAC's policies demonstrate how the negative impacts of globalization brought about by the agrarian transition can be diminished within the local context through the adoption and promotion of locally developed and supported regulations.

Under ISAC, Northern Thai farmers were trained to use NOSA's organic agricultural practices. Farming practices were overseen by NOSA and then tested for chemicals and pesticides by MOAC and MOPH test facilities. The result was that ISAC farmers were able to successfully produce rice, soybeans and vegetables without pesticides. However, residues, well within safe limits, were found from pesticides sprayed at nearby fields. Overspray can not be avoided in the narrow valleys of Northern Thailand and continues to be a major point separating NOSA from ACT and IFOAM regulations. As long as there is conventional agriculture, or farmers practicing "Safety Vegetable" regulations, pesticides will become atomized into droplets and settle onto neighboring fields.

NOSA's translation of regulations demonstrates that counter discourse is the result of translation. The alternative regulations codified by NOSA defined the extent of acceptance and the degree of rejection of the dominant discourse to be practiced in Chiang Mai. The regulations form a boundary around its network of farmers. The actual agricultural practices, as taught by ISAC and enacted by its farmers are the

result of an intentional small-farm orientation. NOSA translates the regulation, ISAC mobilizes it, the farmers displace their production processes through it. An organic commodity network specific to Northern Thailand developed as coalitions of farming practice, consumer awareness of pesticide toxicity, and a core group of dedicated initiators inspired by the need for consumer protection and environmental safety.

Understanding regulations through the process of translation operationalizes each network into interactions, social values, intentions and power relationships. In this way my research is not attempting to know and answer a specific question, but to understand the questions relating to general processes as to why distinctive networks operate, how interaction occurs along their borders, and how they translate and are translated by others. Specific answers are only pertinent to a situation, a time and a place of occurrence. The questions themselves are vital as they lead to understanding the boundary negotiations, cross network transactions and future translations. They establish a medium for discourse, a way of seeing outside of one's vision.

Actor-network theory situates Chiang Mai's certifying bodies by "seeing differently." This was demonstrated in Tania Murray Li's analysis of forestry rights in Indonesia. Certifying bodies such as MOAC, IFOAM, or ACT can be seen as "trustees," being in positions of power where they claim to have knowledge of how things should be done. In the case of Chiang Mai, acts of governmentality are the regulations, interventions, and disciplines enacted by the certifying bodies. However, trusteeship, as defined by Li, is too confining a term to be applied to NOSA. The local regulations established by NOSA go beyond "rendering technical" or simply problematizing organic farming (Li, 2007: 7,12). NOSA positioned itself within the larger scheme of the national and global commodity networks by translating those objects suitable for use within the limitations of Chiang Mai's environment and within the context of *Lanna* village life. As an organization developed by local consumers, NOSA broke out of the "matrices" of compromised, international values (Li, 2007: 21), internalized them, and displaced them into something new and uniquely Thai. Acting as "local" trustees, NOSA reach into the local discourse and acquire objects particular to local circumstances. In a broader context, the GAP and "Safety Vegetable" standards have also brought international ideals in line with Thai realities. Global ideologies have been displaced, international standards, rendering technical

process of production; have themselves been rendered into ways of doing things Thai. Thailand's governmental agencies, acting as certifying bodies, have intentionally developed policies to support different scales of production allowing for greater freedom of production with Thai national markets.

Li's analysis demonstrated that policies are what create the boundaries between trustees and the populations which they serve. Network policies lead to contradictions when they are translated inside the system. Commodity networks are made of coalitions, they being sub-networks inside the greater whole. The farm groups, resellers, certifying bodies and support agencies, such as ISAC, or Greenet, or RPF, are all networks comprising the larger commodity network. Networks can become closed when there is no room for compromise, no space for displacement to occur. Trustees, such as certifying bodies, may invoke policies that are untranslatable forcing untenable conditions for compliance, such as international regulatory standards being enforced in local conditions. Such policies reach into local practice to enforce technical, neoliberal meanings and practices of organic agricultural networks (Li, 2007: 68-69). Another problem noted by Li is that dominant trustees often have a "plurality of specific aims" whereby trustees experiment with different rules. Those who could translate them prosper, while those who can not are excluded (Doherty, 2007:52). Each new certification scheme, assembler and market opportunity results in changing practices by those farmers willing to use the opportunity.

However, my analysis does not seek out heroes, victims, and villains, but examines many actors at multiple scales of power interacting, translating, excluding and profiteering on policies and market conditions. Agricultural commodity networks are interacted upon by outside discourse and act upon each other through translation. RPF, ACT, and NOSA represent different strategies for production, different standards for consumer's benefit. Certifications are enacted by different markets and different levels of consumption. While there are, in fact, many contentions between them, they can not be approached in terms of right or wrong, good or bad. Each is acting within its understanding, its associations, and its networks.

Regulations form boundaries surrounded by borders of practice. They are accepted by networks creating connections and passages to other networks, to assemblers, retailers, and consumers. Organic regulations are made of groups of



related objects which may be used by adjacent networks without losing their identity. They become stabilized within their networks and may extend themselves into other networks, strengthening their cohesion through acceptance. They are the obligatory passages, but more so, they are the nodes through which translation may occur. They allow for the creation of discourse coalitions, such as farming groups and community markets to interact with consumers (Forsyth, 2003: 141-146). The act of certification establishes the boundaries by granting them legitimacy through the power and authority of a certifying body's evaluation and approval. For example, NOSA is the local organic certifying authority of the north, though its legitimacy is contested by national and international authorities. "Safety Vegetable", and now GAP, are the leading production alternative, safe production practices and are observed by the public as being "organic." IFOAM, through ACT, is the standardized measure by which all organic activity in Thailand is measured by global authority.

Whereas the intent of organic agriculture is to produce agricultural products without the use of pesticides and agro-chemicals, "Safety Vegetable" is a way of practicing agriculture to only limit these inputs. "Safety Vegetable" regulations were developed to encourage agricultural processes leading to "economic and social sustainability" with an outcome of producing safe and healthy food. They represent alternatives to conventional agriculture and create different social formations based on the larger concept of environmental sustainability and improved social livelihoods. "Safety Vegetable" appears to be a conventional agricultural process when compared to IFOAM or NOSA standards because "Safety Vegetable" allows for pesticides and chemicals. However, as a regulated form of agricultural production it provides an accepted measure of safety for the public. IFOAM emphasizes the elimination of pesticides at all steps of production. These formations come together by framing principals and assumptions about agriculture and livelihood into political, environmental and social concerns. Certifying bodies such as IFOAM seek to enclose the issues of the use of pesticides, agro-chemicals, biodiversity, food quality and quality of life through regulations resulting in standardized farming processes (Forsyth, 2003: 77-78). They become enclosures as institutions based on certified membership.

In Northern Thailand, NOSA provides an alternative, breakaway set of regulations setting standards for organic processes agricultural production specifically for Northern Thai farmers. These regulations were developed in 1994 by a coalition of local residents desiring organically produced foods. Doctors, university researchers, NGO leaders, members of the ministry of agriculture and farm leaders met, informally, to establish standards suitable to the needs of the farmer and the wants of the consumer. NOSA has codified its regulations into a set of documented, standardized regulations used by ISAC and the Chiang Mai Organic Cooperative as a process of agricultural production. The codification of local standards by NOSA addressed the specific needs of farmers based on historic precedents, local knowledge and livelihoods. These needs have been articulated as organic standards to both state and Thai society through the creating and support of agricultural policies by coalitions of community members.

Several conflicting storylines emerge from the discourse of Thailand's competing safe agricultural regulatory networks. ACT, representing the international organic network, claims that their process is completely free of all pesticides and chemical inputs in the production process. GAP, representing the national network, claims that the residual pesticide remaining on products under their certification are negligible and effectively pesticide free. NOSA's claim is that farmers adhering to their production process use no chemical pesticides and support biodiversity. These storylines situate the farmers and their products in the marketplace. They are positions of truth applying order and meaning to each network. They all make the general claim of caring for consumer safety but address the safety using differing qualifications. They mold and shape one another as each organic commodity network seeks differentiation using truths about safety and production process as boundaries.

Regulations are the outermost limit of acceptability with the network, validated by the certifying body as essential product requirements. The power and intent of each network, be it a member of the international commodity networks such as Greenet in Bangkok, or a national network such as the Royal Project Foundation, or a local network such as ISAC, press in on each other's production processes and spaces of marketing, impressing upon the public declarations of truths to establish legitimacy and acceptance.

ISAC expanded its storyline to include new discursive objects to reach out to more potential consumers interested in more than health and safety. Specifically, ISAC began to promote biodiversity and women's issues. These issues were also supported by one of its key funding agencies, OXFAM International. There is no clear evidence to support or reject the origin of ISAC's new storylines, or whether or not they were accepted and translated into the ISAC network through key innovators within the organization or if they were part of a funding agreement. What can be pointed out is that these ideas are becoming part of all organic networks, IFOAM being a case in point. Biodiversity<sup>37</sup> was a simple match, and easy translated given ISAC's adherence to NOSA's organic regulations. Biodiversity became translated into regulations prohibiting the use of nets and other mechanical devices that indiscriminately killed pests. Organic production became linked with the promotion of local species, and as a consequence, with advocacy for traditional foods of Northern Thai culture. The displacement separated NOSA, and consequently ISAC, far from the values of RPF or any other competitor, including MCC. ISAC also championed women's issues<sup>38</sup>, specifically the risk of miscarriage and birth defects linked to pesticide exposure. These new objects reshaped the NOSA-ISAC commodity network, creating new boundaries detached from any of its competition.

## 6.2 Coalitions shaping boundaries

The consumer is confronted with multiple definitions of "pesticide free" vegetables. The competing storylines are presented at the marketplace as advertised truths; they become marketing tools and contesting objects along the network boundaries. The truths establish a relationship between farmer and consumer; they circulate throughout the commodity network establishing points of passage between

<sup>37</sup> "Biological diversity" means the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems. From the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, 2009 (Online) <http://www.cbd.int/convention/convention.shtml>.

<sup>38</sup> For example, in 2008 ISAC launch a educational campaign about the adverse effects of pesticides on the development of unborn babies. Educational seminars were held in villages where ISAC had member farmers throughout Northern Thailand.

producer, assembler, retailer, and consumer. NOSA's regulations, examined through ISAC's commodity network, illuminates and exposes the power relations within its domain and at its boundaries. NOSA regulations are hybridized objects, having crossed boundaries and been translated into facts. The intentions, moralities and ethics of its actors provide the foundations of beliefs, the actors became points of passage where particulars are negotiated, accepted, or rejected. ISAC operates at a distinctive scale with its own power, force, and domination. Its network is intertwined with multiple networks of differing morality, ethics, and intentionality. Competing with RPF, the major producer of organic products in Northern Thailand, ISAC finds alternate settings and brings together collations of consumers desiring its products. By adopting network objects from OXFAM and NOSA, ISAC reframed its definition of organic agricultural process within a new network structure, establishing a new set of truth conditions at the marketplace.

Translation abets transactions within and throughout scale. The structures (networks) guide the agencies (actors) and the actors guide the networks. They are stabilized by perceptions, interactions, negotiations and rejections along their borders. Translation is reflexive, that is, each network sees itself within the perspectives, powers, and impositions of the other networks. So many values come into play, such as race, region, social class, occupation, and culture, all situating the networks in relative ordering. Do the actors shape the discourse or is the discourse shaping them? The assumption of actor-network theory is that they are co-constructed, the challenge is to find the relative applications of power (Forsyth, 2003: 140-141). Did the leadership of ISAC want to adopt biodiversity or was there pressure from OXFAM to go in this direction? ISAC's long-term commitment to OXFAM presupposes an overall alignment with OXFAM's agenda<sup>39</sup>. Other issues, such as biodiversity and women's health and civil rights were already being practiced without regulation. Formal adoption of these issues strengthened the consumer coalition already committed to shopping at ISAC. Aligning these issues with Northern Thai culture

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<sup>39</sup> OXFAM currently has campaigns concerning high food prices, farm access to markets, fair trade, arms control, climate change, health and education. Oxfam of Great Britain has an ongoing program with ISAC concerning health, HIV and AIDS, sustainable livelihoods, and labor rights.



and also to community culture politicized ISAC. Consumers shopping at ISAC support and affirm *Lanna* culture, Thai values, and all of the other issues before mentioned. This idea can be witnessed by attending any of the morning markets. Over half of the foods available are local vegetables and the ready-to-eat foods, many carefully wrapped in banana leaf, are *Lanna* or Thai foods, preparations, or sweets. The exchange of *Lanna* language, the frequent response of “sow baht” (20 baht) instead of “yee-sip baht” and the constant endings of the *Lanna* “jao” instead of “ka” helped even this foreigner to know that he was witnessing a local event. ISAC’s transformation of social concerns into agricultural practice polarized it against global culture and neoliberalism. ISAC’s own literature champions community culture and sufficiency economy (Chomchuan Boonrahong, 2008)<sup>40</sup>.

The politicization of ISAC changed its boundaries and created changes in the way other organic retailers and markets perceive it as well as identify themselves. ISAC’s extreme local position displaced the perception of organizations like Greenet and ACT representing global economy. Organic advocacy groups continued to emerge in Bangkok promoting local and overseas marketing of organically certified produce. According to their website, the Thai Organic Trade Association (TOTA) was founded 2005 by a coalition of private companies, including River Kwai International Food Company and Greenet Cooperative. TOTA works closely with ACT to promote and expand organic markets. Most recently, GTZ, the *Thai-German Cooperative Programme for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises* (SME’s) has become increasingly involved in the promotion of Organic products from Thailand. The GTZ website states that among its various missions, GTZ is to promote economic efficiency within SME’s. This policy matches the national goals of sufficiency economy whereby SME’s must develop internal organizations capable of maintaining domestic market share while competing in a free trade environment. Burghard Rauschelbach, director of GTZ’s Thai program to promote organic exports, was recently quoted by the Bangkok Post saying, “The point is, if Thailand wants to

<sup>40</sup> In a summary of ISAC’s guiding principles, ISAC’s director lists “emphasize self reliance and reducing production costs” and “emphasize production for family consumption first. Sell or barter what is left over” as the second and third objectives. These objectives are completely aligned with “sufficiency economy” as previously described in chapter 4.

become the organic food kitchen of the world their government will have to invest in it," adding that organic commerce in Germany is successful because, "a government-sponsored programme was needed because it allowed businessmen to get the economies of scale. Without the programme it never would have happened."<sup>41</sup>

Greenet was already export oriented and has positioned itself for years with other organic exporting groups, particularly with the assistance of Thai-German Cooperative (GTZ). The growing rift between Thailand's two dynamic certification bodies, NOSA and ACT, is unfortunate, as both have different markets, objectives and contribute to the overall development of organic agriculture in Thailand on many scales. But behind the certifications and production processes is profit and wealth. NOSA is a practical alternative to ACT in the north. Whereas ISAC attempts to educate farmers to develop organic production for local sales, resellers using ACT want to redirect production for large-scale domestic and export markets. However, the overall market for organic vegetables produced by both ACT and ISAC is very small and disputes between ideology and authenticity between alternative agricultural commodity networks are counter-productive.

RPF produces vegetables in Chiang Mai for distribution and sales throughout Thailand. They market exclusively to consumer's perception of safety in food products. They also have a mission to eradicate opium production by villagers living in the mountains of Thailand. This apparent from their literature and displays at official RPF marketing centers and website<sup>42</sup>, providing a representation of RPF in idealized terms. But retailers marketing RPF products tend to focus mainly on the theme of consumer safety. RPF was developing "Safety Vegetable" standard when NOSA was first organizing its regulations. With guidance from the Ministry of Health, RPF developed standards to keep the level of pesticide residue at minimum levels assumed to be safe to humans. For a while RPF marketed these vegetables under the "Organic Thailand" label, offering the pesticide reduced process as "organic." Today, RPF markets their products under GAP. RPF associates its products with the ideas of goodness and safety.

<sup>41</sup> "Organic farming sprouts slowly." In the *Bangkok Post*, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.royalprojectthailand.com>

Competing with RPF is challenging. ISAC, MCC, and other producers of GAP vegetables, such as the San Sai Farm Group compete on price. The extent of RPF's operation and bureaucracy makes RPF vulnerable to being undercut in local markets. Also, the location of RPF prevents its farmers from growing many lowland crops. However, large scale of operation assures RPF consistent placement in all large retail outlets. RPF is also vulnerable on its message. Not everyone trusts the reliability of governmental and royal institutions. The consumer survey showed that 25% of those surveyed do not trust RPF at all, leaving an opening for its competitors, such as ISAC, to fill.

The market boundaries are defined by the message offered to the consumer. RPF offers goodness and safety but produces a pesticide reduced, not organic products. ISAC produces a wholly organic product, but with limited distribution and selection. ISAC also markets the concept of *Lanna* culture, biodiversity, and women's rights, as well as a reduced price. Other networks, as listed in Appendix E, attempt to undercut the price point, or advertise their products as even more safe and healthy for those who doubt RPF's credibility. All are limited to the same potential markets as RPF. Producers certified through ACT cannot offer their products in Chiang Mai as they are linked to a global price, far exceeding any other vegetables being offered. Producers such as the San Sai group can also undercut RPF, but they are limited in variety of vegetables they can produce. This farm group uses a mixed strategy by selling their vegetables with those grown by RPF farmers while promoting the same message of goodness and safety. RPF can effectively market to all health conscious consumers at almost every venue, easily distinguishing itself from all conventionally grown produce. ISAC market can survive because its message catalyzes a consumer coalition, a group of people willing to support its causes and make a special trip and limited times to its market. ISAC effectively uses the translated objects of organic production, biodiversity and women's rights to make its products appeal to consumers who share these ideas. The market boundary of ISAC is established by these discursive attributes, distinguishing ISAC from the boundaries of RPF.

A new entrant called MCS<sup>43</sup> has been attempting to establish itself since 2007. MCS is a wholesale assembler marketing out of Ratchapak University in the *Amphoe* Mae Rim. MCS does not offer training or certification. It is a government sponsored organization designed to compile lists of farm groups and their products for the purpose of creating an organic wholesale market. From one perspective, MCS may provide more opportunities for local farmers to sell their produce. However, from another perspective, MCS encroaches on already established commodity networks, undermining established practices and fragmenting an already small marketing network. The activities of MCS are limited to GAP and “Safety Vegetable” certified farm groups known to the offices of agricultural extension. MCS made no effort to contact NOSA certified farmers, probably because of NOSA’s “unofficial” status. Contacting RPF farmers would violate *krengchai* due to RPF and their farmers. RPF is a powerful and already established network. As an interloper, MCS has no objects; it translates without redaction, repackaging the efforts of other’s as its own.

ISAC sponsors community markets for their farmer members. These markets are accepted by the public as having pesticide free, organic vegetables. By completing the commodity network, ISAC establishes local authority for NOSA’s regulatory standards. Results of the consumer survey used in this dissertation showed that 18% of those surveyed purchased vegetables at ISAC, while 40% purchase vegetables at either ISAC or MCC, Chiang Mai’s two community markets. Consumers trust in the reputation of ISAC as competent to train and oversee their farmers and NOSA’s ability to authenticate the production process. Through translation, ISAC, working through NOSA standards, has developed a market strategy to overcome “systems of domination” that control certified commodity networks and establish a credible market for up to 2 out of every 5 vegetable consumers in Chiang Mai (Thrift, 1997:291).

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<sup>43</sup> MCS was developed under the Office of knowledge for research and development (OKRD) at Ratchapak University campus at Mae Rim, Chiang Mai. More information can be found at <http://www.mcs.okrd.org/>. The English version of this website is intermittently available.



Community members, concerned about health and safety, established the local organic regulatory institution (NOSA), distribution network and marketplace (ISAC). The market functions because of the trust of the consumer in the processes of production and regulation. An example of this trust can be seen in consumer loyalty. The survey reported that almost 70% of people who shop for vegetables at ISAC do so exclusively. (Figure 6.1) The level of committed participation in ISAC's market looks like a coalition, but exclusivity by shoppers is better explained by a strong affinity to the ideals and objects represented by the discourse contained within the space of ISAC's community market. This affinity may be expanded to the idea of a community, albeit temporal, existing during the hours of operation and in the expectations of consumers before their next visit. Hence, the term community market, is a complex, tacit, and temporal Thai experience. The marketplace is filled with traditions, local knowledge, and historical practice of Northern Thai people. These experiences are outside of the imagination of national and international agricultural market venues. Once institutionalized by community acceptance, local organic regulations become the foundation of local commodity networks. Aggregating the experiences of local actors results in unique translations of dominant discourse into local practice (Harvey, 2001: 163, 199).

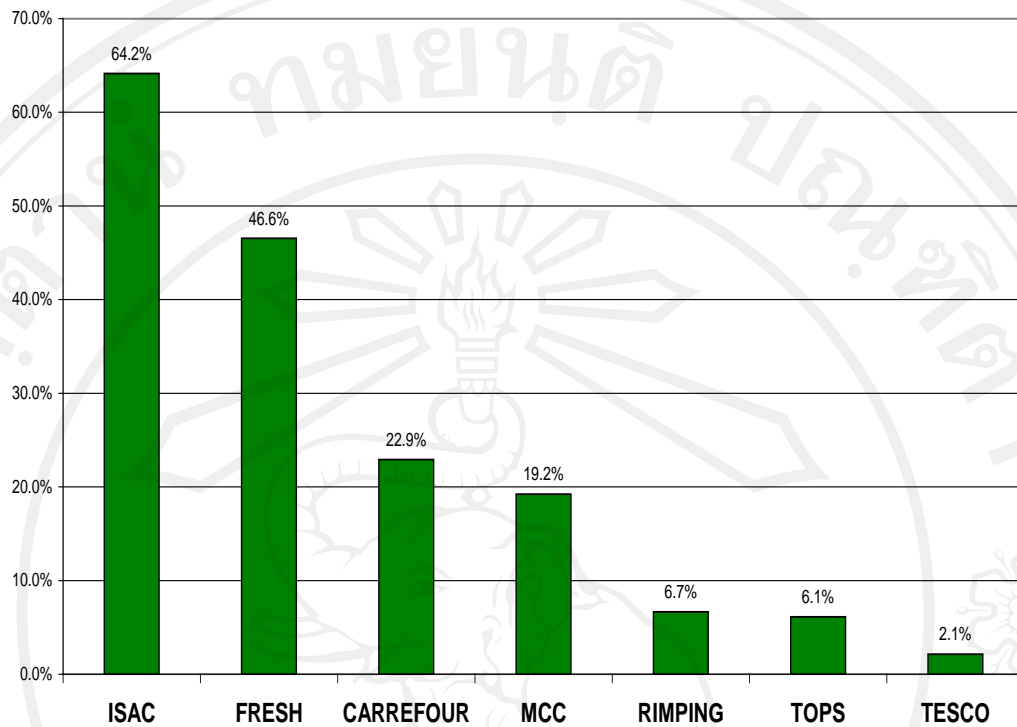


Figure 6.1 Exclusive point of purchase

Network nodes are strengthened by community discourse, social values and consumption. The consumer coalition which has developed around ISAC comes together around a complex set of values concerning health, safety, biodiversity and women's rights. There is also a tacit relationship based on the availability of local vegetables and the interpersonal relationships with people of the same background and cultural heritage. The farmers and customers speak *Lanna* language<sup>44</sup> and develop a rapport around the transaction of local vegetables. Consumers become bound in the discourse and establish a boundary of consumer values encompassing more than the virtues of safety and cleanliness.

Other retailers attempted to develop similar consumer coalitions through the marketing of less specific values as listed in Appendix E. They focus on values such

<sup>44</sup> It is estimated that *Lanna* language is spoken by up to 6 million Northern Thai people (Khon Muang). Though it has been forbidden in schools since Bangkok's administrative take over of the Chiang Mai and Prince Domrung's educational reforms of 1890, *Lanna* continues to be spoken in the homes and passed along generation to generation.

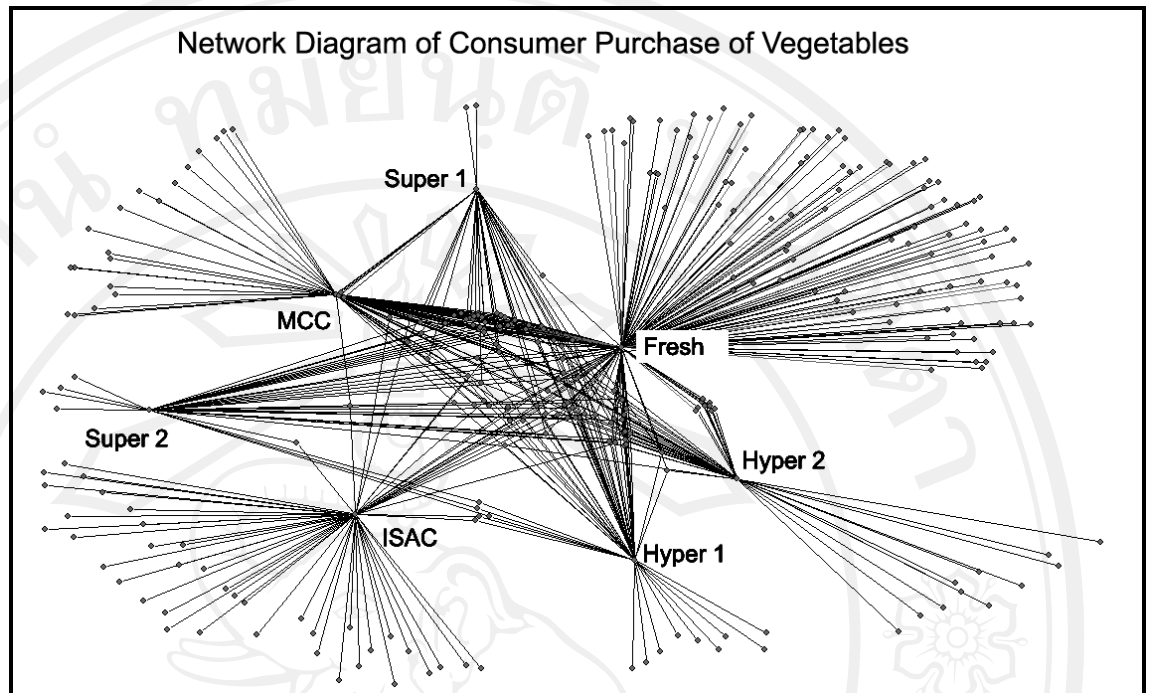
as freshness, cleanliness, and safety. RPF vegetables add the idea of goodness and concern for security in the northern highlands as well as the eradication of drugs, particularly opium. But these ideas are not enough to establish consumer coalitions. Fresh market vendors also market the concept of safety and cleanliness. Many fresh markets in Chiang Mai have been certified as having clean marketing stalls under the Food Safety program. Fresh markets have a loyal consumers looking for low price and personal communication with the vendor. Fresh vegetables are piled high throughout the market. Consumers who are unaware or unconcerned about the dangers of pesticides can see, touch and smell the uncertified vegetables and find direct observation acceptable in determining quality.

Consumers come together at fresh markets by tradition and price; it is a place to see and be seen, a place to purchase fresh food and a low price. The fresh market predates neoliberal marketing venues, originating as places where farmers or assemblers would come together at a central location to sell directly to the public. However, the fresh market is being infiltrated by the processes of neoliberal production. Locally produced foods are being replaced by cheaper imports from China. The unregulated use of pesticides makes the safety of the vegetables highly uncertain. Recently, the use of formalin, an aqueous solution of formaldehyde, to extend the shelf life of highly perishable foods, particularly local vegetables, places a strain on the long term legitimacy of the fresh markets. The market survey shows that over 70% of consumers believe that farmers use excessive amounts of pesticide, and that nearly all consumers are aware that pesticides are used. Regardless of this knowledge, 70% of Chiang Mai consumers buy vegetables at the low priced, fresh markets. This information leads me to conclude that price clearly dominates concern in the vegetable market for the majority of consumers in Chiang Mai. For those who make special trips for certified vegetables, and particularly for those who buy almost exclusively in certified community markets, the message has been able to overcome price, forming a unique consumer orientation toward the coalitions forming these markets.

Consumers may develop strategies to purchase from multiple networks, remain loyal to a single network, or to a particular set of discourse promoted by discourse coalitions. The strength of the discourse coalition may be observed as the

ability of a market to attract and capture customers. Using data from the survey, a social network demonstrating consumer loyalty was constructed using the open source software called Pajek (Batagelj and Mrvar, 2009), based on consumer choice of venue. Consumer loyalty can be observed as the number of consumers only shopping at a particular venue. A second level of loyalty can be observed as consumer who only shop at a specific kind of venue, or limit their shopping between only a few venues. In Figure 6.2, fresh markets and community markets have very strong bases of consumer loyalty. The tendency for customer loyalty at fresh markets can be explained by the consistently lower prices and variety available at Fresh markets compared to all other venues. What is compelling about this graph is the strong customer loyalty to community markets, and particularly the one labeled ISAC, is the primary retail outlet for NOSA certified vegetables. As stated earlier, NOSA is a local certification that is pesticide free, organic. Referring to Figure 4, the NOSA, subsidized by OXFAM, has equivalent prices as the fresh market, and lower than most supermarkets and hypermarkets. However, the limited, early morning shopping hours and single location in Chiang Mai puts an extra burden on customers, compared to the long hours of the fresh market. In the case of ISAC, customer loyalty comes from the effective dissemination of the message of health and safety. The same is mostly true with for MCC market, which shares many of the same characteristics of ISAC market. The other conventional retailers do not show the same level of loyalty. The marketing discourse of supermarkets appears ineffective in gaining customer loyalty. They must share the relatively small pool of health and safety conscious customers with all other venues.





**Figure 6.2 Social Network of consumer habits**

### 6.3 Meaning and permeability

Up to this point the organic vegetable commodity network of Northern Thailand has been described in terms of its sub-networks and their boundaries as defined by discourse, price and acceptance. Each network is constituted by objects with socially and politically constructed meaning. These permeate along network boundaries, become translated, accepted and mobilized, leading to displacements of practice. The ability to reframe organic issues around different meanings provides many opportunities for discourse coalitions to form and result in a multiplicity of strategies. The objects of meaning representing the regulations of production practices move throughout integrated networks of farmers, certifiers, retailers, and consumers, establishing unique commodity networks, as well as across different commodity networks based on other regulations through different certifying bodies. The commodity network acts as a conduit of meaning whereby the actions, intents, and understandings of the actors throughout the network internally translate the objects leading to further displacement. Commodity networks change through translations within the network as well as through the translation and internalization

of objects entering through the external borders where different commodity networks adjoin.

There is little to no communication about product quality or safety within the commercial, non-certified vegetable network. In Chiang Mai, farmers or assemblers bring produce to Muang Mai wholesale market where the vegetables are sold to wholesalers or retailers who bring them to the various marketing venues for sale as fresh vegetables. (Figure 6.3)

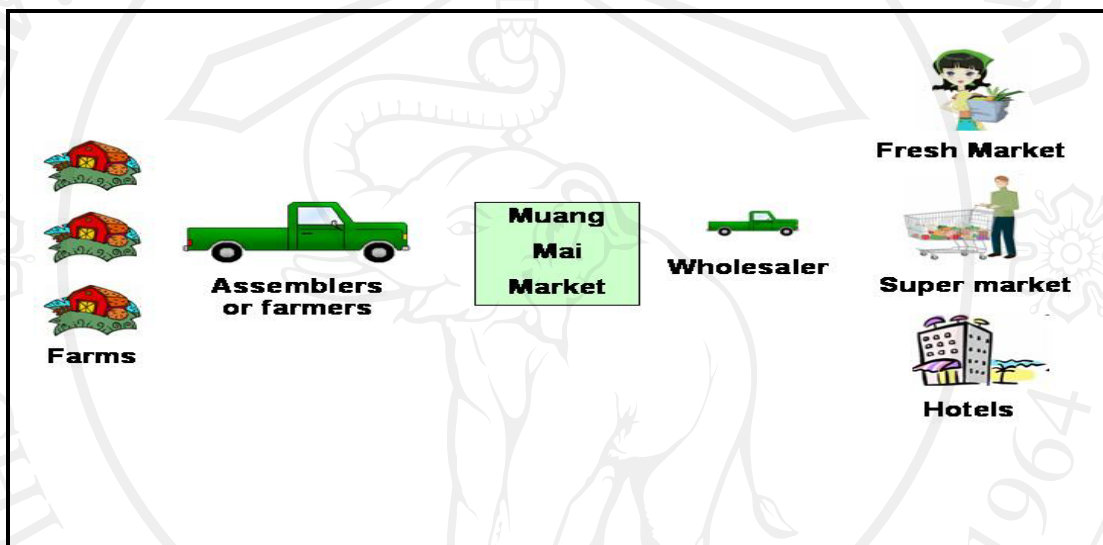


Figure 6.3 Uncertified wholesale distribution

Within the uncertified commodity chain there is no chain of custody, no knowledge of agricultural practice or test for contamination. The uncertified market is disjointed and unregulated, a true place of *caveat emptor*, “Let the buyer beware.” However, a perverse form of communication occurs at the retail level where vegetables are packaged, labeled and presented with meanings inscribed by the retailer. They take advantage of consumer’s perceived trust in logos and labeling. (Table 5.3) Many labeling misnomers are found at different market venues. (Appendix E) Many retailers will package and label uncertified, unregulated vegetables in plastic wrappers with printed claims that the product is fresh, safe, and clean, but without the oversight of third party certifying agencies. These messages are deceptive inasmuch as the packaging often looks the same as actual, certified produce. In one case at Thanin market a vendor packages and places a logo on vegetables bought at Muang Mai market, placing them below an official GAP

certification sign. Neither the vendor nor the vegetables have any claim to GAP certification. The sign was given to the vendor by a farmer who no longer practices GAP. Currently there are no government procedures to verify the integrity of those who sell uncertified vegetables. The Thai government only monitors those who are registered with the government as certified resellers.

Thailand's GAP certification represents a standard of safety ensuring that vegetables have a minimum level of pesticide contamination. Several times a year RPF organizes special events to increase public awareness of its products and practices. RPF products are displayed at market fairs and sold at or below wholesale price. Promotional literature and information displays are made available to the public. RPF situates itself as the intermediary between the public and the farmer. Information on individual practice is controlled by RPF and presented as a uniform and unerring. However, the survey suggests that the public is not entirely convinced.

At a smaller scale, individual farm groups promote themselves directly to the public. They are free to practice greater self-restriction. Their individual practice will become known and the reputation of the farm group will increase the value added by certification. MCC farmers practice a wide variety of IPM techniques as directed by the university farm. The survey reported that 25% of all respondents purchase vegetables at MCC. This is a considerable amount considering that MCC is only open 2 days a week. MCC connects the consumer directly to the farmer or local assembler. Not all of the sellers at MCC are the actual farmers, some are relatives or other persons living in the village of a particular farm group who bring the vegetables to market. They are local people, aware of the production process and capable of speaking in local language to consumers. The same holds true for private retailers for the San Sai farm group. Communication is established by both Khun Pak Sod and her sister directly with the customer at the point of sale. Personal communication between farm leader and consumer builds trust in the product and its production process which has ensured ten years of successful business.

ISAC farmers have a direct line of communication between the farmer and the consumer. The farmer is the retailer. When consumers at ISAC were asked to rank their trust in order between logos, supermarkets, and farmers, 3/4ths of the customers ranked the farmer as most trustworthy. The perception of the farmer is

reinforced by ISAC's ongoing campaign to increase consumer awareness of the many issues it supports. Saturday markets feature presentations about the dangers of pesticides, the need for biodiversity, the problems of women in remote villages, and *Lanna* style cooking demonstrations to promote local foods.<sup>45</sup> ISAC has embodied its discursive objectives into its market space, creating an excellent example of producer to consumer communication, reinforcing and reflecting the values of its consumer coalition.

Certified vegetable marketing venues are established by ordered commodity networks based on accepted rules linked to the "privileged knowledge" (Harvey, 2001: 163) of third party authority. All regulations are based on an abstraction of reality creating a set of practices designed to advocate a particular goal, political agenda, or social ideal. The knowledge instituting a particular regulation, or network object, is privileged because it is empowered by the institution promoting it. This is not to suggest that there is a good or bad, right or wrong way of practicing organic or safe agriculture. What I am stating is that the network objects supported by each discourse coalition and accepted by consumers as truth are created by institutional abstractions and representation of agricultural safety. Each market makes claims of safety, sustainability, and consumer acceptance based on certificated agricultural practices. There are also illegitimate claims of unsubstantiated qualities of uncertified vegetables.

Certification holds the marketplace in shape though a complex "set of relations" between regulatory institutions, certifying bodies, certified farmers, assemblers, retailers and health conscious consumers. NOSA, GAP, certified producers, and RPF contest the normalized standards of international organic agricultural regulations, creating new commodity networks founded on unique Thai standards. They offer counter-discourse to the normalized standards of governmentality based on existing institutions, such as IFOAM, which find acceptance in domestic and international markets. State ministries and civil society have created new technical discourse to allow existing farming practices to be seen differently. Thailand's GAP regulations were established to provide meaning within

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<sup>45</sup> Special events are coordinated by ISAC's warehouse manager.



Thai sovereignty. In the north, NOSA established local processes to meet the needs of farmers with small holdings. These technical solutions created points of passage through which their respective institutions certify entrance into safe agricultural commodity network. Whereas Thailand's GAP is suitable for large scale producers such as RPF and large, Bangkok based agricultural conglomerates, it offers no opportunities for the small scale farms in Chiang Mai.

Regulations are examples of problem closures as defined by Forsyth. The regulation marks the end of discussion, the compromise and acceptance of a set of rules to define the proper implementation of a process. Once defined and enforced, the regulation makes certifiable the practices of the farmer and ends further discussion concerning quality or safety. NOSA, GAP, and ACT have created problem closures for their approaches to organic agriculture. They limit the argument, the processes, and practices to a predetermined set of conditions based on unequal power relations (Forsyth, 2003: 87). Agricultural production processes have been identified to meet the criteria set by each of these certifying bodies. Rules of governance and processes of production are designated, qualified, overseen and enforced within each network. However, these networks do not exist in isolation, their boundaries squeeze and convolute in marketplaces, government agencies, universities, and in the public milieu of social discourse. Boundary objects are pushed and pulled through gateways of acceptance or corridors of doubt. Whether rejected or accepted, they create tension and introspection, imposing themselves on transcendental network structures, flowing through the conduits where consumers and producers search to find agreement and transaction.

ACT became the powerful minority for organic agriculture in central Thailand. There are other organic regulators to be sure, subscribing to other international export standards primarily for export production. ACT draws its power from the authority of IFOAM, promoting those regulations at the expense of small farming groups. ACT certifies the farmers of Greenet, the largest organic cooperative in Thailand. Greenet makes no claim to be inclusive. In fact, Greenet specifically supports a policy of promoting farmer groups whose scale can "complete

a commodity network”<sup>46</sup>. ACT presents itself as the standard for all others to follow. The leaders of ACT dominate the debate and direct international discourse regarding the position of organic agriculture in Thailand. It may be that ACT is all but unattainable as a national standard. Vegetables produced under this standard are qualified as internationally equivalent. Their market value has international potential, far above the market price of vegetables grown for sale in Thailand. The higher price reflects not only the higher costs of production, but also the higher prices foreigners are willing to pay for certified organic vegetables. ACT is Thailand’s national certification body for organic commodities produced for export sale. ACT and IFOAM certified vegetables may be found in supermarkets in Chiang Mai at prices far above those of GAP, and multiples of those at ISAC’s community market. Permeability into ACT comes from outside of Thailand through changes and adaptations to IFOAM regulations and foreign markets. My research is interested in the pressure from ACT into the networks such as GAP and NOSA. ACT presents the international standard by which all other regulations are compared. The presence of IFOAM diminishes the other standards and weakens their position, though in fact no one can afford their products.

NOSA is often portrayed as a small, independent “pesticide free” group in the north. Not internationally certified, it can make no official, government certified claim to being organic. ISAC provides training in agricultural processes under NOSA organic production standards for Northern Thai farmers in organic production techniques with an emphasis on sustaining biodiversity (Chomchuan Boonrahong, 2008). NOSA and ISAC’s permeability has already been well noted. International concepts of social responsibility and environmental protection, such as rules for biodiversity, permeate through the NOSA-ISAC network’s contact with OXFAM. NOSA’s constant struggle with identity comes from the perceived legitimacy of ACT through IFOAM. NOSA has repeatedly gone to ACFS seeking to be certified as a registered, organic certifying body in Thailand. Each time ACFS refuses certification because NOSA does not conform to all IFOAM standards. This is regardless of the fact that Northern Thailand’s small-scale farmers can not meet IFOAM standards

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Greenet director in 2004

without government intervention or subsidy. IFOAM sets a global condition on government accepted Thai organic agriculture. International regulatory objects have been translated in whole by ACT and its legitimacy is accepted by ACFS. IFOAM's hegemony has diminished Thai sovereignty over the control of organic agricultural production, leaving organizations such as NOSA to establish their own legitimacy in Thai and global markets. The problem is the differential power between international, national, and local discourse.

Non-conformity to IFOAM, or any of the other internationally accepted organic standards leads to exclusion from international markets, limiting Thailand's ability to gain hard currency from export sales. This need is, of course, the result of Thailand's imports of foreign goods, itself driven by an obsession with foreign lifestyles, techniques, and processes. International and Western ideas are often given more credibility than Thai, particularly in the sciences. An international standard will be considered more rigorous, and therefore, more healthy. This is, in fact true regarding organic regulations. NOSA, with the help of other organizations within the commodity network, including ISAC, responds to these challenges by conducting presentations at ISAC, participating at national symposiums, and hosting national and international workshops. NOSA attempts to claim legitimacy by reframing the questions, by forcing open the "problem closure" created by NOSA and other international organic regulations, opening them to further debate. As mentioned earlier, NOSA is not alone in its effort to constitute local legitimacy, as there are hundreds of other national and local organizations around the world stimulating alternative organic standards.

Organic regulations are transitive (socially constructed) representations of intransitive (underlying reality) things. Organic agriculture is a production process based on statements bounded by and set in conditions of hierarchical truth (Forsyth, 2003: 217). There are shades of organic as there are shades of grey between light and shadow. Evaluating organic agricultural networks using actor network theory goes beyond looking at the many definitions of organic and the multiple statements of truth, but also asks whose power directs the light to fall on one place or another. Who casts shadows on some and darkness on others? Organic regulations are the social structures (truths) on which commodity networks are formed. They exclude

alternative explanation by assuming a discourse of representations of what is healthy, safe, and environmentally and socially responsible.

Organic networks are permeable when objects are either imposed or accepted as conditions of truth. They may be translated and mobilized, or rejected as untenable. Yet once an object enters into a network it leaves an indelible distortion as either a displacement for new opportunity, a new configuration based on new understanding, or as conflicts and tensions arising from debates over truths, of new minority opinions coalescing giving rise to counter objects and possibly break-away networks. For now, the alternative local regulations promoted by NOSA and ISAC, as well as the national standards set by MOAC through GAP and “Safety Vegetable”, continue to be reconceptualized and debated. Adjustments are made to changing conditions, translations occur when external discursive objects are considered and transformed to meet Thai needs. In the long run, the only certainty for these networks is that they will continue to change to meet the needs of Thai consumers.

New government promotional funding for GAP in 2007 led to over 100 new farmers being certified in *Amphoe* Saraphi, just outside of Chiang Mai. However, field investigation in 2007 revealed that many of these farmers were only in the planning stages of production. Some had never been farmers before while others did not yet have land to farm. Though the concept of GAP may have permeated into the agricultural landscape, large scale translation and mobilization have yet to occur. Certified farm networks can not function alone, they are part of the larger commodity networks. GAP can be translated and accepted by these networks, but without a large retail market the regulation can not be mobilized and displacement can not occur.

Currently, there may be as few as 700 small-scale, certified vegetable farmers practicing agricultural processes defined by all regulatory standards living in the Chiang Mai area and selling vegetables in Chiang Mai. Networks of farming groups mobilize when they are connected to marketing networks associated with other networks of consumers wanting organic vegetables. A forth network, being the certifying body, gives credibility and assurance to consumers that the agricultural practices meet consumer needs. These networks must be in place to establish an organic commodity network.



The problem with creating alternative agricultural commodity networks in Chiang Mai is bringing farmers and consumers together around a standard of production practices that can meet the needs of both. RPF, the largest producer of certified vegetables trains and certifies only highland farmers. RPF acts as an assembler and resells through a complex commodity network to supermarkets, hypermarkets, small markets, and its own private market places, as well as at various small stalls outside of schools and hospitals. RPF is limited in vegetable variety to highland crops only, fulfilling only a portion of local consumer demand for certified vegetable. RPF does not produce certified organic vegetables, thereby excluding itself from those consumers. The limits RPF places on itself situate it within a seemingly impermeable boundary. Agricultural innovations coming out of RPF were the “Safety Vegetable” and GAP. Boundary objects permeated RPF through the process of translating RPF farmers to GAP. Information, including research and techniques, were transferred from RPF to other networks, especially to the Ministry of Agriculture.

Different regulatory processes are accepted by farming groups desiring change in their lifestyles. Farmers seeking to practice organic production are unique in that they want more than plant and harvest vegetables for profit. They seek something more from their lives. This dissertation suggests that these farmers wish to participate in the community culture of Northern Thai villages. During field interviews, certified farmers claimed to live healthier lifestyles free of the use of poisonous chemical, and to have greater involvement with “community culture.” According to farm group leader “Pak Moon” of San Sai, she chose to move her farmers to “Safety Vegetable” production because she saw so many people in her village get sick from the use of chemicals. Another farm leader in San Kamphaeng had the same story of knowing many people getting sick from pesticides. He added that he earned more money after being certified. During an interview with a farmer in Saraphi I learned that her husband had once supported the family as an engineer, working in the city. But after her children moved away the couple wanted to return to the village life. They received training from the *amphoe* office and MCC and now raise GAP certified vegetables on 5 rai, selling their produce in the local village. Private sector GAP and “Safety Vegetable” certified farmers in Chiang Mai are few

in numbers and their commodity networks are precarious at best. Certified farmers sell their produce either directly to assemblers or through *amphoe* sponsored demonstration markets, local hospitals, small-scale contracts and retail market tables.

The claim of happier and healthier lives was mostly expressed by farmers participating in NGOs. I know that these farmers had given many interviews before. They had a vested interest in supporting the ideas of community culture and pesticide free farming, not only as practice, but as the discourse itself. Funding for their markets and the NGO staff came from sources promoting these ideas. It is not that I wasn't convinced of their sincerity; it was that no one I interviewed would talk about the basic act of making money to live. I needed to interview someone whose commodity network was not subsidized by a more powerful authority, someone who was concerned about making a day to day living, particularly someone belonging to a privately organized certified farm group.

Khun Het, a member of the San Sai farm group, agreed to answer personal questions about the life of his family, as well as his personal concerns about farming. His story uncovered the mystery I had been looking for, the link between certified agriculture and community culture that did not rest upon an idyllic notion of a noble Thai villager or farmers universally concerned about their health. Khun Het moved into the village of *ban* Tha Guian 38 years ago to live with his wife. Before he was certified Khun Het grew many different vegetables, including chili, cauliflower, and tomatoes using conventional farm practices. Each year he would borrow money from the Thai Farmer Bank. Sometimes he would take out short term loans for a year, other times he would take out longer term loans of between 3 and 10 years. The government loaned him money at extremely low interest to pay for seed, fertilizer, pesticide, equipment, and the many farm workers necessary to cultivate and harvest his crop. During some years he had a bountiful harvest, as did all of the farmers in the valley, and the farm gate price would drop so low that he could not get enough money to pay for the cost of production. Other years the harvest would be so small that, even though the price would be higher, there was still not enough money to pay for production. He complained that there were not enough years when the price was high enough to pay for production and pay back the government for the loans. Finally Khun Het sold most of his land to pay back the government.

At the time Khun Het had sold his farm, professors at Ma Joe University were teaching farmers with small parcels of land how to grow mushrooms. He went to the agricultural extension classes and began growing mushrooms. He was introduced to Khun Pak Sod to sell directly to her under contract. The rest of this story has already been described in a previous chapter. I asked Khun Het specifically what was that made him produce mushrooms and vegetables for so many years for Khun Pak Sod. He told me that it was the contract she made with him and the security it gave him. Before contract farming certified produce, Khun Het had to wait an entire season before he knew how much money he would earn from his labor, now he enjoys getting money everyday. In the past he had to work hard for almost the entire year, but now he only works hard for a short time, either preparing the mushrooms or planting small plots of high value vegetables. I asked him about the feeling of *chai yen* in his life and he said that he now lives very calm, secure that each day he will get money.

Khun Het described his relationship with Khun Pak Sod in familial terms. He refers to her as “*nong*”, similar to younger sister, and she calls him and his wife “*na*”, meaning aunt or uncle, because the couples are older. Khun Het only remembered one person who ever died from pesticide poisoning. Pesticides do not trouble him, but being in debt to purchase pesticides caused him a lot of stress. As I sat beneath his house it was easy to see how calm his life had become. Basil seeds were drying in a bamboo tray perched on the stairs to the leading to the second floor of his home. The yard was filled with many different fruit trees, each day he could pick fresh bananas, guavas, longans, and pusa. Nearby where we sat, on the floor, were two rice sacks filled with longans for sale to another assembler. All around his house were small pots filled with basil, chilies, and other local herbs, and an assortment of local vegetables grew beneath his trees. Pak wan, makua jae, do fan, saleum, short bean and pumpkin grew like ornamentals, neatly trimmed and ready to eat.

I asked him about his wife. He told me that she is the leader of village wives. During the interview she returned from the village where she and other village members were organizing a money tree for the temple. Khun Het explained that with security he was free to do whatever he wanted. His sons had gone to college,

one had gone off to Bangkok but the other stayed to help him. Khun Het and his wife have the time to participate in village life, to go to the temple on Buddha days, to stop work on funeral days, and to go to weddings. He was happy that he had saved enough money to retire from farming at age 60, only a few years away.

The answer linking certified farming to community culture is personal security. It brings the farmer calmness; it leads to *chai yen*, and brings freedom to whatever the farmer wants, which is most often to be part of the village life. The contract, the access to the marketplace, the ability to make money each day without worry of debt is the most important attribute of the certified commodity network for the farmer. Being safe from exposure to pesticides, having biodiversity on the farm, and participating in *Lanna* culture are all benefits arising from financial security.

There is an additional link to certified agricultural commodity networks and community culture, that being the personal interactions and relationships between farmer and seller. *Krengchai*, familial relationships, and patronage may all come into the equation of bonding the farmer with the marketplace or reseller. These are attribute of community culture, which may be described here as Thai village life in general, which bring about stability and security between people of different power relations. Community culture also extends into the act of selling. Markets are small and primarily in community settings such as fresh markets and hospitals. As stated earlier, during my inspections of the community market I saw long interactions between customer and retailer including the questioning of quality, the price of the vegetable, and, at times, how the vegetable can be prepared. The point is that within the local certified markets of Chiang Mai community culture is integrated as both cause and effect of the market. They co-constitute each other in a uniquely Thai way. I can not say that there is something inherently special about community culture that allows it to promote certified agriculture, but it is clear that safe and organic agricultural production processes promote many of the practices of community culture.



#### 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter described the development of local organic regulatory standards through the establishment of NOSA. Individual, external standards were explained to be discursive objects belonging to already established organic regulations. These objects were brought into the general discussion of NOSA's founding group and reviewed for their applicability for Northern Thai agriculture. The result was a transformation of external discourse into local understanding, a process known as translation. Each time an object was translated, it displaced the original trajectory of NOSA's, acting as a discourse coalition, into something different, a hybridization of the organizations original purpose, Thai practices, and international procedures.

Certified, safe agricultural networks in Northern Thailand have formed through the cooperative efforts of many coalitions of actors. The examination of NOSA gives support to the idea that discourse coalitions arise around agricultural regulatory standards of certified vegetable crop production. New ideas and processes permeate across network boundaries either through acceptance of key actors within the network or through pressure by retailers, the government, and consumers. Once these discursive objects enter the network they are translated into practice and thereby displacement occurs.

Discourse alone can not enact an agricultural commodity network. It is constituted by the practices of the different collations of actors pursuing the various and necessary roles of production, training and management, oversight, assembly, retailing, and consumption. In this example, ISAC was responsible for the role of training and assembly, as well as facilitated a market for retail. By accepting NOSA standards, ISAC brought the objects of local discourse into its own network of beliefs, values, and procedures. As mentioned in the previous chapter, ISAC also accepted other objects from different coalitions, such as OXFAM and AAN, further translating the organic regulations outlined by NOSA into something larger and more complex, bring more displacement to the commodity network. Certified farmers, personal representing them as assemblers and retailers bring local customs and *Lanna* traditions into the marketplace. These objects of local discourse blend with the objectives of NOSA and ISAC, already imbued with similar values as part of their operational objectives, further displacing the network into something uniquely



organic and local, the result of the translation and displacement of objects from many different constellations of ideas, networks, and locations.

Extending beyond ISAC these network operations can be seen occurring in other regulated, certified agricultural networks. The objectives of the “Safety Vegetable” program, detailed in the first chapter, were the result of translations of many hygienic practices combined with national goals of farmer and consumer safety, as well as the desire to limit foreign imports. The regulatory standards promoted by Thai GAP are the translation of the values of GlobalGAP, recontextualized to meet the needs of Thai farmers and satisfy the demands of consumers for safety. MCC demonstrates an extreme case of translation and displacement, being an marketplace for practically any form of safe, pesticide free or pesticide reduced vegetable to be sold, without labeling, yet accepted by the consumer solely on the spatial labeling, acting as a discursive blanket over all of the produce within the marketplace. The combined entourage of network objects is translated into a single notion of safety and health by consumers willing to accept that the produce provided meets a standard, not codified but perceived, as existing within the market space.

Translation fits well with the actor network approach because it is open ended, allowing for adaptations and changes to occur with the acquisition of new knowledge or conditions by the network. Situations such as “problem closures” are shown to be susceptible to alteration; translation denies the permanence of institutional ideas. Instead, it suggests that what appear to be permanent conditions are continuously influenced by new ideas and discoveries. Displacements occur whenever something new is examined and accepted or rejected; because the process of reflection required understanding something new itself causes a displacement of either new acceptance or a stronger opposition to the examined object. Translation accommodates a multitude of ideas and values, the objects of discourse in a network, enough so to bring social values and traditions, such as community culture, into the network discourse of certified agricultural, revealing that the actor-network approach can accommodate the breadth of society interacting with a specific network of ideas.