



## ***Decent Work, Decent Bananas?***

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There are over one hundred different varieties of bananas in Southeast Asia, and farmers have used a score of different kinds in each country, ranging from small and sweet ones for direct eating to large, savoury cooking bananas. There is also a huge variety in the cultural significance of bananas and in how and where they are grown. Increasingly, however, this variety is being replaced by the industrial production of one variety – the Cavendish banana – in monoculture plantations. This has been the case for several decades in the Philippines, but in recent years plantation production has expanded into Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand to service the growing Chinese demand for supermarket bananas. This shift has also seen the transformation of banana-related work from small-scale peasant production to a system of alienated wage labour in the plantations, transportation infrastructure, and retail outlets that now characterize banana production. This photo story shows that alienated work cannot be decent, and that it is bound up with an alienated relation to nature.

The following pictures were taken by the authors in July 2018 on a joint research and educational trip to two banana plantations in Northern Thailand (Pha Ya Meng Rai and Chiang Khong) as part of the EU-funded KNOTS (Fostering multi-lateral knowledge networks of transdisciplinary studies to tackle global challenges) project.<sup>35</sup> The project brings together partners from different Southeast Asian and European universities, which meet once a year to contribute to transdisciplinary research and teaching, focusing on the topics of environment, migration, and social inequality, and initiating a closer collaboration with the non-academic sector.

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(PS) The main varieties of Thai banana are ‘Hom Thong’ variety (Gros Michel), ‘Kai’ banana or baby banana, and ‘Namwa’ banana. The Rim Kok sub-district, located in Mueang Chiang Rai District, is a well-known local banana community enterprise. The community has grown bananas for more than 20 years and sells them to local markets and in pop-up stores in front of the growers’ houses. The agricultural system is mixed-agro-forestry production; farmers control the process of production and the various products of their labour.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Cavendish (OP): As consumers, we automatically associate bananas with one variety: the Cavendish Banana, which now dominates industrial production and supermarket distribution. The Cavendish cultivar replaced an earlier dominant variety, the Gros Michel, which was wiped out by the Panama disease in the 1950s. Today, a new variant of the Panama disease has hit the banana plantations in The Philippines, one reason for the expansion of monoculture production in mainland Southeast Asia.



Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Plantation and Rubbish (DH): The Pha Ya Meng Rai Banana Plantation is a typical example of the large-scale monoculture plantations that increasingly characterize banana production across the world. Four hundred and thirty-two hectares of banana plants are arranged in lines in a sea of mud. The plantation occupies 8km of the bank of the River Ing in Northern Thailand.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Mekong (OP): A view from the Mekong, facing the Lao river bank, with banana plantations and forested mountains in the background. Mainly Chinese-owned plantations have spread across Laos over recent years. In 2017 the Lao Government shut down scores of plantations and has imposed a ban on new operations. Serious health impacts on plantation workers are cited as one of the main reasons for the policy.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Truck (OP): A Chinese truck waits to be loaded at a small-scale banana plantation in Northern Thailand. A vast infrastructure, now being expanded within the One Belt One Road project, connects fruit production in Northern Thailand to Chinese cities. Truckers drive to a major distribution network in Mohan, in Yunnan Province. Fruit is also shipped down the Mekong to Guanlei Port and then distributed across the country.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Boxes (OP): The distribution structure dominated by large supermarket chains in China puts its stamp on the production and labour process. The commodity required is a standardized 30kg box of banana bunches. The guidelines are strict in order to meet the standards. If the banana bunches exceed the required weight, individual bananas are simply cut out and thrown away. All other work steps are geared toward creating this uniform commodity.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Loading (OP): Throwing, catching, and stacking 30kg boxes is hard and, if done all day long, can hardly be described as decent work. Plantation owners in Northern Thailand employ gangs of Chinese workers who spend a few weeks training up local workers to meet the standardized requirements.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Inside Plantation (OP): The picture of thousands of banana clusters all wrapped in plastic is one of the most enduring images from a visit to the plantation. Each cluster is wrapped in cardboard, foam, and plastic to protect them from insects and the rain, and to ensure a constant temperature. Permanent workers, in this case Hmong from the mountain areas, are allocated 2,500m<sup>2</sup> of the plantation to prepare in this way. They are paid 9,000 Baht per month, just half of the legally stipulated minimum wage of 15,000 Baht.



Picture © Oliver Pye

**Pesticides and Hormones (OP):** Each cluster is treated with pesticides, fungicides, and growth hormones. Due to the monoculture mode of production, without this chemical treatment, pests would soon decimate the plantation. Pesticides can cause irritation of the skin, upper respiratory tract, and eyes; fatigue, nausea, and dizziness; and vomiting and diarrhea in workers applying them. Workers complained that basic safety requirements are not upheld on the plantation.



Picture © Oliver Pye

**Harvesting (OP):** Harvesting is men's work. Harvesters are paid at piece rate, 8 baht per cluster. Workers carry the clusters, which can weigh up to 50kg, as fast as they can from the banana plant to the truck, wading through mud, jumping across ditches and ducking under the wires and strings that hold up the bananas to stop them falling down in the wind. Depending on their strength, they carry between 70-100 bunches a day. They can earn up to 800 baht (22 Euros), which is good money in the Thai context. The cost is their health – back pains and injuries are common.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Workers in Hut (OP): Workers resting in a makeshift hut in the middle of the plantation. Their physical exhaustion is evident. In a short discussion, workers stated that they hated their work and that the only reason they do it is to earn the wage. The product of their labour and the work process itself does not belong to them. They are literally just selling their labour power to survive.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Assembly Line (OP): At the centre of the plantation is a huge factory-like compound, in which workers process the bananas. Here female workers are stripping the clusters – which have been unloaded and hung on the ‘clothes line’ – of their various packaging. Women workers make up the main workforce in the factory line, earning 300 Baht (8 Euros) a day.



Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Factory (DH): Each worker at the packing station is responsible for certain steps in the packing process. Some of them try to protect themselves from the chemicals with often inadequate protective clothing, such as gloves or face masks. Despite harsh working conditions, the workers – who are mostly locals from nearby villages – confirm that they prefer to work here rather than on the plantation. The harvesting work mostly has to be done by the ethnic minority Hmong, who often have few or no alternatives to the harsh work between the plants due to their precarious situations.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Washing (OP): Before being cut into smaller fingers for the boxes, the bunches are washed and then treated in a wax-and-chemical water vat. Each work step, from unloading the clusters, unwrapping them, and cutting the bunches from the stem, to the washing and waxing, cutting into smaller fingers, and packaging, is done on an assembly-line basis. This makes the work extremely monotonous.



Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

**Barracks (DH):** The workforce is typically made up of locals, who work as seasonal labourers at harvest times, and migrant workers responsible for more permanent tasks, who live on the plantation. The housing is very basic, one-room habitations made of cement blocks, without proper air circulation. Workers describe them as 'adequate'. Living on-site saves time and money, as arriving late leads to heavy deductions in pay.



Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

**Living Quarters (DH):** Workers recreate some aspects of rural life in the plantations. To supplement their meagre wages, some basic forms of subsistence gardening are practiced, such as the cultivation of papaya and chickens. Motorcycles are the main means of transport, and are important for workers' mobility.



Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Break (DH): A worker sits at the assembly line behind a pile of discarded bananas and takes his break. The workers at the packing station work from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and have only two short breaks of 10 minutes a day, at 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Mobile phones play an important role in coordinating protests over wages and work conditions, which have characterized labour relations in the plantation.



Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Mobile Phones (DH): The smell in the packing station is unpleasant, and the station is messy. A lot of plastic garbage from the banana stems is lying around in the dirt on the ground. Not a pleasant place for working, or in which to take a break; there are not even proper seats. Two workers at the packing station are sitting on improvised seats and are busy with their mobile phones during their break.



Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Mud and Rejects (DH): The processing and packing station in the middle of the plantation is a sea of mud, rubbish and banana-rejects. Bananas do not always grow to the specified standard bunch. Any deviant banana is discarded. The amount of thrown away bananas is substantial. Workers or locals living nearby would not eat them anyway.



Picture © Oliver Pye

Waste (OP): The waste from banana plantations is tremendous. A toxic mix of foam, cardboard, plastic and chemically treated banana stems is dumped on the plantation site. The alienation of work is mirrored by the alienation of the workers from nature. Ecological impact costs are not of interest to the investor, while the state fails to regulate and enforce standards to protect the environment.