



HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

SEMINAR SERIES

Monday, 2 April, 2007

3.30pm–5.00 pm

Seminar Room C – Coombs Building

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On the margins of the global food system: how a simple technology is driving dietary diversity and the nutrition transition in Khon Khaen, Thailand

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The commercialization of Thai agriculture, in conjunction with food imports from neighbouring countries, has generated greater volumes and variety of produce. This enhanced food supply has provided an economic incentive for large firms to enter the food system. The adoption of technologies such as the mobile phone along with cool chain improvements has fostered relatively sophisticated distribution systems allowing middle men and global supermarket chains to source their produce from around the country and internationally.

However, we have observed the rise of a new type of entrepreneur: the village middle man or woman. The importance of the plastic bag in Thai culinary culture has been noted before in relation to the sale of ready cooked Thai food. The plastic bag not only delivers food to the 'plastic bag housewife', making her life easier, but has two additional benefits. It provides income opportunities for village people by allowing individuals with limited capital to set up retail businesses, and it gives low income villagers access to a wider variety of fresh and convenient produce because it enables vendors to package produce in small and affordable quantities.

This presentation focuses on the second benefit – recent changes in the availability of food variety – in Khon Khaen, north-east Thailand. This case study of the multiple functions of the humble plastic bag leads us to identify the multiple and contradictory forces shaping the food system of Thailand's poorest region.

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