

LETTERS

Eviction of Upland Peoples in Northern Thailand

Re: Andrew Walker and Nicholas Farrelly, “Northern Thailand’s Specter of Eviction.” *Critical Asian Studies* 40 (3): 373–88.

Nicholas Tapp —

I am writing with regard to Nicholas Farrelly and Andrew Walker’s article in the September 2008 issue of *Critical Asian Studies* (“Northern Thailand’s Specter of Eviction”), which kindly quoted from the new preface to a reissue of my 1989 ethnography, *Sovereignty and Rebellion: The White Hmong of Northern Thailand*. While it is all very well to deny that much eviction of upland people has taken place in northern Thailand, contrary to the general impression, and call for a greater sympathy toward market mechanisms and government interventions, as this article does, I am afraid the authors have missed the point of the very quote they use to illustrate, I think, how people generally accept the fact of evictions. The quote from myself that they give is:

More frightening than actual incidents, perhaps, are these frequent rumours which spread [across] the hills of impending relocations, since these are almost certainly deliberately instigated and serve to create a constant atmosphere of terror and uncertainty about livelihood and tenure security.... Continuing cases of land confiscation further reduce the options for hill people, forcing them to relocate even where they are not forcibly relocated.

As often in such cases, what has been missed out is the key. The missing phrase is (“compare the case of government ‘slash-and burn’ policy in Chapter 1 of this book”).

What I am afraid Farrelly and Walker have failed to realize is that a Specter is not just a Specter for the academics and activists they consider, but also for people on the ground. To live in the constant fear of harassment or eviction is arguably a worse state of affairs than to be actually evicted. I think Judith Butler makes the point that a raised fist is as much an instance of violence as the actual blow. The whole point suggested in the quote, to which the careful enumeration of actual cases of evictions Farrelly and Walker make (see follow-up discussion on New Mandala blog) is actually irrelevant, is that there is an atmosphere of fear that evictions *may* take place at any time, which is deliberately propagated and which allows local officials to take unfair advantage of villagers in the uplands. This is an old story; in the days of the lax enforcement of the opium ban a precisely similar situation obtained (which was why I mentioned a case of

government token burning of opium fields). “You are doing something illegal, e.g., cultivating poppy, *read* living on forest reserve land, what will you give me if I overlook it?” The disparity and inequity this points to between agents of the state of many kinds and local villagers who, it must be stressed although the article avoids this point, have mostly not moved into or settled in forest reserve land already declared, but have had their surroundings for in many cases several generations suddenly declared to be reserved for forestry, is an invidious situation. This in my belief is a deliberate state tactic and ploy of quite long standing in Thailand. The flexible implementation of policy at the local level, as in China, opens a huge yawning inviting gap for corruption and exploitation to take place, particularly where low-paid forestry or police officials or those in charge of citizenship papers processing are involved. That is the situation in which these people find themselves and for them the Specter is not something to be dismissed because it is sometimes not a reality, but is a reality precisely because it is a threat.

Andrew Walker and Nicholas Farrelly —

We thank our colleague Nicholas Tapp for his comment on “The Specter of Eviction in Northern Thailand.” He has drawn attention to an important issue that is not directly addressed in our paper, namely, how Thailand’s upland residents themselves respond to the threat of eviction, however small that threat may actually be. Tapp asserts that their response is one of fear: “there is an atmosphere of fear that evictions may take place at any time.” This is a powerful assertion that certainly warrants contemporary ethnographic investigation.

Unlike Tapp, however, we are reluctant to assume that the statistically small risk of eviction automatically creates a widespread atmosphere of fear. Our own reading and observation suggest that local responses are likely to range from outright fear, to concern, occasional anxiety, nonchalance, and even assertive confidence. To assume that fear is the most likely, or even natural, response is to disregard the great potential for local variation in relationships between upland communities, forest regulators, and other state agencies. The assumption of fear also ignores the cultural, social, and institutional strategies that upland residents use to creatively manage the risks they face in all aspects of their lives. Where fear is found to exist, it would also be intriguing to trace its origins; and this is a point that follows, more clearly, from our original discussion. Tapp points to two sources: previous cases of actual eviction and threats that are “deliberately propagated” by government officials. To these we would add a third line of enquiry: academics and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who promote the specter of eviction. Given the emphasis that has been placed on the threat of eviction during activist campaigns in the uplands of Thailand, it would be surprising if some degree of fear or anxiety had not been produced by NGO workers and academic commentators themselves. After all, fear is a much more potent basis for mobilization than nonchalance.

We have no intention of denying the reality of fear in some cases, and we thank Tapp for highlighting this issue. But where fear of eviction does exist, drawing attention to the rarity of eviction can provide a foundation for reassur-

ance and perhaps even confidence. If activists and academics did more to demonstrate how unlikely eviction actually is, it may contribute to empowering local communities in their dealings with the dishonest and manipulative government officials that Tapp rightly condemns.

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