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## **The Rise and Fall of the Tribal Research Institute (TRI): “Hill Tribe” Policy and Studies in Thailand\***

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### **Abstract**

The Tribal Research Center/Institute (TRI) was inaugurated in 1965 and dissolved by the Thai government Bureaucratic Reform Act in 2002. This paper discusses the rise and fall of the TRI by showing that the TRI has come from the need of the Thai government, with the support from foreign agencies, to have an “advisory and training” center to deal with “hill tribe problems,” in the context where few ethnic studies institutes and researchers existed. TRI had actively served its mother organizations by providing them necessary information and recommendation for the monitoring, evaluation and improvement of the government and highland development projects, while its resource center and experts had served academic society for many decades. In 2000s, when “hill tribe problems” have diminished: communist operation stopped, opium cultivation reduced and hill tribes were seemingly well integrated into Thai society, the government no longer needed to maintain its focus on the hill tribes and related organizations. The TRI’s role was terminated without any proper handing over of its human and other resources to the right institute. Unlike 40 years ago, however, now ethnic studies institutes and especially ethnic own organizations and communities have grown up to take care of their problems, arising from government policy and modernization, by carrying out ethnic studies and development by their own.

**Keywords:** Tribal Research Institute (TRI), Thai government, Northern Thailand, “hill tribe problems,” hill tribes, highland development, ethnic studies

Researchers and students who have studied the “hill tribes” in Northern Thailand over the last four decades have usually known of the Tribal Research Institute (TRI). I still remember going there for the first time in 1987 to look for books and materials in the library. As my M. A. research was on the Karen, I also sought advice from the TRI researchers, each of whom was trained as a specialist of a “tribe.” I met the late Khun Prawit Phothiart, a Karen research specialist, who gave me a non-stop lecture on Karen socio-economic and cultural characteristics for almost three hours. I really admired his vast knowledge and deep understanding concerning Karen. I returned again to give my thesis to the TRI library, to acknowledge the support of the TRI and to enable my thesis

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to be of use to the many researchers who continued to visit. The TRI was located on the grounds of Chiang Mai University and this often led to the misunderstanding that it also belonged to the university. In fact, it came under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior since it was set up as the Tribal Research Center (TRC) in 1965, and only upgraded to institute level in 1984. In 1993 it was moved into the Ministry for Labour and Social Welfare and then in 2002 it was dissolved, by the Bureaucratic Reform Act.<sup>1)</sup>

The dissolution of the TRI was done with less notice from the public. Unlike the grand inauguration day on October 21, 1965, when the Deputy Minister of Interior with high-rank foreign and Thai guests joyfully joined the ceremony, the closing day was done quietly but in a hectic way. Chiang Mai University asked TRI officers to move out as quickly as possible so they could start demolishing the TRI buildings to give way to new school buildings. Researchers who still remained had difficulty moving more than 20,000 books, research papers, dissertations, journals, pamphlets and newsletters which were kept in the library. There are also valuable archives which included about 81 reels of 16 mm films, videos, 300 black-and-white photos and more than 2,000 colour photographs and slides [*The Nation* April 13, 2004]. Clearly, there were no plans after the TRI was dissolved for these resources, nor for the researchers with their vast knowledge and life-long experiences of “hill tribe” research. A few researchers asked to be allowed to further work at the Tribal Museum and to continue giving library service. Most researchers however had to be transferred elsewhere to a new job, irrelevant to their past experiences, under yet another ministry, the Ministry for Social Development and Human Security.

The TRI seems to be passé now. But how can it be that an institution of high standing over many decades, is now of no value? After studying conditions pertaining to the rise and fall of the TRC, I would explain that the TRC was created in the specific cold war situation when very few research institutions interested in conducting ethnic studies existed. It was actually the convergence of the need and interest of the three parties, namely the Thai state, foreign funding agencies and foreign academicians, who believed in the “applied research” paradigm. The Thai state with the support from the US had seen the “hill tribes” to be increasing threats or “problems” for Thai society because of their opium cultivation and susceptibility to communist mobilization, so they adopted the TRC as a research and development tool to deal with the “hill tribe problems.” Although the problems of communism and opium cultivation were essentially resolved in the 1980s, the Thai government has continued to make use of the TRI until it is basically sure that the “hill tribes” have been integrated well into Thai society, until the day when they no longer saw any need for research to be conducted specifically on the “hill tribes,” leading to the end of the TRI. Although the TRI had actively played an

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1) The 2002 Bureaucratic Reform Act is another attempt to adjust the government structure to reduce the cost, reduce the work redundancy and increase the work efficiency.

academic role, serving as a resource center, giving advice on hill tribe research etc. for many years, this cannot be a strong argument for its continuation because the TRC/TRI was under implementing sectoral agencies, which have no academic mandate, while in the last two decades, ethnic research and development has been increasingly taken care of by many academic and non-governmental ethnic organizations.

This paper discusses conditions which contribute to the rise and fall of the TRC/TRI. By doing so, it will reveal the development of Thai government's evolving policy on the "hill tribes" and the state of ethnic studies in Thailand on which the TRC/TRI depended. I am aware of the negative connotation of the term "hill tribes" for it is often used in connection with the word "problems," thus "hill tribe problems," which blames the "hill tribes" for many large problems that occurred in Thailand in the last half a century. However, the term "hill tribes" is still used in this paper, henceforth without quotation, to refer to specific groups classified and targeted for research and development by the Thai government until the beginning of the 2000s. The paper will first describe the political, administrative and academic context before the emergence of the TRC, then TRC/TRI's subsequent role and its termination 37 years after its inauguration during which time the context of ethnic research and development has dramatically changed.

### **Hill Tribes Policy and Research before the Emergence of the TRC**

In the 1950s, the political situation in Southeast Asia came to a turning point. China's change to a Socialist country and the support its Communist Party gave to many Communist Parties in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar, had caused alarm and concern to the Thai government and the United States. As explained in a 1965 USAID document cited by Wakin [1992: 118],

Thailand is currently of enormous strategic importance in terms of U. S. national interests:

1. Thailand is located in the midst of the all-out struggle between the Free World and Communist Forces in Southeast Asia.
2. Thailand is formally committed to the side of the Free World despite its perilous location.

Within this changing context and with financial support from the US, the Thai government started to pay attention and focus its operation on hill peoples.<sup>2)</sup> It sets up a "Committee to Give Welfare to People far from Road Access" (*prachachon klai khamana-khom*) in 1951, to oversee hill peoples in remote areas around the frontiers of Northern Thailand [Thailand, Hill Tribe Welfare Division 2002]. The Border Patrol Police (BPP) was

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2) It is also at the time that "aid for development" was provided to the "Third World" by US agencies on the assumption, widely accepted in the early 1950s, that "if poor countries were not rescued from their poverty, they would succumb to communism" [Escobar 1995: 34].

created by the CIA in the early 1950s and was later supported by the US Office of Public Safety (OPS) and US Agency for International Development (USAID) in paramilitary, intelligence gathering, development, and other operations [Wakin 1992: 120]. It started operating in the border areas in 1955 to establish schools and distribute some medical and agricultural equipment to the hill peoples. According to Wakin, the BPP carried out the “Remote Area Security” project, which was financially supported by the USAID, aiming at “involving the remote villager in his own development in order to consume his latent energies with constructive activities easily assisted by these tradition-oriented peoples and readily appreciated as evidence of RTG [the Royal Thai Government] concern for their well being” [*loc. cit.*].

The move to focus on hill peoples was also due to the changing policy on opium cultivation and consumption in Thailand. Although, on the international level, the United Nations organized the first meeting on drugs in an attempt to reduce opium cultivation since 1946, the opium ban in Thailand was only enforced in 1958 by General Sarit Thanarat, who came into power by a staged coup d’etat. It was not easily banned before that because many high-ranking officials including military and police men had been involved and gained benefit from opium growing, trading and smoking den business.<sup>3)</sup> The compliance of General Sarit to banning opium is understandable for his military government was receiving a considerable amount of financial and military support from the US.<sup>4)</sup>

Although opium was banned, opium poppies were still widely cultivated in remote hill areas by some of the hill peoples. The Ministry of Interior was entrusted with responsibility for abolishing opium cultivation. Thus they created an administrative body to deal directly with the hill peoples [Thailand, Hill Tribe Welfare Division 2002]. The term “hill tribe” would then officially emerge for the first time in 1959 when “Committee to Give Welfare to People far from Road Access” was renamed “Hill Tribe Welfare Committee,” with the Minister of the Interior, was designated its chairman. Then a program on “Settlement areas for Hill Tribe” (*nikhom chao khao*) was set up to contain hill peoples within demarcated areas thereby making it easy for officials to conduct the development and welfare projects to purportedly solve the problem of opium cultivation.<sup>5)</sup> Three years later, in 1962, as this scheme was marching down to failure, a new “Hill

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3) For background on opium business and its relation to politics, see McCoy [1972; 1992] and on the specific case of Thailand, see Pasuk and Baker [1995] and Chuphinit [1989: 65], to mention only a few.

4) Pasuk and Baker [1995: 277] report that from 1951 to 1972, total US military assistance amounted to US\$1,147 million. Another US\$92 million were provided in grants through USAID with much of this, after 1965, being funneled into the military effort.

5) Four land settlement pilot projects were established for hill peoples in 1960–63: in Tak Province (Doi Musser); Chiang Mai Province (Doi Chiengdao); Chiang Rai Province (Maechan); and Loei Province (Bhu Lom Low).

Tribe Welfare Division” was set up within the Department of Public Welfare (DPW). Its work was to coordinate other government agencies to work with the hill tribes in a proactive way.

Indeed, in order to be successful in solving the problem of opium cultivation, the Department of Public Welfare, under the Ministry of the Interior, needed to learn more about the situation of the hill tribes. But at that time, only few research institutes and individual researchers conducted research on hill tribes, unlike in Burma where a lot of studies had been done on ethnic groups since the nineteenth century.<sup>6)</sup> The Siam Society which focused its activities on art, science and literature in Thailand and neighbouring countries, established a Research Centre in 1959. One of its research projects during 1960–62 was on the hill tribes of Northern Thailand. Its more important activities included the procurement of dresses, clothing and other artefacts of the material culture of the hill tribes for exhibition purposes. Research was also done on the hunter-gatherer group in Nan Province called “*khon pa*,” or forest people or “*phi tong leung*” or the Spirits of Yellow Leaves. The result was an ethnographic and linguistic report published in the *Journal of the Siam Society*.<sup>7)</sup>

For individual works on hill tribes in Thailand, the first one was done in the 1930s by Prince Sanidh Rangsit, said to be the first Thai professional anthropologist, and by Hugo Bernatzik, whose work *Akha and Meau* was published in 1947 [Hanks *et al.* 1965: v]. Later well known studies on the hill tribes had been conducted by people of various backgrounds who had their own interest in the hill tribes. Examples are Boonchuay [1950; 1962] Young [1961] and Patya [1970]. The first two were not anthropologically trained. Boonchuay was a traveler, writer and a member of Parliament of Chiang Rai who admired the diversity of ethnic groups in Northern Thailand. He also wanted to educate people in other parts of Thailand about this. Young was born in 1927 in a Lahu community in Yunnan, China mission house [1961: I]. His grandfather, William M. Young, was a Baptist missionary who had been working in northeast Burma since 1898. His father was born in Kengtung, Burma and, with others, created the Lahu romanized script in 1925. Young supposedly spoke Lahu fluently and traveled through all mountain ranges of Northern Thailand. After finishing his degree in animal husbandry from the US, he returned to Thailand. With his own curiosity and with the support from the United States Operations Mission to Thailand (USOM)<sup>8)</sup> and various Thai agencies, including the BPP, Young conducted a socio-economic survey of all hill tribes in North-

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6) This was because colonial governments took an interest in the peoples under their jurisdiction, and also because foreign anthropologists were motivated to conduct studies in these countries. Examples of such colonial anthropological studies were of the Karen in Burma by Marshall [[1922] 1997], of the Kachin and Shan by Leach [1954], and of the Lamet by Izikowitz [1951].

7) Kraisri Nimmanahaeminda and Hartland-Swann [1964 L (2): 165–186].

8) It was the USAID's Thai office, established in 1954 [Wakin 1992: 118].

ern Thailand in 1960. Patya was an Associate Professor in Social Anthropology at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok when he was awarded a South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) Fellowship to conduct research on “The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand” in 1962 [Patya 1970].

It is noted that in early 1960s, foreign funding agencies began to support research on the hill tribes. The Ford Foundation funded the establishment of the Research Centre of the Siam Society while the Asia Foundation supported the research project on the hill tribes of Northern Thailand. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization's (SEATO) fellowship programme was established in 1957 as part of SEATO's cultural programme, and supported Patya Saihoo's research on the hill tribes. The National Science Foundation of Washington, D. C., supported the Bennington-Cornell Survey of Hill Tribes in North Thailand, which resulted in, for example, Hanks' work among the Akha [Hanks 1974: 114–127]. Young [1961] received support for his extensive survey from the USOM. His work was possibly in line with the interest of Christian missionaries, many of whom moved to Thailand from Burma, after its independence in 1948, and from China after the political change in 1949. These missionaries worked with the same hill tribes they had worked with in the two countries. For example, the American Baptist Mission moved from Burma and later started their work among the Karen in 1952, while the Overseas Missionary Fellowship began its work among the Hmong and other hill tribes in 1952 after moving in from China [see Patya 1970: 53–55].

There were few professional researchers conducting research which would lead to better understanding of the situation of the hill tribes and more importantly, to give recommendations for implementing additional measures regarding opium cultivation, highland farming systems, and the integration of hill tribes into Thai society. Therefore, the Department of Public Welfare under the Ministry of Interior had initiated a general socio-economic survey during 1961–62 on its own. Financial support for this survey was gained from the Asia Foundation for training the government officials and for the field survey itself; and from the United Nations, which sent an Austrian social anthropologist, Hans Manndorff as an expert to give technical assistance [1967: 533]. The survey covered 18 villages belonging to 4 groups which grew opium: the Hmong, Yao, Lisu and Lahu, in 3 provinces—Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Tak.

This was the first comprehensive and systematic survey of the economy and social structure of the hill tribes. It was based on the concepts and approaches of anthropology, a very young discipline in Thailand at that time. Manndorff described the methodology as follows:

The field-survey personnel were grouped into five teams, each consisting of one official from the Department of Public Welfare, one official from the Ministry of Agriculture, and an associate from the Border Patrol Police, who gave medical assistance and was dressed in civilian clothes. The survey teams were stationed in sample villages, usually for a period of from one

to three months, and were constantly advised and guided by the social anthropologist. Great pains were taken in the beginning to establish a friendly relationship with the tribesmen and to gather information in a casual way through "participant observation." More systematic interviews were started only after a good amount of mutual confidence and amicability had been developed... [ibid.: 534]

The survey report was published in 1962 under the title, "Report on the Socio-Economic Survey of the Hill Tribes in Northern Thailand" [Thailand, Department of Public Welfare 1966]. According to Manndorff [1967: 534], "This report has become an authoritative source of information, and its recommendations are used as a basis of the present Hill Tribes Development and Welfare Program of the Ministry of the Interior." The recommended action program includes (1) intensification and broadening of settlement project activities; (2) [set up] mobile development workers to approach the hill peoples outside the settlement project areas; (3) establishment of a Tribal Research Centre to serve as a permanent advisory institution [ibid.: 535]. As the program to relocate hill peoples in some designated settlement areas was not successful, Manndorff [ibid.: 536] suggested the use of the settlement areas as experiment and demonstration centers for the promotion of cash crops to replace opium. He also recommended that they should be turned into health, education, and welfare centers that would give services to hill peoples nearby, as well as training centers for mobile development workers assigned in the hill tribe villages. But all this would be successful only if the TRC was set up to serve as research and training center. The location of TRC was suggested to be "preferably in the town of Chiangmai on account of its central location. It could, perhaps, be associated with the University of Chiangmai, which is about to be inaugurated, but should cooperate also with other national universities as well as with the Siam Society in Bangkok." [ibid.: 538]

### **The Emergence of the TRC**

The recommendation to set up the TRC was taken up by the Ministry of Interior which initiated the socio-economic survey. In 1964, the TRC project proposal was approved by the National Economic Development Board and later by the cabinet. Prior to this, the Thai Government approached the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which had its headquarters in Bangkok, for support in setting up the TRC. William Geddes, Professor of the Anthropology Department at the University of Sydney, Australia, was asked by the Australian Government for advice on the organization of the TRC and the planning of research, on the grounds that he was an anthropologist who was knowledgeable about the Hmong. His interest in the Hmong (or "Miao" as he called them) was roused when he visited China in 1956. He subsequently had come to study a Hmong



village in Northern Thailand during 1957–59 [Geddes 1976]. Geddes recalls:

When the request did come before the SEATO Council, the Australian representative offered to consider it as part of the Australian civil aid programme. This may have been partly due to the fact that, when I returned from field-work amongst the Hmong both in 1958 and 1962, I gave addresses to the Siam Society in Bangkok, in which I stressed the need for an adequate understanding of the Hmong socio-economy before the introduction of any measures for social and economic development. [1983: 4]

The way the TRC was formed very much depended on the academic orientation and experiences of its founding advisors. Geddes believed in and had devoted himself to applied research. Hinton describes his background in these terms:

Geddes, a New Zealander... returning from extended fieldwork amongst the Hmong in Thailand, threw himself into the task of running the (Sydney) Department with considerable energy. Geddes was an anthropologist who prided himself on his ethnographic research and was scathing about the pretensions of self-styled theoreticians. He would not have been insulted to have been labeled an empiricist. He became intensely involved with the peoples he studied – the Hmong, the Dyaks and the Fijians. He was, additionally, of the conviction that anthropology should be a humanizing discipline and a vehicle for improving cross-cultural communication. This set him on two courses: first to encourage anthropologists' informants to themselves undertake anthropological training, so as to better convey understanding of their own people; and second, to the view that anthropology is a discipline which can and should be applied to help tackle concrete human problems... Previously, Geddes had been involved in the genesis of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies... [Hinton 2002: 163]

Geddes was responsible for refining Manndorff's plan and laying down the specific characteristics of the TRC. But because preparations for opening the TRC took longer than expected, Geddes's stint as advisor was cut short (October 1964–January 1966). He would return to Australia just after the TRC was officially opened and was succeeded by Peter Hinton, his student, who stayed for four years (1966–69).<sup>9)</sup> Like his teacher, Hinton was also interested in issues of development and applied research. As Cohen put it:

[Hinton's] first major piece of field-based research (fifteen months in 1962 and 1963), for an MA thesis, was much closer to home – at Weipa in Cape York. The thesis is titled “The Prosperous Aborigines: The Industrialisation of a Mission Community in North Queensland” and is a study

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9) Peter Hinton worked as full-time adviser for two years, then continued his field work among the Pwo Karen in Mae Sariang District of Mae Hong Son Province for another two years [Hinton 2002: 157].

of the impact of bauxite mining on an Aboriginal mission community. He spent the next two years as a Field Officer in northern Queensland for the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies.

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Peter's Weipa research, his role as TRC adviser and his research on Karen agriculture reflect his special interest in issues of development and applied anthropology. . . . His research on development issues spilled over to his teaching and he introduced a popular coursework Masters in Applied Anthropology Studies at Sydney University. . . . [2004: 329-330]<sup>10)</sup>

Although the TRC focuses on applied research, Geddes saw an opportunity to conduct basic research, for there was little done up to that time. He wrote: "There is. . . great scope in the hill tribe areas for research work of a more purely academic kind. I hope that the Thailand government, in the interests of international scholarship, will always be friendly to such work. . . . Indirectly, it will profit by the improvements to anthropological theory which the work should provide" [Geddes 1967: 558]. His plan for hill tribe research, at least in the first two years of the TRC, was to have anthropologists conduct detailed socio-economic studies of each tribe. This model was also derived from his own experience while working on a previous program in Sarawak. According to Hinton [2002: 156],

This program, drawn up by Edmund Leach for the British Colonial Office, was to carry out "intensive socio-economic studies" of the major minority groups of Sarawak to assist policy development in areas ranging from health to forestry. Like the TRC program, it was based on the idea that sound policy could only be devised on the basis of comprehensive ethnographic knowledge of the client peoples. Like the TRC program, various researchers were assigned to study each of the main ethnic groups as identified by Leach. These anthropologists included, amongst others, Derek Freeman (Iban) and Geddes himself (Land Dyaks).

Since there were only two Thai anthropologists in Thailand both of whom were teaching in Bangkok universities,<sup>11)</sup> Geddes pointed out that "it would be necessary for foreign anthropologists to conduct the studies, but each should be linked to a local national who should first act as field assistant and then be given the opportunity for postgraduate study in anthropology" [Geddes 1976: viii]. Therefore, in the beginning, the TRC staff consisted of five foreign anthropologists studying five tribes, assisted by five Thai research assistants.<sup>12)</sup> The pairings were as follows:

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10) Peter Hinton passed away in May 2004. Cohen published an obituary in the *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 15 (3): 329-330 [2004].

11) Dr. Patya Saihoo and Dr. Suthep Sunthornphesath.

12) Nusit Chindasri, Somphob Larchrojna and Sanit Wongprasert were supported to continue their Master's degrees in Anthropology at Sydney University, Australia, while Prasert

Hmong: William Geddes assisted by Nusit Chindasri  
Mien: Douglas Miles assisted by Chob Khachaanon  
Karen: Peter Hinton assisted by Somphob Larchrojna  
Lahu: Anthony Walker assisted by Sanit Wongprasert and  
Lisu: Paul Durrenburger assisted by Prasert Chaiphikusit

The TRC was thus the first official center to coordinate socio-economic studies on each hill tribe. Its staff hoped that the knowledge thus gained would help the Thai Government implement appropriate hill tribe welfare and development programs. Its objectives, which were in place from the beginning of the TRC until the end, were as follows:

- To be a center for the consultation and exchange of ideas and technical knowledge among officers of various agencies working with hill tribes;
- To be a center for socio-economic research on various tribes in North Thailand, in a way which is useful for the government in its implementation of welfare and development activities among hill tribes;
- To be a resource center for the collection of books and materials in relation to the culture of hill tribes in Thailand and in other Southeast Asian countries;
- To be a center for coordination and cooperation between educational institutions and research institutions which are conducting studies on minority problems, both inside and outside Thailand; and
- To be a center for the promotion of understanding between hill tribes and Thai people in general. [TRI 1995: 11]

The funding support in cash and kind from the Thai and western governments through SEATO contributed to the realization of the TRC plan. The Thai government provided the budget for the construction of the TRC building and officials' houses. The Australian, British and United States governments contributed budget via SEATO to hire foreign advisors, buy cars, pick-up, books, tape recorders, and cassettes and equipments for movie production and film processing.<sup>13)</sup>

The TRC office was inaugurated on October 21, 1965 in a very grand way, with the

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↙ Chaiphikusit received ethnological training in Austria and Chob Khachaanon studied ethnology in France. Their theses were ethnographic studies of aspects of hill tribe culture, such as religion, for instance, or health.

13) As presented by Mr. Suwan Ruenyos, Director General of Department of Public Welfare in the TRC inauguration ceremony, TRC offices and houses were built by Thai government budget of 420,000 baht, books and tape recorders supported by the British government costed around 600 pounds, tape cassettes and movie production equipments from the US government costed around 240,000 baht [TRI 1995: 17-18].

Deputy Minister of the Interior acting as Chairman of the inauguration ceremony. Other honorable Thai guests included the Permanent Secretary of the National Development Ministry, the General Secretary of the National Security Council, the Governor of Chiang Mai, the Head of Provincial Government Agencies, and administrators of Chiang Mai University. Guests from foreign agencies ranged from the General Secretary of SEATO, to the ambassadors and representatives of New Zealand, England, the United States, France and Burma. After the opening ceremony came the training, lasting 22 days, of medium ranking regional officers from 13 agencies, on knowledge about hill tribes' livelihood, social structure, culture, problems and problem solving approaches as well as about government policy and hill tribe development and welfare projects, which were carried out by different agencies at that time.

The opening remarks by the Chairman confirmed the importance of the TRC in providing data and information urgently needed for planning the "development" of the hill tribes. He stated:

Because of problems with hill tribes with respect to economic, social, political and governmental matters, the government, concerned about their livelihood, has set up the Hill Tribe Welfare Committee to supervise activities for their welfare and development. Such activities will enable hill people to enjoy occupations, sanitation, education and social welfare, according to government policy. But this will only be achieved if research data is used as a basis for planning. In addition, officials must first be trained in their understanding of hill tribes, so they, in turn, will be able to help the hill tribes to understand the good will of the government. . . [TRI 1995: 21, my own translation]

The General Secretary of SEATO echoed similar observations when he stated:

The Royal Thai Government is to be commended for the efforts it is making to attend to the wants and needs of its minority peoples. . . it is a wise policy, particularly when one considers the bi-polar nature of political developments in the world today. I need not remind you. . . that it is among minority peoples that Communist propagandists and agitators find a fertile field for their subversive activities. Totalitarian Communism hesitates not one moment in seizing upon their legitimate problems and aspirations and twisting them to its own use. . . . It is thus a matter of the utmost importance that steps be taken to isolate and study these problems and aspirations. . . . [ibid.: 22]

To sum up, the TRC proposal was adopted by the Ministry of Interior and financially supported by many foreign governments and organizations. Although the TRC structure and research plans, which were suggested by the foreign founders were academically-oriented, and were therefore out of the Ministry's mandate, the TRC proposal was totally adopted. I believe that the Ministry did so for the advisors's ideas sounded

logical and fit with the situation where there was no other research institute to which they could turn to. It is also possible that in that particular period of time, the nature of TRC, which was rather academically-oriented—aiming to be a resource center and a center for coordination and cooperation between educational institutions not only in Thailand but worldwide, as well as to strengthen anthropological discipline in Thailand, was a compromised solution. For the Ministry in that situation, the nature of TRC may not have mattered so much so long as it could contribute to the Ministry's efforts to deal with the "hill tribe problems."

### TRC's Role and Affiliation

The role and affiliation of the TRC was in fact questioned even by its own founder since the beginning. The first question is how the TRC, which was academically-oriented, linked with an academic institution like Chiang Mai University (CMU), on whose grounds TRC was located. The TRC is designed to be an advisory and training institution working for the Department of Public Welfare (DPW) but some of its objectives, including the development of a resource center and a center for socio-economic research on various tribes in North Thailand, are academically-oriented. Given this academically-oriented proposal, the cabinet asked the Public Welfare Department to "contact Chiang Mai University to conduct TRC project together since the beginning" [TRI 1995: 10] in its letter of approval. Later, in the Memorandum of Agreement between the Department of Public Welfare and the CMU, the latter agreed to provide space on its campus for the TRC.<sup>14)</sup> The CMU also requested that anthropologists who worked with the Center teach in the university. It is noted that CMU was also opened in 1965, the same year when the TRC was inaugurated, so, as I understand, it had to attend to many other priorities in setting up a regional university. At the same time, the interest in the study of the hill tribes, which had only around 220,000 people living scatteredly in remote hill areas, was generally low.<sup>15)</sup> Moreover, academic institutes in various parts of Thailand had just been developed after the application of the first National Social and Economic Development plan in 1961. Only a few anthropologists had graduated from abroad and started working with universities in Bangkok. However, there had been the controversial cooperation in a short period between the Faculty of Social Sciences, CMU, and the TRC in the activities

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14) It is still not clear to me why the CMU offered the TRC the space inside its campus. It may be possible that this was the concrete way of the cooperation the CMU could give to the DPW. The CMU may also have seen that this would make the academic services of the TRC easily accessible to students and their academic staff.

15) Kunstadter [1967: 297-398] gave an estimated figure of each hill tribe in Thailand by referring to Young [1961], LeBar *et al.* [1964] and his own knowledge.

of the Tribal Data Center (TDC) in 1969, which I will describe below. After that there was no other institutional cooperation between the two organizations in conducting research on hill tribes.

The second question is how the TRC could successfully function as “a permanent advisory and training institution,” when it belonged to just one out of many government agencies working with the hill tribes. Geddes [1967: 578–579] asked how could the TRC freely and easily supply information to other agencies and also receive aid from them in the gathering of information. He was also worried about the TRC’s low-rank status as a section of the Hill Tribes Division, which was then a subsidiary of the Bureau of Land Settlement. The TRC staff would thus belong to “relatively low grade” ranks, and thus create some human resource problems because qualified persons may not want to work with the Centre permanently.

The third problem arose from the objective of the Center “to evaluate continuously the hill tribe projects conducted by both the government and private organizations.” If the TRC was a section of the DPW, how could it evaluate the DPW, which was its own department? Neither would it be easy to offer evaluations of the projects of other departments. For the TRC to perform this role, Geddes favoured its attachment to the university. Yet even this attachment bothered him; he feared that the TRC might still be unable to “exercise considerable influence on government activities” because, he thought, “In Thailand at the present time the universities do not have the same degree of prestige as is often accorded to them in Western countries.” To overcome this problem, Geddes suggested that, “in drawing up conditions for a university attachment, provision could be made for a definite relationship of the Centre to government agencies working with hill tribes” [*ibid.*: 579–580].

The last question which was raised by Geddes was related to the role of TRC researchers, whether they should assume the role of pure academics who supplied information to all who needed it, or the role of government officers who used academic work purely to obtain information that would be useful for government purposes. A more important question is who would the researchers represent, the tribal peoples or the government. Geddes’ concept of the role of the advanced researcher, which was rejected by some government officials, was reflected in his writing:

During my stay at the Centre, and I believe subsequently, members of the staff were encouraged to regard their role as one of representing the tribes people to the Government rather than the Government to the people. They did not engage in the promotion of developmental measures, which was the province of other sections of the Hill Tribes Division of the Department of Public Welfare. The lack of a positive involvement in planning by the Centre later brought criticism from some Thai authorities [in his footnote, he refers to a paper on “Overcoming the Problems of the Hill Tribes,” by Krachang Bhanthumnavin published in *Spectrum*, Vol. I, No. 1, October 1972, by SEATO in Bangkok] but it did serve the purpose, in circles where its reports were read

or its voice listened to, of attuning policy to the tribes' desires, and in the political troubles which came later to the tribal areas there were no instances of conflict between the people and members of the Centre. [1976: vii]

These questions had remained unsolved throughout the TRC/TRI's life but as an organization under the implementing agencies, first the Ministry of Interior (1965–92) and then the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (1992–2002), it had the commitment to serve its mother organizations' mandate, which was set up in response to the government policy on the hill tribes. As the government policy evolved, the TRI's role had been continuously adjusted, as reflected in its changing research focus, in the following three phases, which are divided and described by the TRI in its publication of the 30 years anniversary [1995: 5].

Phase I: (1965–71)

- The study of hill tribe communities according to each tribe, along socio-economic and anthropological lines
- The survey and study of particular topics

Phase II: (1972–83)

- The study of agriculture and land use
- The study of particular topics as requested by other agencies, namely the Royal Project, the Royal Forestry Department, Chiang Mai Provincial Administration, USAID, FAO

Phase III: (1984–present [1995])

- Action research, searching for factors which contribute to the success of a project
- Cooperation with ORSTOM (1989–92) to develop human resources and research projects
- The study of particular topics in response to state policy, such as on HIV/AIDS, prostitution and labour.

I will here further describe the focus of each phase in responding to the changing policy and administration. In phase I, with the guidance from anthropologist advisors, basic anthropological research was carried out on each tribe in several topics in order to gain in-depth understanding on the people's livelihood, culture and attitudes for the design of appropriate government measures. Examples of research works conducted by foreign researchers who either associated or cooperated with the TRI can be found in Keyes [1979], and McKinnon and Wanat [1983]. But the work of foreign advisors in this phase was interrupted by a significant event called the "Thailand Controversy," which occurred in 1970, in the United States, when some American anthropologists who received financial support from the US Department of Defense's counterinsurgency research program, were criticized and later investigated by the American

Anthropological Association Executive Board on ethical issues [Wakin 1992: 8]. This “Thailand Controversy” later covered the account of the TRC, which was accused of being a SEATO-centre whose work was to give information to the military to suppress the hill tribes.<sup>16)</sup> Geddes [1983] and Hinton [2002], the first two TRC advisors, explained that the TRC was not related to military operations and SEATO “only provided the channels through which unilateral aid from Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and America passed” [Wakin 1992: 192]. However, as reported by Wakin [*ibid.*: 193–194], there was also another complicating event in relation to the Tribal Data Center (TDC), which was set up by the Department of Defense’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), to develop systems of data collection, processing, and publishing concerning tribal people of Northern Thailand and nearby areas. ARPA had approached Hinton, then the TRC advisor, many times seeking closer “coordination” in the carrying out of the project, but was not successful at that time. ARPA then went to the Dean of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University and created the Lanna Thai Research Center as a joint ARPA–Faculty of Social Sciences operation. In late 1969, the TRC accepted to cooperate with the Faculty of Social Sciences in ARPA-financed TDC. Oughton, the then TRC agricultural advisor was quoted by Wakin [1992: 198], explaining that there was no reason to refuse the involvement in the gathering of information “in an honest and open way” for information can be used by both sides: those who were involved in subversive activities and those who designed measures to counter insurgency.

The Thailand Controversy around the issue of TRC not only had an impact among academic society in Australia but also in Chiang Mai.<sup>17)</sup> In 1973, a group of Chiang Mai University lecturers and students protested in front of the TRC, accusing that it was employed by the US [Prasit and Panadda 2005: 218]. As written by Chantaboon [1995: 104], the “Thailand Controversy” had discouraged American Anthropologists from working with TRC on the hill tribes. He cited examples of an American anthropologist who, for fear of accusation, had to take his book which was formerly donated to the TRC library back, another one had to stop his teaching work at a university and returned home before the end of the term. In effect, after Phase I, the TRC had ceased to have anthropological advisors. Many foreign experts subsequently worked at the TRC on various projects, but they were agriculturalists or geographers or from other disciplines whose work focused

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16) Issues of Tribal Research Center’s function were reported in Wolf and Jorgensen’s article [1970], sparking Thailand Controversy in Australia.

17) Accounts on the “Thailand Controversy” especially its impact in Australian academic society are comprehensively written by Hinton [2002] and Robinson [2004], emphasizing actors in the University of Sydney department of anthropology in the 1970s. Both discuss ethical issues in research conduct. Hinton, however, points out the importance of doing an anthropology of anthropologists, for the characteristics of each anthropologist greatly influences the way he/she acts.



on highland development.<sup>18)</sup>

In phase II, the government stressed the national integration policy, which aimed to change the hill tribes, seen as “non-Thai” because of their different culture and religion, to become “Thai,” mainly by opening more schools in the highlands so that young people could learn the Thai language, culture, and history of Thai nation etc. to instill the sense of being citizens of Thailand. Dhammacharik Buddhist program, which was set up in 1965 and supported by the DPW had also worked in the highlands to engage in development activities while persuading hill tribes to become Buddhist.<sup>19)</sup> Around the end of this phase, many foreign governments and donor agencies initiated highland development projects in order to introduce alternative crops to replace opium. TRC researchers had thus moved from basic research to applied research, helping various agencies and projects to collect base-line, socio-economic data, and proposing appropriate policy recommendations to agencies and projects that were implementing activities among the hill tribes. Examples of research topics done in this phase are “Cooperation of Hill Tribes in Family Planning” [Wanat 1986], “Handbook for Working with the Musur” [Supchai 1984], and “Taboos and Popular Practices among the Lisu” [Prasert 1986].

In the year 1984, which was the start of Phase III, government armed forces started to launch opium suppression by cutting opium plants in many opium fields in the highlands. They continued the activity every year which led to the dramatic reduction of opium cultivation area because hill farmers were forced to change to other crops to earn their living. Many joint Thai and foreign highland development projects had started to operate their integrated rural development in the highlands to extend new crops and introduce social development activities. For many projects, field workers were staff of the DPW’s hill tribe development and welfare centers, which had many hill tribe development and welfare field units in the highlands. The TRC research staff played significant role in field staff training, and monitoring and conducting applied research for these highland development projects. With this expansion in the scope of work, the TRC was upgraded to the Tribal Research Institute—the same status as a Division under the Department of Public Welfare.

In the early 1990s, most highland development projects terminated their operation towards their utmost goal, which was to reduce opium cultivation area and to provide alternatives to opium. These goals had seemingly been achieved. Without the projects, hill tribe development and welfare staff stationed in field units had little activities to accomplish and lost justification to stay on in the highlands. The TRI’s roles which were to assist development projects and to work with those units in the field were reduced. As

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18) For example, Garry A. Oughton, an agriculturalist from Australia; F. G. B. Keen, and John M. McKinnon, both are geographers from New Zealand.

19) Details of Dhammacharik Buddhist missionary program can be seen in my own book [Kwanchewan 2003] and Hayami [1999; 2004].

hill tribe problems in relation to opium cultivation were principally solved and communist operation had stopped since the 1980s, the “hill tribe problems” which remained in the eyes of the government was their socio-economic disadvantages. Thus when the reform of bureaucratic system took place in 1993, the TRI was transferred, together with its mother organization, the Department of Public Welfare, to a new ministry—the Ministry for Labour and Social Welfare. The hill tribes were to be seen as one among many groups of disadvantaged people, whose labour skills had to be developed and social welfare given in order to put them in a more advantageous position. Under the new ministry, the TRI researchers continued their research on hill tribes, looking at social problems and finding the way to improve the labour skills and social welfare. Thus, research topics in this period included drug abuse, HIV/AIDS and commercial sex work, which was increasingly prevalent among the hill tribes, as well as an assessment of state mechanism such as Village Welfare Centers, which were set up to deal with these problems.<sup>20)</sup>

To sum up: TRI's role had changed from that of conducting basic research among each tribe to applied research to assist the national integration policy. Although the main “hill tribe problems”: the opium cultivation and communist expansion had declined, the TRI had been further used, with the continuation of foreign support in forms of Thai and international joint highland development projects, to make sure that the hill tribes were fully integrated. In 1990s, when the problems were no longer seen in terms of national security, the Department of Public Welfare, which was in the past dealing intensively with hill tribes, together with the TRI, was moved to be under the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare to focus on the hill tribe as a disadvantaged group. The TRI's academic component, development of resource center and dissemination, was less supported by its mother organization although not totally rejected.

### **TRI and the Trend in Ethnic Studies and Development**

The TRC was set up during the time when few institutions and individuals took up research on hill tribes. But as time went by, as I will mention in detail below, many research institutions have been set up, either attached to universities or independently, and expanding their scope of work on ethnic studies and development. Ethnic organizations and communities have also conducted their own research to serve their own development activities. As an institute which was set up to serve the government's policy and implementation, TRI's role and achievement were different from those of

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20) Research topics in this phase are for example, “Transmission of HIV/AIDs in Pang Pob Area of Chiang Kham, Phayao” [Niphatwet 1996], “Culture and and Drug Abuse: Case Study of the Meo” [Songwit 1998], “Hill Tribe Community and the Tambon Administrative Office: Case Study of Villages under the Royal Project” [Uraiwan *et al.* 2001], and “Village Welfare Center: Case Study of Learning Process Initiation in Hill Tribe Village” [Itsak 1996].

other academic institutions and ethnic organizations. These can be described in two main areas, namely in the construction of the hill tribes discourse and in research and development, as follows.

1. *Constructing the Discourse on the “Hill Tribes”*

Before the official term of “hill tribes” was used, different terms were used to refer to groups of people who live in the hills of Northern Thailand, and who usually have cultures that were different from the lowland Thai people. Boonchuay [1950; 1962] used the term *chon chat* or nationality and *chat* or nation to refer to many ethnic groups including some hill groups, which are later defined as hill tribes. Sometimes the term “hill tribes” were used without clear definition as to exactly which groups the writer was referring to. Boonchuay’s book on *Hill Tribes in Thailand* also includes the Sakai, the hunter-gatherer group usually found in the forest areas in the South of Thailand. The research project on Hill Tribes of Thailand of the Siam Society in 1960–62 also covered the Mlabri which was not in the later official list of hill tribes. When the “Hill Tribe Welfare Committee” was set up in 1959, the official definition of hill tribes was designed to include only nine hill groups, which were Karen, Hmong, Lahu, Akha, Thin, Khamu, Lisu, Mien and Lua. These nine groups were portrayed in a negative way since the beginning such as that found in the report of the first Socio-Economic Survey of the Hill Tribes in Northern Thailand, conducted by the Thai government, under the supervision of foreign anthropologists.

According to this report [Manndorff 1967: 534], two points were always repeated: that the hill tribes were people who were a problem to Thailand, and by nature were totally different from Thai lowlanders and from each other. According to the report:

These tribesmen differ considerably from the Thai population in their ethnic, linguistic and cultural characteristics. . . . The hill tribes present a many-sided problem to the Thai government, on general grounds of public policy and welfare. [*ibid.*: 1]

The Thai, as a typical lowland population, have never exhibited any particular interest in settling in or developing the mountains through their 800 years of history in this country. As a consequence, the mountains have lain open to the immigration of peoples who differ considerably in their ethnic and cultural characteristics from the Thai lowland population. [*ibid.*: 4]

. . . there are those tribes who have come into Thailand rather recently, like the Meo and Yao, the Lisu, Lahu and Akha. They definitely do not show any characteristic trend to assimilate with the Thai people or with other tribes, nor are they inclined to move from their mountain areas to lower regions. [*ibid.*: 13]

Slash and burn agriculture is the economic foundation of hill tribes under discussion. . . . Evidently many of the problems which the hill tribes cause in this country—such as destruction of forests, opium growing, border insecurity, difficulties of administration and control—are to

some extent connected with this very fact. [*ibid.*: 14]

The term “hill tribes problems,” which was used to refer to the problems caused by the hill tribes namely insurgency operation, opium growing and trading, and forest destruction, had become an official discourse as it had been widely used in text books, newspaper and official reports and documents.

The TRC/TRI's research and development work focusing on only nine tribes, and not some other groups which also live in the highlands of Northern Thailand such as the Yunnanese, the Shan etc., had confirmed the definition of hill tribes as those who were deemed to have problems and thus needed more government attention and intervention.

Although a few researchers, working closely with one or two hill tribes, expressed their appreciation of hill tribe culture and tried to correct the misunderstandings or wrong images of the hill tribes in their writings, especially in the TRI newsletter, still the main focus of the TRI research was to find out hill tribes problems and alternatives for the development projects. As a government research agency, the TRI seems to represent the government towards the hill tribe peoples, instead of the reverse as was the original wish of Geddes, the TRC first advisor and founder. Prasit and Panadda [2005: 216] cited examples of terms with bad connotations on the hill tribes and their practices such as *rai luan loi* or shifting cultivation, *kan nab thue phi* or spirit worshipping. These terms were continuously used by the TRI amidst the criticism from highland ethnic organizations and communities, which, especially from the 1990s onward, began to use other terms to imply a non-biased understanding on their practices such as *rai mun wien* or rotational cultivation or *rabob kwam chue* or belief system. Also, the TRI was reluctant to officially change the terms they used to call hill tribes, which were often perceived as derogatory by the people designated, to autonyms or terms used by hill peoples to call themselves. For example, they continued to use the terms Meo, Musur, Ikaw instead of Hmong, Lahu and Akha, respectively, which are increasingly used by academic and ethnic organizations and communities and the media.

## 2. *Research and Development*

The socio-economic report recommended, among other things, that the Thai Government make a decision on the legal position of tribal communities and on the proper land tenure to be granted to them. It is now 40 years since this recommendation was made, and requests by many hill communities for Thai citizenship and for land use rights have continued, but to no avail. It is not clear how far the TRI was influential at policy level. Also, it may be because the TRI research had not been seriously developed to help tribal villagers solve their problems, which were consequences of the government policy and the modernization. This is not to deny that toward the end of the TRI's existence, a few individual researchers at TRI had started to work closely with ethnic NGOs and ethnic communities, and often criticized government policy in their writings. Chuphinit [1989],

for instance, showed that the government policy on opium reduction led to the wide-spreading use of heroin which had worse impact on hill tribes and general Thai society. He also claimed that the relocation policy was doomed to failure and would only cause more problems because new land allocated was often too small and not suitable for cultivation. People had to move on to work as unskilled labourers in the city, get less return and become poorer than before [Chuphinit 1996]. Somphob [1995] always argued for the right of Karen to live in Thung Yai Naresuan National Park, in the west of Thailand, amid plans to relocate them. Thawit *et al.* [1997] reported the trend of urban migration among the hill tribes, which was a result of the government's restriction on forest land use and the increasing need for cash. In a new urban environment, hill tribes faced new problems, yet tried to adapt their way of life.

As I see it, the success of the TRI was not in conducting applied research to make an impact on ethnic communities or on policy, but in giving academic advice and service to scholars (students, researchers, lecturers etc.) and other people with general interest such as tourists. In the early period up to the 1980s, scholars who came to consult the TRC/TRI and used its library were more foreigners than the Thai. During that time graduate schools on social sciences where students would conduct research on ethnic communities or ethnic issues, had not yet opened in Thailand. During 1965–95, the TRI listed 93 foreign scholars who conducted research in hill tribe communities in cooperation with the TRI. These scholars produced valuable reports, dissertations and books on the hill tribes of Northern Thailand, and later on the hill tribes of other countries of the Mekong region as well. Their books and reports were kept at the TRI library for further studies. There is no record of how many Thai scholars used the Institute's library and consulted with the TRI researchers. But as graduate schools have been opened in Chiang Mai University and in other universities in Northern Thailand, more students and researchers conducting research on the hill tribes have come to the center for consultation with the researchers who were experts on a specific tribe. Some TRI researchers also served as committee members for master's thesis examination. Other important clients of the TRC/TRI were foreign tourists, who came to visit the Tribal Museum, to look at the library and to ask for basic information such as the number of hill tribes divided into each group in each location. TRI researchers also sometimes helped organize study trips to visit hill communities or coordinated with DPW's local officers to arrange such trips.

All in all, the TRI had functioned as the government's tool to conduct applied research for the government's development of appropriate measures to deal with "the hill tribe problems." The government's development process, however, had had a positive effects for it gave the tools (i. e. formal education, knowledge from training etc.), and facility (i. e. modern transportation, communication etc.) to ethnic communities to connect with each other and to organize themselves to represent their own interest. From the 1990s onward, many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), large and small, were set up by ethnic peoples themselves to deal with their real problems. Some NGOs have

represented the interest of all hill tribes, some only a specific tribe.<sup>21)</sup> Some focus on specific issues such as natural resource management, health, education, and culture. Some of them also conduct applied research, publish the result and disseminate the result by writing, organizing seminars etc. They usually argue against the discourse on “hill tribes problems,” asserting that many factors cause problems of opium cultivation and deforestation. They point out that demands from opium users, involvement of some bad authorities in drug trade, logging business, to mention only a few factors, have also to be blamed. The government policy which has proclaimed the protected forest area on the hill communities’ settlement and arable land has to be changed for it seriously affects highland people’s livelihood. At the same time, knowledge on forest and ecology and the value of their culture are explained by these organizations to correct misunderstandings on hill tribe livelihood and culture.

In the last two to three decades, many social science research institutions attached to universities and graduate schools have been set up. To mention a few important ones: the Language and Culture for Rural Development Research Institute of Mahidol University in Bangkok which was set up since 1974 has played an important role in researching ethnic culture especially language and music; the Sirindhorn Anthropology Center, a young institution, has played a great role especially since the early 2000s, in conducting ethnic research, building up database of bibliography on ethnic studies and ethnic media and annually organizing anthropology meetings, in which ethnic issues are an important part. Looking only at Chiang Mai University: graduate study programs on human and environmental management, non-formal education, gender studies and social development have been opened, and each year many graduate students conduct their research in ethnic communities or choose ethnicity-related issues as theses topics. As a result of government’s extension of formal education to the hill tribes, young ethnic people have increasingly studied in colleges and higher degrees and return to conduct research in their own communities. The Social Research Institute, formerly the Lanna Thai Research Center mentioned earlier, has also Ethnic Studies and Development Research Group within it, to which I belong. Besides, the Regional Center for Social Sciences and Sustainable Development of the Faculty of Social Sciences also opened an international graduate course where some students select ethnic issues as their research topics. These graduate students and researchers, especially those from Chiang Mai and the North, had

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21) In Chiang Mai, the Inter-Mountain Peoples Education and Culture of Thailand (IMPECT) seems to be the biggest ethnic organization in terms of number of staff, scope of activities and budget. Set up in 1980s, it started working with various hill tribe communities and later also joined some regional organizations and networks working with tribal communities in Greater Mekhong subregion (Myanmar, Thailand, Yunnan Province of China, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) and elsewhere. It links with many other international non-governmental organizations and helps organizing many international forum to empower ethnic communities.

come to visit TRI and asked for advice and cooperation to do research. The TRI researchers were largely acknowledged for their vast knowledge on socio-economic and cultural aspects of the tribes on which they had expertise. But, except for a few researchers who worked closely with non-government ethnic organizations and social science academicians, most researchers were generally seen as government research officials, those defending government's policy and doing research according to the assignment of their mother organization.

For other researchers in ethnic organizations and in academic institutions, Chiang Mai University in particular, the current and increasing trend in the approach to ethnic studies is to go beyond the role of advanced researcher, the term put forward by Geddes above, that is, not just to represent the people but to facilitate, encourage and empower ethnic people and communities to conduct their own research, to disseminate the result, and push for policy alternatives. This trend has for some time been facilitated by the Thailand Research Fund's local office in Chiang Mai, which will give funding to any project only if it shows that local communities are involved in a way that benefit them. Also, recent research goes beyond the study of a community or a tribe but focuses on ethnic relations and comparison across locations and nations.

In 2002, in contrast to the atmosphere of the grand opening in 1965, the termination of TRI was accomplished quietly with less public notice and was a sad event for TRI researchers. Chiang Mai University, which has no institutional cooperative work with the TRI, wanted to demolish the TRI office as quickly as possible to gain space for a new faculty building. Some TRI researchers took it upon themselves to move books and other research materials partly to the Tribal Museum in the Rama IX Lanna Park, and partly to the DPW's hostel for disadvantaged boys, both in Chiang Mai. A few researchers have asked not to be moved to work in other provinces but to remain working at the Museum until their retirement. As the TRI had less cooperation with other research institutes and non-governmental ethnic organizations and communities, unsurprisingly its dissolution did not draw any outcry from other organizations or communities in Thailand.

The TRI's task to focus its research and development on the hill tribes to assist the government to solve "hill tribe problems" seemed to come to an end for the problems had been fundamentally solved with the hill tribes being integrated into Thai society. Reasons for its termination may be well explained by an official's words: "there is no need for further study on the 'hill tribes' as they are now considered to have become Thai; thus '*chao khao*', the term for 'hill tribes' which can be translated as 'other people', becomes '*chao rao*' or 'our people'" [*The Nation* April 13, 2004].

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the rise of the TRI has come from the need of the Thai



government, with the support from foreign agencies, to set up a research center to deal with “hill tribes problems,” in the context where few Thai research institutes and individual researchers were interested in ethnic studies. Although some problems have diminished, after the CPT collapsed in 1982 and opium cultivation was largely reduced in 1984, still some “hill tribe problems” remained such as the forest destruction and the poor livelihood conditions. The TRC still found its role in assisting in the research and development of many joint Thai and international highland development projects which had operated among hill tribes in northern highlands during 1980s–90s. Thus its status was upgraded to the division level in 1984. When most international highland development projects had left in the 1990s and the implementation of the national integration policy was seemingly achieved, “hill tribe problems” were reduced to just the problem of being disadvantaged. Therefore, with the bureaucratic reform in 1993, the TRI was moved to the Ministry for Labour and Social Welfare, and researchers have supported the development of hill tribes to be skilled labourers and to gain social welfare. In 2002, when the government was confident that hill tribe peoples were well integrated into Thai society just like other Thai peoples, there was no need to focus their research and development on the hill tribes as a specific category. TRI was thus dissolved and together with it the Division of Hill Tribe Welfare, and its Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Units, thus erasing all the word “hill tribe” which had been in the directory of government agencies for many decades.

I have also shown that the TRC academic-oriented structure and research plan resulted from the founders’ belief and ideas of “applied research.” The TRC had served its mother organizations by providing them necessary information for the monitoring, evaluation and improvement of the government and highland development projects while its resource center including the museum, and library had served academic society and other interested people and groups for many decades. It seems to be natural for an institute to be created and dissolved by its mother organization when its goal was seen as achieved. But for researchers who are interested in ethnic studies, like myself, the end of TRI without the handing over of resource materials and experts, who have experienced working with hill tribes for many decades, to be further used at the right place is a great waste. The contradiction between its academic role and its affiliation with an implementing agency had existed since the beginning of its set up but nothing can be done for there was a rigid line demarcating between agencies of different Department/Ministry, making it difficult if not impossible to move, share and integrate human and other resources across a department.

But looking at the trend of ethnic research and development, I found that “hill tribe” category which was created by the government and confirmed by the TRC/TRI cannot easily be erased. Ethnic and research organizations and communities are on the rise to study the hill tribes, or new terms as they now call them “highlanders/highland ethnic groups/ethnic groups,” on its history, culture, local knowledge and identity. The “hill



tribe problems” may have diminished and “hill tribes” are no longer targeted as a distinctive category, but problems of hill tribes, arising from new environment and government policy, still exist. The research and development task carried out by hill tribe organizations and communities is now aimed for solving their own problems although with limited support from the government and foreign funding organizations, unlike the TRC when it was set up 40 years ago.

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