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Trickle-down effect

As demand for coffee soars in Thailand, many northern hill tribes that used to farm opium have switched to cultivating coffee beans – and are prospering because of it

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A path slithers through rugged terrain in a hilly backwater of northern Thailand before dipping into a vale fringed by thick undergrowth.

This outlying place, sheltered from prying eyes, is where some residents of a nearby hill-tribe hamlet grow their poppies. When they are in bloom the plants adorn the dale, now home to two wayward water buffaloes, with photogenic red and white flowers.

Illegal in Thailand, the opium the tribespeople derive from the milky latex in the bulbs of the poppies serves medicinal purposes in the community. Some older villagers also use it recreationally, puffing away languorously on handcrafted pipes with a faraway gaze in their eyes.

This vale in Thailand's hilly north lies near the fabled Golden Triangle – a geographic confluence also including Myanmar and Laos – that was once an epicentre of opium production. These days, though, thanks to a decades-long battle against the opium trade and royally sponsored crop substitution projects, fields of poppies are rare in northern Thailand.

Instead, another cash crop now dominates much of a verdant landscape peopled by a myriad of hill tribes with their multi-coloured costumes beloved by tourists. That crop is coffee, which too gives a boost, but in the form of a legally sanctioned stimulant.

Top: Hill-tribe women in traditional dress pick coffee beans on a farm in Chiang Mai.

"I used to grow opium and had a modest income from it," says Tua Jangaroon, 59, an ethnic Hmong farmer who lives in a hillside village in Lampang province. "We knew it was illegal, but we grew the poppies up in the hills where officials did not go. We did not think if it was good or bad. That was just the way."

> **Some beans from the north are excellent quality with great flavour profiles**
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> PIYACHAT TRITHAWORN, BARISTA

Nowadays, he and his wife, Mhee, get their income – and a much better one, they say – from cultivating coffee plants and selling the beans. They have some 5,000 coffee trees on wooded land where villagers also grow nuts, fruits, vegetables and herbs.

"We grow coffee where we grew opium," Tua says. "We always planted poppies in good soil, which is now perfect for coffee trees."

The couple recently launched their own brand, Tua Ka Mhee ("Tua and Mhee"). Printed on packs of their freshly roasted dark coffee is a stencilled image of them in traditional Hmong garb against a backdrop of mountains.

Demand for coffee grown by hill tribes is increasing, so Tua and Mhee are planning to plant yet more trees. Nearly all the other 250 or so families in the village grow coffee.

Nor are they alone. "In almost all the hill-tribe villages, people grow coffee," says Thirach Rungruang, director of the Agricultural and Food Marketing Association for Asia and the Pacific (AFMA), a UN-affiliated non-profit organisation.

Along with other marketable crops such as nuts and stone fruits, coffee is bringing relative prosperity to plenty of tribal communities. "In many villages you now see a pickup truck outside every house," Thirach says.

The arabica coffee plant, which despite its name originated in the highlands of Ethiopia, thrives in forested environments in subtropical climates, especially at higher altitudes with stable and more moderate temperatures. Thailand falls within the so-called Coffee Belt that encircles the planet in a wide equatorial band from Guatemala to Papua New Guinea. The country's cooler mountainous north is ideal for growing flavourful and aromatic arabica beans.

Coffee is a fairly low-maintenance but high-yield plant, which makes it a choice crop for hill-tribe farmers. They usually plant sunlight-sensitive saplings in the shade of taller trees in orchards and local woods. By protecting woods that sustain their coffee trees, the growers are helping to preserve some of Thailand's northern forests, Thirach says.

"We do not need to look after our coffee trees much," says Tua, an affable man with a toothy smile. "When they're fruiting we may have to cover them with nets to keep away rats, bats and pests, but usually that is all."

That is good news because quality beans are becoming a sought-after commodity in Thailand, where locals drink 300 cups of coffee a year on average. They are expected to drink even more in coming years. In a country where middling instant coffee was once the norm, demand for high-quality brews is fast growing.

The Thai coffee market officially generates more than 36 billion baht (HK$9.1 billion) in annual revenues, which could double in the next five years, according to market analysts. Outlets run by Starbucks and other prominent chains have become ubiquitous around Bangkok. Thousands upon thousands of privately owned coffee shops have also sprang up throughout the country.

Although most locally consumed coffee is imported, Thailand's central and southern regions are turning into major producers of beans of the hardier, but less savoury, robusta variety. Yet it's the single-origin arabica produced by certain hill-tribe villages that is becoming popular with aficionados of the drink.

"Some beans from the north are excellent quality with great flavour profiles," says Piyachat Trithaworn, a barista whose cafe in central Bangkok caters to lovers of speciality coffee.

"That wasn't the case a few years ago. Hill-tribe people are getting much better at growing coffee organically and processing the beans skilfully."

After swapping poppies for coffee beans, Tua Jangaroon and his wife, Mhee, now produce their own brand.

Few of them do it better than Ayu "Lee" Chuepa, who hails from a small hamlet of minority Akha people in the northern province of Chiang Rai and sells high-quality, locally grown arabica.

Lee, 34, speaks fluent idiomatic English. He picked it up from foreign tourists at the Buddhist monastery where he lived and studied during his teenage years as a temple boy and novice monk. His parents, who are illiterate farmers, were too poor to afford fees at a normal high school.

"When I was a child the jungle was my home. I lived like Tarzan," Lee says with a chuckle. His mother, Meelor Churmue, sold home-grown cannabis to pay for his fees at a nearby village school. "You could say ganja paid for my early education."

But it is another plant that would help turn the family's life around. Like other villagers, Meelor began growing coffee, but wasn't making much money from it. Lee, who moved to study and work in the northern city of Chiang Mai after his stint in the monastery, realised that unscrupulous middlemen had been short-changing hill-tribe farmers.

"People in my village worked hard all year long, but they stayed very poor all the same," Lee says. "I wanted to find a way to change that."

Selling high-quality coffee at fair prices could be the way, he figured. He decided to learn all he could about how to grow, process, roast and brew coffee. He then taught Akha farmers back home and set about selling their beans in Chiang Mai, a hub of northern Thai coffee.

In 2010, Lee launched Akha Ama ("Akha Mother"), a brand named in honour of Meelor, 60, who was born in Yunnan province. From there she migrated to Myanmar, but armed conflict in the war-torn country sent her fleeing to northern Thailand, where Lee was born.

Akha women are famed for their lavishly beaded, silver-studded headdresses of almost pharaonic grandeur, and Lee chose a portrait of his mother in her headwear as an emblem for his venture. The exotic imagery and high-quality arabica from his village proved a winning combination.

Within a year Lee's coffee was selected by the World Cup Tasters Championship, a competition which awards the best coffee tasters, in the Netherlands. It would be selected twice more. "I got lucky from the start," he says unassumingly.

His three coffee shops in Chiang Mai are popular and Akha Ama coffee is also prized by connoisseurs in faraway Bangkok.

"Hill-tribe beans have come a long way," says Kanyavee Sakunpiwat, who sells high-end drip coffee in Bangkok. "Lee's are among the best."

Living standards have also come a long way in Lee's hillside hamlet. Rickety bamboo shacks with leaky thatch tops have given way to tidy houses with gabled roofs of tiles and solar panels. There is a pickup truck outside every home.

"Coffee has been good to us," he says.

Thirach Rungruang makes a brew from beans grown by hill tribes; a basket of fresh coffee berries and dried beans.

Ayu "Lee" Chuepa with his Akha Ama coffee brand.