Watermelons, bars and trucks: dangerous intersections in Northwest Lao PDR

An ethnographic study of social change and health vulnerability along the road through Muang Sing and Muang Long

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Introduction: the road through Sing

Young men, stripped down to their underwear, heave styrofoam boxes dripping ice water up into a waiting 6-wheel truck. Hundreds of boxes are still to be unloaded from the cargo boat that has recently berthed on the rocky shore of Xiengkok after its 5-hour journey up the Mekong from the river port of Chiang Saen famous for its vistas of the geographic fulcrum of the Golden Triangle. Each box contains scores of *pa fa* - a small turtle highly prized in China as culinary delicacy – frozen to within an inch of their lives. The Lao port in Xiengkok where they are loaded onto trucks promises rapid delivery, it is just two hours by road from the southern China border. The truck-driver and labourers are Chinese, the boat-driver Burmese, the *pa fa* are raised in Thailand, but for its brief journey from the sandy Xiengkok border just the width of a river from Burma to the border at Pangthong where Route 17B enters China, everything the truck passes is Lao.

Or perhaps one should say nearly everything. In the recent past, as the road was still being built, one could catch glimpses of exuberant red and purple poppy fields tended by Akha men and women in embroidered black and silver ushering the harvest that would ensure they have medicine, a daily fix for local addicts and a crucial item of exchange in times of rice shortage. Nowadays numerous fields along the roadside glisten with more modern light – regular rows of plastic coverings catch the sun and profile scores of Chinese labourers who are supervising more legally acceptable market gardens. As trucks and turtles pass the two district towns and markets, Chinese traders and day-trippers mix with scores of Western backpackers who, in turn, are more often than not engaged in barter for handicrafts brought by women and girls from a wide range of different ethnic groups in nearby villages and who actively seek out the tourists sipping coffee in the small restaurants along the road. Meanwhile local Lue townsfolk meander in what were until recently quiet towns cut-off from other provinces and countries by the existence of only one dilapidated road built by the Chinese in 1970 from Muang Sing to the province capital. The 85 km's of newly upgraded 17B hasn't made travel to the capital any easier (although that road too has been renovated). But it has meant that now huge cargo trucks thunder through Sing and Long towns to and from China and the children, adults and an increasing number of young people on shiny cheap Chinese motorcycles run the daily risk of being crushed flat in the clouds of dust that surround this constant thoroughfare.

And then of course there are the aspects of trade that one doesn't readily see. The pursuit of endangered flora and fauna from the forested hills is only exacerbated by the increased efficiency of transport the road provides for traders from Thailand and China. Exploratory missions run by Chinese and Vietnamese specialists are probing the hills for gold and copper (once mined by the French in this area). The road is also cited in some international journals as a trafficking route for illegal drugs produced in nearby Burma (Geopolitical Newsletter #7 April 2002; www.geodrugs.net); recent seizures would appear to confirm this.

Route 17B cleanly bisects two districts of Long and Sing in Luang Namtha Province in the north westernmost corner of Lao PDR, traversing the valley corridor

that runs down from China to the Mekong. It links the economic powerhouse of Yunnan Province conveniently with the Mekong River (avoiding a series of troublesome rapids for river traffic) and Burma and Thailand beyond. It is not the only road being built to provide trade and commerce networks throughout the upper Mekong. Compared to the intended scope of the Northern Economic corridor (Route 3) that will pass through adjoining districts and, when it is completed in 2007, will connect China more directly to Thailand, Route 17B is modest in size and still limited in the range of populations it serves. Nevertheless in the three years since its completion its impact on the local lifestyles and livelihoods has been dramatic.

Until very recently, travel between the two districts of Sing and Long was not undertaken lightly. Although the Sing and Long valleys down to the Mekong have long been an important route for trade caravans using pack animals moving between mountainous areas of China, Thailand and Burma, its passage has always been difficult. In the mid 1990s, government officials and development workers in residence in Sing and Long would take two days to move between the two district towns or to reach the river. Xiengkok had been opened as an official border point in 1986 to police goods delivered to or moving inland from passing boats, but scales of trade were enormously limited by an overgrown trail that was passable only by oxen or motorised ploughs.

A million dollars from the World Bank in 1996 was to change all this. The Province engaged this loan to upgrade the 74 km's of Route 17B from Muang Sing to Xiengkok. Five different companies were involved in the construction: four were Lao and one Thai. It was completed in the year 2000. While still an unsealed road, this national highway is now regarded as an all weather road and indeed the amount of traffic remains high throughout the year. A separate project improving the road 17A from the provincial capital upgraded the 12km section from the town of Muang Sing to the Chinese border at the same time. It is no understatement to say that since Route 17B was completed its impact on local populations has been profound; a wide range of social and material changes have taken place throughout the lowlands and highlands of the two districts that the road bisects.

In the first instance, the road has opened opportunities for a huge influx of people and goods. Numerous trucks travel from China to the port of Xiengkok ferrying goods to and from Thailand. Traders, investors and agricultural labourers are moving into the two districts utilising the road's transport efficiency as an incentive to produce goods for sale back in China. This is an important distinction - many studies analyse the modest economy of Lao PDR and its largely rural population as a source rather than host of cross-border labour migration. In this area, it is in-migration that has the most impact on issues of material and social livelihood.

But it is not just transit vehicles or in-migrants that are catalysts of social change. The road has played a significant role in demographic changes that are fundamentally transforming the social fabric in this region. Ethnic groups that have for centuries lived in the mid and upper slopes of the mountains flanking the valleys are quickly moving down to be near the road and the market opportunities it

symbolically and materially represents. This is a pronounced trend in both districts (and other parts of Laos) and is a complex product of 'push and pull' factors promoted by larger policy and socio-economic transitions. The end result is an increasing integration of people from different cultural backgrounds engaging in market enterprise and negotiating new forms of social competencies in the lowlands near the road.

In recent years the Lao Government has adopted a number of strategies to bring about development and reduce poverty especially in the poorer remote areas that predominate in the mountainous north. A key goal of the Government is to elevate Lao PDR to a level of social and economic standing above its current designation as a Least Developed Country. While Muang Sing has historically had profitable trade relations with China, Muang Long is still ranked as one of the poorest districts in Lao PDR (forthwith Laos). Providing road access is a key Government platform to assist in poverty reduction. The construction of route 17B and the gradual addition of small feeder roads is part of this vision. So too is facilitating the movement of highlanders into the supposedly more economically viable lowlands and various initiatives have been employed to encourage this relocation. A key component of current Government initiatives that significantly reconfigure life in the Sing and Long Districts is the prohibition of opium cultivation. The dual mandates of opium eradication and stabilisation of upland slash-and-burn agricultural techniques has made the option of life in the lowlands near the road an irresistible alternative for many highlanders. Here they engage in a variety of economic pursuits marked most notably by their role as an expanded and flexible labour force for the many new (foreign) market initiatives. A growing number of foreign development agencies are also contributing to myriad lifestyle changes within this complex mix bringing with them a package of agricultural and social projects aimed at improving livelihoods.

As with all programs of social change, predicting precise outcomes is enormously difficult. The various economic and social forces impacting on life in Muang Sing and Muang Long have numerous consequences, some beneficial for certain individuals and communities, other less so. One element of these changes is clear: the road has played a key role in bringing development to the peoples of Sing and Long. It has concretely anchored a vast number of material and social forces that have an impact on almost every resident within the two districts. It is for this reason that we choose to frame a study of changing livelihoods and their health consequences in this region by focusing on the impact of Route 17B.

Supported by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, a research project to examine these issues was conducted in three phases from Jan 2003-Jan 2004. It had the following objectives:

- To conduct an impact analysis of increased mobility along the recently constructed Xiengkok-Muang Sing Road and the implications of this thoroughfare for the increased transmission of HIV and the trafficking of drugs.
- To analyse how the shift from subsistence economy to an increased reliance on commodity trade within a market economy is affecting health

standards and increasing the potential for HIV transmission within ethnic minority populations in areas proximate to the new highway.

- To examine how increased infrastructure development, such as roads, impacts on local livelihoods and provide a basis for pro-active public health initiatives in areas where future roads and mobility are planned in the upper Mekong region.

To achieve the above objectives, the project collected anthropological data from selected sites along, and in proximity to, the Muang Sing-Xiengkok highway in four overlapping contexts:

1. *The influx of people*. A survey of the categories of people using the road both internally and to travel between China and Thailand via the Mekong River. This included traders (primarily Chinese, but also Thai and Lao); investors (mainly Chinese); Chinese and Thai labourers, tourists (Chinese and Western); and service providers such as commercial sex workers (Chinese and Lao) and truck-drivers.
2. *The infrastructure development associated with the increased movement of people through the area*. A survey of the facilities that have been established to cater for the increased mobility along the road. This included accommodation, food, trade, transport and hospitality venues. This allowed the identification of specific forms of social interaction that take place in these sites and an analysis of public health implications that are a direct product of the increase in commercial trade and social interaction at these venues.
3. *The types of social interactions that are promoted by the presence of the road.* This entailed a study of the ways in which increased mobility establishes specific forms of interaction between mobile groups from outside the area and locals. This uncovered the dynamics underlying certain forms of social relationship, such as the provision of hospitality services, that emerge as a direct product of mobility in the region and that promote vulnerability to public health threats such as HIV transmission and substance abuse.
4. *The ways in which increased trade and movement of people and goods impacts on local livelihoods and changing social values.* Here the intent was not to focus so much on the influence of an increased number of outsiders in the area but rather to study the social relationships between highlanders and lowlanders brought into greater proximity by the presence of the road and the access it affords to a market economy. Some of these interactions are positive and bring direct benefits to the relocated highland communities. Other pressures incurred by the emphasis on buying and selling promote exploitation and community fragmentation which in turn have direct repercussions for public health of the highland populations who have moved closer to the road.

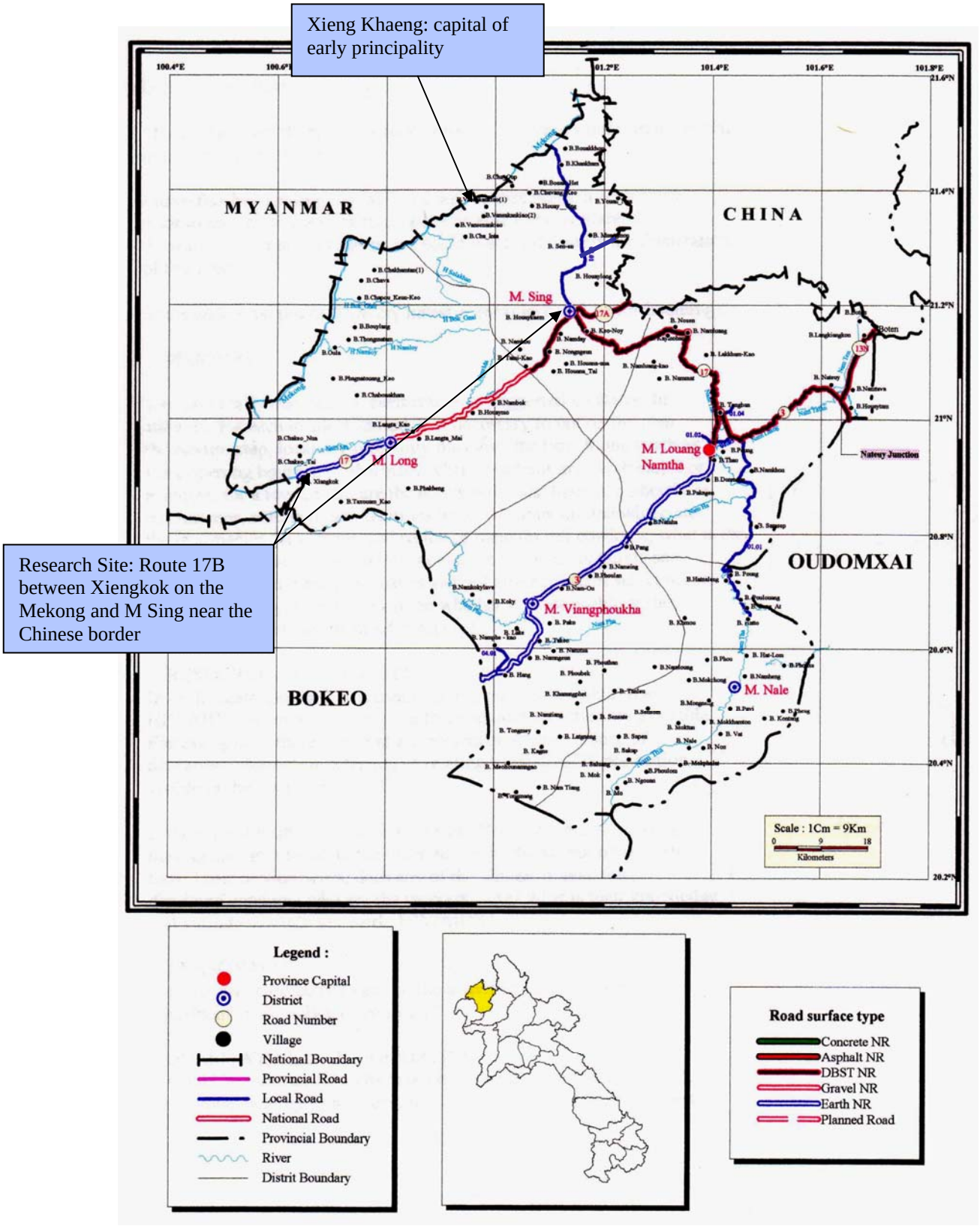
The research was primarily carried out by Ms Bouakham Tongkhamhane and Mr Souriyanh Sisaengrat, research staff from the Lao Institute for Cultural

Research, within the Ministry of Information and Culture, under the supervision of the Institute's Director, Ajarn Houmphanh Rattanavong. Ajarn Som Phaxayamoungkhoun from the Institute also helped on one research visit. Aphu, a local Akha man from Muang Sing worked with the research team facilitating and assisting data collection. Research collaboration was provided by two Australian anthropologists, Dr Chris Lyttleton and Dr Paul Cohen from Macquarie University who assisted with data collection and writing up. The two research staff from Vientiane spent a total of five months on three separate visits in the field gathering qualitative and quantitative data. It must be noted that many of the statistics concerning demographics and trade were somewhat inconsistent between different government departments, each with overlapping responsibility. With constant staff turnover and little in the way of computerised record keeping, historical and empirical data has proven enormously difficult to tabulate or verify.

Nevertheless over time and with a combination of data sets, a picture of change clearly emerges showing demographic shifts, increased trade and diversifying markets. Some sectors show distinct progress. Improved road access and upgraded education facilities and attendance are easy to verify: in 2003 the province built more than 430 kms of new road in mostly rugged mountain areas, in Muang Sing 53 new secondary teachers were employed and school enrolments in Sing and Long year went up by more than 1600 students in just one year.

Health and quality of life are far harder to quantify. This study seeks to document both by looking at the material impacts of the road on trade and agriculture and its more subtle components that shape subjective states of well-being – or its opposite. We will begin with a history of the two districts followed by a summary of agricultural and commercial characteristics of the areas proximate to the road. We then turn to an analysis of demographic shifts and the increasing integration of different ethnic groups under the broad paradigm of market capitalism as it takes shape in the valleys of Sing and Long. We finally consider the impact of the road on health with a specific focus on HIV and drug abuse.

Grabowsky (1999:250) concluded his summary history of Muang Sing noting that its prior position as an important buffer state "inspires the local population and its administration to develop the district of Muang Sing in to a major regional trade and tourist centre". Other recent analyses suggest that the Lao PDR is set to become the hub of land transportation for the Greater Mekong Sub-region in particular the North which will be the nexus of a road system that links China, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Chamberlain 2000). As we will describe, the upgrading of Route 17B contributes substantially to these complementary visions albeit in complex ways with both positive and negative consequences.



Source: Chamberlain 2000: 27

Chapter 1
Historical and Cultural Overview

Muang Sing is a vibrant town with remnants of French stone porticos, traditional wooden Lue homes, modest migrant abodes and myriad quickly-built concrete homes and storefronts huddled in the centre of a sprawling valley etched with the careful geometry of highly fertile rice-fields. It has a bustling market, a high level of Chinese and other foreign visitors as well as a growing number of Lao government and private sector delegations arriving regularly. The town's population indicates its local market dominance with over 3000 inhabitants compared to around 1500 in nearby Muang Long town. Development is proceeding apace in Muang Sing town – a telephone service arrived in early 2003, electricity arrived several months later and the internet is not far away. Muang Long with a much smaller town population is still waiting for these advancements. So too is Xiengkok. These three towns are predominantly populated by Lue residents, although since the road's construction different ethnic groups are rapidly populating the outskirts of these towns creating a far more dense concentration of ethnic groups than before. The lowlands of the region have typically been dominated by Tai peoples and the highlands by a diverse number of ethnic groups and this historical sequence sets the stage for the intersection of different cultural beliefs and economic practices as they increasingly cohabit in the regions serviced by the road. District populations that in the past were largely dispersed throughout the hills are now consolidating along the road and peripheral areas of the towns.

Little was known about Muang Sing and Muang Long prior to the 18th century. Since then Muang Sing has had historical significance within regional politics, belied by its modest size and remote geography. An early chronicle details Muang Sing's involvement in an uprising against the Burmese in the mid 16th century[1] after which it is probable that Muang Sing was deserted for more than two centuries. The first successful attempt at resettlement took place in 1792 by Nang Khemma, the widow of the past ruler of Chiang (Xieng) Khaeng a small principality in the mountain areas of the upper Mekong. She first settled with her followers in Ban Nam Dai (about 5 kilometres south of present-day Muang Sing town and situated adjacent to what is now the road to Xiengkok). She consigned a stupa (*that*) to be built on the top of a nearby hill which was named That Chiang (Xieng) Teum. This stupa is still renowned throughout the region and the focus of an annual Buddhist merit-making festival (*Bun That*) that draws Lue mendicants and celebrants from throughout the area.

The history of Muang Sing is closely linked to that of Xieng Khaeng principality whose remaining legacy is a picturesque Lue village on the Mekong nearly two days walk on rough mountain trails from Muang Sing town. The founding of Xieng Khaeng, probably in the 15th century, is recounted in the legend

[1] Most of the historical details of the early history of Muang Sing are derived from Volker Grabowsky's "Introduction to the History of Muang Sing (Lao PDR) prior to French Rule: The Fate of a Lu Principality" (1999)

of Cao Fa Dek Noi (the "child ruler"), the unruly son of the ruler of Chiang Rung (in Burma), who upon exile from his father's realm, sailed down the Mekong River with his followers, to establish his own principality on the bank of the Mekong. Xieng Khaeng became a vassal state, first of Lanna (north Thailand) until early 16th century and then of Burma from the mid 16th until the beginning of the 19th century. In the first half of the 19th century Xieng Khaeng fell under Siamese domination and was largely decimated. From the 1850s Xieng Khaeng was restored through an alliance with Chiang Tung (then a vassal state of Burma) and the capital of Xieng Khaeng was transferred to Muang Yu on the west bank of the Mekong.

In 1885, Cao Fa Silinor, the ruler of Xieng Khaeng, decided to resettle in Muang Sing with more than 1,000 of his Tai Lue subjects (including all of his officials). One likely reason for the relocation from Xieng Khaeng was the scarcity of rice land in its old locale and the comparative fertility of the Muang Sing plain. Another might have been "geostrategic". Xieng Khaeng had ceased sending tribute to Burma and the transfer of the capital and its population some distance away would have offered some level of protection against a Burmese punitive reprisal (Grabowsky 1999: 242).

Muang Sing, however, was not destined to be a quiet repose removed from regional geopolitics. In the 1890s, it became the focus of British and French efforts to establish a "buffer state" between their expanding colonial territories. An agreement was reached following high-level negotiations convened in Muang Sing town in May 1896. The agreement dictated that the Mekong River from Chiang Saen in Thailand until the point it entered Southern China would become the recognised international border between British Burma and French Indochina. The loss of territory on the west bank of the Mekong (districts such as Chiang Lap, Muang Yu and Muang Luai) resulted in a substantial reduction in the size of Muang Sing principality to about half its original area and its autonomous inclusion under French governance.

Cao Fa Silinor died in October 1901 and was succeeded by his eldest son, Cao Ong Kham who, under French direction, re-organized the local administration and introduced fiscal and judicial reforms to his territory. In 1914, Cao Ong Kham, with the help of Chinese gangs, led an unsuccessful rebellion against the French. The rebellion was suppressed by April 1916. Ong Kham fled to Sipsong Panna and he and all his heirs lost their titles and privileges. There is a regrettable absence of published historical sources on subsequent French colonial rule in Muang Sing. Today there remain scarce material remnants of French occupation. The present day town shows only a few dilapidated buildings of French design. An old army barracks has several overgrown ramparts that corner the current army offices and a few crumbling storefronts still survive but they are rapidly eroding in face of the influx of new commercial interests.

Oral histories from Akha villages reveal a concurrent Akha occupation of the highlands of Muang Sing for well over 100 years. Even when the Sing plain was deserted for most of the 19th century due to forced resettlement of the Tai Lue population it is probable that Akha inhabited the hills. During the reign of Cao Fa Silinor and his successor, highlanders commonly practicing swidden agriculture

were called *kha* (a pejorative term for hill people in common use during colonial times) and were administered separately in units called *buak*. A Tai official (with the title *Cao Buak*) controlled each unit and exacted tribute and corvee labour (Nguyen Dui Thieu 1993).

The lowland Tai Lue domination of highland ethnic populations in Sing (and present day Long) has persisted to the present, with the feudal system of tribute and corvee being replaced by wage-labour dependence. The political supremacy of the Tai peoples throughout the region is enhanced by a strong sense of localized ethnic identity, expressed, for example, by the cult of the 32 guardian spirits of Muang Sing (still worshipped in a major annual ritual which, although prohibited, still continues today). The 32 guardian spirits include Cao Fa Silinor and one of his wives together with other spirits considered ancestors who have shown beneficence towards the Tai Lue of Muang Sing. Notably each of the 32 guardian spirits is identified with a particular feature of the natural landscape with the Muang Sing plain. This provides a kind of spiritual map or sacred topography, which has the cadastral function of setting the geographical limits to the Lue-inhabited political core of the *muang*. It also serves to mark the boundaries of the Lue as an ethnic group both different from and superior to neighbouring highlanders (Cohen 1998:50-52).

The present population of Muang Sing district is only 29,307, which gives a very low population density of approximately 16 persons per sq. km^2. This can be explained by periodic demographic collapse. As noted above, there was a considerable population loss in the 19^{th} century as a result of the depredation of the invading Siamese armies of Chiang Mai and Nan. Reports of the late 19^{th} century indicate that after the re-establishment of Muang Sing by Cao Fa Silinor in 1885, settlers, mainly Tai Lue, came from Chiang Tung province in Burma and Sipsong Panna in Southern China. According to a census taken in Muang Sing in 1888, there were 16 lowland villages, comprising 483 households, in the principality of Muang Sing. These included settlements now administratively located in Muang Long such as Muang Nang and Ban Khwang. Grabowsky estimates the 1888 population to have then been 3,391 but this figure only included lowlanders and did not count the ethnic groups living in the hills surrounding the valleys (1999:247). Village oral histories reveal a gradual migration of Lue immigrants from southern Sipsong Panna (Muang La, Muang Phong, Muang Hun, Muang Mang) over the next fifty years or so. This influx was intensified in 1958 with the land collectivization campaigns in China.

However, these population gains were offset several years later by the local turmoil created by the left-wing Lao Issara (Free Lao) uprising (*pot poi*) in 1962. The Lao Issara (also called Pathet Lao) launched their attacks on loyalist forces from sanctuaries in Burma, in particular the Lue settlement of Chiang Lap, with the

[2] A GTZ report of 1999 estimated the population density then to be 14.1 persons per sq. km, with 51 persons per sq. km in the lowlands (i.e. land under a 35 degree slope) and 10 persons per sq. km in the highlands. The lowland population is still very low compared to other fertile, irrigated plains in the region.

assistance of some 90 Vietnamese 'advisers'[3] and later from roughly 400 local Lue, Neua, Akha and Lao Theung recruits from Muang Sing. The ensuing conflict caused the exodus of many Tai Lue residents from Muang Sing. All the inhabitants of three villages Nong Ngen, Huay Kot and Xieng Yeun which make up about half the present day town and about half the population of Ban Silimun, and small numbers from other villages just outside town sought refuge in Thailand and some of these later in the U.S. Only a few eventually returned. Hostilities between the Pathet Lao and Royalist forces continued unabated till 1974 and dragged on with sporadic fighting till 1977.

While not playing a central role in feudal hierarchies and territory establishment that characterise Muang Sing, what is now called Long District was an important trading centre linking lowlands and highlands and also a major route used for pack-animal traders from China passing through Sing and for traders from Thailand and Burma passing through Xiengkok. For almost a century, settlements in present-day Muang Long were governed directly by authorities in Muang Sing. The first plans to establish Muang Long as separate district began in 1957 and it became a separate administrative district in 1962 with its headquarters (*samnak muang*) at Muang Sa, which borders the Mekong River. The years of military conflict between Pathet Lao and Royalist forces in the area caused the relocation of the headquarters several times, first to the Long/Sing border in 1968 and then a year later to Muang Mom near the Chinese border. When peace was restored in 1975 the district administration returned to Long, first near Ban Luang and then in 1993 to its present location about a kilometre away adjoining the road that was to become upgraded to Route17B.

The population of Muang Long was more dramatically affected by the years of fighting to the point that it is regarded as one of the Lao districts that has had to endure amongst the highest levels of population movement in recent times. The 1962 uprising began in the newly designated district of Long two days after the insurrection in Muang Sing (3 June). Despite sporadic fighting Muang Long continued to function as a small trading centre. But in 1965 more serious armed conflict began between the royalist government in Vientiane and Pathet Lao forces in Namtha Province and a large percent of the lowland population in Long, mostly Lue and Kui villagers, were driven south by the royalist troops and required to take up residence in Huay Xai in Bokeo Province. A similar exodus occurred again in 1968. This forced migration contrasts with the largely voluntary exodus of Lue from Muang Sing in the same period. It was bluntly enforced when Royalist forces burned the Lue trading and administrative centre of Ban Luang to the ground to compel the inhabitants to leave. The only remaining village at the foothills of the plain was the Lanten village of Pakha. From 1965 to 1975 the Long plain was almost deserted and in ruins. After 1975 a number of original inhabitants of Lue

[3] It is noteworthy that the first district governor (*Caw Muang*) of Muang Sing, Thaw Phomma, was a semi-literate boatman (*nai heua*) from Xiengkok appointed by the Pathet Lao in 1962, presumably as a reward for his long service of ferrying Lao Issara fighters from Chiang Lap to Xiengkok.

villages in the Sing and Long plains returned from Huay Xai to take up residence again.

Likewise the residents of Xiengkok (17kms from the centre of Muang Long) who had also been forced south to Bokeo returned to their old settlement. They were joined by other Lue from both the nearby Muang Sa (the old district capital) and from Chiang Kham in Burma. In 1987, 5 families moved down to set up a small settlement on the river bank to capitalise on its establishment as a new port. Known as Xiengkok Mai (new Xiengkok) this has now grown into a small port town of 77 households (398 residents).

Since the new government took power, the towns of Sing and Long in the centre of the corridor of plains leading to the river have become more important as both administrative centres and trading towns. With the completion of Route 17B, they have grown noticeably, although Muang Sing still vastly overshadows Muang Long in terms of the scale of its market activities and ability to host outside travellers. Muang Sing has become a highly popular backpacker tourist destination: it has 19 guesthouses which are frequently full with visitors looking for the exotic mix of ethnic diversity, the quiet circadian rhythm of life in Lue towns, opportunities to visit highlanders on remote jungle trails. More than a few are lured by its prior notoriety as the capital of the opium trade in the Golden Triangle. Its four small restaurants grouped on the main road overflow nightly with visitors from numerous countries in the peak season between December and February. Travellers typically move directly from Xiengkok and Muang Sing passing straight through Muang Long. However as tourism in general grows and government officials, aid workers and visitors from other provinces also become interested in Long's cultural and forest resources it has recently also built four guesthouses and is developing rapidly.

Religion

While they are sometime listed as a separate ethnic group from the Lao, the political and economically dominant Tai-Lue population of Muang Sing and Muang Long share with other lowland Lao a Buddhist heritage. This sets them apart - at least in their own eyes - as a "civilized" people superior to the animist highlanders (Akha, Yao, Hmong, Kui, etc.). The Tai follow a tradition of Theravada Buddhism called Yuan Buddhism, that is, a Buddhist tradition (sect) that was nurtured in Lanna (northern Thailand) in the 14th and 15th centuries and spread, through missionary monks, to other Tai-speaking peoples to the north (including the Tai Lue of Sip Songpanna and Tai Neu of Dehong). Yuan Buddhists share a common script (*tua tham*) and religious literature, and an accommodative attitude towards popular animist beliefs.

Religious syncretism is highlighted in the annual Bun That festival (see Cohen 2000a). According to a local chronicle (*tamnan*), the Xieng Teum stupa (*that*) contains the relics of the Lord Buddha. The stupa (or reliquary) is protected by four guardian spirits, including a Naga (serpent) spirit and Panya Tanhai (a

legendary local ruler responsible for building the reliquary). Although the *Bun That* is primarily a Buddhist merit-making festival the thousands of devotees all first pay homage to the four guardian spirits before the ritual circumambulation of the reliquary and the making of donations to monks as acts of merit.

It is noteworthy that the *Bun That* has, for many years, attracted Tai Lue pilgrims from southern Sipsong Panna. Until quite recently the numbers were small due to the poor roads, the time spent on travelling (e.g. three days from Muang La), the physical danger of being killed by robbers, political turmoil in China (from the Cultural Revolution) and political tensions between Laos and China. However, the border agreements between Laos and China of 1992 and subsequent increase in vehicular transport have facilitated access to the festival and the number of pilgrims from Sipsong Panna has increased substantially, in some years numbering as many as 2,000 in a single day.

Cross-border visiting between the Lue of Muang Sing and Lue of Sipsong Panna for other religious purposes - such as ordinations and temple merit-making (*bun than*) - is common. Such visiting is connected to the preservation of strong kinship links (and therefore with villages or origin) over many generations. Indeed, at the time of writing this report a group of Lue from Muang Ham (Sipsong Panna) were visiting relatives at the edge of Muang Sing town for an ordination, ceremonial Lue singing (*khap Lue*) and a merit-making festival at one of the local temples.[4] [5] Other inter-regional Buddhist connections have been forged by the renowned, charismatic monk (of Lue ancestry) Khruba Bunchum. He has a mission of reviving Buddhism throughout the upper Mekong region and has on many occasions travelled along the road from Xiengkok to Muang Sing, building or restoring Buddhist stupas at Xiengkok, Muang Long, and Muang Sing (including two small stupas at the Xieng Teum reliquary), on his way to Sipsong Panna. In short, the road from Xiengkok to Muang Sing and beyond into China is not just a artery of commerce but a thoroughfare of pilgrimage, for monks and laymen, that incorporates the Lue of Muang Sing into a wider Buddhist moral community. At the same time, in more subtle ways it is also providing the highland ethnic groups with access to social and economic networks that increasingly extend well beyond national and cultural boundaries.

Ethnicity

Despite different historical settlement patterns that highlight the dominance of the Lue in the lowlands, both Muang Sing and Muang Long districts are ethnically very diverse. The local populations include 15 ethnic groups: Tai Lue, Tai Neua, Tai Dam (Black Tai), Tai Khao (White Tai), Tai Daeng (Red Tai), Khamu,

[4] There is also inter-regional contact between Lue for other social occasions such as housewarmings, marriages, funerals, as well as for trade.

[5] There are now 28 Buddhist temples in Muang Sing, with 2 senior monks of high rank (*khruba* and *sathi*), 27 abbots (*tu*) and 377 novices (*neen*).

Lanten, Akha, Yao (Mien), Hmong, Musur, Kui, Lol, Doi, and Phu Noi. As noted above, the Tai Lue and Tai Neua have been the most powerful politically and economically, despite comprising only about 30% of the population of Muang Sing and 16% of Muang Long. By far the most populous ethnic group is the Akha, with about 46% of the population of Muang Sing and 58% of Muang Long. In fact, the two districts have the highest concentration of Akha in Lao PDR – together they account for almost 50% of an estimated 60,000 Akha living in Lao PDR (Chazee 1995:154).

Table 1: Ethnic diversity in Muang Sing (2003)

Ethnic group	Villages	Households	Population
Tai Lue	27	1311	6,527
Tai Nuea	5	398	2,053
Khmu	1	39	236
Hmong	4	350	2,511
Yao	4	159	1,110
Akha	58	2,720	13,533
Mixed villages Tai Lue, Tai Dam, Phu Noi	4 villages in Muang Sing township: Xieng Yeun; Hua Khua; Nong Bua; Sing Charoen	556	3,337 of which Tai Lue predominate and Tai Dam and Phu Noi are a minority in these villages

1 village of Lolo and Kui/Muser (91hh) moved into Muang Sing in 2004.

Table 2: Ethnic Diversity in Muang Long (2002)

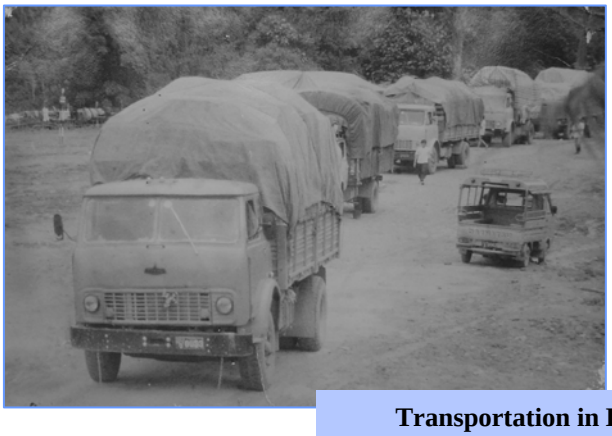
Ethnic group	Villages	Households	Population
Lue	11	677	3,596
Lanten	2	74	434
Hmong	3	125	850
Kui	6	261	1,844
Doi	2	84	438
Akha	60	2,565	13,679
Muser	2	39	151
Yao (mixed with Lue)	1	77	419
Tai Khao, Tai Daeng, Kui	1	84	438
Tai Dam, Lue, Akha	1	84	503

Over many years there has been a long-term movement of Tai Lue from southern Sipsong Panna and Tai Neua from the Dehong region of Yunnan. Chazee reports that some Akha entered Lao PDR after 1850 but that the majority have come from Yunnan and Burma since 1900 (1995:154). Oral histories of Akha villages in Muang Sing indicate that some villages were established in the early 19th century and the elders of two Akha villages claimed their ancestors arrived in

the area between 700 and 800 years ago! (Gebert 1995:55-89). The Yao (Mien) of Muang Sing were relocated by the army during the period 1975-1985 from Vieng Poukkha District due their links with counter-revolutionary guerillas (Goudineau Vol.2:17); prior to this period there were a number of long-established Yao villages in Muang Sing in the vicinity of Xieng Khaeng.

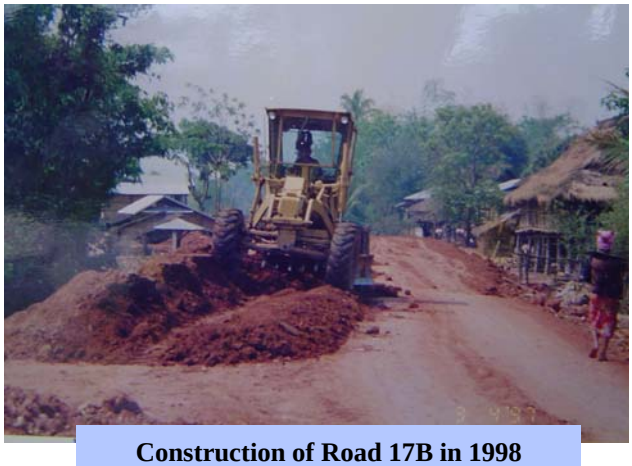
The Hmong of Muang Sing are migrants from Xieng Khouang and Houaphan provinces. They were attracted to Muang Sing in 1992 in response to an announcement on national radio by the deputy governor of Luang Namtha - himself a Hmong - that there was an abundance of potential wet-rice land in the Sing valley. The Tai Dam are also relative newcomers (from Phongsaly), arriving in the early 1990s, but only a small number of households have been able to acquire rice land. They have relied for a livelihood on construction work, agriculture wage labour for the Tai-Lue and Tai Neua and selling of handicrafts to tourists. The Phu Noi also came from Phongsali in the early 1990s but initially under government sponsorship; migrants therefore received some allocation of land and many now sell vegetables and fruit at the local market. Those coming subsequently have lacked rice land and have been forced to work in the town restaurants and guest houses and labour in the fields for the Lue and Neua. The most recent immigrant ethnic group has been the Kui. Lacking adequate land in Vieng Poukha district the government has resettled them in Muang Sing as recently as January 2004 with promises of assistance (including the allocation of rice land).

Grabowsky's prediction that Muang Sing would become a major regional trade and tourist centre is advanced a long way by the presence of route 17B and the concentration of different ethnic groups in close proximity to each other. As we will describe, the changes brought about by the road are multifaceted and diverse. The following two chapters will consider the empirical changes evident in the collection of statistics concerning demographics, agriculture, trade and investment in the districts of Sing and Long. This will give us the basis for analysing the health implications of these changes for different forms of social and employment interactions between mobile populations and different ethnic groups whose lives are in the process of adapting to new options and livelihood endeavours.

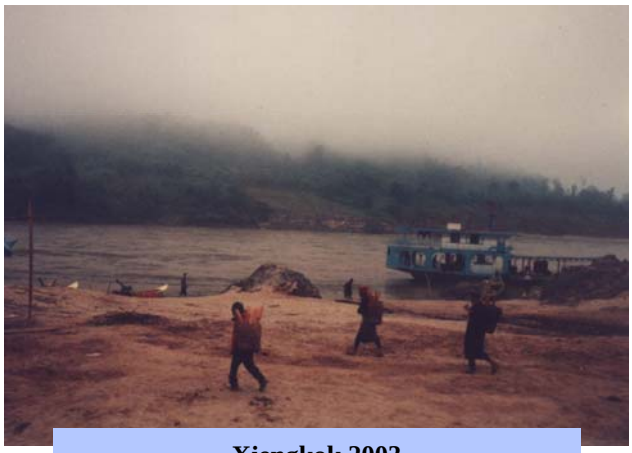


Transportation in Luang Namtha in the past

Xiengkok border port then and now



Construction of Road 17B in 1998



Xiengkok 2003

Chapter 2
Local Livelihoods

It is important to note at the outset that the changing dynamics of social interaction along the road are not a product of massive population growth. In both Muang Sing and Muang Long populations have waxed and waned in the past, in particular during the large upheavals caused by the war between royalist and revolutionary forces. In recent decades, population numbers have grown gradually and steadily. A number of in-migrations from different ethnic groups (primarily, Hmong, Tai Dam and Phu Noi) have taken place over the past 10 to 15 years, especially after the provincial deputy governor's announcement that there was a surplus of flat arable land available in Muang Sing. Such growth has not occurred in a fashion that has caused the towns of Sing or Long to expand dramatically. Rather it is significant that the radical social changes taking place over the past five years in Luang Namtha are a product of demographic shifts in place of residence within the district and the influx of temporary traders and labourers primarily from China. These changes can be directly attributed to the construction of the road 17B. The recent jump in population in 2003 in Sing follows the increasing influx of highlanders from neighbouring districts including Muang Long seeking residence in the lowlands of the Sing plain and lowlanders from other Lao provinces seeking economic opportunities in the town.

Table 3: Population changes

Muang Sing	Villages	Households	Population
1998	115	5101	24,420
1999	115	5306	26,628
2000	109	5505	26,068
2001	103	4994	26,628
2002		5322	25,403
2003	97		29,307
Muang Long*			
2000	119		20,470
2001	90	3,474	24,684
2002	91	4,412	24,240
2003	92	4,458	23,594

*population figures in earlier years not available

Agricultural changes

The decreasing number of villages in Muang Sing from 115 to 97 reflects the government push for consolidation of ethnic highlanders into smaller number of villages concentrated in the lowlands. A similar process is underway in Muang

Long where a substantial number of villages are slated for relocation. To a significant degree this demographic shift is a product of State mandates to halt swidden and opium cultivation and will be discussed in more detail in following chapters. It also indicates the desire on the part of many highland Akha to take advantage of greater economic opportunities in the lower slopes. Recent attempts to introduce cash crops (coffee, cardamom, and sesame) to replace opium and increase livelihood security in the highlands have been significantly overshadowed by Chinese investments in lowland cash crops such as sugar, capsicum and watermelon. More recently rubber is being aggressively promoted as an agricultural alternative in both upper and lower slopes and it remains to be seen whether it will provide viable economic opportunities in the highlands. Foreign development agencies are also promoting improved fallow systems and terracing for rice production and livestock-raising as highland alternatives to opium and swiddening. But so far most examples are in the experimental stage and cannot compete with the obvious cash crop successes that have followed Chinese investment in products grown in the lowlands that have immediate market value amongst Chinese populace. The table in Annex 1 shows the increased reliance on agricultural exports to China.

Whereas donor agencies concentrate on assisting livelihood security and agricultural sustainability in highland communities, in the lowland areas market forces drive the primary demand, production and increased emphasis of a limited number of successful products (sugar, watermelon, corn and capsicum). For example, in 2002 many Muang Sing locals planted watermelon (210 ha) with Chinese investment but the market dropped markedly, they were unable to get reasonable prices and some crops were simply destroyed. In 2003 after word spread of the price drop far less was planted (only 40ha). In 2004, Chinese growers moved into the two districts in significant numbers this time renting the fields themselves and the area under cultivation rose to 74 ha in Sing. As watermelon is usually only grown on the same piece of land for one season due to rapid influx of disease (root parasites), a significant amount of the watermelon cultivation moved from Muang Sing to Muang Long in 2004 where 173 ha have been planted this year (up from 51ha the year before).

The increasing number of agricultural products exported from (and through) Muang Sing and Muang Long to China (and Thailand) underscores the expansion and transition of the agricultural sector within the valleys. While commercial trade and industrial investment is slowly diversifying enterprises in Sing and Long, the agricultural sector remains the social and occupational context into which most external investment is injected and into which highland communities increasingly enter as they come to live close to the road. It is therefore necessary to explore in adequate detail the changing dynamics of the local agricultural sector before turning to social and health implications of the presence of the new road.

Lowland/Highland Agricultural Systems

Roughly 83% percent of the Lao population of 5.5 million lives in rural areas and of this 75% practice typically practice subsistence farming (UNDP 2001: 4.1) although this number is rapidly being altered by a shift towards market driven agricultural development. Lao agricultural systems are typically characterized by two divergent economies: those in the flatlands along the Mekong corridor and its tributaries and those in the uplands everywhere else. The lowlands are generally considered to be progressively transforming under market forces that deliver agricultural inputs through commercial channels and consequently farming households are now consuming part of their production and marketing the other. On the other hand, the usual picture of agricultural potential in the highlands is largely negative. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MoAF) note that upland agriculture is "basically subsistence and farm households are locked into an acute poverty trap, created in part by lack of regional market access, absence of productivity-increasing technology flows and lack of capital needed to fuel the transformation process. Increasing human pressure on the upland natural resource base is accelerating environmental degradation and creating adverse downstream impacts on the fragile Mekong river ecosystem" (MoAF 1999:vii).

While many implicit (and contentious) assumptions in this image of poverty-stricken upland communities are subject to serious debate amongst government and development workers, one aspect is patently clear. Regardless of the provision of adequate capital, rapid social and economic transformation is underway for highland populations in Sing and Long. It comes as the government policies increasingly control the traditional practices of opium production and slash-and-burn techniques. The presence of the road is a key facilitating factor in the new economic choices faced by both long term and newly arrived local inhabitants in the lowlands. As such, the road provides a key symbol for the co-ordinated expansion of lowland enterprises that can now move beyond national borders within the designated Mekong corridor. At the same time, it offers a concrete beacon for those wanting to partake in the optimistic visions of a growing local economic base. A diversifying agricultural landscape typifies livelihoods where crop production is the mainstay of economic livelihoods and in keeping with national policies there is a deliberate shift to maximize export-generated income in this sector. The following section will thus concentrate on the specifics of agricultural livelihood in the two districts as a backdrop to the changing forms of social interaction that emerge as a product of new economic relationships of production.

Rice cultivation in Sing

Rice cultivation has been and remains the staple of agricultural activities throughout most of Lao PDR. It is by far and away the most important crop in Sing and Long. A GTZ report of 1999 states that only 2,975 ha of wet-rice land (*naa*)

has been utilized in Muang Sing out of a potential area of 6,500 ha (now revised to 6,802 ha). Nevertheless in 2003, current usage represented a 60% expansion of wet-rice land since 1995 and a 30% expansion since 1999 resulting in a rapidly declining area that can be potentially developed into wet-rice land (from 54% potential land available in 1995 to 30% in 2003). This expansion has substantial implications for the recent national opium eradication campaign which has caused many highlanders to resettle in or at the edge of the Muang Sing and Muang Long plains in search of alternative crops and sources of income. There is thus a rapidly increasing demand for land in the plain (especially wet-rice land) in a situation of declining availability. The demand for land is particularly pressing in Muang Sing.

Table 4: Land use in Muang Sing

Area of agriculture land	31,500 ha (17.6% of total district area)
Area of forest	63,000 ha (35.21% of total area).
Area of rivers, residential and community land	84,000 ha (47.18%).
Total area of wet-rice land (2003)	4,744 ha (15% of agricultural land)

Muang Sing has long been a rice surplus and rice export district. This has been made possible by a fertile plain and an irrigation network with presently 440 small scale water management facilities (dams, weirs) providing a wet-season irrigation capacity of 3905 hectares and dry- season capacity of 428 ha. Since border trade agreements between Lao PDR and China in 1992, there has been a substantial export of rice to China (via Pangthong).

In 2001/2002, the volume of rice production (wet and dry rice) in Sing District was 17,336 tonnes (87% wet rice), with 4,300 tonnes exported. This lucrative export market has encouraged Tai Lue and Tai Neua farmers of lowland villages to expand wet-rice land. The expansion has been facilitated by the movement, throughout the 1990s, of many Akha villages from the mid to the lower slopes of the highlands. These Akha villages have provided a pool of cheap labour which the Tai have been able to use flexibly according to changing agricultural needs and, particularly by employing opium addicts, to clear land for new wet-rice fields. During this period many Akha addict households who had moved to the lowlands did, in fact, possess wet-rice fields with potential rice surpluses. However, the high consumption cost of opium often led to a spiral of the selling of rice for opium with consequent rice deficits and subsequent sale of productive rice-fields and the ongoing necessity to engage in wage labour for heavily dependent families.

Those Akha who have more recently resettled in the lower slopes or plain are less likely to suffer the economic burden of opium addiction (due to several years of opium eradication and detoxification campaigns) but their prospects of acquiring wet-rice land have significantly diminished. Large numbers of Akha,

particularly recent arrivals to the plain, are therefore likely to be highly dependent on wage labour in the foreseeable future. A gradual process of proletarianisation thus begins to characterise different sectors of the Sing and Long valley residents – A process we shall describe in greater detail shortly.

Table 5: Area of rice land in Muang Sing

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003*
Wet rice(area/ha)	3,652	3,829	4,302	4,511	4,744
Dry rice (area/ha)	1,515	1,515	1,326	1,326	930

Volume of rice production

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003*
Wet rice (tonnes)	13,747	14,219	15,082	16,290	7,485
Dry rice (tonnes)	2,575	2,575	2,254	2,259	521

* A serious drought in 2003 substantially reduced rice yields in Muang Sing (and the region).

The total rice production in Muang Sing consists of both wet rice (lowland) and dry rice (upland swidden) cultivation. The respective yields differ in productivity per hectare. Typically, wet-rice yields an average of 2.5 tonnes per hectare and an average upland dry-rice yield is 1.7 tonnes per ha. This is due to the relatively short fallow periods. Consequently, highlanders often suffer rice shortages. For example, according to GTZ surveys in 1997, three-quarters (74.75%) of the 61 target villages in the highlands did not produce enough rice for consumption. In these target villages the area of shifting cultivation was reduced significantly (in line with government policy) from 1,138ha to 859ha between 1997 and 1999. This reduction was matched by GTZ assistance in the development of permanent rice cultivation (rain-fed and irrigated terraces and flat rain-fed paddy fields), which totalled 833 ha in 1999 (presumably located mainly in lower-slope villages).

Even with assistance, those living in the highlands produce substantially less rice than do those living in the lowlands - a situation that has encouraged an enduring reliance on opium that is used as a buffer against rice shortages and a corollary notion that, in the absence of opium, life in the lowlands with its wet-rice lands represent far greater potential for wealth accumulation than the highlands. Access to lowland agriculture is thus the crucial stepping stone for the traditionally subsistent oriented Akha to enter into primitive forms of capitalism.

Rice cultivation in Long

The overall land area of Muang Long is about a third larger than Muang Sing but its valley is only about a third the size of that of Muang Sing. Not surprisingly, the area of wet-rice (paddy) land in Muang Long is much less, with only about 25% of the area of wet-rice land in Muang Sing. The difference in total volume of wet-rice production is a little less due to the higher wet-rice yields obtained in the Muang Long plain (3.7 to 4 tonnes per ha). Nam Ma, Nam Long, Nam An rivers and smaller watercourses provide irrigation for wet -rice cultivation, though the area of dry-season wet-rice (paddy) is minimal, with only 59 ha cultivated in 2002 (though there is the potential to irrigate 760 ha). In 2002 there were 222 irrigation facilities (dams, weirs). Local agricultural officials have planned for a maximum area of wet-rice cultivation of 2,095 ha in 2010. Predictably Muang Long is much more dependent on dry-rice and production (in area and volume) regularly exceeds that of wet-rice. Wet- and dry-rice yields are higher in Muang Long at 3.5 - 4 tonnes and 1.7 - 2 tonnes per hectare respectively.

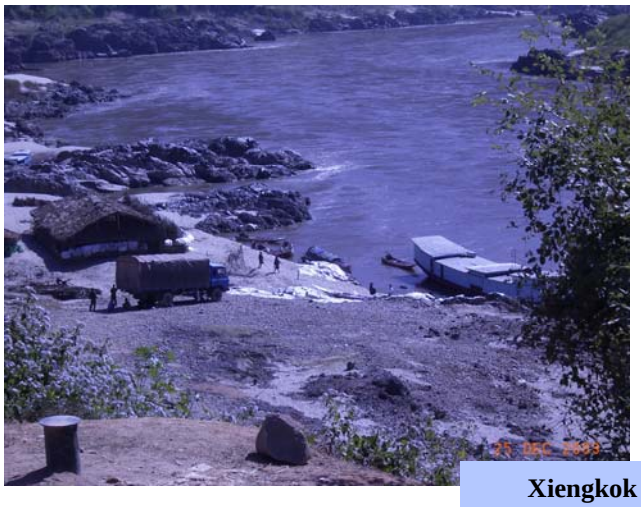
Table 6: Area of rice land in Muang Long

	1999	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**
Wet rice (area/ha)	824	906	1103	1115	1215
Dry rice (area/ha	2438	2310	2210	2210	1810

Volume of rice production

	1999	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**
Wet rice (tonnes)	2819	3566	3629	4586	**-**
Dry rice (tonnes)	4265	4549	3906	4360	**-**

Rice production per person is equivalent to 370 kg per year (2002) i.e. enough rice for local consumption; however this is not evenly distributed amongst lowland and highland populations and in 2001 1,692 households lacked sufficient rice. It is also predictable that Muang Long does not have the rice export capacity of Muang Sing. Indeed, considerable rice deficits are regularly experienced, not just in years of drought such as 2003. For example, in 2001 1,692 households in the district lacked sufficient rice. Nevertheless, traders from Muang Sing regularly buy small quantities of rice in Muang Long (40 tonnes in 1999, 60 tonnes in 2000, 80 tonnes in 2001, 100 tonnes in 2002, and 200 tonnes in 2003), presumably from relatively wealthy Tai farmers.



Xiengkok border port

The congested road passes through the middle of Sing town

Muang Sing and Xiengkok markets

Non-rice sector

Tables in Annex 2 show that production of alternative agricultural products fluctuates as certain crops become more important market driven commodities. As mentioned, highland agriculture is based largely on shifting cultivation of (dry) rice and opium. Vegetables and other consumption crops (such as corn) are usually inter-cropped with the rice and opium. In recent years lower-slope Akha villages near Muang Sing town have responded positively to the expanding market for vegetables in the town and other crops for export to China. Rubber trees are being increasingly planted in highlands and lowlands in Muang Sing but have not yet reached maturation which comes roughly 8 years after planting. So far roughly 680 ha in 16 villages of a planned 2,500 hectares of rubber have been planted in Muang Sing. Eight Chinese companies are contracting villagers to grow this rubber in both the highlands and the lowlands. The terms of agreement would appear not to be particularly in the local farmers' favour. Livestock-raising is also important for subsistence and as a source of cash income. However, villages which moved down to the lower-slopes in the 1990s often suffered serious livestock disease epidemics, mainly from haemorrhagic scepticaemia (Gebert 1995, Cohen 2000b).

Land dedicated to sugar and rubber signals the most dramatic transformation in local agricultural production in recent years. Although more transient in scale or production, a further significant development is the incursions of Chinese funded and managed market gardens growing capsicum and nowadays large quantities of watermelons on tracts of land. This need for land has spread southwards each year peaking at 173 ha. grown in Long in the first few months of 2004 The watermelons are grown by Haw Chinese and Akha immigrants from Yunnan, PRC, on paddy rice land rented from lowland Lue, Lanten, Akha and Kui. As we will elaborate subsequently this agricultural development and related human mobility has significant implications for public health, in particular for sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS).

Non-timber forest products

The remaining forests in Sing and Long hold many NTFPs that have potential and already accessed value to highland communities. Up to 15,000 kg per month of bark from certain species of tree used for the manufacture of glue passes through Xiengkok on its way to Thailand. Orchids sold to China for medicinal purposes are a less sustainable marketable commodity; select varieties fetch high prices (150,000kip/kg) but they are increasingly hard to find in the Sing and Long forests. Like the fragrant woods *mai kessana* (and *mai hom*) they will soon be commodities no longer in existence in this part of the world.

By contrast, palm nuts are a more sustainable forest crop as their collection does not destroy the source. In recent years they have become a notable example of a successful non-forest timber product sold to Thailand. A Lao company

(*Borisat Hun Suan Pattana Kaan Kha*), run by the ex deputy governor of Luang Namtha, imports and exports food products to and from China and Thailand. This company manages the exports of palm nuts to Thailand. The sale of palm nuts began in Muang Long in 1998; sometimes assisted by small private companies who organize the collection and delivery to the sales point on the banks of the Mekong at Xieng Kok. At first, the most that was collected 300 tonnes per year. The amount exported dropped for several years as local swiddening in the highlands reduced the number of accessible palm nut trees. In 2001, a new district policy stipulated that any palm nut trees cut down or destroyed by fire would incur a fine of 100,000-200,000 kip. Since then land allocation in each village includes a reserved area of forest that allows for the utilization of palm nuts.

Palm nuts are found in the south-western reaches of Muang Long and rarely in areas closer to Muang Sing. However for those in this area the crop is lucrative, and for some villages this is now the primary form of income to the extent that they no longer grow rice at all. Villagers collecting palm nuts and delivering them to the port get 10 baht/kg. A steady stream of Akha men and women lug sacks of palm nuts between 30 and 50 kg for hours to reach the port. One palm tree can yield up to 60kgs of palm nuts during its fruiting season (Nov-Feb).

Palm nuts brought to sales points on the banks of the river

The sale of palm nuts has expanded rapidly and many villagers in the southern region now seek income in this fashion and in more distant areas from the port there are increasingly middlemen who act as collecting agents from local villages. The palm nuts must be gathered, shelled and then cooked at a steady temperature (but not boiled) for a specified amount of time before being brought for sale at the river. Palm nuts delivered at the company's collection point that are not

properly prepared only get 2 baht/kg. A family of 3-4 people can collect and deliver between 30-40kg per day depending on the distance need to go to find the palm nut trees. In 2003, the Lao company managing sales of the palm nuts began encouraging the villages to plant the trees in certain fertile locales. Through its collection point at Xiengkok, the company has sold the following amounts to Thailand where the nuts are canned and exported internationally.

Table 7: Palm nuts exported from Muang Long to Thailand

2000	150 tonnes
2001	170 tonnes
2002	120 tonnes
2003	250 tonnes

Opium

In the highlands of Sing and Long opium has been grown extensively to be used both as an effective medicine for a range of illnesses and as a crucial source of income, especially to obtain rice in times of shortage. In addition opium has been consumed by the sizeable highland addict population in Sing and Long, at times averaging approx. 9% of total Akha population in these districts. A GTZ opium survey in January and March 2000, following UNDCP guidelines revealed that 45.7% of villages (48 out of 110) in Muang Sing cultivated opium.[6] However, few households produced enough opium to satisfy the needs of addicts. According to surveys by Epprecht (1998), in Muang Sing in 1996 (of 433 highland households), the average annual production per household was only 547 gm - less than a half of an addict's requirement for a year (of 1.2 kg).

According to the GTZ 2000 opium survey, the total area of opium cultivated in Muang Sing in 2000 was 222 ha. Subsequent reports show 305 ha cultivated in 2001 and 288 ha in 2002. There was then a significant decline to183 ha in 2002. This was undoubtedly a response to the Prime Minister's decree (No.14) of December 2000 ordering the total elimination of opium in Lao PDR by 2006 (later altered to 2005). In 2002 and 2003 local authorities in Muang Sing and Muang Long launched a determined campaign to eradicate opium cultivation in the district, first by confiscating poppy seeds and later by the voluntary or forced destruction of poppy fields. Between December 2002 and January 2003 local authorities eradicated more than 150 ha in Muang Sing, leaving the district with only 28ha under cultivation (GTZ 2003).

As in Muang Sing, opium has been cultivated extensively in the Muang Long highlands by Akha, Hmong and Kui villagers, supplementing dry rice, corn

[6] Epprecht reports that 93.3% of the 433 households he surveyed in 19 villages grew opium in 1996. However, these were all Akha villages and all but 2 were mid-slope villages located between 900 and 1,400 metres altitude.

vegetables and livestock-raising. In 1997 about 60% of highland villages in Muang Long grew opium. The total area and volume of production is high compared to other districts in the province, including Muang Sing. In 2002 the area of poppy cultivation in 53 cultivating villages in Muang Long was estimated as 638ha. or 47% of the total area of poppy cultivation in Luang Namtha province. The volume was 4.8 tonnes or 51% of the total volume produced in the province. Opium productivity in Muang Long in 2002 was also the highest in the province at 7.3 kg per ha. Some highland villages grew opium extensively such as Jakhamlu (30ha) and Mone Laem (59ha). The Hmong village of Mone Laem has long been (and still is) a source of opium for local villages that do not grow opium and surpluses were traded across national borders (in particular to Myanmar).

In 2002 and 2003 after the confiscation of poppy seeds and destruction of poppy fields a number of villages have re-engaged in opium cultivation - in some cases officials have destroyed poppy fields as many as three times. Towards the end of 2003, a Muang Long district report claimed that 267 households in 14 villages were still cultivating a total area of 54 ha. Ostensibly this falls within the State policy of allowing a certain amount of ongoing production until 2005 to allow for the elder opium addicts who are unable to reasonably rehabilitate.[7]

Crop substitution

Aware of the looming prohibition and damaging effects of opium addiction, GTZ has attempted the introduction of crops such as coffee, cardamom and sesame as substitute crops, although to date these have not had substantial successes. A major initiative in the area of crop substitution (alternative development) for opium has been an agreement between the head of Sing District's Drug Control Committee and a Chinese and a non-commercial organization (which also operates in China and Myanmar). The organization is called the Centre for Research on Economic Development for Opium Substitution (*Sun Khonkhua Pattana Setakit Thaen Ton Fin*)[8] and has established an office on the outskirts of Muang Sing – it plans to purchase (at 60 kip per kilo) a weed (called *yaa phang*) that infests the area. In China it has proven medicinal value for animal feed. The Centre will produce a feed that comprises 60% *yaa phang*, 5% soybean, 20% molasses and 15% corn - all to be grown locally. The feed will be used to raise livestock (oxen, buffaloes and pigs), poultry, and fish on government land near Don Poi village, mainly for sale in Thailand. The labour of highland villagers that once planted opium will be hired for these purposes[9]. The head of the

[7] In 2002 elderly opium addicts (over 60 yrs) were allowed to grow 900 sq. m of opium but in 2003 this dispensation was withdrawn.

[8] In Lao PDR it also carries the name of Centre for Sino-Lao Scientific Exchange

[9] The villages included in the plan are: Ban Nam Lek Kao (47 households), Ban Nam Lek Mai (32 households), Ban Yang Luang (47 households), Ban Lorsi (35 households), Ban Hom Xai, (35 households), Ban Huai Um (56 households), Ban Chavang Mai (18 households), and Ban Huai Hoi (15 households). There are 516 households altogether but our informant could not provide information on two additional villages.

District Drug Control Committee has selected these households according to their previous dependence on opium cultivation. The centre plans to operate for 20 years with a budget of 800,000 yuan per year.

Needless to say, near-eradication of opium over such a short period has placed a heavy economic burden on highland communities, both in terms of the elimination of a major source of income and the rising cost of opium to addicts (prices doubled between 2002 and 2003). The burden is exacerbated by a fragile and low-production rice economy. Efforts to lighten this burden through crop substitution have also taken place in Muang Long. Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) contacted a company (*Borisat Khampa*), with offices in Oudomxay and Thailand, in April 2003 with the view of introducing substitute crops in the 25 Phase 3 villages (in Bokbor and Soploy sub-districts) of NCAs Long Alternative Development Project. The company has agreed to supply corn seed (3.6 tonnes) and ginger seed (6 tonnes) with a contract to purchase the produce at stipulated prices (800 kip per kg for maize and 1,000 kop per kg for ginger) for sale in China. The company also plans to introduce greater cultivation of sesame and soybean. Despite efforts by development agencies to provide alternatives to poppy cultivation in the highlands, the lure of lowland opportunities is proving a major enticement for many. This is clearly linked to the perception that economic diversity promoted by access to markets relies on proximity to lowland commerce and trade. There is no doubt this perception is based on the recent economic growth in the lowland valleys.

Xiengkok bimonthly market

Xieng Kok bimonthly market

Kui people buying rice at Muang Long market during rainy season

Chapter 3
Material Development: Commerce and Trade

Many of the agricultural products described in the previous chapter are not solely for export. They are also sold locally at the Muang Sing market, which the January 2004 Lao Airways tourist promotion magazine describes as "the most colourful market in Northern Lao PDR". Before 1946, the local market was outside the town (called *kat noi* in Lue) and took place once a week, in the early morning before sunrise. After 1946, the market moved into central Muang Sing and opened 3 days a week. It provided a meeting point for Akha from the mountains and near the Chinese border came to sell livestock and opium. The same tourist magazine describes this market as "once the biggest market for opium in the Golden Triangle, a function officially sanctioned by the French." While many highlanders would trek into town to buy, sell or exchange opium and other items on a regular basis, local Lue would occasionally travel into the mountains to trade salt and fabric for opium using 'man' or French coins.

In earlier times it was difficult to bring items for trade at the markets; it would take days to travel between Muang Mang and Muang Phong in China and the Lao markets in Muang Sing and Xiengkok. Lue traders would come 3 times a week to the market in Muang Sing and sometimes undertake the arduous journey to take Chinese goods to the occasional market in Xiengkok. They would either carry the goods themselves or if wealthy enough hire horses and porters. Typically it would take 3 days to travel between Muang Sing and Xiengkok; during which time they would sleep in the Lue villages of Ban That or Ban Sivilai and in Muang Long on the way. Primary trade items were Chinese batteries, salt, and clothes; while in Xiengkok they would buy Thai kerosene and clothes to sell back in China upon their return. Other Chinese traders would come to sell buffalo meat and opium (that they brought along the route in Sing and Long) further afield in Thailand and Burma.

So, while trade within and between different ethnic groups and nationalities is nothing new, nowadays the new road has facilitated commerce from far greater distances and allowed movement through these two districts in a matter of hours rather than days. The market is now open everyday, it sits in the centre of town and in the mornings is thronged with villagers from each of the ethnic groups each recognisable in their traditional attire. Trucks, tuk-tuks, buses and motorcycles clog the roadway and make passage past the market very difficult until the early morning crowd disperses back to their home villages.

The upgrading of route 17B that connects the Sing market with the now bimonthly Xiengkok market has ushered in a wider network of trade and far broader expansion of people movement into the towns and rural communities and back and forth across borders. The types of goods and their trade have also been transformed. In a microcosm of global changes throughout the world, increased flows of people, trade items and ideas move into and through the area, in turn, leading to changing lifestyles in a broad range of sectors. An idea of the increasing

number of people and vehicles is clear in the numbers crossing the border points. The statistics also make clear the highly volatile nature of such movement. As SARS struck the region in early-mid 2003 the number of travellers dropped noticeably at the international border point (Boten) but less obviously at the local entry points into Muang Sing (Pangthong and Ban Mom).

Table 8: Border Point Crossings

People	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**
Boten					
Entry (all foreigners)	13,433	17,396	21,785	22,452	15,799
Exit (Lao)	6405	3482	5088	5419	4745
Pangthong					
Entry (Chinese)		8,281	15,803	14,747	14,552
Exit (Lao only)		10,352	7,924	11,696	15,035
Sopla					
Entry (Chinese)	10,838	12,739	10,636	7,889	10,507
Exit	59	52			
B Mom					
Entry (Chinese)					2,067
Exit					1,251
Vehicles					
Boten					
Entry (all foreigners)	1,660	1,872	1,911	1,520	1,270
Exit	3,074	2,629	2,794	2,974	3,788
Phangthong					
Entry (Chinese)		3,670	5,211	4,399	3,961
Exit		3,581	3,670	3,364	3,325
Sopla (boats)					
Entry (Chinese)	1,319	1,645	1,389	1,194	1,286
Exit	10	9			
Ban Mom					
Entry (Chinese)					464
Exit					49

Table 9: Cross-border vehicle traffic:
Phangthong border with China (near Muang Sing town) 2001-2002

	Lao vehicles going to China	**Chinese vehicles entering Muang Sing**
Trucks	212	2,065
Buses	574	2,063
Motorcycles, tuk tuks	2,932	1,133
Total	3,670	5,211

The unevenness of trade relations is evident in the styles of vehicles crossing the border. The majority of Lao vehicles crossing into China are motorcycles, which is to say local Muang Sing travellers visiting Chinese towns for shopping or visiting relatives. In marked contrast, Chinese buses and trucks are the predominant vehicles coming into Muang Sing at an average of roughly 12 per day. In local perceptions the traffic is constant when compared to the recent past; the District Governor estimated that roughly 30 trucks pass through Muang Sing each day.

This might seem a small number by any metropolitan standards, but for townsfolk using the tiny main road that traverses the heart of this small town it is an enormous number bringing both the hallmarks of rapid development and the problems associated with an overburdened infrastructure.

Chinese trucks and motorcycles arrive daily

Thai and Burmese commerce

Route 17B links China with the Mekong across river from Burma and upriver from Thailand. The Xiengkok border post provides a ready access point for Thai and Burmese traders and travellers who reach Lao territory from the river. From the Burmese town of Chiang Lap (a large Lue town about 15 kms upriver) traders come to sell goods such as cotton, cosmetics, silk, perfume, soap, tobacco, food, coconuts, dried fish, and fresh-water seaweed at the bimonthly market in Xiengkok. Others come to purchase buffaloes and cattle in the mountain regions. Some Lue in Muang Long migrated in the early part of the 20th century from Muang Yong in Burma; some moved back to Muang Yong after being moved to Bokeo during the insurrections and conflicts of the 1960s but they regularly return to visit those who resettled after 1975 in Muang Long. At any given time officials estimate about 50 Burmese are in Muang Long conducting various trade arrangements. An arrangement between Muang Long and Tachilek in Burma allows officials to get together each year for sports and arts exchanges. Along the way, Burmese men who visit Lao will occasionally spend time in the growing number of bars that provide hospitality services.

Burmese coconuts for sale in Xiengkok
Buffalos bound for Thailand

Thai traders usually come to buy timber and buffalos. A resort with a number of bungalows overlooking the Mekong was built in Xiengkok by a Thai investor in 2000; and a nearby timber processing factory was established with Thai money in the same year. One Lao trading company controls most of the exports that move through route 17B on their way to Thailand; this company in turn pays the requisite customs at the respective border points.

Mr Bun

Mr Bun is a 32 yr old truck driver from Vientiane who delivers goods to the Chinese border. He has been plying this trade for the past 15 years. His father owns the trucking business and uses his son to drive the products around the country. His most recent trip was to bring 12 tonnes of corn from Luang Prabang to the Boten border. He was paid 130,000 kip ($13) per tonne. He makes the trip from Vientiane to China about twice a month. He can make an income of 7-8 million kip per month.

He often comes in convoys of several trucks; the drivers and their assistants will sleep over in villages on the way and regularly stop at bars on the way to have sex with service women. Many truck-drivers take amphetamines (*ya ma,* or *ya dope*) on their trips.

Pangthong border point was first opened in 1962 providing direct access into the Muang Sing and Long valleys from China. The Chinese arrived to work officially in the district in 1970 to construct the Muang Sing - Namtha road. All borders were closed with China 1977-1983 during the Vietnamese-Chinese conflict. A small border point at Ban Mom north of Muang Sing was opened in 1984 and the checkpoint on the river where it reaches Lao territory at Sopla was opened in 1996. Around 1984, there was an influx of Chinese attempting to illegally migrate into remote areas of Lao territory along the river. This type of encroachment has mostly been controlled until 1992 when, according to the District Governor, there was again a large influx as Lao and Chinese trade agreements were reached that opened up economic relations between the two countries. Since then there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of Chinese, some working legally, others operating clandestine trade (such as in protected animal and plant species) beneath facades of legitimate businesses.

Akha stocking up on Chinese goods in the Xiengkok market

Chinese and Chinese investment

Chinese traders at a tea shop in Muang Sing

While only a small number of petty traders come from Thailand and Burma, they are eclipsed by the current Chinese influence, which ranges from individual traders selling any number of items from vegetables to nail-clippers in the market or travelling medics selling injections and vitamins in the more remote villages or the entrepeneurs who trek through the mountains collecting human hair for doll factories, or less scrupulous traders buying endangered turtles through to small factories producing animal feed, processing rice, liqueur or wood, and a copper mine. In total, the District Governor estimates some 400-500 Chinese are presently in Muang Sing conducting various sorts of business, and official figures suggest another 100 in and around Muang Long. Their presence is most obvious in the Chinese tea shops, bars and guesthouses. Officially, the figures vary. According to the district Social Welfare and Labour Department there are just over 200 Chinese registered to work in the district.

Table 10: Official Chinese businesses in Muang Sing and Muang Long (2003)

Restaurants	7
Nightclubs	2
Fish raising plants	3
Commercial vegetable farms	3
Health clinics	2
Brick Factory	2
Small household furniture workshops	5
Appliance stores	24
Mechanic shops	3
Livestock raising and Animal food factory	1
Rice processing factory	1
Liqueur plant	1
Timber processing factory	1
Copper mine	1

Outside of official businesses, large numbers of Chinese move into the plains of Muang Sing and Muang Long either investing or providing services (labour or advisory) for commercial crops such as sugar, watermelon, capsicum, rubber, corn and bananas. Some come individually with 10-day work permits; others come with agents who organise papers for them. It is estimated that during the dry season there are several hundred agricultural labourers and advisors in both districts. They themselves are ethnically diverse - Chinese Akha, Chinese Lue and Chinese Haw - and this has significant implications for the differing styles of social interaction that emerge as a consequence of their presence. Some Chinese enter through legal channels (they have to request 3-6 month work permits from the Provincial Social Welfare and Labor Department). At the border they can get 10-day entry passes (these entry permits are not officially work permits but most who come this way work anyway) and they can be extended for another 10 days by returning to the border. Those who get long term permission have to know district officials well – they rent houses from which to operate businesses (shops, entertainment places) for up to 15 years with agreements from high-ranking officials. They get guarantees and usually rent land and houses from the officials themselves (after 15 years they must return the property).

Sugar

Sugar is one of the chief forms of Chinese investment in the local economies and one that is increasingly being utilised by Akha who have moved into the lower slopes of the hills surrounding Muang Sing. Before 1995, a handful of rural households planted sugar but only in small plots near local villages of Ban Mom and Ban Nakham outside Muang Sing. The growers had to find the markets themselves in China. Some growers made no income as frequently they couldn't get the sugar out of the fields with the available small trucks and bad roads. Ban Losi an Akha village near Muang Sing tried growing sugar in 1997 and made no returns; they couldn't get anyone to buy it and lost all the money they had invested.

In 1998, agreements were reached between the District Agriculture Office and the Chinese Jenjay Company who invested in local fields with money borrowed from a Chinese sugar factory and agricultural bank. Unfortunately, they didn't bring specialists and the planting techniques in local areas were inappropriate and not managed properly (livestock ate the sugar). Where the plants did grow adequately, there was no pick-up system (or roads were too bad) so no profits were made for either grower or distributor. Jenjay went out of business. Locals continued to plant sugar often with a 50/50 split with other Chinese companies who invested in the gradual expansion of sugar cropping. However, initial experiences were not always improved for the grower; there were reportedly many examples of Akha middlemen who delivered the sugar to the Chinese giving less money than expected to the local growers. The growers

unsurprisingly felt they were being cheated. In 2001, a weighing station was built on the road to the border (run by an agent of a Chinese factory and local Muang Sing officials) to evaluate the exact worth of the sugar to try and solve the problems of disagreements over worth of sugar loads.

In 2002 a contract was signed between Muang Phong Sugar Company, the District Commerce and Agriculture Departments and the Governor of Muang Sing to give greater transparency to the process and agreements. Ostensibly, two contracts exist for sugar cultivation:

a) Contractual agreements for growing (these are not widely distributed)
b) Purchase contracts that specify fines for parties not abiding by the agreement.

Following these arrangements, Agricultural and Commerce Department officials meet with villagers in each village to determine how many families will be contracted to grow on how many hectares. The Chinese investors bring seedlings, associated products and written agreements concerning the duties of the farmers during growing season. Chinese technical advisors are sent to each sub-district (*khet*) – several of these stay throughout the growing season. To further facilitate local production, a Chinese company established a seedling plantation (near Ban Hua Na Kang on the road to Muang Long) two years ago to provide for all the sugar plantations in Muang Sing.

In 2003, an official contract between the Muang Sing district and Chinese processing factory (with offices in Muang La and Muang Phong) specified 33,000 tonnes of sugar to be brought from Muang Sing for that year (3000 tonnes were earmarked for use in subsequent years as growing stock). Usually sugar contracts specify 30% profits for the investor (Chinese) and 70% for the grower (see Annex 3 for list of contract stipulations). The Chinese investors provide the sugar seedlings, fencing wire and fertilizer (10bags/hectare). The costs of these materials (roughly 2000 yuan/hectare) are deducted before the profits are divided. In 2003 an average yield in villages we visited was roughly 100 tonnes/hectare. Successful growers can make upwards of 20 million kip (US$2000) per year. It has still been relatively commonplace, however, that not all the above contractual stipulations were necessarily followed, or certainly not those that protect the rights of the growers. There have been frequent shortfalls in the payments the villagers received for their work. During the initial years of sugar cultivation, many problems between Akha growers and Chinese buyers have emerged that highlight the fraught transition from more typically subsistent lifestyles into those oriented to sedentary cash-crop production. The Akha complain that they don't always receive the money they are due, arguing the weights of sold sugarcane are reduced in the accounting and recompense; that they seldom receive payment on time or sometimes not at all; that Akha middlemen take large cuts and pay the growers markedly less than they are due and so forth, with little ability to seek legal redress in each instance. These are issues to which we will return; nevertheless it is worth noting that economic relations established during recent years of Chinese investment are not straightforward nor necessarily equitable. A key point is that there are few resources at the Akha's disposal to prepare them to avoid these

problems in advance or to resolve these disputes in their favour after they have taken place.

Rubber

Chinese investment is also prompting a significant amount of land being devoted to rubber tree planting. So far roughly 680 ha in 16 villages of a planned 2,500 hectares have been planted in Muang Sing by eight Chinese companies who contract villagers to grow this rubber in both the highlands and the lowlands. Rubber planting thus operates in similar fashion to sugar with specified division of profits (and perhaps similar potential for exploitation of local inexperience in marketing or commerce). It is currently being championed by provincial and district authorities as a commercial crop to take the place of opium for highland communities and Chinese investors seem to be enthusiastic about the potential Sing and Long offer for its long-term market value. It also has enormous appeal to those Akha villagers who are wish to have a form of commercial crop that will allow them to stay in the highlands. In late 2003, a number of Akha who had moved to the lowlands in wake of the opium eradication activities moved back into their original homes in the mountains after they heard of imminent Chinese investment in the area. However, contractual agreements between the Chinese and the local district authorities stalled and the villagers have now moved back down to the lowlands in search of arable land. In the existing land being planted the trees are provided by the Chinese and raised by the Akha until they begin producing rubber at about 8 years. After deducting costs, current contractual arrangements are as follows:

Forested hillsides cleared for rubber trees

8-13th year of production 60% for growers - 40% for Chinese investors
14-19th year of production 50% for growers – 50% for investors
20-25th year of production 40% for growers – 60% for investors
After 25 years, discarded trees are split 50/50 for the sale of the wood.

The Chinese pay 250,000kip/ha/yr rental for land, although with lack of clear land titles it is hard to know who precisely will receive this money. Trial plots have been planted in the neighbouring district of Namtha that have begun to be harvested but it remains to be seen whether rubber planted in Sing and Long will in fact prove to bear a viable alternative to opium growing and allow for sustainable crop production in the mountains. In the meantime, a far more immediate source of profits comes from the rapid expansion of watermelon crops financed by both

Chinese agriculture companies and individual growers from all over southern Yunnan who come in search of cheap rents and fertile land. For the local owners of rice-land (on which it is grown before the rains begin and rice fields prepared for planting) it represents the option of quick and easy profits.

Watermelon

Watermelon was first planted in Muang Sing in 1997-98 when Chinese Haw from Sipsong Panna of Yunnan came to start businesses. They usually have no official permission to do so; they come as individual entrepreneurs. At first watermelon was just planted in and around Ban Mom in northern Sing District. Watermelon is usually only grown in the wet-rice fields (*naa*) for one season as disease infestation makes subsequent crops unprofitable. The Chinese (and some Lao) growers rent the land from local owners (Lue, Tai Dam and Akha); sometimes middlemen help find the land and get a percentage of the crop. Contracts are drawn up between owner and planter. If more than 5 specialists (advisors) come at any one time, then they need to request permission from District Labour and Welfare Department and the Police Department. Since 2002 many more Chinese have come and there are presently 6 companies officially bringing 20-30 people each; but many more come in small unregistered teams. In Muang Long the bigger Chinese companies pay the government to insure they get adequate land. So far, most locals don't dare to invest and manage the watermelon cultivation themselves without Chinese

Chinese advisors and Akha labourers in watermelon fields

assistance because of quota requirements and the delicate nature of successful watermelon cultivation. If the rains are not adequate and timely, large numbers of plants can be unproductive and unless quota requirements are met the Chinese refuse to pay anything for substandard yields. The Akha and Lue therefore simply rent their land to Chinese investors who send teams of technical advisors and labourers during the growing season. The rental for land varies between 800,000 and 1,500,000 kip depending on its location. The Akha and other nearby villagers provide labour during the planting in December and January (at 15,000kip /day) and during the harvest season during March and April (500,000-700,000 kip per truck load). The Chinese prefer to hire women rather than men for their apparent subservience and superior diligence.

People Commerce: Inter-ethnic marriage and trafficking in women

As the roads and use of fields along the roads provide greater levels of contact between traders, labourers and tourists of different nationalities, it is inevitable that different forms of social interaction will be established. Some Chinese long-term migrants and labourers take local wives during their time in Sing or Long without official permission to marry (some pick up young women in bars – other Akha from China and Haw Chinese establish sexual relationships with local women that sometimes develop into ongoing relationships). While we are not in a position to judge the intentions of the visiting men, local communities react in different ways. The elders in some Akha villages prohibit sexual interactions between visiting Chinese Akha men and village women precisely out of concern that their young women will be lost to Chinese households across the border. However, in many villages there are no sanctions on liaisons between local women and visiting men even in light of a rapidly growing number of 'cross-nationality' relationships. Not infrequently the informal and unregistered unions result in the women moving to China accompanying their partners.

Casual relationships are established relatively easily between Chinese and locals and this is sometimes used as a means of effecting longer term residence as there is little rigorous scrutiny of documents that would verify these de facto relationships. In general workers can overstay relatively easily but it is very difficult to individually change citizenship to Lao (although we were told it is possible if enough money is paid). An alternative is to request citizenship based on marriage to a Lao citizen and it is here that informal relationships take on strategic value. As we will describe in an upcoming chapter, in either case, whether final residence is established in China or Laos it is becoming increasingly common for Akha and Kui women to establish sexual relationships with Chinese men whom they meet when working together in sugar and watermelon fields.

Anecdotal information indicates that over the years an unreported number of Akha women have been more systematically trafficked to China to be sold as wives. Sometimes, according to police reports, these women have moved there initially with partners they met in Laos and have been subsequently sold. In

another instance Muang Sing police repatriated several Akha women from villages nearby the town when a group of about 18 women were taken by Chinese brokers as arranged wives. One returnee related how she had been moved by train for several days journeying far into Northern China. We also heard of trafficking south into Thailand. In Xiengkok, both police and local residents described instances of groups of between 6-8 women from both local ethnic communities and other Lao provinces being trafficked to Thailand. Noy is one of these women. While her story has a number of unusual characteristics that are hard to verify some elements such as the harsh reception on her return characterise most women trafficked out of Laos.

Nang Noy

Noy is a 20 yr old Kui woman whose home village is just out of Muang Long. Her father has smoked opium for 18 years; her mother died when she was young and father remarried. She is the youngest of 2 daughters – her older sister is married. We met Noy four days after she had returned from Thailand.

Three years ago a Lue woman had come to her village that had only recently moved down to be by the road. The woman had made promises of good money to be made in the nearby town. The enticements of new clothes and expensive food persuaded Noy (and a friend) to work at a restaurant in Muang Long. Here, when she was 17, she spent 6 months earning money through drinking beer and having sex with customers. After returning home for a brief period she moved to Xiengkok and began work in a bar catering to Chinese truckdrivers. She hadn't been there long when a client said he could find her a better job in Bokeo. He gathered 8 young women together (Kui, Khmu and Lao) and together they agreed to see what it is like in the neighbouring province.

The boat downriver never arrived in Bokeo. They were landed on the Thai shore and bustled into cars and taken to a large open air restaurant. They were too scared to resist. One by one the women were separated and taken by men to waiting cars. Noy was the last to be chosen by the waiting men. A 25 year old Thai man took her past Mae Sai district and down to Chiang Rai. From here they soon left to drive to Bangkok. He told her he had paid 100,000 Baht for her to be his wife. She was installed in a good apartment somewhere in Bangkok and kept there for nearly 3 years. She was almost never allowed out; only on occasional shopping visits. She couldn't read Thai and had no idea where she was. Downstairs, the building housed several commercial sex venues and karaoke bars where she occasionally saw western women entertaining local men. She was not allowed talk with anyone else in the building. According to Noy, her '*por liang'* gave her a large monthly income for food and expenses – she insists she was a kept wife and never had to entertain other clients.

One year later she had a son; but despite beginning a family she yearned to return home. With some of the money she had saved she bribed the security guard at the building's gate with 100,000 Baht to help her escape. Leaving her child behind, he assisted her to get to the public bus station where she boarded a bus to Mae Sai. She had an additional 100,000 baht to take home with her, however, she thinks the guard tipped off the bus-driver and she was given a sleeping drug on the journey. When she arrived in Mae Sai, the money had been stolen apart from a few thousand Baht stashed in her back pocket. Undeterred she made it to the border and crossed over well away from the border detection points.

Everyone in the village was very happy at her return. The next day, her father informed the village headman who in turn informed the district police. The police arrested her for illegally leaving the country. She was fined 30,000 Baht. Not having this amount, the police agreed to a sum of 10,000 baht leaving her with nothing. While at the police station, she met another woman from her village; she was being held for the same offence – having been in Thailand (Phuket). As the friend had no money to pay any fine she was being held indefinitely.

Noy is now wondering how to make money so she can survive.

While Noy's example is not unique, to date it is still a rare occurrence in Sing and Long where trafficking in women is of a very small scale. Nevertheless, social and economic changes are promoting other forms of sexual opportunism within local exchange networks that play a huge role in increasing vulnerability to commercial sex and trafficking and the more specific health threats that often accompany these processes. We will return to these issues in a subsequent chapter. At this point it is worth noting that it is internal movements from highland to lowland combined with in-migration of mobile populations that have the most impact on the health status of the local residents of Sing and Long. Additional major contributors to the changing social and economic landscape in these valleys are foreign tourists and development workers.

Tourism

While the Chinese influence is the most powerful in terms of the road's impact and its effects on everyday livelihoods in the rural sector, international tourism has also transformed Muang Sing town over recent years. One travel guide terms route 17B as the "Akha Road" and it is the appeal of the rich ethnic make-up of Muang Sing that brings large numbers of tourists into the town and surrounding villages. Muang Long has not yet established anything beyond the most minimal tourist facilities; however the road from Xiengkok to Muang Sing is now well traversed by a constant stream of travellers completing the route either to or from the Thai/Lao border point downriver in Bokeo. In contrast to Muang Long, Muang Sing has become a favoured destination for many young backpackers. The rapid rise in tourism as a key staple in the local economy has lead many local entrepreneurs to capitalise on the daily arrival of new visitors. This ranges from transport, food and accommodation services through to guide provision and handicraft production (and in the past commonplace opium sales).

The trend of increasing tourism is a characteristic of recent development throughout Laos. Statistics compiled by the National Tourism Authority (NTA) indicate that the number of international arrivals peaked in the year 2000 at 737,208, increasing from 37,613 just 9 years prior in 1991. In 2002 the 735,000 recorded international arrivals placed tourism as the nation's number one foreign exchange earner, topping US$ 113 million. Those visiting Luang Namtha Province in the far northwest of Laos have risen from 4,732 in 1995 to over 40,000 in 2002. The rising number of tourists is attributable to concerted government initiatives to capitalize on the huge numbers of international tourists visiting neighboring ASEAN countries, as well as the significant number of regional Asian tourists, through both advertising campaigns and loosened regulations on visas and internal travel.

Tourists come to Laos to experience its rich cultural and natural heritage. Coupled with diverse range of ethnic groups, Laos also has an abundance of natural forest cover home to a vast number of bird and animal species, some of whose survival is threatened by forest utilization and hunting. Recognizing its

importance to Lao economic development, international donor and lending agencies are actively supporting the growth in tourism – for example, the Asian Development Bank is investing $12 million in assisting both tourist infrastructure development, such as roads and airports, and the capacity to manage a growing number visitors.

Mr Somphon

A 48 yr old Lue man born in a village just outside Muang Sing town. He was the first of many children in a poor farming family; he had only rudimentary education mostly from his time in the temple as a young man. When he was 23 he married a Lue woman also from Muang Sing. Together they moved to a house near the market. He found work as a police officer but the salary was so small that his wife began a small trading business bringing small household goods from China by bicycle to sell at the Muang Sing market. They have 3 children who also received minimal education due to lack of resources. The eldest daughter died in childhood.

In 1990 he quit the police and joined his wife buying and selling goods from China. Now they used a motorcycle to trade small goods, appliances and cosmetics along the Muang Sing-Muang Long-Xiengkok route. Slowly their income improved; the most profits could be made selling at the Xiengkok bimonthly market. Slowly as he had more money at his disposal, he began to increasingly visit women in bars along the road without letting his wife know. As their business kept growing, they invested in a pick-up which cost them 200,000 Baht. Now they could transport passengers as well as goods along the newly upgraded road. There were few passenger vehicles in the late 1990s and he made substantial profits.

In 2000 he invested some of the profits in a more substantial dwelling that he and his wife ran as a guesthouse for the growing number of tourists in Muang Sing. Gradually his wife noticed that he was frequently away at night, spending money on women in the bars. Sometimes he stayed away for days. Money was less available, and he frequently fought with his wife taking extended trips away to Thailand and Burma usually accompanied by young women. In 2001, Mr. Somphon left home and built a small house outside of Muang Sing. By 2003 he had turned this into a bar with 4 serving women about 5kms outside of town. Many of the customers are men from the different ethnic villages nearby. These days he seldom visits his wife and children.

It was estimated in a recent assessment of eco-tourism potential in Muang Sing that nearly 25,000 international tourists would visit Muang Sing in 2003, indicating a large percentage of those who come into the province. In other words, the town has almost as many visitors over the course of a year as the total district population. Likewise roughly 25% of the provincial accommodation facilities (18 guesthouses and one resort – in total 140 rooms) are in Muang Sing town indicating its primacy as a tourist destination (see Annex 5). Muang Long by contrast has only 4 small guesthouses, 2 of which have been recently completed.

Table 11: Number of tourists visiting Luang Namtha Province

1996	20,984
1997	30,792
1998	35,103
1999	36,780
2000	33,902
2001	40,580
2002	43,274

Table 12: Hotels, guesthouses and resorts

Luang Namtha Province	Hotels	Guesthouses	Resorts	Total rooms
1995	2	4		91
1996	2	10		109
1997	2	15		138
1998	2	22	2	246
1999	2	24	2	268
2000	2	36	2	316
2001	2	27	3	329
2002	2	63	3	557

The large number of foreign visitors staying for several days in Muang Sing town and often visiting the outlying villages has prompted a brisk trade in local handicrafts (and until it was regulated by a district tourism trekking service, a number of freelance guides offering organised visits into highland villages). The pattern of selling handicrafts began with the Hmong families who came from Sam Neua in 1993 (in Don Mai). They were the first families to sell things here to tourists in Muang Sing in the early to mid 1990s – fabrics, bags, etc. Since then Tai Dam women soon began to sell silk and cotton fabrics and traders regularly come from Vientiane and abroad to buy silver artefacts of the various ethnic groups. A local tourism initiative is the recently-constructed small market building for local Tai Dam and Hmong women to sell fabrics and clothing. The groups of Akha women who come to sell bracelets and small bags (and in the past opium) are gradually beginning to use this venue. Typically they prefer to seek out tourists and hawk their goods on the street and in the restaurants but recently they have begun to join the other ethnic women in the centralised stalls area signalling a form of ethnic convergence. The Akha traders largely come from one village, Ban Lakham, which will be described in a case study (see annex); they have set the pattern for Akha from other nearby villages who are slowly starting to bring items to the tourists for sale also. On a good day some women could realize up to 100,000 kip but this is rare with income more typically 20,000-30,000 kip on days when there are many tourists. However the majority of Akha villages feel such economic pursuits are inappropriate and shun their uptake. From Ban Lakham, on the other

hand, actively entrepeneurial women have expanded their horizons dramatically, now travelling to the provincial capital of Namtha and other provinces such as Oudomxai.

In the past, opium was also widely sold to tourists to the extent that it has been considered as a primary reason for much of the tourist influx in the late 1990s. Muang Sing was termed the opium capital of the Golden Triangle in high-profile guidebooks. Nowadays, the practice of tourist opium consumption is strongly policed (not before at least 4 deaths of foreign tourists from overdoses occurred), although there are suggestions that some sales still continue. As prohibitions first began, the police would fine the Akha who sold opium to the tourists; subsequently the police found it more effective (and financially viable) to fine the tourists who consume the opium (and marijuana) in amounts up to $500 often with the tip-offs coming from the original seller.

Mr Boonthan

Mr Boonthan is a 32 yr old from Luang Namtha town. He is married and has two children. His wife sells dry goods, soaps, oil and so forth at the Namtha market. He studied at a teachers college in Namtha and worked as a teacher in a local high school for a year. He didn't enjoy the work and his father suggested he try vocational study – he took a driving course.

In 2000, his father brought a tuk-tuk taxi which his son drove making about 20,000-30,000/day. This was not enough to support the family so in 2001 they invested in a second-hand pick-up. He used to run passengers between Huay Xai and Namtha towns. But because the road was so rough there were few passengers and the constant upkeep required on his vehicle meant he could not make any profit whatsoever. The next year he shifted routes to Namtha to the Boten border crossing and would make between 400,000 and 500,000 kip a month. In 2003 he began driving for Namtha to Muang Sing figuring it was a more profitable route due to the number of tourists travelling this way. He still works this route making between 600,000 and 700,000 kip a month. Tourists are still a large percent of his passengers.

A one way trip between the 2 towns takes about two hours; he has much free time between trips and often spends time at local bars drinking with the women. He sometimes takes them back to a guesthouse with him paying between 50,000 and 125,000 kip. When he was single he would never use condoms but nowadays he does with women he meets in bars. Sometimes he will pick up a woman travelling on his route and take them back to guesthouses. He doesn't usually pay money in this instance. Nor does he use condoms.

An important connection is that the Akha women who began selling tourist items did so precisely so they could gain an income to support their addict husbands after they moved down to the lowlands. Sales of opium and handicrafts were conflated. Nowadays as opium is limited in availability and marketability, some Akha are looking to expand items with commercial value. Unfortunately, as we will describe, this has recently begun to include the commodification of sexuality with potential ramifications for health and disease transmission. Another consequence of the confluence of tourists, trade and drugs is a growing number of

arrests for drug taking and selling. This comes at a time when opium is increasingly prohibited and methamphetamines are rapidly entering the districts – there have been a number of seizures along route 17B. In fact one of the first murders associated with ATS (*ya ba*) occurred outside of Muang Long just after the road was built in 1997.

Mrs Yo

Yo is a 38 yr old Akha woman from Lakham village about 7 kms outside of M Sing. She has 4 children and her husband smokes opium daily. In the past she would plant rice and sugarcane but now supports herself and her family through selling handicrafts to tourists.

Yo was one of the first Akha women in Muang Sing to begin selling handicrafts to tourists. Over the years opium has been a popular item of trade and western tourists would frequently buy small quantities of opium or marijuana from Akha villages around Muang Sing. But the active sale of hand-made goods was largely looked down on by the Akha. Yo decided that it was a reasonable means of making money and in the past four years many women from her village and its neighbor Pakha come into Muang Sing each day hawking small bracelets and woven bags made from forest vine. At first she would only sell to tourists arriving in Lakham but now she goes into M Sing each day. Several years ago she could make much more than she can these days as the competition is much greater with roughly 25 other Akha women also selling the same sort of items. She usually makes between $1 and $5 a day – in the village children make the trinkets for sale, the married women come into town to sell up and down the main street. On days when sales are not good she will resort to selling her (or other family members) personal silver. Such items intrinsic to Akha cultural reproduction are gradually disappearing; as is the traditional art of silver-smithing.

In mid-2003, Yo and several other Lakham women went to Luang Namtha town to sell their goods there. They made about $10 each over a week which compares well with the average daily wage for agricultural field labor of $1-$1.5/day. She has visited Udomxay town and plans to go back there with other villagers to sell to tourists where she thinks the market will be better as there are no local Akha villages providing such services to tourists.

Indication of the increased number of court case comes from the police records. It is a truism to note that with increased modernisation comes a rise in petty crime; the relevant point to note here is that increase in drug related crimes both possession and, according to police, the rising number of the thefts, assaults and murders are also attributable to ATS uptake.

Development Agencies

While most of our discussion is focused on local communities and mobile populations that use the road as access to and through Sing and Long there is a further important constituency that has a large part to play in the social and economic changes happening for lowlanders and highlanders alike. Since the mid

1990s foreign development agencies have played a huge role in the changing landscape in Sing and Long. The agencies with the highest profile and the longest history in the area are GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft fur technische Zusammenarbeit) in Muang Sing and NCA (Norwegian Church Aid) in Muang Long.

GTZ first established a presence in Muang Sing in 1994 and for the next 7 years expanded a food security program to a large percent of the villages in the highlands around Sing valley (the focus was largely on Akha populations but also included two Lue villages in remote areas on the banks of the Mekong). During the early stages of this program GTZ established 5 sub-centres from which to operate its broad-based development initiatives including agricultural extension and livestock services, and health (including opium demand-reduction programs) and education provision. To make up for an absolute lack of government services reaching the remote areas GTZ employed a large number of Lao staff to reside in the sub-centres and assist with the wide range of activities geared to livelihood improvement. During this time, roads were opened up into the more remote highland areas through food-for-work programs. More recently the GTZ program has evolved into a new phase of activities that have reduced the number of GTZ staff and encouraged a more engaged collaboration with district government which has gradually increased their numbers of health, agriculture and education staff. GTZ's focus remains on the decreasing numbers of Akha remaining in the highlands and initiatives are oriented towards improved land-management techniques and micro-credit strategies. Eco-tourism strategies are also being considered as a means of bringing livelihood to the highland communities.

In Muang Long, NCA began operations in 1993 with a pilot project funded by UNDCP. The primary focus developed throughout the 1990s was on opium detoxification targeting 19 villages in upland sites. The current project, called the Alternative Development in Long District (2002-2005) is still operated with support from UNDCP but now targets 37 villages. As before the focus is demand reduction through community based drug abuse control (CB-DAC) and on opium elimination through alternative development strategies that incorporate crop substitution, water supply, micro-finance schemes and a broad range of community-based initiatives including health. In addition to the alternative development initiatives NCA has given assistance to the provincial and district officials to develop HIV/AIDS prevention activities. This has largely involved workshops for women working in the growing number of bars in the 3 towns of Long, Sing and Xiengkok although they plan to extend activities to the village level.

Accion Contra la Faim (ACF) has also worked in villages in Muang Long since 2000. Their initial activities in 16 target highland villages focused primarily on sanitation and water supply. In 2003, they expanded to 60 villages in Muang Long (and neighbouring district of Na Lae) and broadened activities to address the negative effects of resettlement of ethnic villages out of the highlands into lowland areas near new roads. Activities now include broad-based Primary Health Care education activities in target villages, which are mainly ethnic Akha and Kui (and Khmu in Na Lae). In addition to the provision of clean water supplies (water bores

and water storage facilities), health education activities include: hygiene training using specially designed media materials, (posters, booklets and videos) conducted in schools and households.

Reflecting a larger budget, GTZ has over the years had the most comprehensive approach to agriculture and public health activities amongst highland communities of the 3 agencies, but it is notable that in 2004 all three agencies are increasingly focusing on reproductive health and STDs. ACF has recently expanded their staff to 40 whereas GTZ and NCA have reduced the number of workers in their employ and rely more on collaboration with district personnel than in the past.

Other agencies such as ZOA, EU (European Union) and ESF (Ecoles sans Frontieres) also work in Sing and Long but their presence has been somewhat less than the other three agencies as they employ less local staff and target a more limited number of communities. Taken together, however, there are now few villages in either Sing or Long who have not had assistance of some sort or other from one of the foreign funded agencies. While the impact of this assistance varies from the provision of notebooks and teaching materials through to water supply equipment and road provision, the influence of foreign-led initiatives has been, and continues to be, a major element of the forces influencing livelihood strategies in Sing and Long.

While macro-level economic changes and policy directives have the ability to concretely influence the decisions made by both highlanders and lowlanders, the long term and powerful presence of development workers also plays a considerable role in determining the social and economic landscape in Sing and Long. Even though what we describe focuses on the micro-level changes amongst local populations, and even though development agencies must work within the parameters of government policy, their impact remains substantial and the presence of foreign ‘experts’ needs to be included in the complex ethnic mix that populate the towns and hills around them. One pressing issue that currently confronts both government and foreign agencies working on broad based development issues is the rapid movement of many villages to establish settlements near the road.

Nam Ma river in Muang Long

Ploughing ricefields in Muang Sing

Rice planting in Muang Long

Lanten farmers in Muang Long

Chapter 4
Deterritorialisation and movement to the lowlands

Resettlement, the stabilisation of shifting cultivation and opium eradication are separate, though closely intertwined policies of the Government of Lao PDR. These state policies have significant implications for the relationship between human populations and the Muang Sing-Xiengkok road, in the sense that the policies and their local implementation have combined to induce the movement of highlanders downhill and closer to the main road.

The policy of the government of Lao PDR on shifting cultivation was enunciated at the Sixth Party Congress in 1996: *"Shifting cultivation (also known as slash-and-burn agriculture) is a problem the Government wants to address. Peoples whose livelihoods depend on shifting cultivation must be settled in areas where they can be allocated land to earn a living".* Clearly resettlement is anticipated in the pronouncement. Another rationale for ending - or "stabilising" - shifting cultivation is that it is perceived as a major cause of deforestation and erosion and also that forestry is a major source of government revenue. The initial deadline for the elimination of shifting cultivation was the year 2000 - the Seventh Party Congress (in March 2001) declared a revised deadline of 2010, stipulating a 50% reduction by 2005.

Opium reduction in Laos is an integral part of the worldwide 'war on drugs' led by the United States and the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), now called the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). UNDCP formulated a Comprehensive Drug Control Program (known as the Master-plan) for Lao PDR for the period 1994-2000. In 1996 the Lao Government revised its drug control law and prohibited the production of opium. In December 2000 the Prime Minister issued a decree (No.14) ordering the total elimination of opium in the country by 2006 (later revised to 2005). Thus, in some respects the current opium eradication policy of the Lao Government is a response to international pressure and 'war on drugs' agendas. On the other hand, as opium cultivation is a form of slash-and-burn agriculture, opium eradication is consistent with, and supportive of, national policies on shifting cultivation. In Muang Sing and Muang Long the implementation of both policies has had a profound impact on the resettlement of highlanders.

Past Resettlement

Resettlement of various populations both highland and lowland is by no means a recent phenomenon in either Laos or the Southeast Asian region. Forced resettlement was common throughout the pre-modern states of mainland Southeast Asia as a consequence of low population densities and the function of warfare as a means to move and gain political control over populations. For Laos, an apt example is the mass deportation of local populations from the Vientiane

area in 1828 to areas in north-east Thailand (Siam) following the Lao-Siamese war (Goudineau 1997, Vol.1:10). Mention has already been made of the military invasions by the Siamese vassal states of Nan and Chiang Mai in the 19th century and the forced depopulation of much of Xieng Khaeng as well as Muang Sing.

Human mobility has also been traditionally associated with shifting cultivation, either short-distance movement to accommodate long fallow periods or long-distance migration of pioneer shifting cultivators (common amongst the Hmong and Yao) in search of virgin highland forests for opium cultivation. Likewise, voluntary resettlement in response to epidemics, fires, inauspicious village location and social discord has been a normal aspect of highland life. Even populations of Tai speakers, engaged in more stable wet-rice cultivation in the lowlands, have traditionally been somewhat mobile. As Goudineau remarks: "At the beginning of the century colonial administrators complained about the elusive quality of Lao villages, which were always ready to move in search of better lands or to avoid taxes or the corvees (forced labour tasks)." (Vol.1:10).

Constant small-scale movement notwithstanding, there were no major population shifts in Laos under the period of French colonial administration. However, the Indochinese War, in particular the American War, caused considerable disruption throughout the country and massive movements of people, eventually consolidating into a royal zone and a zone controlled by the Pathet Lao (Lao Issara). The scale of movement in this period was substantial: "The shifting border between these two zones provoked…. the migration of thousands of families: 27,000 people were transferred in 1958, 90,000 in 1960, 125,000 in 1962 and up to 730,000 in 1973 during the cease-fire" (Goudineau 1997 Vol.1:11). In addition, some 300,000 people fled across the Mekong River. Altogether more than half the villages in the country moved during this period.

In the post-1975 period, the new government of Lao PDR sought to repopulate entire regions or abandoned towns (in some cases by returning refugees) or relocate populations for security reasons. As noted previously, Muang Long was subject to far greater population movement than Muang Sing was during the period of conflict and required in turn extensive re-population after the war. By 1996, relocations either within the district, from a neighbouring district, or from across national borders involved 84% of the total population of Muang Long (with 90% of the movement occurring between 1975 and 1985). During this first phase the role of the state was weak and resettlement was somewhat anarchic. In the second phase (1985-1995), however, relocations became more organised and an "instrument for the management and control of territory" (Goudineau 1997, Vol.2:21). By the 1990s, with the significant expansion of state-sponsored infrastructure development, relocation has now come to focus much more directly on the integration of highland and lowland populations.

Resettlement and "focal zones"

The main difference in the current resettlement initiatives, closely linked to rural development, is that it has made sedentisation an integral part of a process of "deterritorialisation" that not only requires leaving a territory but the transformation of a whole way of life (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). In this light, deterritorialisation inevitably involves a process of "domestication" of highland populations. We emphasise that there is no official policy of resettlement, embodied in state decrees or legal contexts (Goudineau 1997, Vol.1:17). However, resettlement emerges as an inevitable product of the government rural development policy of creating "focal zones". Resettlement (sometimes referred to as "village consolidation") of highland villages in the lowlands (or along arterial roads leading to the lowlands) is considered essential to an "area-focused development approach" (NPEP 2003:57). Focal zones involve the provision of essential services (roads, electricity, schools, medical facilities, etc) as well as the development of paddy land, livestock-raising, etc, in selected areas. The logic behind these initiatives suggests that it is less expensive to bring highland villagers to lowland services than to extend the same services to remote areas. The Government also considers focal zones (and therefore implicitly planned resettlement) as an essential means of reducing shifting cultivation and the conservation of forests and watersheds (NPEP 2003:57). The only significant change in the Government's focal zone policy since the Seventh Party Congress in 2001 has been the priority given to poverty reduction targeting the 47 poorest districts (which include Muang Long) (NPEP 2003). Despite some local and foreign donor resistance to the possible coercion in relocation components of focal zone strategies (UNDP 2001: 4.3.2), the approach has generally been supported by major international organisations such as FAO and the World Bank, at least until quite recently.

Negotiated movement in Sing and Long

The current Muang Long resettlement plan reportedly entails the displacement of 50% of upland villages by 2005 – altogether 65 out of 122 villages and 6,000 villagers are to be allocated land in the lowland or joined with existing villages. (Romagny & Daviau 2003). Resettlement entails new village sites near the main road (17B), one of the 6 feeder roads, or the Mekong River. The villages have been chosen on specific criteria stipulating that to remain in the highlands villages must have at least 30 households, access to road or river, a school, paddy land and/or cattle breeding. .

In contrast, until recently, local officials in Muang Sing had largely abandoned active and orchestrated resettlement of highland Akha. One reason is the desire to avoid prolonged inter-ethnic conflict between lowland Tai and Akha already resident in the plains and recent highlander immigrants. For example, the influx in 1992 of Hmong immigrants from Xieng Khouang and Houaphan provinces caused

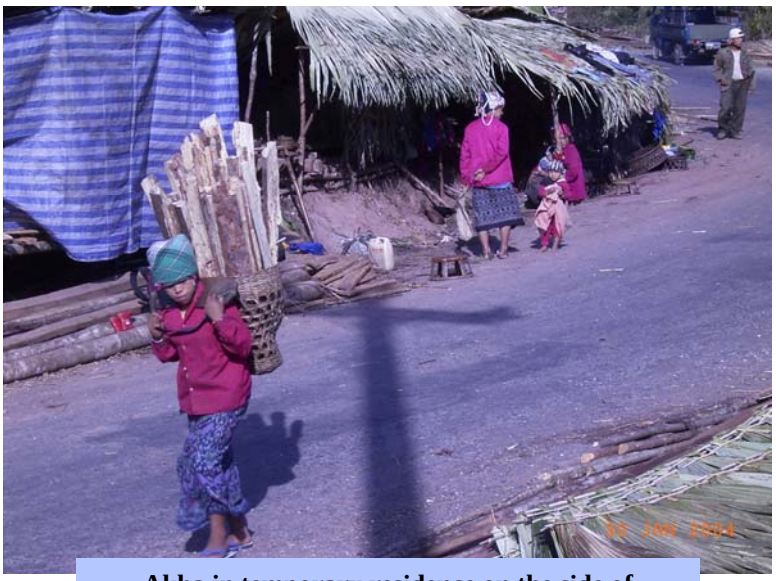
considerable conflict over land and water resources between the Hmong newcomers and local Tai and Akha villagers (Cohen 2000b). On the other hand, there is notably less pressure for the government to take the initiative in Muang Sing as there has already been a far greater movement out of the highlands into the lower slopes than in Muang Long. Over the past 20 years more than 40 villages have relocated at their own instigation (albeit under economic pressure) to be closer to the Muang Sing town and markets. Relocation and village consolidation was revived in Muang Sing as government policy in response to the Seventh Party Congress directives of 2001 and a Village Management Plan for the district was formulated. According the plan, 422 households (including 2,365 persons) from 19 villages (nearly all from the highlands) were to be resettled over the period 2002-2005.

An important feature of contemporary resettlement in Sing and Long is that the reality of village movement often diverges significantly from local government plans. This in part derives from the fact that resettlement is induced by a mixture of push and pull factors. The final outcome often depends on a protracted process of negotiation between highland villagers, lowland host communities and local authorities. Here leaders of highland villages play a crucial role; some accede more readily to government demands; others are more resistant and refuse to move. Local aid agencies may also bargain with district authorities to offer village-level assistance that reduces the necessity to move. Another factor is that young people are more likely to respond to the plans of local authorities to resettle than their elders, lured by the prospect of paddy land, wage labour for cash and consumer goods. For example, the establishment of the Akha village of Ban Yang Luang in 1990 at the lower slopes of the Muang Sing plain was preceded by dissension between older and younger men in the original village of Hua Nam Kaeo. The senior men wanted to rebuild the village after it was destroyed by fire but the younger men argued for a new village near the lowlands where they perceived their economic prospects to be better (Cohen 2000b). According to Epprecht's research in Muang Sing (in 19 Akha villages), there was a large dent in the population pyramid in the 15-24 age group, which he explains in terms of their "worsening prospects for the future of their subsistence agriculture due to an observed diminishing soil fertility in the area and increased scarcity of general resources" (1998:65-66). Needless to say, increasing government restrictions of shifting cultivation provides an additional incentive (or pressure) to search for paddy land in the lowlands, irrespective of local government plans.

Opium eradication and resettlement

Recent opium eradication campaigns have further complicated local government resettlement plans. We noted earlier that the Prime Minister's decree in 2000 compelled local authorities in Muang Sing and Muang Long to conduct local opium eradication campaigns in response to the deadline of 2005. Poppy seeds were confiscated in August 2002, followed by the destruction of opium crops

between December 2002 and January 2003. As mentioned, this imposed a heavy burden on highlanders, in particular the sudden elimination of a major source of income. In a situation of declining swidden (dry) rice yields and government restrictions on shifting cultivation, opium was crucial to many highlanders as a source of cash or item of barter to make up for rice shortfalls.



Akha in temporary residence on the side of the road to Namtha

In Muang Sing these conditions have produced the spontaneous and somewhat uncontrolled mig-rations of highland Akha down to the lower slopes of plain. Out-migration has a snowballing effect resulting in the depopulation of whole highland areas (eg. Ban Sai sub-district![10]). As more and more villagers leave, the pressure on remaining villagers to follow increases, with the disruption of exchange and kinship ties. At the same time, some lowland villages, anxious about government village consolidation plans, have persuaded those remaining in the highlands communities to join with them to ensure village population reaches the prescribed minimum of 50 households.

Not surprisingly this spontaneous exodus from the highlands has caused consternation among Muang Sing officials, aptly summarised in the following GTZ report:

> It is estimated that about 15 villages with about 2000 people (300-400 families) from the mountains moved to lowland areas because their poppy fields were cleared. 'We knew before the clearing of the poppy fields that villagers would move', the District Vice Governor informed the team. 'On the one hand, it was good that they moved. For many years we had asked them to do so, but they did not. However, on the other hand, it made things more complicated because the district could not carry out the development as planned. Villages were messed up everywhere, it was not according to our plan'. 'We have to stop all development activities because of migration: everyday villagers ask the district authorities to find a new place for them to live', the Vice Governor added. (GTZ. 2003).

[10] Some Akha eventually returned to the highlands with promises from Chinese investors to plant rubber trees; when the Chinese failed to turn up the Akha returned to the lowlands.

The economic and social impact of resettlement

A UNDP document of 1997, *Basic Needs for Resettled Communities in the Lao PDR,* reports on a survey of 67 displaced villages from six provinces. Serious problems were identified, including devastating epidemics (particularly from malaria), loss of assets, debt accumulation, rice deficits, intensified competition for land, and lack of government resources to provide assistance to relocated communities. Each of these problems is associated with contemporary movement out of the highlands into the Muang Sing and Muang Long valleys (Gebert 1995, Cohen 2000b, Romagny & Daviau 2003, Lyttleton 2005, Alton and Houmphanh 2004).

One impact not mentioned in the UNDP survey is the increasing dependence of resettled highland villages on wage labour in the lowlands. Wage labour dependence is highlighted in the following case study of two Akha villages in Muang Sing:

Both villages of **Ban Sopi Mai** and **Ban Yang Luang** relocated from parent villages to the lower-slopes in response to pressure or enticement from district officials, though low swidden rice yields was probably an additional incentive. Sopi Mai resettled (from Sopi Kao) in 1994 and had 39 households in 1997 (at the time of research). Yang Luang moved down from the parent village of Hua Nam Kaeo in 1990 and had 64 households. Both villages were relatively well-off in terms of paddy land (mostly rainfed) - 30ha and 65ha respectively - due to the fact that some land was developed prior to resettlement. Immediately following resettlement both villages suffered human and livestock epidemics. In Yang Luang 80 people died (mainly from malaria) within two years of the establishment of the new village. Both villages had high rates of opium addiction, Sopi Mai 12% and Yang Luang 15% of total population (well above the district average for Akha of about 9%). Approximately 38% of Sopi Mai and 84% of Yang Luang households cultivated opium but, on average, produced well below consumption requirements for addicts.

In the late 1990s lower-slope Akha villages were connected to lowland Tai villages by many-stranded economic relations based on cash transactions, barter, and multiple currencies. Wage labour was the dominant form of exchange. In Sopi Mai and Yang Luang about 80% of wage labour was external to the village and almost all of this for neighbouring Tai Lue and Tai Neua villages. External wage labour included rice cultivation tasks, land clearing for new paddy fields, cutting firewood, ditch digging, and the making of house-posts. Notably addict households (i.e. households with at least one opium addict) provided more than 80% of all external wage labour.

Tai villagers endeavoured to hire Akha labour as cheaply as possible. This they were able to achieve through commodity transactions that were disadvantageous to the Akha. Thus Akha addicts often exchanged rice for opium with the Tai during the rice harvest (November-December) when opium was in short supply. During the opium-tapping season (January-February), when rice stocks were low and depleted by earlier sales, addicts often exchanged opium for milled rice. The Akha, especially the addicts, lost out in these transactions by being forced to sell opium and rice at the time of harvest, when prices were at their lowest. The opium obtained by the Tai from the Akha and from other sources was almost entirely used to hire Akha labour.

Thus, Akha villages of the lower slopes, such as those of Ban Sopi Mai and Ban Yang Luang, provided Tai lowlanders with a pool of dependent, cheap and predominantly addict labour. The Tai were able to use this labour flexibly according to the changing labour demands for rice cultivation and, in particular, to clear new paddy land in response to the expanding market for rice.

Source: Cohen 2000b

The opium eradication campaign has served to further the process of the proletarianisation of highland labour in the lower slopes and plains (Lyttleton 2005). Many of the Akha who have relocated recently in Muang Sing have been allocated land which is generally of poor quality and not irrigable. Furthermore, the new arrivals seldom have the capital to develop the land; nor do they have the time as they are compelled to engage in wage labour on a daily basis in order to survive. What has changed in the current situation is that it is not predominantly addict labour that is sold; now a far greater number of villagers are inexorably drawn into wage labour relations on a daily basis with a wider number of employees including the Lue, Chinese and wealthier Akha.

The recently established village of Hom Xai is an apt example. Following the destruction of opium fields in early 2003, 35 poorer Akha households from the villages of Cheta, Chakheun and Meuto Kao petitioned district officials for land allocation in the lowlands. Many sold their livestock for rice to tide them over for the initial months of relocation. It is not unusual for wealthier households in highland villages to have invested in land in the lowlands over the past 15-20 years in the possibility they move in the future. But this is a minority and none of the recent migrants were in this category. Muang Sing officials established a new village at Hom Xai (in the vicinity of Ban Nam Lek, Nam Dai and Ban Kang). They allocated a total of 25 ha to the Akha settlers, suggesting the land had the potential to be developed into paddy land. However, there is no immediate prospect of irrigating the land and presently it can only be used for swiddening (*hed hai*). Water is in very short supply and various wells have dried up. In order to supplement GTZ and local government rice rations, villagers have had to labour in fields of nearby Lue and Akha villages. This has left them little time to even cultivate swiddens, let alone the development of paddy land. A year later only three families have cultivated enough swidden rice to subsist.

What follows is an emerging degree of labour competition within the village. Due to the influx of migrants from the highlands there is now a surplus of agricultural labour in the lowlands of Sing. The Lue, who depended heavily on Akha addict labour in the past, now will now selectively hire the youngest and healthiest of workers. In Hom Xai labour competition has coalesced around source villages. Those from Meuto Kao have proved to be most successful but at the cost of causing minor resentment and dissension amongst other residents within the new village. This is a significant new development. In the past villagers competed to some extent for material resources, but competition for wage labour as a scarce resource on a daily basis is a new event, with its impact on social relations within the village yet to be determined.

Earlier we noted that there has been a rapid expansion in the Muang Sing plain of wet-rice cultivation since the mid 1990s, so that at present only about 30% of the plain remains that has the potential for the development of paddy land (irrigated or rain-fed). It is this residual marginal land that is being allocated to the increasing numbers of poor Akha villagers. In an agricultural environment of rapidly growing demand for land for new commercial crops (sugar cane, water melons, and rubber) and for livestock raising it is likely that much of the land

allocated to Akha immigrants will eventually be alienated to those who have the capital and skill to exploit the land profitably.

We thus envisage a future, in particular in Muang Sing, in which those of highland origin, such as the Akha, will be increasingly dependent on wage labour and increasingly lacking in productive land - a new landless proletariat. Furthermore, wage labour dependence will no longer be a product of high levels of opium addiction but of structural changes in the economy created by government policies and market forces. Quite obviously this has a number of implications; the contingent health of the new settlers is one of these.

Ban Hom Xai: a recently resettled village near Muang Sing

Chapter 5
Relocation and Health

The Akha have been moving down into the Sing valley for many years, a process rapidly accelerated by recent government policies. By 1995, 35 villages had been newly established in the lower slopes and about 23 remained in the highlands. Despite an uncertain future and a departure from traditional life-ways, many of the current generation of Akha consider improved market opportunities, proximity to transport routes and social changes implicit in becoming lowlanders to be a challenge worth taking. But at the same time, the relocation caused high levels of morbidity. Total numbers have not been recorded but lowland Akha villages report large numbers of deaths during the first two years of resettlement. Headmen we interviewed commonly describe between 50 and 100 deaths occurring shortly after relocation - sometimes whole households perish. In 1995 mortality rates were documented by GTZ. With data derived from the interviews of over 150 families, Gebert (1995) compared health levels in 11 mid-upper slope villages and 22 relocated lower-slope villages:

Table 13: Epidemics and Mortality in Muang Sing

	Mid Slope	Lower Slope
Disease Epidemics	6	24
Epidemic deaths	199	749
Child Mortality (per 1000 live births)	133	326

In the neighbouring District of Long, a 2003 survey of mortality over the preceding 5 years confirmed high death rates sometimes up to 20% (Romagny and Daviau 2003:21).

Table 14: Mortality in Muang Long

	Average Mortality (per 100)
Existing Lowland Villages (n=5)	0.78
Highland Villages (n=15)	2.32
Resettled Villages (n=17)	3.99

While mortality is already severe in the highlands, it is clear that movement to lower slopes increases death rates. High mortality stems from a series of interrelated factors: lack of physiological immunity to mosquito-born diseases, particularly malaria; a lack of access to unpolluted water sources and familiarity with sanitation; lack of village based health services and a disinclination to access

state medical assistance where it does exist (only in the district town) and a lack of Government vaccination programs (human and livestock). Combined these shortfalls have led to high levels of human misery and as some have argued a continued reliance on opium as a coping strategy for these additional psycho-social traumas (Cohen 2000b; Gebert and Chupinit 1997).

But despite these dilemmas, Akha continue to move down to Muang Sing valley. Noticeably, over the past 8 years some overt health indicators have gradually improved in Muang Sing. Since the 1995 data was collated, GTZ and district health officials have conducted extensive campaigns to eradicate malaria and to reduce water born disease and child mortality. In contrast to Muang Long, GTZ health statistics show that villages which have relocated to the lowlands since the late 1990s report no large-scale epidemic deaths.

Despite ostensible improvements in morbidity and mortality in Muang Sing (which is in marked contrast to Muang Long's continuing high levels of mortality), it would be wrong to say that highland-lowland migration has necessarily become a more straightforward and benign procedure. Crucially in this context health is never simply about the absence or control of recognized disease vectors. The damaging impact of social change should not only be measured by bodies after they become ill or die. There are other variables that foreshadow the emergence of social pathologies and influence states of well-being in particular with respect to changing social relations and communal livelihood. In most previous village migrations down to the lowlands the Akha have maintained strong links with the parent villages in the higher slopes with regular movement and exchange of household commodities including opium. As mentioned, enforced opium eradication has significantly ratcheted up the pressure to move to the lowlands and some areas of the higher slopes are now completely abandoned.

The important question for studies of health is what impact does this movement, voluntary or forced by circumstance, have on the lives of the Akha who move close to route 17B? It remains to be seen whether large-scale malaria epidemics and other forms of infectious disease re-occur.[11] As we will describe more subtle forms of dis-ease are also established as a product of these changes, in particular vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. They apply not only to the most recent arrivals, but also to the process of social and cultural assimilation of the Akha that has been underway for the past 10-15 years in Luang Namtha (and much longer in neighbouring countries).

Present-day aspirations of many Akha who have moved to the lowlands revolve around the assumption that access to markets and roads and the sedentary production of cash crops will bring automatic livelihood improvement. Informants in this research were largely unanimous noting that in the mountains, Akha live just as their forebears did, with little visible improvement and a daily routine marked by unforgiving weariness and recurrent food shortage. In marked contrast, lowlands represent the antithesis of this, precisely through the display of

[11] When we visited one relocated village in June 2003, 4 children had died in the past month. Local GTZ staff attribute it to malnutrition.

overt indicators of progress or change. Roads symbolize the end of backbreaking portage of rice, timber and other essentials from the forest. The visible successes of some Akha, who have moved down over the past 20 years, provide the image of accruable wealth most notably defined by purchase of motorcycles or small tractors. But as the numbers moving down increase dramatically, those who do become financially better off become the exception rather than the rule.

Poverty and exploitation are clear consequences of relocation (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). While some families might improve economically, this is a notable minority throughout Laos (and the region – cf McCaskill and Kampe 1997). The National Poverty Eradication Program which surveyed a large number of districts notes that for those who had relocated in recent years: "In the villages where overall income had increased, it was found that increases in production were being realized by only a few families" (GOL 2003:45). Gebert (1995) noted tremendous variation in the socio-economic status both between villages in the lower slopes and within them. The poorest of the villages were still recovering from the severe disease epidemics they had suffered with the move. Despite dreams of wealth, purchasing land requires substantial de-capitalization – a burden many families never overcome. Serious rice shortages ensure villagers have to labour for wealthier villagers or neighbouring ethnic groups, which in a vicious catch-22 prevents them from developing their own rice fields a highly labour intensive exercise that requires clearing and preparation of paddy fields and irrigation canals.

A recent study by UNDP that included a sample of relocated villages from Sing and Long confirmed that in many villages livelihood systems were not doing well and health impacts were commonplace:

> *The main problem encountered with migration to the lowlands concerned inadequate available agricultural land and this led to conflicts with neighboring villages and earlier migrants. Another major problem was the incidence of human diseases including mosquito borne fevers, gastrointestinal tract diseases, parasites and upper respiratory diseases. Among new migrants, death rates were high in some villages*.
> (Alton and Houmpanh 2004: 14)

Exploitation of a growing Akha workforce in the lower slopes commonly takes place with neighbouring ethnic groups such as the Tai Lue who have historically employed Akha addicts who exchange labour for minimal cash or opium. More recently, Chinese investment in sugar and watermelon in the valley has increased the demand for labour enormously. Established lowland Akha villages are converting much of their land to sugarcane, and some householders are making substantial profits. But lack of market expertise is exploited by a small number of unscrupulous Akha middlemen who refuse to pay after the crops are collected by Chinese trucks. In the more recently relocated villages, the lack of rice to eat or opium to trade has enforced all the émigrés to hire themselves out to Chinese employers. Young Akha women cross the border to assist with rice planting and harvesting Chinese fields. The men labour on local sugarcane fields

for Chinese investors. Alternatively, newly relocated villagers spend many hours each day collecting diminishing forest products in the largely deforested lowlands so they can trade for rice.

While wage labour might be considered as equivalent to subsistence gathering in terms of delivering a daily ration, the terms of exchange are no longer in the hands of the labourer and such arrangements make it impossible for new settlers to work their own fields. Waged employment inevitably introduces the potential for articulation of uneven power relations, which as numerous studies have shown, and which the Akha seem destined to repeat, become a key precursor of a wide range of illnesses when everyday choices become increasingly constrained by disadvantageous pursuit of material support.

We mentioned that in some recently relocated villages the growing proletarianisation is taking an added dimension - inter-village competition. As wage labour provision becomes a surplus commodity in Sing and Long lowlands increased competition is emerging between different groups within villages. On the one hand, the ethnic groups employing casual daily labour from the Akha have begun to request only those between the ages of 20 and 35 severely disadvantaging many older householders. On the other hand, the need to be actively seeking work from neighbouring groups or villages is also unevenly advantaging sub-groups within the village. Some village women told us they were too shy to repeatedly go out asking for work in neighbouring villages when they had been turned down once, and yet this daily demand for labour is the precise result of the current employment arrangements. Other sub-groups (stemming from their arrival from different source mountain villages) were seemingly not so reticent, thereby attaining the bulk of local work available and creating the beginnings of village factionalism. These women described subtle feelings of resentment born of this biased distribution of work. It is further exacerbated when the demand for labour is limited and certain kin groups (again based on different home villages prior to migration) will only alert those within their sub-group setting in place the gradual but insidious advantages that accrue from greater access to capital.

Competition is the heart of market-based capitalism. But for the largely subsistent Akha and Kui villagers who are familiar with group and village wide work activities, the competition for labour and absolute reliance on casual wages are setting in place the basis for entrenched village factionalism. While village conflicts are nothing new, they have seldom been based on competition for external resources and the sale of labour. By the same token, villagers have little familiarity with ways of adjudicating conflicts that could well emerge. Exploitation and comparative lack add to the creation of inequitable social relations that augur forms of social and material suffering for those villagers on the downside of such exchanges. In the past, village-level conflicts were often resolved by one faction moving to establish domicile elsewhere in the forested hills. In the lowlands, where agricultural land is now a scarce commodity, conflict avoidance in this fashion is no longer an option.

The Akha and Kui in Luang Namtha have in the past fought for their health largely against an unforgiving physical environment and the high mortality rates

attest to harsh terms of negotiation. It is precisely the ill-defined causes and consequences of marginalization, only now taking shape in Luang Namtha, but entrenched in other parts of the upper Mekong (Chupinit 1994, Kammerer 1988, 2000, McKinnon and Viene 1989), that need careful attention in ongoing manoeuvres to reduce swidden agriculture in SE Asia. If the newly relocated Akha (and Kui) are perpetually at the lower rung of a cash economy and must compete with each other for access to capital and daily livelihood, then insidious health threats will also be promulgated - threats not readily treated by medical prophylaxis or antibiotics.

The desire motivating or facilitating a move downhill is the fundamental coinage for the social changes taking place; it is the ticket to the new life and at the same time the harbinger of potential dis-ease present and still to come. Marginalization, experienced as factionalism and community disempowerment at the group level and passivity, exploitation and social shame at the individual level are inevitable underpinnings of the disjunctions emerging from the move. Together they underlie new forms of social and material suffering that emerge with the movement from small-scale subsistent communities to sedentary groups partaking in larger networks predicated on a market economy. It is highlighted most distinctly by the increased dangers of HIV infection and forms of social damage incurred by changing forms of substance abuse to which we now turn.

Nang Dam

Nang Dam is an 11 yr old Akha girl who lives in Muang Sing town. Her father is a local Akha who married an Akha woman from Muang Phong in China. She can speak Lue, Akha, Phu Noi, and Haw Chinese. She is the youngest of three children. Her father used to be a soldier but nowadays only works occasionally as a labourer in rubber plantations in China. He takes the whole family with him during rubber collecting season.

Dam began working when she was 6 years old. After school and on weekends she would collect plastic containers from hospitals and schools and re-sell them for 100 kip each to Lue and Yao villagers. She could make about 2000 kip a day. She would also collect trashed iron and aluminium cans for resale – getting 500 kip/kilo of metal. In 2002 she studied 1st year primary school but in 2003 she had to leave school because her mother took her to China to help collect rubber. They would get 3500 kip/kilo of rubber. When she returned to Muang Sing in late 2003 she didn't go back to school but took work as a domestic worker for a Lue family helping look after two young children and doing many household chores. She received 150,000/month and food and board. But she didn't stay long as the children were often upset and she did not have the patience to take care of them. She worked for several other families, and once took a job cooking for a visiting music band from Vientiane.

At present she works at a nightclub. She washes clothes for the women who work there and does various other chores for them. She shares rooms with the women. It is possible that in the future she will entertain guests also.

Chapter 6
Health and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS/STDS

This chapter will look at the ways in which the number of forces we have been describing, in combination with the material changes occurring along the road, act in concert to bring about specific health consequences for both mobile populations and host communities. Clearly movement is a major element of the current social and economic landscape in Muang Sing and Muang Long. Everyday life is strongly marked by a growing number of flows no matter where along the road one chooses to look. As we have described, trucks move up and down the road in sizeable numbers each day; large cargo boats regularly ply the river between China and Thailand stopping to deliver goods at the port of Xiengkok. Labourers and investors from China and Thailand establish a social and economic presence in the towns and fields all along the road. It is not just migration across national borders that are harbingers of changes; one of the most profound transformations in recent times in these two districts is the movement out of the hills of the Akha and Kui highlanders. Throughout 2003, virtually every month, groups of villagers come to the district requesting the allocation of land in the lowlands now that life in the hills is deemed untenable in the absence of opium and adequate alternatives. Their movement is assisted by a combination of push and pull factors: the lack of government services that reach the highlands to provide health, education or economic assistance and the draw of market opportunities, labour and trade in the lowlands.

Together the lowland valleys of Sing and Long are currently home to a highly diverse yet intensive mix of social and economic aspirations. It is within this crucible of change, opportunity and exploitation that people's lives are shaped: physically and psychologically; socially and materially. This then is where the current analysis will seek to explore the consequences of the new road. Route 17B has anchored a series of larger structural and interpersonal changes that are occurring across Lao PDR in wake of newly promulgated policies targeting swidden and opium cultivation. The road and its environs offer a microcosm of social and economic change that have very direct consequences in the lives of those impacted by its presence. It is a highly dynamic context and the implications for future benefits and shortfalls are diverse and far-ranging. In what follows we will focus specifically on certain negative issues relating to health. Other contexts of economic, environmental and cultural sustainability in face of the scale of changes underway are of course equally important.

There are numerous benefits that come with the more ready access and ease of travel provided by the road. We make almost no mention of these, not because they are insignificant but simply because our interest is in the subtle and unintended consequences of rapid social change in areas that seldom get pro-active consideration. At this stage we will frame our approach within a broad consideration of the everyday livelihoods of those living by the road by limiting the discussion to several key facets that have an important part to play in the ongoing

wellbeing of the district populations: HIV/AIDS and, in the following chapter, drug use.

While the road is a catalyst for a wide range of newly engaged social relations, it is the increasing vulnerability to HIV and the changing patterns of drug use that emerge as a direct product of these relationships that will concern us most here. It must also be repeated at the outset that the road does not only bring negative consequences for health. The modernization brought by donor assistance and State health initiatives has definitively lessened certain aspects of morbidity and mortality. In Lao PDR, health is understandably the focus of numerous development initiatives. The population is relatively young; almost 55% of 5.5 million are under the age of 19 and only 4% over 65 years. Health standards are low measured against any international standard and the worst in Southeast Asia: The overall crude mortality rate is 15/1000, maternal morbidity is 656/10,000, infant mortality 104/1000 and life expectancy (calculated in the 1995 census) is 52 years for women and 50 years for men (MOH 2000). Amongst highland groups these indicators are notably worse.

But there have been some recent improvements. Life expectancy since 1995 as risen from 52 to 59 years of age (and up from 45 in 1985), mortality for malaria has been reduced by 60% in rural areas since 1996 and access to clean water has increased in rural areas from 31.8% in 1995 to 56% in 2003 (NPEP 2003:83). Overall perhaps the challenges outweigh the successes and substantial foreign aid packages are seeking to address this, in particular the provision of more efficient and extensive Primary Health Care services. For instance a recent survey notes that:

> *Infant and under-5 mortality rates are twice as high in rural areas compared to urban areas while maternal mortality rates are more than 3 times higher; in remote mountainous areas and among ethnic minorities the disparities are even more marked. Limited access to health services is one of the reasons for these disparities; almost 30% of the population of the north (the poorest region in Lao PDR) lives 16km from a health centre; language is also a serious barrier. Severe poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, superstition, non-hygienic lifestyles and opium growing are other causes for low utilization of health services. Low quality of services is yet another cause…only 40% of villages have ready access to essential drugs (chloroquine, paracetamol, antibiotics and ORS).*
> (NPEP 2003:83)

This then is the situation confronting the government health services and the foreign agencies working in Muang Long and Muang Sing. Thus agencies and NGOs such as GTZ, NCA, ACF, EU and ZOA all have health components in their current broad-based development programs. These range from provision of clean water, village health volunteer training, malaria control through to HIV/AIDS awareness raising and reproductive health programs. Until recently the bulk of health activities have been to reduce the endemic levels of malaria and parasite based diseases. In GTZ target villages in Muang Sing infectious diarrhoea and parasite born disease decreased from 29% in 1996 to 13% in 2000 and under-5

mortality decreased from 311/1000 in 1997 to 105/1000 in 2001. Those treated for malaria by GTZ health staff declined from 10,144 in 1995 to 552 in 2000.

The public health figures collected by the district indicate some improvements but it must be recognized that only a small percent of morbidity (and mortality) reach the hospital physicians in either district. It should also be noted how understaffed the local health institutions are. Apart from services operated from the donor agencies' sub-centres established in the hills there are no health centres outside the district towns. In Muang Sing there is one government doctor to nearly 6,000 district inhabitants (GTZ privately employs several more to work with highland populations).

Table 15: Public Health Statistics, Muang Sing

Disease incidence	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Malaria	1,542	1,193	727	759	576	565
Respiratory infections	362	276	264	327	236	346
Influenza	557	433	584	707	519	908
Diarrhoea	836	221	363	292	323	346
Dysentery	95	81	77	100	52	79
Fever (hemorraghic)	20	24	2	3	7	2
TB	10	8	3	2	3	
Liver Disease	6	6	9	7		
Other	4,458	985	2273	554	2685	3296

Table 16: Public Health Statistics, Muang Long

Disease incidence	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Malaria	1944	932	802	1295	576
Respiratory	1001	621	386	403	156
Influenza	864	305	189	163	250
Diarrhoea	534	311	192	273	164
Dysentery	392	83	52	71	58
Other	1940	5512	3398	1412	1192

Table 17: Health Service Provision

Muang Sing Hospital	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Beds	18	18	18	18	18	18
Inpatients	1144	1008	660	690	700	800 (6months)
Consultations	7886	6993	3395	4138	3836	2525 (6months)
Drs	5	5	6	5	5	5
Paramedics	7	8	8	7	7	7
Nurses	22	22	22	22	22	22
Outreach Services						
Health centres		1	1	2	2	2
Pharmacies		3	5	4	4	5

In the past several years, UNICEF, UNESCO and Lao Red Cross have all conducted HIV prevention activities with the collaboration of the National Committee for the Control of AIDS focusing primarily on raising the capacity of health officials and improving awareness in a few selected villages. These days NCA, GTZ and ACF are developing more intensive projects targeting HIV/AIDS vulnerability in local communities. Although there are no surveillance studies that show any incidence of HIV in the province (only one informal testing round has been conducted several years ago), these new activities are based on the assumption that HIV is a clear and present danger. In what follows we will demonstrate that the presence of the road has in fact exacerbated this threat making HIV a pressing health issue that needs careful and appropriate attention.

HIV in Lao PDR.

At present identified levels of HIV in Lao PDR are extremely low but there is abundant evidence of potential risks of increased levels of transmission. In particular, rates of certain STDs are worryingly high in some target groups, for example a national survey in 2001-2 showed high STI prevalence among service women: Chlamydia 32%, and Gonorrhoea 13.9%.

HIV/AIDS situation until mid 2003

- The first HIV infection identified - 1990
- The first AIDS case identified - 1992

Cumulative number of HIV/AIDS reported cases from 1990 to April 2003:

- Number of provinces reported - 14
- Number of blood samples - 88,803
- Number of HIV positive tests - 1,089
- Number of AIDS cases - 590
- Number of deaths - 452

The 1089 known cases of HIV are distributed by province as follows (3 provinces have had no testing done, many of the below provinces has had only small ad hoc surveillance):

Table 18: HIV caseload in 2003

Province	HIV cases	Province	HIV cases
Vientiane Municipality.	286	Xayaboury	5
Vientiane Province.	5	Khammouan	92
Borikhamxay	9	Savannakhet	481
Bokeo	71	Champasack	79
Luangrabang	19	Sekong	1
LuangNamtha	0	Saravan	27
Oudomxay	14	Attapeu	0

Source: NCCA

It can be seen that Luang Namtha shows no evidence of HIV infection within the province. However, there are no empirical figures that can enumerate precise risk quotients and there are multiple behavioural contexts that are worthy of consideration. In Muang Sing and Muang Long the situation is of concern.

Bars and Nightclubs along route 17B

The numbers of nightclubs/bars and women selling sex in towns (and recently villages) along the road is growing steadily. In the recent past, commercial sex services were concentrated in the towns, in particular at either end of route 17B in Muang Sing and Xiengkok. But in a significant departure from this pattern, more recently new bars have opened in Muang Long and in villages outside of Muang Sing along the road. At the start of 2000 there was only 1 nightclub in Muang Sing with 5-6 women (in the late 1990s there had been several more locales but they had been closed by government decree) none in Muang Long and one in Xiengkok. Three years later, a breakdown of venues showed the following:

Table 19: Entertainment venues

2003	Number of venues	Number of service women
Muang Sing	5 venues	15
Muang Long	2 venues	11
Xiengkok	7 venues	22
2004	**Number of venues**	**Number of service women**
Muang Sing	6 venues	36
Muang Long	3 venues	14
Xiengkok	7 venues	18

Against a backdrop of rapid proliferation of commercial sex sites, the specific nightclubs and bars are constantly changing, with venues closing and new

ones opening. Likewise, the number of women working in these sites varies as they move from place to place. Sometimes, the police insist on limits to the number of women in any one venue but this also seems a transitory and fleeting practice. In Xiengkok, the police collect taxes from the bar owners on the number of individual service women (50,000 kip/month) at twice the rate of those in Muang Long or Sing (25,000 kip/month) as a supposed means to reign in the rampant service sector and freewheeling atmosphere in the small town.

In Muang Sing, the nightclubs vary from the very familiar dancehall/karaoke ve-nues to small drink-shops. One Chinese-owned venue opened in 2001 and initially employed only Chinese women working as beer hostesses/CSWs but this was disallowed after some months by the district authorities and now only Lao women work there. Recently two venues have opened several kilometres outside of Muang Sing on route 17B. This indicates an important transition to locales in immediate proximity of relocated Akha and other ethnic villages. The rationale is that men in the town will prefer more discreet venues some distance from their homes. However, it also places the form of social interaction right at many villagers' doorsteps. Increasingly, therefore, village men with money from various forms of market trade are engaging in new forms of social and sexual interactions with women from other parts of the country (CSWs almost inevitably move from other provinces). Whereas in the past, life in the mountains culturally and geographically circumscribed regular sexual interactions with women from other ethnic groups, these barriers are now disappearing for many Akha men and other relocated ethnic groups. This is not an issue for moral adjudication; cross-cultural sexual contact is nothing new anywhere in the world. But it warrants consideration if it increases the potential for HIV spread.

Chinese women in a Xiengkok restaurant

The Expansion of Sexual Networks

A number of economic, cultural and geographic variables have contributed to the low levels of HIV in Lao. Given the rampant epidemics in neighbouring countries the concept of social and geographic boundaries are of particular salience. Remoteness and limited range of multi-partner sexuality coupled with the absence of needle based drug abuse are key issues in the apparently low rates of HIV infection in most of Lao PDR. Route 17B represents the concrete dismantling of elements of these boundaries. Multi-partner sexuality is typically associated with the ethnic peoples living in and around Sing and Long. However when sexual interactions create networks that extend beyond cultural groupings the potential for infection is increased dramatically.

Nang Euay

Nang Euay is a 36yr old Lao woman from Namtha town. Nowadays she runs a bar in Xiang Kok. Before she married she would sell goods at the Boten border crossing with China. There she met her husband, a policeman, and together they moved to Xieng Khouang Province where she worked as a trader at the Phone Savanh market. After some years, the marriage split up and Euay and her 8 year old daughter moved back to Luang Namtha where she decided to live with her younger sister who had recently opened a beer shop in Xiang Kok. At this stage the bar was just a bamboo lean-to on the banks of the Mekong.

In 2001 Euay opened her own bar with help from her 13 year old daughter on the road just up from the river banks. She employed young women from other provinces Oudomxay, Luang Prabang, Phongsaly and so forth. She and her sister would make visits to home villages in remote and poor areas recruiting young women - 14 -16 years old. Euay applies for official permission to employ them as restaurant helpers, sometimes giving the families small gifts but no fixed amounts of money. She does not tell the young women that they will be expected to sell sex.

In 2003, Euay and a colleague from Bokeo decided to traffic two women from the bar to Thailand making 50,000 Baht each. The young women's families were furious when they learned that they had disappeared and threatened Euay and her family with violence. The police were called in but it wasn't until a year later when the young women made their way back to Laos that Euay was arrested. The police discovered that her colleague in Bokeo had a long history of trafficking women into Thailand – he was jailed for 5 years. Euay spent 2 months in jail and was fined 2 million kip ($200).

Euay, recently released, is now back running her bar. She has adopted a 6 month son from a woman working in another of the bars. At present, she has no outside women working with her as sex workers; she says it is because the business is not so good now the Chinese truck-drivers come to Xiang Kok less than they used to and the fact the police tax the sex workers more in this town than elsewhere. She is not actively recruiting as she did in the past due to her concerns with official scrutiny. In the meantime, her 16 yr old daughter will sleep with customers (she has done this since she was 13) until more young women arrive of their own volition.

Women working in bars typically move widely and regularly throughout the country (Lyttleton 1999). Generally men frequenting these bars are a mixture of local townsfolk and visitors from other provinces. Assuming condoms are not

always used in sexual interactions that take place, the sexual networks that local Akha men connect themselves with are increased dramatically. These networks are not purely to other parts of the country.

In Xiengkok there has been a steady presence of Chinese girls in one or two of the several desultory bars/restaurants that flank the road where the Chinese trucks come to park before loading or unloading goods. Sometimes queues of 8-10 trucks await the arriving boats and here the service industry is more geared to these clients or the timber labourers than the orientation of larger clubs to visiting government workers in the district towns. In Xiengkok, the majority of women work in small beer shops that have what are euphemistically called 'emergency rooms' (*hong suksoen*) in the back where clients can have sex. These days the demand for such services from truck-drivers has decreased as the boats use truck services less and are able to ply their route more directly to China since the obstructing rapids in the river were blasted in early 2003 (this was a large Chinese project that has prompted a degree of resistance from some sectors in downstream countries, to little avail as the 18 chosen sites were dynamited by mid 2003). Nevertheless while there are less Chinese truck-drivers stopping in Xiengkok these days, their presence is somewhat replaced by the Chinese labourers in the newly built timber-processing plant. In the past the women servicing the Chinese (and Lao) men in Xiengkok include Chinese Akha who have worked in the Chinese sex industry before coming to Lao PDR.

Thus the bars and nightclubs along Route 17B and their overlapping clientele are one very important nexus for possible HIV spread (and other STDs). Since the very recent past they provide opportunities for sexual exchanges between far more diverse groups of men and women in this area. It doesn't need repeating that sexual customs of the local ethnic groups such as Akha and Kui provide little in the way of social constraints on multi-partner sexuality - this is often reiterated and sensationalised as the fundamental basis of the ethnic group's vulnerability to STDs. Despite protestations to the contrary, multi-partner sexuality is also common amongst lowland Lao groups, in particular in the context of men visiting bars and nightclubs. Put together, if - and in the absence of any clear data it remains a big if - HIV is transmitted in some of these interactions then the potential for it to spread between different and geographically widely dispersed communities has increased enormously in recent years.

Research team in a bar in Xiengkok

Nang Ko

19 yr old Khmu woman from Nam Bak district,Luang Prabang Province. She left home at age of 14 after finishing 5 years of primary school. With minimal reading or writing skills she worked for 9 months in garment factories in Vientiane receiving about $30/month. She returned home briefly and then when she was 16, following the invitation of a friend, she moved down to a newly opened restaurant in Muang Long that had a number of women who entertained customers and provided sexual services. After 3 months here she moved to a small bar in Xiengkok.

She worked here for about 20 days when one of the bar owners in Xiengkok approached her and 4 other young women and suggested they could make a better income in the neighbouring province of Bokeo. The bar owner's 'boyfriend' organized a boat to take them there, however several hours after departure they landed on the Thai side of the river near Chiang Saen. Here they were separated and taken by men referred to as 'por liang'. At this point Ko realized she wasn't being taken to Bokeo but into Thailand instead. She was too afraid to resist. The man who had brought her from Xiengkok received 50,000 Baht for each woman from the agents and left.

Ko was taken into a new car and followed by other cars took a circuitous route to avoid checkpoints. She was forced to sleep with a number of men in different locales until she arrived in Bangkok at a large bar several days later. Here she was 'taught' how to receive customers and various sexual techniques by the bar owner and his associates. She was with a number of other new arrivals, women from Lao PDR and Burma. They were told to speak only Thai and not allowed to talk about each other's background. Each of the girls was rated on her ability to provide sexual services by the owner and assigned a number.

At night they were made to sit in a large glassed room and men would choose them for sex – Ko never saw less than 3 men a night. The bar operated a system whereby women having sex with more than 3 men a night no longer had to sit in the show-room, but became listed as 'star ladies'. The owner listed the income of each woman in a large book but the women received no recompense apart from clothing and food. Over the next two years she was moved between a number of venues ending up in Chiang Rai in 2003. She had been unable to find any way of returning to Lao PDR until a regular client offered her advice on travel to the border and gave her 3,000 Baht for the trip. She made it to the Chiang Saen border point where the police queried her over her lack of travel documents. She lied that she had just come briefly to sell goods and her mother was waiting for her on the Lao side of the river. The police let her cross the river.

She took a bus and then a boat back to Xiengkok. As she told people her story, many suggested she go to the police. The Luang Namtha police arrested the bar owner in Xiengkok and her 'boyfriend' in Huay Xai. They spent several months in jail. In early 2004, Ko is still working in bars in Muang Sing and Muang Long.

STDs amongst local populations

One indication of the ability of infectious diseases to spread rapidly is the high levels of gonorrhoea being noted in some Akha villages. Although, once again, there exists no empirical evidence, there are numerous anecdotal accounts of widespread gonorrhoea (*nong nai*) from district and development agency health workers who indicate a wide number of their target villages have large numbers of

men requesting drugs for STD treatment. They indicate that it has been known to spread rapidly throughout village populations. Local men also talk about its widespread incidence and the fact that they seldom seek treatment as the symptoms either disappear or are treated with a local herbal concoction.

It is unclear to what extent these gonorrhoea epidemics are a new phenomenon. Certainly the health officials have only recently learned of their presence as they move into the mountains on anti-malaria and clean water programs. In the past health officials spent little time in the mountains and had little interest in the sexual health of the highlanders; however with increasing awareness of the threats HIV/AIDS poses there is a growing sensitivity about such issues. A Chinese doctor who has lived in the Muang Long mountains for 3 years and married into an Akha family reports regular requests for treatment from local men – and while numbers have increased since he has been there he says he is unsure to what extent it is a new phenomenon. Be that as it may, its widespread presence is a clarion call that signals the ready transmission of STDs in local communities. The major unknown is whether HIV is amongst these.

HIV prevention campaigns and their impact

Campaigns throughout Lao PDR have introduced a degree of knowledge about HIV amongst much of the populace.[12] There have been numerous projects targeting women in bars all over the country and, even though most of these in the more remote districts are little more than cursory top-down information sessions, a basic level of awareness exists amongst many women who have been part of one or another training session. One cannot say the same

[12] Gossip is also beginning concerning the intersection of mobility and HIV vulnerability. Police officials in Muang Sing are suspicious that 3 local deaths might be attributed to AIDS because the people were super thin and one had sores. One man 25 had been a trader in Thailand and Lao PDR; another had been a CSW in a bar in MS and had returned home to Luang Prabang and committed suicide there; another man had been a labourer moving all around the country (and in Thailand).

about ethnic communities or local townsfolk in Sing and Long. Although there have been a number of workshops (*obrom*) for government workers of various departments in Sing and Long, and several pilot projects undertaken at the village level[13], this information is, to date, often token and has had very limited uptake. Some ethnic villages have been subject to the equivalent of a mail drop – with dated pamphlets showing gruesome shots of AIDS symptoms being delivered to villages along the road. With no accompanying explanation or discussion, such manoeuvres can only be considered counterproductive.

As concerns the effectiveness of knowledge disseminated in training sessions for women in bars, there are several points of relevance to the situation along route 17B.

- A number of the women in the bars have worked in various other provinces before coming to the towns of Muang Sing or Muang Long. They have therefore heard often about HIV/AIDS. Whether this knowledge is adequate to induce sufficiently safe behaviour is another question. We heard frequently from the women that condoms were not always used depending on who the client was and the level of perceived risk based on criteria such as status, wealth, sophistication, that is to say highly subjective and problematic forms of assessment.

- In the smaller bars of Xiengkok, a majority of the women are ethnic Khmu brought directly (quite often deceived by promises of work in up-market restaurants) from the rice-poor districts in Luang Prabang (Nam Bak) and Udomxai by the owners of the bars (*mae liang*). The owners of several of these bars will acquire young women with no sexual experience for clients if they so desire. In short, women in the bars of Xiengkok tend to be younger, less educated, come from a wider range of ethnic backgrounds (including Lanten and Kui but so far no Akha) and have far less facility with lowland Lao language or the ability to negotiate safe sex with clients. They were unable to follow the content of one HIV training session we attended. Condom use is therefore seldom insisted upon in these bars frequented by a mix of Chinese, Thai, Lao, Burmese and (occasionally) local men from Akha or Kui ethnicities.

- Transitory Chinese women working in the bars along Route 17B speak no Lao. They are excluded from any campaigns run by health officials targeting risk practices and it is uncertain whether they have any prior knowledge of HIV.

[13] Lao Red Cross/Australian Red Cross have made a concerted effort to introduce HIV awareness to villages close to the road near Muang Sing and have made some impact, PSI have also taken a traveling campaign vehicle to Xiengkok with widespread appeal. But with limited reach and without follow-up the positive impact on local knowledge levels in ethnic communities is still extremely low throughout both districts.

The key issue of infrequent condom use emerges in many of the interviews conducted during this research with informants that include the women who work in the bars and the men who buy their time and bodies. The following are snippets from these interviews:

- Trader (37 yrs) goes to China and Thai and sees CSWs wherever he goes – he likes Chinese women as they are prettiest – he doesn't always use condoms.
- Long distance truck driver (32yrs) drives between Vientiane and Pakse in the South and China in the North. He visits CSWs wherever he stops – sometimes uses condoms, sometimes not if he is drunk and depending on whether the girl is warm (ie normal temperature) – it also depends on how she looks. He uses ATS (*ya ba*) as well; only buys it from those he knows well. If any body tells the police about drug trade details they are killed.
- Bus driver (32 yrs) takes passengers between Muang Sing and Xiengkok – he has lots of free time to see the girls in the bars; and he sleeps with them once or twice a month. He never used to use condoms when he was single; now he uses them all the time he is married. He also picks up female passengers sometimes – they agree on a price and stop at a guest house at the destination, in these cases he seldom uses a condom.
- Boat driver (43yrs) – a Lue from Burmese town of Chiang Lap – he prefers young women in Muang Sing than other spots along route 17B – he feels they are prettier. Visits them 2-3 times a month – doesn't always use condoms.
- Trader from Vientiane collecting *mai kessana* (perfumed wood). He sees CSWs wherever he goes – doesn't use condoms only takes ampicillin (2 pills) and omoxycillin (2 pills) before having sex.
- Labourer at the timber factory (35yrs) from Vientiane. He used to work in the South – he drinks often in the bars of Xiengkok and when he is drunk never uses a condom as he is a regular customer. He used to visit the Akha villages and sleep with the young women there. Several of his friends have taken CSWs as girlfriends during their stint at the factory.
- Owner of Muang Long restaurant says the Chinese men who come to plant watermelon visit the bar regularly – one has taken a woman from the bar to be his wife.
- Woman from Kui village (30ys *mae hang* - widow) is an opium addict - she labours in Akha villages and Hmong villages and for the Chinese. She will sleep with men wherever she works (and with soldiers in nearby villages) – if possible she will get opium in exchange for sex. She always has younger unmarried women with her – they go as a group; the young women also sleep with men wherever they go in return for food and lodging.
- Government official, 32yrs would sleep with village women wherever he went to work in rural areas (Akha, Kui and Hmong; of these the young Lanten women are the hardest to convince to have sex but with some effort a relationship it is possible). He never used to use a condom but now as more government staff work in the mountains he is starting to use them.
- 17 yrs CSW from Sida ethnic group in Udomxai – worked in various bars along route 17B – she has had gonorrhoea before, usually self treats – she didn't stop working during this period and doesn't always use condoms. Has a policeman boyfriend. Another CSW at the same bar in Muang Sing also has problems with sexual health, probably gonorrhoea – clients usually labourers or Chinese, or married men. Says most CSWs are scared to sleep with western men. A 17 yr old from Udomxai says she won't use a condom if the men give her more money. Mostly government officials.
- CSWs (and bar owners) mentioned they often take drugs (ATS - *ya ba*) to improve their mood, to talk more enthusiastically with guests and to stay thin. They smoke in the bathrooms, or sneak to bushes outside; sometimes in groups. Other times they smoke at the houses where they buy it in Muang Sing.
- A Khmu woman who worked in one of the Xiengkok bars has a Kui boyfriend who drives a speedboat; during her stay he would often bring several of his Kui village friends with him.

Now she has moved to near the Boten Chinese border where she works in a restaurant as a waitress but also takes money for sex - usually Chinese traders and Lao truck-drivers. It is a regular deal not to use condoms every time. She doesn't think about it much.

- A Sayaboury CSW can speak some Chinese and only likes the older rich men - Lao, Chinese or Burmese, condoms seldom used – other CSWs don't like the Chinese as they cannot speak with them.
- A 16 yr old woman came to visit relatives in the guesthouse at Xiengkok, but also casually sells sex; she has worked before in Muang Long since she was 14 – at the time of interview she had no idea what condoms were.
- An 18 yr old transvestite works at a nightclub in Muang Sing – he has regular western customers.

Table 20: Women working in bars in 2003

Name	Ethnicity	Age	Home	Entry into sex work	Cost for services	First Sex	Salaries/ month	Education
Xieng Kok								
Tong	Lue	26	Oudomxay	Voluntary		16 yrs	200.000k	Primary
Kaeo	Lue	28	Oudomxay	Voluntary		18		Primary
Tic	Lue	15	Luang Namtha	Deceived		13		Primary
Sy	Khmu	16	Phongsaly	Deceived	100.000k	16	200.000k	
Daeng	Khmu	15	Oudomxay	Poverty	100-500.000k	15	100.000k	Third year primary
Veo	Khmu	15	Oudomxay	Poverty	50-100.000k	15	150.000 k	Fourth year Primary
Dee	Khmu	17	Oudomxay	Deceived	50-100.000k	16	150.000 k	Fifth year Primary
Kee	Khmu	17	Luang Namtha	Voluntary	50-100.000k	15	150.000 k	Third year secondary
Nanh	Khmu	15	Oudomxay	Deceived	50-100.000k	14	150.000 k	Third year primary
Phuan	Khmu	23	Xayaboury	Deceived	50-250.000k	17	200.000 k	Third year secondary
Vee	Lue	21	Luang Prabang	Deceived	50-100.000k	21	200.000 k	Fourth year primary
Soon	Khmu	16	Luang Prabang	Deceived	50-200.000k	16	250.000 k	Fifth year primary
La	Khmu	18	Luang Prabang	Deceived	50-200.000k	14	250.000 k	Second year primary
Muang Long								
Phay	Khmu	18	Oudomxay	Deceived	100.000k	15	350.000 k	Fifth year primary
Sy	Khmu	17	Bokeo	Voluntary	50-100.000k	12	200,000 k	Third yr secondary
Muan	Khmu	16	Oudomxay	Deceived	50.-100.000k	13	200.000 k	Third year primary
Pha	Khmu	18	Oudomxay	Deceived				Second year primary
Banh	Khmu	17	L. Prabang	Voluntary				Third year primary
Boonmy	Khmu	16	L. Prabang	Voluntary				Fifth year primary
Bai	Khmu	18	L. Prabang	Deceived	100-700.000k	15		Third year primary
Phua	Khmu	21	Phongsaly	Voluntary	100-700.000k	16		
Muang Sing								
Vay	Khmu	23	Oudomxay	Voluntary	1000 Baht	15	200.000 k	Third year primary
Nyay	Khmu	19	Oudomxay	Deceived	1000 Baht	17	150.000 k	First year primary
Kay	Khmu	16	Oudomxay	Voluntary	1000 Baht	16	150.000 k	First year secondary
Ang	Lao	23	Xayaboury	Voluntary	1000 Baht		200.000 k	First year secondary
Nood	Lao	18	L. Prabang	Voluntary			200.000 k	Third yr secondary
Teo	Lao	19	Oudomxay	Voluntary			200.000 k	
Nyan	Khmu	19		Voluntary			150.000 k	
Nyaeng	Khmu	17		Voluntary			250.000 k	
Ta	Khmu	16		Voluntary			200.000 k	
Joi	Sida	17	Oudomxay	Deceived	500 Baht	16	150.000 k	
Suang	Khmu	19	L. Namtha	Deceived			150.000 k	
Sy	Khmu	21	Oudomxay	Deceived			150.000 k	
Kong	Lue	19	Oudomxay	Voluntary			150.000 k	
Monh	Khmu	19	L. Prabang	Deceived	200 Baht		150.000 k	
Nuay	Khmu	17	Oudomxay	Deceived	1000 Baht	15	150.000 k	Fifth year primary

Very little of this type of detail is unusual in studies of commercial sex in many parts of Laos (Lyttleton 1999); nonetheless they give us ample indication of the varied range of relationships and the extent to which condoms are not yet commonly used. Most of the women in the bars along Route 17B are young and have low levels of education – very few completed primary school; and a significant number indicated they had been promised other forms of work only to find themselves trapped into prostitution. The low level of schooling contrasts significantly with a recent study by UNICEF called 'How Did I Get Here' where a broader sample of CSWs had notably higher levels of education. The following table shows the education levels of a sample of women working in bars during the early part of 2003. It also makes obvious some women in the Xiengkok bars are younger and more likely to have been brought under modes of deception into work here than those in the UNICEF study. For many it is their first involvement in commercial sex as several of the bar owners make regular trips to Oudomxay and Luang Prabang to bring young women to their bars, making promises of good jobs with a regular income.

The commercialisation of local sexuality

The characteristics of the women working in bars and the information from interviews highlight very clearly the extent to which commercial sex and multiple partner sexuality is increasingly crossing ethnic divides. One very important corollary trend that is a direct consequence of the bars and economic transitions facilitated by the presence of the road is the increasing commodification of sexuality amongst ethnic groups. This is an issue with profound implications and needs careful study and consideration. It is not an uncommon phenomenon throughout the world and has the unfortunate association with a tragic history of ethnic women introduced into commercial sex in a number of other developing countries. A local version can be seen in the high percentage of ethnic Khmu women selling sex in bars in the two districts.

While occasionally local Kui and Lanten women have worked in the bars of Xiengkok, in the past there has been no evidence of Akha women selling sex in either Sing or Long districts. But in the past year a disturbing trend has been observed for the first time. Several young women from the village that has made itself well-known for its active embrace of the handicraft trade reportedly visit the Muang Sing nightclubs late in the evening soliciting male customers as they leave. Whether these are isolated incidents remains to be seen. If it is a nascent trend then one must lodge it directly in the range of social changes occurring in the lowlands of Muang Sing. It would appear to be no coincidence that it is individuals from Ban Lakham that are the first to engage in this form of commercial exchange. It is no doubt evolving for reasons that are not based simply on the village's proximity to Muang Sing town nor its poverty – both these are indicators shared by other Akha villages. Notably, this village initially endured the subtle disdain from

other Akha villages for their tourist trade initiatives; they learnt before others that Muang Sing was a centre of diverse forms of commerce.

The combination of a desire/need for money and the ongoing search for commodities that can introduce cash into the household follows a logical trajectory to the point that individual bodies become the commodity for sale. Lakham village has moved from sale of opium and trinkets to now diversify to other forms of commerce. In the past the women selling to tourists in the streets of Muang Sing would offer shoulder massages also to the tourists (massage is a deeply traditional aspect of Akha culture and one that carries highly charged exotic and sexualised appeal for the many tourists and officials that visit Akha villages). Nowadays the District has banned the Akha women from offering such (asexual) services to tourists in the streets of Muang Sing. The reports of young women capitalizing on aspects of their sexuality outside the nightclubs signals a huge break with traditional customs and highlights the inroads market commerce is making into traditional life-ways and understandings. Notably, young women are too shy to sell trinkets to tourists during the day – it is only married women who perform this role. At night-time however, if such reports are verified, it seems a small number are not so shy.

This form of an expanding realm of commercialised sexuality is not limited to a few fleeting encounters outside the bars of Muang Sing. It takes its place as one example of ways in which market relations are increasingly impacting the life-ways of ethnic peoples as they move down to be near the road. We have discussed in the previous chapter how increasing dominance of market relations not only sets in place structural hierarchies with associated forms of economic exploitation; it also impacts on subjective conditions of well-being. That is, how people think and feel alters as the underpinnings of everyday life become transformed by growing engagement in a (globalized) capitalist world. Trade, commerce, labour, mobility, commodity exchange, tourism, resettlement are the obvious signs of rapid development along route 17B. What also needs to be emphasized is that each of these facets of social and economic lifestyle introduces changes in how people think and experience life. Every bit as important as the material goods flowing through the area are new ways of thinking about the world. Even though they are much harder to quantify; it is often changing values that set in place profound potential to transform, in a phenomenological sense, the lives of the people along route 17B.

While bars and nightclubs are an obvious site for the intersection of men and women from different geographic, ethnic and economic backgrounds, it is neither the only occasion where sexuality is commodified nor the only arena where HIV can possibly spread. Due to a broad array of social changes in lives of most people near the road, other forms of social and economic relationships taking place well away from the bars are also a potential threat for HIV transmission that can take place in a rapidly expanding realm of sexual exchanges. They deserve attention precisely because they are more subtle and less likely to be the target of specific health campaigns. They come as a direct product of the newly expanded economic practices and relationships.

Ethnic sexual customs and HIV vulnerability

Much has been made of the traditional sexual customs of the Akha and Kui in the context of HIV transmission. Worried health officials shake their heads with concern and mention the 'free sex' practices typical of adolescent women and men of all ages in the village communities. It is certainly true that it is expected that young men and women of these ethnic groups sleep together after reaching puberty. In Akha and Kui villages, the small sleeping huts built by the men and women are now the target of State health projects – headmen are told they must curb the 'promiscuity' of their youth and the availability of their women by destroying these huts if they are to avoid the threat of HIV.

Destroying huts, however, is not the point and will do little to prevent HIV spread. What we would like to bring attention to here is the ways in which HIV can enter a local ethnic community in the first place; it is this point of introduction that should be the issue of concern and measures taken to prevent chances of HIV introduction would be best applied here. This is precisely where the rapidly expanded social networks and shifting social consciousness of all the changes brought by the road coincide and together provide social and sexual liaisons in situations far removed from the bars and nightclubs.

In Akha communities, it is commonplace that young men and women congregate in the evenings in a specially constructed site usually with elevated rows of seating planks. In the evenings, the village

A communal Akha sleeping hut for the young men and women (top)
A young Kui woman sleeping hut (bottom)

adolescents gather, exchange stories, songs and some couples repair to a sleeping hut (the youth of the village form a youth group led by one man who makes important decisions concerning the application of village customs which in turn affect the ongoing reproduction of the village). Such practices continue until the young woman becomes pregnant at which time she chooses which of the young men is her preferred choice for husband. After marriage, older men can still sleep with the young women but it occurs less within the home village and more commonly on visits to other villages. In the past, men visiting from other villages customarily are massaged by young women from this group of adolescents. This is a traditional form of welcome and is obviously oriented to the difficult terrain that must be traversed between villages in the mountains. If the visitor was so inclined he could request that a young woman also have sex with him.

Such requests were usually accompanied by gifts of liquor and cigarettes to the young men within the youth groups as a form of recompense. It also signals a nominal request for permission to access the sexuality of the village women and rights of refusal lie with the head of the adolescent group (*hua na saw num:* akha - *ya ku ayu*) who acts as a gatekeeper controlling the sexual contacts of the young women with outsiders (the young women also have some rights of refusal but these are limited). Such exchanges have traditionally been predicated on the ability to converse with each other; one clear stipulation has been that the young Akha women will sleep with other Akha men because of cultural familiarity. Rights of access to men from other cultural groups are not always so forthcoming.

In the past, government employees working in the mountains could also sometimes sleep with Akha women, but this was not always assumed or always possible. Some young women are not comfortable sleeping with men from other cultural groups who they cannot converse with; however if the government workers (or traders) become known to the villagers, especially the young men – then soon they can expect to be regarded as acceptable as sexual partners with the requisite recompense and permission from the young men. These cultural sanctions vary from village to village. But invariably, cross-cultural sexual access to Akha women has been limited by local sanctions that are controlled and protected by the young men of the village, particularly their leader

Rights of cross-cultural sexual access still do vary from village to village. In some villages, Chinese Akha are allowed immediate access to sleep with local village women when they come to visit or work as they are considered to be of the same culture whereas Lao government workers are not and these men are not given similar permission. But in other villages, local Akha men are concerned that allowing such liaisons with Chinese men would set in place an exodus of the young women who would be taken as wives across the border. These villages on the other hand voiced less concern with Lao men taking temporary sexual partners. Other villages indicated that a more pan-regional 'Asianness' was the defining criterion; we were told men with black hair could sleep with the young women implying foreigners from further afield could not.

In short, there still exist some controls on men from outside the region accessing local Akha women's sexuality. But the issue of concern is how these

are rapidly changing. Increasing numbers of government staff are working in the mountains. Local Akha sexuality and customs are highly sensationalized in lowland understandings and the exotic 'primitiveness' of the minority groups is heavily eroticized. Lowland Lao talk in glowing terms of the cultural stipulations that require young Akha women to massage visitors; those visiting the mountains often wish to experience local sexuality beyond just the massage, and the money, status and increasing familiarity they carry often allows such liaisons. So much so, that some NGOs have now officially prohibited local staff to have sex with village women. There are no such government policies in place – in the past remoteness and lack of government services reaching the mountains has precluded high level contact. This is all changing as the feeder roads extend out from route 17B.

Labour migrants and sexual commodification

Nearer the road it is the huge influx of Chinese workers that needs to be noted. Many of these are Chinese Akha, who are familiar with the custom of hospitality in local villages. Thus, for instance, it is common for Chinese agricultural labourers who come to work the fields of Sing and Long, to visit local Akha villages and sleep with the women. It is commonplace because they are also Akha. But many of the advisors and traders, who negotiate, supervise and assist in the cultivation of the sugar cane, capsicum and watermelon fields in Muang Sing and Muang Long are Haw Chinese. Nowadays they accompany their Akha counterparts or employees to the nearby villages at night and the Chinese Akha introduce and facilitate sexual interactions for these men as well, gaining permission from the head of the adolescent group to sleep with the young women.

In Muang Long, where in 2004 many hectares of watermelon have been planted using Chinese and local labour, the opportunities for sexual contact are rapidly diversifying. The Chinese prefer to hire female labour from the nearby villages, so there are often relationships born of this contact. The Chinese men will visit the villages of the labourers they hire and either take the women 'out', that is to a nearby Lao village that might have a festival or a roadside stall with a TV or just simply back to their encampment. Other times they will just stay in the village for shorter visits that include the provision of sex. The two villages of Charoenxai and Phonsamphan in Muang Long provide clear examples of the growing network of sexual liaisons occurring since watermelon arrived.

The Akha village of Charoenxai which moved down to the road six years ago comprises more than 60 households. The migrants have come in two groups with a second group of highland Akha arriving only in 2003. The village is directly opposite a large number of watermelon fields; the locals commented that all of a sudden this year it is commonplace in the evenings to see Chinese men arriving to look for a local sleeping mate. Mostly it is Chinese Akha who come as labourers, but not exclusively. Even though the Chinese technical advisors who come to supervise the crop production tell us their employers prohibit the practice of

sleeping with other women while here in Laos, local village men tell us it takes place regularly.

The duration of time in the lowlands plays an important part in the increased acceptance and gradual commercialisation of these relationships. Newly arrived Akha women in Charoenxai described with disdain the behaviour of the young women in the initial group of migrants who arrived 6 years ago. These young women nowadays dress as lowlanders and this year are regularly seen as partners of the visiting Chinese who come in groups of 3-4 (Chinese Haw and Chinese Akha) every couple of days. The newer arrivals suggested they would not entertain such liaisons. Likewise government and development staff also reportedly come to Charoenxai. Usually the cost of such liaisons is as before, some liquor and cigarettes for the young men of the village once approval has been gained from the head of this group.

But nowadays the nature of these exchanges is also changing. Some Chinese men take one girl as a regular partner during their stay (in the past marriages have occurred this way in villages in Muang Sing that have had this form of labour contact over several years). In this instance he will provide her with some degree of everyday financial support. In a very telling departure from customary norms, other forms of financial exchange are entering the picture. Village men described how currently some of the more 'modern' Akha women will receive direct financial payment from the visiting Chinese men for the sexual services provided. This is still only a minority of women who accept this form of transaction as it is seen as inappropriate by many. Those that like the man feel money should not be part of the relationship. But significantly, the men who relayed these details described the women who do accept money as being 'smarter' than their counterparts who do not.

Money for provided services is now a logical accompaniment for any number of labour relationships the Akha enter into. It is becoming a key value that attaches to the assessment of the worth of everyday pursuits. If it makes money, it is worthwhile and 'modern'. Following the arrival of watermelons, commodified sexuality has now also entered the list of negotiable income-earning relationships in which the Akha can engage. This transition to commercialised sex has been taken further in Donyeng, an Akha village on the edge of the road slightly nearer to Muang Long town. Here, Chinese men and government workers show up regularly looking for sexual relations – here they no longer have to get approval from the head of the adolescent group, but rather financial arrangements can be made directly with the chosen girl.

Variations on this trend of money for sex are not only present in villages with women who provide labour or those located right on the road. Rather we see far more widespread transformations in local sexual customs occurring in synch with other forms of social change in a number of contexts. For example, in another village about 12 kms outside Muang Sing town, that has had an actively entrepreneurial headman and regular visits from tourists for some years, the forms of sexuality are also evolving under the sway of the cash economy. Here, young women somewhat concerned at their lack of autonomy in receiving male guests

have adopted a new strategy of negotiated compliance. Nowadays, it is no longer satisfactory that the leader of the youth group receive the whisky or cigarettes as coinage for sexual access. In order to keep the young women compliant with the culturally traditional form of hospitality, money must now be paid directly from the guest to the young woman who will receive him sexually. While the youth group still has rights to determine who has sexual access to young women within this village, in order to cope both with increasing number of village visitors and the desires of the young women for some benefits in the exchange, the traditional system has changed to allow direct sex-for-cash transactions.

These new forms of commodified relationship signal profound transformations in the social relationships being constructed in the lowlands of Sing and Long and highlight the ways in which longstanding cultural formations adapt under new forces. In the absence of adequate HIV prevention activities reaching these populations, they highlight the ongoing association of compensated sex and HIV vulnerability.

Ethnicity and sexual exploitation

The complicated ways that labour, markets, sexuality and disease transmission intertwine is not the only current issue affecting Akha systems of cultural interaction and the men who engage in sexual commerce, other examples also show that exploitation readily accompanies ethnic difference and can exacerbate forms of sexual vulnerability. In the Kui village of Phonsamphan, located between the Akha villages of Charoenxai and Donyeng, money has not yet entered new forms of sexual contact. But the interactions between outside labourers and local women are becoming part of a wider world of orchestrated relationships nonetheless. The Kui have long been on the lower end of social and economic relationships in the Muang Long district (and other parts of Laos). The Akha, usually used as cheap labour by other ethnic groups, themselves employ Kui to work for them. Even though they are culturally distinct ethnicities, many of the Kui can speak some Akha and social and economic interactions between the two groups are commonplace. Opium has been a common item of trade between the two groups; sexual contact is also commonplace but tends to be somewhat unidirectional. Akha men will sleep with Kui women, sometimes in exchange for opium, sometimes sex comes as an additional component of a day's labour provided by the Kui women. Men from Charoenxai will also visit the neighbouring Kui village of Phonsamphan to sleep with the women there.

Ban Phonsamphan is a Kui village that has undergone considerable stress in its relocation to the lowlands. A recent ACF report cites it as one village where the negative impacts of resettlement are most obvious in terms of poverty and health standards including high mortality upon initial arrival. It has high numbers of opium addicts (Romagny and Davineau 2003). Five villages have come together from different sections of Muang Long making it the largest population centre

outside of the towns. Of relevance here are the sexual contacts that are facilitated by the village's location on the edge of the road.

Kui customs encourage young women to build their own bedrooms separate from the main house once they reach puberty. They build small bamboo rooms high on stilts either completely themselves or with the help of a friend. Once they have reached puberty and built their own bedrooms they remove themselves from the main household after dusk. At their discretion young women are able to take regular partners into their rooms. This is how relationships are established that lead to marriage upon pregnancy.

The important distinction is that there are little in the way of controlling sanctions on outsiders coming in to sleep with the local women. In most Akha villages the male head of the youth group has rights of refusal to visiting men who wish to sleep with one of the village women (he can also fine the woman if she takes a guest without his approval). In the Kui villages it depends entirely on the young woman's inclination and Akha and other men have long visited Kui villages to avail themselves of the young women's sexuality. There is little in the way of any sort of recompense involved in these relations although in the past some level of courting was required before the girl would be compliant. The young women take multiple partners and it is a well established tradition that the young women can be fairly easily persuaded to her room. Sometimes, it appears that this persuasion is not far from coercion, as the young women have little support for any refusal.

This then is the context where numerous outsiders are now choosing to go to Ban Phonsamphan. For the past several years it has been popular with some lower-level government officials to visit regularly. A nearby army barracks was causing so many local pregnancies that the village eventually successfully petitioned the District have it moved. Since 2004, its notoriety has escalated. During the research period in early 2004, when our team slept for nearly one week in the village, between 10 and 20 men would show up each evening. Some are regulars, others are newcomers. Young men from Lue and Tai Dam villages arriving for the first time proclaimed they had come because: "they had heard there were lots of young women available".

It is not clear that in each instance any man visiting the village gains immediate sexual relations. Sometimes some level of courting is required – but how much varies. Villagers suggest that men can gain ready access to their young women; this is not seen as problematic and the men are not proprietorial of their sisters or daughters (until they get pregnant). Chinese men also come frequently, sometimes they were observed literally grabbing young women and expecting immediate embraces. Overall there are about 50-60 unmarried women in this village and, as mentioned, sexual customs allow for a regular change of partners for the young women. Each night they can choose a prospective partner; some relish this choice – others are more reticent.

Of relevance to our study is the extent to which nowadays many outside men come to avail themselves of a fairly large pool of sexually available women. It appears this village is providing sexual services for a wide range of men from

nearby villages, the nearby township, and the nearby agricultural fields. Some of these men are local, for example the neighbouring Akha; others come from far further afield, for example Lao men from distant provinces and Chinese men from widely diverse locales in southern China. Ban Phonsamphan is therefore acting as a sexual melting pot, in effect almost a brothel, for men who want 'exotic' and free sex. So far the costs of these transactions have not been counted. A campaign had focused on this village for HIV awareness but achieved very little. Posters are used as wallpaper, and condom use is entirely up to the male. With little understanding of the nature of STDs or HIV, we heard they are seldom used.

The Kui women are to this point (insofar as we can tell) not visibly averse to the heightened attention. But the high number of prior pregnancies from soldiers in the nearby camp caused problems so there do exist communal concerns over the women's sexual availability. To date there appear to be few traditional mechanisms that support community or family controls over the sexual practices of the women. Typically, it has been at the women's discretion as to whom she might have sex with, although the parents must agree to any marriage. On the other hand, the women themselves have limited control over their sexuality. Cultural norms encourage rather than discourage young women from accepting offers. This is the context that numerous men are taking obvious advantage of. Whereas in the Akha villages there is still a sense of male-determined appropriate versus inappropriate sexual partners (although this is changing along with the addition of money in these exchanges), in the Kui village there are neither cultural boundaries around sexual partners nor any form of token recompense to be negotiated, although the Chinese men will reportedly occasionally give token amounts of money. In addition to this local context of unpaid sexual labour, two women from this village have recently returned from Thailand to where they had been trafficked into sex work several years ago.

The Kui have historically been at a position of disadvantage in numerous economic relations; throughout the Golden Triangle the Kui and related Muser groups find themselves on the lower echelon of a social and economic hierarchy in a wide array of contexts. Here in Ban Phonsamphan, such patterns stand to repeat themselves in a sexual context. The Kui women have little to gain from relations with men from outside who visit for the simple pursuit of sexual pleasure. The individual Kui women's desires for such relations (to whatever extent these exist) notwithstanding, what the growing number of contacts potentially delivers is the introduction of STDs from outside sources. If HIV is introduced then the terms of exchange become far more damaging than just socially exploitative.

Like the roadside Akha villages, what Ban Phonsamphan presents is a microcosm of larger changes taking place along the road where the social and material relations that come as part of a wider parcel of changes carry benefits and shortcomings directly related to its presence. In Charoenxai and Phonsamphan villages, labour is readily available in the fields along the road due to outside investment and this is seen as a mixed blessing. The labour relations also bring outsiders into geographic and social proximity that encourage increased sexual exchange. This is in itself a significant facet of HIV vulnerability in the region.

Most studies highlight the vulnerability of out-migrants; that is, the labour force that leaves Lao to look for work in Thailand or beyond (Lyttleton 2002). Here in Sing and Long, it is the combination of in-migrants and local resettlement that are the most obvious elements of HIV threat. Ongoing drug abuse is a further social and material aspect of everyday life that have been enormously affected by the roads presence and have distinct consequences for the health of local populations.

Lanten of Muang Long planting rice

Akha of Muang Long

Chapter 7
Regulating Drug Use and Abuse

Opium use in Sing and Long

Injection of illicit drugs is virtually unheard of in Laos. There are occasional anecdotal reports of small scale needle use in border provinces with China and Vietnam but no ongoing tradition of injecting drug use has yet been reported. Despite occasional seizures of heroin in transit to Vietnam, there is no known incidence of needle use for injection of illicit drugs in Sing or Long Districts. This makes the spectre of needle-born infectious diseases significantly less in Laos than in neighbouring countries (so far). On the other hand, opium use is widespread in northern provinces of Lao PDR, (and Burma and Thailand). Its common cultivation and habitual use bring both medicinal and economic benefits; but at the same time high levels of addiction promote deep levels of poverty, family discord and ill health.

The cultivation of opium is associated with a number of ethnic minorities living in these highland regions, in particular the Hmong, Yao, Lisu, Lahu, Wa, Shan and Akha. Its production was encouraged during the 19th and 20th centuries by colonial powers, warlords and traders through taxes, quotas and indebtedness. Despite numerous outside interests promoting its cultivation, it is also clear that high potential profits have, in and of themselves, been an adequate incentive for highlanders to grow poppy. Thus, the tribal Hmong and Yao have often attempted to increase income through opium growing since the beginning of large-scale production in southern China in the mid nineteenth century. Historically this commitment to opium as a cash crop, coupled with avoidance of Chinese warlord exactions, has significantly influenced the movement south of a number of ethnic groups and the nature of their migration within the Golden Triangle region to higher-slope land most suitable for opium growing.

In Lao PDR opium is grown in 10 out of 17 provinces however its cultivation is concentrated primarily in northern remote mountain regions (26,800 hectares in 1998) with Louang Namtha ranking 5th behind the provinces of Phongsali, Oudomxai, Houapanh, Xieng Khuang and Luang Prabang. The majority of opium is produced for local consumption - 57% according to some analyses (NCA 2002). In 1997/98 the LCDC/UNDCP survey indicated that roughly 1,500 hectares in Muang Sing and Muang Long were used, largely by the Akha, to cultivate poppy that yielded around 12,200 kg of raw opium.

Opium cultivation never assumed the same historical economic importance for the Akha as it has for other highland people in the Golden Triangle. This remains true for the Akha of Sing and Long where overall priority is still given to rice as the most important crop. Studies of settlement and land use that Muang Sing district indicate it is a comparatively 'low-scale opium-producing region' (Epprecht 1998:131). Nonetheless, opium has been a crucial cash crop or item of barter in Akha economic exchanges with highland and lowland villages. It is also

an important item of consumption as a medicine (e.g. for diarrhoea, and as an analgesic and tranquilliser) and for recreational, regular or habitual consumption by those who have become addicted. Other activities on which the Akha in the highlands depend for their livelihood include vegetable gardening, the raising of livestock (oxen, buffaloes, pigs and poultry), hunting and the collection and sale of forest products (e.g. medicinal barks and fruits) although to date none of these come close to the economic value of opium in terms of an item of exchange.

Following its widespread cultivation, opium addiction has been a common presence in the virtually all Akha villages of Muang Sing and Muang Long. According to Gebert's 1995 survey, the rate of addiction among the Akha was 9.3 percent in Muang Sing (and according to NCA 8.8% in Long) compared to 2.8 percent for the Hmong and 3.5 percent for the Lue. Although addicts are to be found in each village, the percentage of households with one or more members dependent on opium varies widely across villages. Addiction levels are also rapidly changing due to several years of rehabilitation projects run by development agencies in collaboration with District officials which together with the drastic supply reduction activities in 2003 has significantly lessened the large pool of local addicts.

In the past several years, previously tolerant state attitudes have hardened and there has been an increase in official directives prohibiting opium cultivation.[14] In 1994 a Comprehensive Drug Control Programme (Masterplan) for 1994-2000 was formulated jointly by UNDCP and the newly formed Lao National Commission for Drug Control and Supervision (LCDC). In 1996, the Lao Government revised its drug control law (Article 135) to prohibit the production of opium and increase the penalties for trafficking. Until the Prime Minister declared in 2000 that all opium is to be removed from Lao PDR by 2006 (later revised to 2005) this mandate was not actively enforced in the remote rural areas of the north where most opium

[14] In 1996, for the first time opium cultivation was legally prohibited in Lao PDR.

production takes place[15]. Instead the Masterplan sought to first expand alternative development strategies with assistance from international agencies such as UNDCP, GTZ and NCA that aimed to gradually reduce the dependence on opium amongst highland farmers.

In 2001 the Government ramped up operations to reduce opium production. Initial gestures were more symbolic than punitive. Several rounds of mortars were fired across the valley close to the juncture of Sing and Long from one side of route 17B into the hills on the other. Stockpiled poppy seeds were collected from all households in mid 2002 (although no-one believed this would be an effective measure). Production which had been declining in the late 1990s peaked in 2001 as anxiety over looming prohibition caused an increase in production. During the next growing season, in late December 2002, teams of State officials visited all villages in the hills of Muang Sing and Long, demanding that poppy plants be cut down. The majority of crops were destroyed in both districts. The Provincial Annual Report notes that by12 March 2003 out of total of 1,164 ha of poppy fields planted in the whole province, 1,004.8 ha had been destroyed and only 160.1 ha remained. The combination of demand reduction and supply eradication initiatives has had profound consequences on the lives of the Akha and other communities living in proximity to Route 17B.

Demand Reduction

Since 1997, GTZ has offered assistance with detox to addicts in the majority of their 63 Akha target villages in Muang Sing. Prior to 2003, NCA in Long concentrated its detox operations on a much smaller number of villages targeting 18 villages in Phase I and II of their activities (1997-2002). More recently NCA have begun activities that in collaboration with district health officials will carry out detox in a further 37 (33 Akha, 4 Hmong) villages. The detoxification involves community-based rehabilitation sessions. After preparatory sessions involving the whole community, addicts spend two weeks in specially built encampments essentially undergoing 'cold turkey' detoxification. They are supervised by project staff and while family members can visit to assist them through the worst stages of withdrawal the addicts themselves are not allowed to leave the encampment. They are provided with a herbal tea prepared specifically for assisting with withdrawal symptoms (this concoction is produced and marketed throughout the northern provinces of Laos where many addicts commonly attempt to self-detox), and provision of commonplace pharmaceuticals such as painkillers.

Statistics from 1997 until mid 2001 shows a vacillating number of addicts in Muang Sing. As some smokers successfully quit, their places are taken by in-

[15] Prior to the revolutionary government taking power, opium use was common in both rural and urban locales. Following 1975, opium use was tightly controlled amongst lowland population as part of a movement to eradicate 'social vices'. Highland ethnic groups continued to produce and consume opium. A study in 1992 showed only one of 80 opium users reported heroin use, in 1996 small-scale use is also reported amongst Lao refugees returning from Thailand. (UNDCP nd 25)

migrants and new addicts (the increased number of addicts in 2001 reflects an increased number of villages included in the District data collection including some Akha villages not previously surveyed). Significantly, of the 798 addicts in Muang Sing who have taken part in detox programs up until the end of 2001, 512 (64.16 percent) have relapsed.

Table 21: Opium addicts in Muang Sing

Year	1997	(female)	1998	(female)	1999	(female)	2000	(female)	2001
Number of Addicts	890	Na.	745	137	824	181	832	176	1108

NCA's 2001/2002 opium survey estimated 1,239 opium addicts in Muang Long in 2001 rising to 1,550 in 2002/2003 (NCA 2002). In 35 villages surveyed, the report cites 824 addicts. Between 1997 and 2001, NCA reduced the number of addicts in their 18 target villages from 233 to 145 and addiction levels in these villages have dropped to 4.3%. Overall, relapse rates have been lower in Long than Sing but many of the social problems facing addicts who go through rehab activities are the same (Lyttleton and Cohen 2003). Recently relapse rates have also dropped noticeably in Sing as more careful demand reduction is carried out and supply reduction plays its part.

Despite an assumed reduction in the number of opium addicts by 2003 due to scarcity (data has not yet been updated by district officials), the social and economic context of drug use and abuse is becoming more complicated by a recent upsurge in the amount of ATS (amphetamine-type substances) being consumed. Transitions in forms of drug abuse emerge as a combination of marketing strategies on the part of petty traders, changes in the traditional supply of opium and importantly a shift in the social context in which drug use is embedded. As opium use is being reduced the use of ATS is increasing rapidly. Route 17B is an integral factor in both the marketing and accessibility of ATS and the changing social and economic relations affecting roadside communities and their use of drugs. The changing forms of drug abuse also come as the social values associated with opium addiction are altered by drug reduction programs, and the values associated with ATS use are inadvertently encouraged (Lyttleton 2004a).

Overall, since the inception of detox programs in the late 1990s a majority of Akha addicts in both districts expressed their desire give up smoking opium, and actively requested assistance from the development agencies implementing these programmes. This is not simply a product of government publicity or specific project activities. It is also a product of the ways in which the Akha are ambivalent about the benefits and dilemmas of reliance on opium. Initially many villagers were sceptical about life without opium and some villages rejected the idea of detox

completely despite the various development 'sweeteners' that were offered as part of the package. But in recent years, the fact that detox has been available when required has allowed many villagers to consider a future without opium in ways that previously were unimaginable, primarily because of the visible numbers of addicts that have successfully given up in each village.

This means that rehabilitation as a concept took on a positive value in village life for many but, importantly, not for all. Thus, many Akha that smoked opium wanted the chance to 'give up', they felt that foreign development agencies could offer them help and furthermore they better act quickly before the Government forced them to give up through more effective prohibition. Even if there are a large number of relapses, the act of trying to give up can itself be productive, giving the addict a sense that he/she can take control of the addiction.

Unfortunately, the fact that many people did not manage to quit on their first or subsequent attempts blunts the positive impact of the existing rehabilitation program in ways beyond simply maintaining high levels of addiction. The social presence of a large number of relapsees - a direct product of reduction programs - has dramatically altered the ways opium use is integrated within Akha communities. Rather than establishing social compassion, the emphasis on moral attribution (detox is advocated to villagers as targeting an individual vice that has strong negative consequences for the family) means that those that relapse are frequently stigmatized and marginalized for their failure (Lyttleton and Cohen 2003).

In other words, for those that were unable to quit, the process of even having tried in the first place created new problems. Those that relapsed became seen as failures that hold the village back from the fruits of modernization that development agencies and government officials are promising to the 'model' villages that are relatively successful in removing opium addiction. Because they are unable to take part in communal work activities due to the morning requirements of opium smoking, relapsees are increasingly seen as delinquent or uncontributing (and therefore unwanted) members of the community. Through the way that opium addiction is negatively sanctioned, failed addicts are seen as a burden to their families and village and in some cases ostracised (in extreme cases evicted from the village). This adds to the sense of shame and hopelessness that many opium smokers feel and only increases their dependence on opium.

As result of the demand reduction activities, opium smoking has been given a new value system – one that takes its shape directly from an outside source of projected development. Because detox is delivered as part of a broader modernization package, failure to conform to expectations is creating a new social identity for these individuals. This is mainly the younger more active members of the community. Older opium addicts (50 yrs and over) are amongst the minority more likely to have not tried to detox in the first place as it is deemed too much a crucial part of their daily existence. Significantly, an addict identity began to emerge that is now characterized by its social implications (Cohen and Lyttleton 2002). Regardless of the fact that the pervasive presence of opium and its practical and symbolic value in specific medical or social contexts makes

abstinence a difficult and at times impossible task, addicts are increasingly marginalized because of their imputed personal responsibility for their addiction and its implications for the village's material development.

This kind of punitive atmosphere began creating a sub-population of 'degenerate addicts' that became optimally positioned to become involved in illicit forms of economic gain in order to sustain their addiction (selling amphetamines for example). Increasingly Akha villages became divided into smokers and non-smokers in ways that were not evident in times before outside attempts to reduce levels of opium addiction. Opium addiction and its merciless demands on the time of the addicts (it takes up to several hours of smoking to reach a level of adequate intoxication) is now under the spotlight of a social gaze that ensures the addicts do their best to avoid public acknowledgement of their practice. As the agencies doing detox began to take note of the problems of relapse and both GTZ and NCA developed more carefully designed activities and allowed for repeat attempts at giving up that noticeably dropped the number of relapses, their attempts at gradual and careful removal of dependence was overtaken by a more pressing incentive to halt. By 2003, opium was suddenly in far scarcer supply than ever before, and the available supplies doubled in price so by late 2003 a *saleung* of opium that a year earlier had fetched 6-8000 kip was now selling for 16,000 kip and upwards.

Supply Reduction

In December 2002/January 2003 as part of a national drive to eradicate opium production by 2005 teams of state officials spent a month in the highlands of Sing and Long, visiting each village that grew opium. They insisted that the fields that had been planted be cut down. Villagers were to be fined if they did not comply. Eighteen million Kip was allocated to Muang Sing for this exercise; a similar amount to Muang Long. The results were dramatic. In Muang Sing, field area had been dropping in recent years due to the constant reminders of looming prohibition and the gradual movement down to the lowlands (where opium production was far more carefully policed). In 2000/2001 growing season, 305 hectares were cultivated; by late 2002 only 183 ha were under poppies. But for the first time, authorities ordered their destruction rather than warning against initial planting. By late January 2003 only 28 ha remained in Muang Sing. In Muang Long that still had larger areas under production that had been increasing until 2001, 573 ha were chopped down to 54 ha leaving just enough for the older addicts who were legally allowed small plots ($35m^2$).

Without entering the obvious debates as to whether adequate alternative agricultural products and other infrastructure provisions such as feeder roads and health services could and should have been provided before this exercise, the strong-arm eradication has had major consequences in the local population and settlement patterns. Immediately after the destruction of the poppy fields, district officials in Muang Sing were swamped with requests for land in the lowlands. One very apparent fact had been made crystal clear and urgent. Life in the highlands

was no longer sustainable in face of the lack of opium to use as a trading item. Immediate rice shortages were forecast for the majority of the Akha still living in the hills.

In Muang Long this was countered by the development agencies having to provide immediate food-for-work activities where rice shortages were prevented by large deliveries through this framework. In Muang Sing GTZ was in the midst of a major transformation in operating style in the transition to its new 10-year program 'Integrated Rural Development of Mountainous Areas in Northern Lao PDR', (2004-2013) which merges two previous rural development programs in Bokeo and Luang Namtha. It was neither in a position nor of an inclination to offer food-for-work programs that it had used with mixed success in the past. A report prepared by GTZ in February 2003 in the aftermath of the opium destruction missions, notes: "It is estimated that about 15 villages with about 2000 people (300-400) families moved to lowland area because their poppy fields were cleared." (2003:18) While this might be overstating the immediacy of the migration there is no doubt, as we have mentioned earlier, that the opium eradication initiatives have upped the ante enormously for rapid decisions that the Akha must make that determine where and how they will live their lives in the absence of opium. This is true in both Sing and Long.

The presence of Route 17B (and the absence of all-season roads accessing much of the highlands) acts as a major catalyst in the decision to leave the highlands. The lack of opium or any alternative cash crop that can easily be produced and brought out of the hills for sale simply highlights how with adequate road access other crops might offer some alternatives. Sugar is one obvious option that, with suitable land and road access in the lowlands, goes some distance to making up the shortfall in income incurred by opium's absence. Likewise the increased opportunities for wage labour in roadside communities or market towns working for either lowlanders or Chinese investors are a further possibility. Together, the viability of life in the mountains has been rapidly overshadowed for many Akha by the desire for sustainable livelihood strategies in the lowlands.

We discussed in a previous chapter how the choice to relocate raises the likelihood of increased proletarianisation and social and economic exploitation for the Akha seeking new lives in the lowlands. Rapid social change introduces a number of potential vulnerabilities to the health of the populations so affected. The removal of poppy plants is not a procedure that simply and cleanly eradicates economic or psychological dependence. In addition to the difficulties faced by the relapsed opium addicts who face a village atmosphere that is increasingly coupling individualised character assessment with village level sanctions such as fines, relocation to the lowlands brings proximity to other forms of drugs. Recently ATS has become a pronounced presence in the towns of Sing and Ling and communities along the road. As the Lao 'National Drug Demand Reduction Strategy' notes "demarcation lines between opium and *yabaa* (ATS) are becoming blurred. ATS has spread into traditional opium-using areas." (LCDC 2003: 4) While we make no attempt to argue that opium dependence has no deleterious

effects for heavy users or their families – it clearly does – our concern here is to consider the consequences of a shift to ATS use. For it is the various forces that motivate a transition from opium to ATS abuse that is a pressing public health issue both geographically and structurally linked to Route 17B.

ATS in Sing and Long

Since 2000, the presence of ATS has increased dramatically in Muang Sing and Xiengkok and communities along the road that joins them. A team of police were recently consigned to spend several months in Xiengkok to reduce its use and trade. While they feel they have lessened its profile and the high degree of local users, Xiengkok is still acknowledged as a key entry point for ATS trafficking in Lao PDR. ATS is produced in huge quantities in Burma, reportedly by the UWSA (United Wa State Army) who control large tracts of territory on the West side of the Mekong bordering Luang Namtha. It also arrives across land from Bokeo province. Sizeable quantities have been seized by authorities in Namtha and Bokeo but it is admitted that a large amount gains ready access and passage through Namtha. Route 17B is now marked on recent maps of global drug trade routes as a key ATS and heroin thoroughfare (Geopolitical Newsletter #7 April 2002 www.geodrugs.net)

ATS was first introduced by petty traders within enclaves of townspeople in Sing and Long District but its consumption is moving steadily outwards into the Akha villages in the hills and to rural communities along the road. A survey conducted by District officials in 2003 identified 800 local ATS users throughout Sing District, of which 30% were Akha (figures many feel are highly conservative). Notably, ATS use is heaviest in villages in closer proximity to the town and the road. Reports from the Sing and Long police indicate that in some roadside villages a large percent of households are implicated in its use and trade. This is confirmed by several high profile arrests that show its use is widespread in most ethnic groups living close to the road (although the Kui seem to have less uptake than other groups to date).

Importantly ATS use amongst the Akha and other groups is not simply a product of ready access as Lue traders market *ya ba* in nearby villages. It is also actively purchased by those seeking its social and/or physical effects. Its current users include ethnic minorities, Chinese truck-drivers, boat-drivers, labourers, CSWs and students (there have also been occasional reports of government staff arrested for petty trading). Akha labourers at the small port of Xiengkok regularly consume ATS to expedite contract work loading and unloading Thai and Chinese cargo: those working as contract labour in rice, watermelon or sugarcane fields throughout the lowlands sometimes smoke it. Villagers undertaking new economic ventures use it to maximise their output. For example, some of the Akha hauling palm fruit to the sales points at Xiengkok take ATS to expedite their lengthy night-time journeys through forest trails.

Nang Be

Be is 28 yr old Lao woman from Luang Prabang. She moved to Vientiane in her early 20's to work at a garment factory. She moved through positions at several different factories but never felt she was making adequate wages for life in the city. She and several of her friends began selling sex. She lived in a rented house with several other women and a 'mae liang' (mamasan) who organized a form of escort service. Sometimes clients would come to the house, at other times arrangements would be made by telephone for the women to meet clients at outside venues. After a period the police arrested the owner of the business and Be began freelancing, moving between guesthouses that were known to have service women available.

Be soon became accustomed to a lifestyle accommodated by regular money made from wealthy 'boyfriends'. She moved constantly establishing short term relationships in towns throughout the country eventually arriving in Luang Namtha in the late 1990s. There she established a relationship with a wealthy Chinese trader, living together in secret. His business faltered however and fearing bankruptcy he fled; Be moved to Muang Sing. Here, she married a Yao man who had been a refugee in Thailand. They lived together for several years but then separated.

After this she moved to Muang Long and took work as a cook at the resort in Xiengkok. This gave her the opportunity to also have sexual relations with suitable guests at the resort. A 43 year old man from a Lue town on the road to Muang Sing soon became her next 'boyfriend'. He was a trader of food crops and NTFPs between Muang Sing and Xieng Kok. Together they began to trade an additional item: ATS.

Be would sell ATS to guests at the resort and soon began to use it in more regular quantities herself. She became an agent for ATS arriving at Xiang Kok from Bokeo and Burma and would pass it on to small traders on-selling it at outlets further up the road to Muang Sing. Occasionally she would travel to Muang Sing with her boyfriend selling quantities of several hundred pills at a time. A network moved the drugs up through her boyfriend's village and on to Muang Sing but this came to the attention of the police and she and her 'husband' were arrested in mid 2003. She paid one million kip fine and moved to Bokeo and reportedly became the partner of a government official.

Methods of spreading its use can be insidious. Landowners sometimes offer ATS instead of, or alongside, cash (or opium) as wages for Akha labour in lowland rice fields, or on road construction projects. We heard of one instance where Akha workers hired by the lowland Lue to plant and harvest rice were given ATS-doctored drinking water to encourage greater labour, a practice similar to coerced intoxication that has been reported in some Thai and Lao factories.

A primary market is young people who want to follow big city trends and labourers who want to extend their physical capabilities. A student told us that some of her schoolmates as young as 13 had smoked ATS during class-time in Muang Sing schools. Drivers of the speedboats that ply destinations up and down the Mekong take it, and to the attuned ear are obvious in how they gun their motors. Chinese truck drivers take it before their journeys back to China. Bar workers consume ATS to provide the elevated mood that encourages ready conversation with clients (and to stay thin). To date, virtually everything most people hear about ATS is positive – it doubles energy for work, it offers new exciting ways of thinking, it creates a good mood for hours (and should a partner

be available, men repeat that one can have sex all night). However, its use does not come without costs.

While its uptake cannot be separated from its presence as a popular commodity, there is one important distinction that still prevents it from reaching opium's level of everyday acceptance amongst highland villages. Following government rhetoric opium smoking might be considered regressive and now illegal, but it doesn't yet feel (morally) wrong to most Akha. In contrast, ATS has always been illegal with overt sanctions demonstrated by increasingly commonplace arrests of traffickers and users. But the strength of moral distinctions is unstable and unlikely to be the same influence in the future. As opium cultivation and use is increasingly prosecuted, legal and conceptual differences with ATS disappear. Importantly, when certain sub-groups are marginalized within their communities because they are unable to quit opium smoking, then a switch to ATS becomes a preferred choice as opium becomes difficult to obtain. Likewise the demands of new labour regimes make its effects immediately appealing to a wider constituency in the lowlands.

Akha villagers offer multiple rationales for ATS uptake. The speed with which pills are smoked appeals within the new climate of surveillance and punishment for opium use. Some villagers along Route 17B are becoming petty traders (and users) due its quick profits. Most importantly, ATS increases physical activity and showcases performance. Whereas heroin provides familiar opiate intoxication, it does nothing to remove the stigma faced by addicts unable to take part in work activities due to lethargy or lassitude. ATS, on the other hand, provides (in the short term) the sort of bodily energy and 'normality' that directly contrasts with the social blame directed at opium addiction. Some opium addicts therefore smoke ATS either with or after opium to provide energy to work in fields or forests. Others use ATS to wean from habitual opium use.

Notably, ATS's appeal is not limited to marginalized opium addicts, rather its uptake is broadly encouraged for those selling their labour regardless of prior history with opium and its marketability is reinforced as a packaged, refined commodity. ATS currently offers both the townsfolk and, significantly, the relocated Akha looking for labour the opportunity to consume a product associated with the wider (global) world of market enterprise and commodity exchange. This is where the combination of opium eradication and relocation are providing a ready-made entry point into alternative forms of drug abuse. ATS is currently being used by some Akha who are relocating to the lower slopes to assist their entry into regimes of production within a capitalist order oriented to satisfying commodity-based desire. Of course, not all Akha addicts take ATS and it has not (yet) replaced opium in Sing or Long in any absolute sense; but already a significant number of both opium smokers and non-smokers try it for reasons that are anchored in new social relations and productive competencies expected of them as they relocate to the lowlands. At present there is no link that we have observed between the sexual opportunism we described in the previous chapter and forms of drug abuse. Drug use does not appear to be involved in forms of

sexual practice or sexual commercialism. But there are of course other implications for health.

Dramatic increases in ATS use are logical for the Akha as they move in to wage-labour in the lowlands in the sense they facilitate new and desirable forms of subjectivity wherein the traits associated with ethnic minority traditions, such as opium addiction, lethargy, and 'primitiveness' are exchanged for a new active entrepreneurial labourer/trader identity. But at the same time, ATS use fosters new forms of social exploitation and marginalisation as the Akha maintain drug dependency on the way to new life in the lowlands. As opium addiction is gradually removed, incipient ATS abuse poses growing dilemmas for those attempting to benefit from its use. This relates both to individual health and social pathologies. Prolonged use creates dangerous forms of psychosis and paranoia. As indicated in the following table violent crimes and thefts - often attributed to ATS users - are becoming more commonplace in Sing.

Table 22: Muang Sing: Police prosecutions

	Rape	Theft	ATS and heroin possession	Homicide	Assault
1999	**0**	**0**	**0**	**2** (1 Akha, 1 Tai Lue)	**0**
2000	**1** (1 Tai Lue)	**33** (21 Akha, 1 Lao, 5 Tai Lue, 1 Tai Dam, 1 Tai Neua, 3 Khmu)	**2** (1 Tai Dam, 1 Tai Neua)	**1** (1 Akha)	**0**
2001	**1** (1 Tai Lue)	**28** (12 Akha, 2 Hmong, 3 Tai Lue, 11 Tai Dam)	**9** (3 Akha, 3 Tai Lue, 2 Tai Dam, 1 Tai Neua)	**4** (1 Akha, 2 Yao, 1 Tai Lue)	**1** (1 Tai Dam)
2002	**1** (1 Lao)	**43** (23 Akha, 2 Lao, 1 Hmong, 8 Tai Lue, 7 Tai Dam, 2 Khmu)	**29** (4 Akha, 4 Hmong, 14 Tai Lue, 6 Tai Dam, 1 Tai Neua)	**2** (2 Hmong)	**5** (4 Akha, 1 Tai Dam)
2003 (6 mths)	**0**	**12** (2 Akha, 8 Tai Lue, 1 Tai Dam, 2 Khmu)	**3** (2 Tai Lue; 1 Akha)	**3** (2 Akha, 1 Tai-lue)	**3** (1 Tai Lue, 2 Tai Dam)

While many drug related incidents are handled at the district level the police may decide to send cases of more serious offences to the provincial police. For example, in 2002 two Hmong were apprehended in Muang Sing by local police for trading 52,000 methamphetamines (*ya ba*) tablets. There was another case in the same year in which 39,800 methamphetamines tablets were discovered in a truck, owned by a Lue man, transporting watermelons. The Hmong and the Lue offenders were sent to the provincial police for investigation and prosecution. Likewise two seizures of heroin in late 2002 (6.5kg) and early 2004 (1.5kg) were sent to the provincial court. A provincial court official told us in mid 2003 that the

majority of cases in the provincial court were over ATS arrests and that while many traders had been arrested many more were still plying the trade.

The perpetrators are, to date, not simply those who live by the road or have recently relocated and the problems associated with ATS are not limited to one ethnic group. But ATS presence and rising crime is most pronounced in the more heavily populated roadside areas where commerce, labour and drug use go hand-in-hand. Whereas opium use is used as a clear and derogatory characteristic used to mark highlanders as different from the lowlanders, ATS has precisely the opposite characteristic. Its uptake is shared by members of all ethnic groups as part of the new social relations characterising life in the lowlands. And as such it becomes an endemic social problem for the wider community. As ATS use becomes excessive, personal and social disjunctions are inevitable for any user. Just as induced movement to the lowlands can create community disempowerment and fragmentation, so too Akha and other ATS users entering capitalist modes of production run the risk of individualised pathologies while at the same time becoming criminalised and further marginalised as social deviants under newly forms of government surveillance. Its rapid uptake is therefore of major concern and cannot be understood separately from the wide array of social changes incurred by the presence of the road.

Chapter 8
Conclusion

For several hundred years the picturesque plains of Sing and Long have played host to ambitious aspirations of settlers in the region. It is clear from the data we have collected that the road has brought numerous changes to the present-day residents of Sing and Long Districts. It has prompted diverse transformations in settlement patterns, with a significant re-configuration of population into the lowlands. It has created new horizons of economic opportunity for locals and outsiders wishing to invest time money or labour in the lowland valley plains. It has fostered new economic relations between a number of different groups all seeking to establish livelihoods in lands close to the road. Notably, some of these ventures profit certain groups more than others. At the same time, it has facilitated the expansion of government services bringing agricultural extension advances, education facilities and health improvements through its presence.

In the agricultural sector there are diverse changes underway. As described there are government, foreign aid and private sector investments in expanding the income potential of the lowlands, and to a much lesser extent the highlands. Crops such as sugar, watermelons and rubber are beginning to rival rice as the primary income generation crop in the Sing and Long valleys. At the same time, competition for land and other resources is rapidly increasing and many of the more recent settlers in the lowlands rely on wage labour to maintain everyday livelihood. Alton and Houmpanh report that while some of the older villages are economically viable after relocation, livelihood systems in a number of newly resettled villages are not doing well due to inadequate land, lack of ability to raise and sell livestock and limited access to forest products for use and sale. They note that poor implementation of land and forest allocation programs can lead directly to increased poverty (2004:121)

Education facilities are gradually improving, but the access to schooling for many ethnic youth in the highlands, in particular girls, is still notably limited. While the non-formal education department runs classes for older villages in some areas near the road, literacy in most Akha and Kui villages is very low. As described earlier some health conditions are improving. Malaria is decreasing and being better treated when it does occur, clean-water programs are gradually bringing about a decrease in water-born infectious diseases. These are notable and significant improvements and they come as part of a package of infrastructure developments of which the road is a central element.

The road and its feeder routes also provide a means of extending government control over remote populations. As Evrard and Goudineau recently suggest, resettlements such as those occurring along route 17B “are supposed to facilitate the implementation of a rural development policy — new roads, schools, sanitation works, the implementation of land tenure reform, intensification of agriculture, preservation and exploitation of timber resources (the primary source of income for the country) are all allegedly designed to accompany this new

dynamic of population settlement." They note, however, that, "resettlement is also conceived as a means of speeding up the integration of the many ethnic minority cultures into the Lao 'national culture'" (2004: 3). This integration is not a straightforward process. When different cultural and social formations intersect the outcomes are diverse and hard to predict.

In this study we have focussed primarily on the changing social relations prompted by development policies and facilitated by the road, rather than just examining the material conditions of agricultural production or the more obvious levels of morbidity and mortality in common infectious diseases. Our interest has been in how the social impact of infrastructure development affects health in more subtle ways particularly in terms of changing forms of drug abuse and increasing vulnerability to HIV infection through changing levels of sexual risk. It is thus a study about mobility and the movement along the new thoroughfare but most specifically about the impact of cultural intersections on health. It has been recently argued that in addition to focussing on migration we also need to consider "real dangers of [HIV] infection through other forms of mobility that are inherent in the week-to-week, or even day-to-day behaviour of the population as a whole" (Skeldon 2000: 17). The logic behind this argument is that it is not just movement per se that makes people vulnerable to HIV but rather that it is behaviours at key intersections of mobile and non-mobile groups which create the opportunity for increasing HIV transmission. Our study has sought to illuminate the precise intersections of cultural and material flows that have prompted different forms of social relations and thereby changing behaviours due to the presence of an upgraded road.

The highlanders of Sing and Long are no strangers to movement; they have been semi-sedentary (semi-mobile) for centuries. Likewise the Chinese labourers and truck-drivers move constantly. But development policies are bringing these (and other) groups into close proximity in ways not possible prior to the upgrading of the road. Thus, the new social interactions occurring due to the diverse people using the road or settling by it present a microcosm of larger changes taking place along new roads being built throughout the upper Mekong. Although one cannot say any road, and the mobility it allows, is solely responsible for increases in sexual opportunism, the social and material relations that come as part of a wider parcel of changes typically termed 'development', carry benefits and shortcomings including disease transmission. Population dynamics in Muang Sing and Muang Long have brought into close social contact two groups of differently mobile people. In relocated villages, local labour is readily available in the fields along the road due to investment from migrant Chinese. Labour relations also bring outsiders into a geographic and social orbit that encourages increased sexual exchange. This is a significant facet of HIV vulnerability in the region. The Chinese labourers are supposedly subject to rigorous health checks before they cross the border including HIV tests; but some Chinese report that some diagnostic tests are neither mandatory nor policed. In addition, the health certificates are good for one year which hardly provides an adequate assurance against the presence of STDs. In Laos, few individuals screen themselves for HIV.

Nowadays, in bars and villages along Route 17B individuals from widely varied backgrounds interact socially and sexually. While still limited in scale, some evidence of human trafficking has also emerged with Xiengkok, and the road servicing this port, as key channels through which young women are sent to Thailand. If HIV is introduced as part of the new forms of sexual exchange taking place in the roadside villages and bars then the new parameters shaping everyday life including the commodification and exploitation of traditional sexual mores must be considered a serious threat to future livelihood of large numbers of people in Sing, Long and the source communities of labourers and bar-workers.

Just as this study has focused on the more subtle changes underpinning new social relations and their impact on everyday livelihoods and health status, so too we will make recommendations of a general rather than specific nature. Commerce, trade, population movement and cultural exchange all take their place in the changing landscape of social relations along the road. At a workshop held at the completion of this research these different elements were discussed with local and national government officials and development workers. Discussants focused on several different levels of necessary action.

- Firstly, in the wake of opium prohibition and rapid resettlement near the road, adequate provisions for alternative agricultural livelihoods are necessary. Sugar and rubber are showing promising signs of being sustainable local products, but careful management and training is necessary.
- Secondly, more viable livelihood options are crucial for those still inhabiting the hills; here unfortunately there are fewer examples of successful alternatives.
- Thirdly, commerce in the markets and lowland agricultural sector needs to be carefully regulated and assistance provided to newer settlers so they can securely and fairly negotiate with outside investors and traders.
- Fourthly, cultural integrity must be supported so that movement to the lowlands doesn't mean the dissolution of traditional customs and mores. This is a sensitive issue, quite obviously a degree of national assimilation is necessary in any national development procedures but sometimes market forces introduce forces of cultural dominance that are hard to counter. Active steps are necessary to work against the assumption that being 'modern' means being homogenously 'lowland' in identity and behaviour.
- Fifthly, contend with the issue of the growing number of young women working in bars and the wide range of sexual interactions happening as a product of increased social and economic engagements in villages along the road by developing better HIV prevention activities.
- Sixthly continue to improve research strategies into the range of factors that contribute to each of these aforementioned situations.

The workshop recognised that these are all interrelated issues and need careful and co-ordinated management. A number of agencies are working precisely in this context. But much remains to be done. Other donor-consigned reports are focusing on concrete issues to do with livelihood security (Alton and Houmpanh 2004) and trafficking (Chamberlain, UNICEF – due early 2005). Likewise, the latest round of sentinel surveillance for HIV seroprevalence conducted by the Lao Ministry of Health will be made public in early 2005. For the first time, sampled groups from Luang Namtha will be amongst those tested for HIV in a national survey and a clearer picture of local HIV threat will emerge. In the meantime there are adequate indications from our research that the road and its communities constitute a tinderbox that could allow rapid spread of HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases unless preventive measures are taken.

It is therefore a key conclusion of this report that urgent and careful attention needs to be directed at potential and/or real HIV spread. Here issues like development and poverty reduction are crucial underpinnings of improving livelihoods so people are able to take and maintain lifestyles that have minimal HIV threat (and less inclination to turn to new forms of drug abuse). But in the first instance more concrete preventive measures are needed.

HIV awareness campaigns need to immediately address the level of multi-partner sexuality occurring throughout Song and Long. As mentioned before this is not the place for moral sanctions. Rather, men and women in the local communities and those visiting from elsewhere need to be targeted so that condom use is an imperative. These campaigns will need to be conducted sensitively and in local languages. Folk theatre would be an obvious choice for the Akha and Kui villages and their residents who are minimally proficient in Lao language. Similarly, there needs to be concerted efforts to reach the incoming Chinese migrant workers and the lowland Lao traders and government workers who avail themselves of a wider realm of sexual contact in the roadside Akha and Kui communities.

At a broader level, the transition to (frequently) inequitable relations of production when people move in to the lowlands carries other threats to health and well-being beyond the presence of HIV. The workshop discussants highlighted that development-induced resettlement in Sing and Long was a fraught process. Unfortunately corrective measures were less obvious to the assembled group. Dramatic increases in ATS use are one example of the negative consequences of rapid social change. In one sense, ATS uptake amongst the Akha is logical in that facilitates their entry in to market-style relations by providing heightened energy for work and stereotyped characteristics of Akha life, such as opium addiction and ‘primitiveness’, are exchanged for a new labourer/trader identity. At the same time, ATS use can foster new forms of exploitation as the Akha stay drug dependent as they embrace life in the lowlands.

To adequately tackle the inevitable downside that accompanies the array of changes occurring for local populations in Sing and Long careful and pro-active planning is necessary. Alton and Houmpanh (2004:120) note in their recommendations that there are significant shortfalls in local government capacity in livelihood security or socio-economic research. This inevitably leads to the

inability to adequately plan for adverse outcomes and unexpected contingencies. This research into the impact of Route 17B was undertaken with this very goal in mind: To increase the local ability to conceptualise, investigate and report on the constellation of factors that impact on everyday livelihoods in Sing and Long.

One of the Akha men we interviewed who had recently quit smoking opium talked with some nostalgia about how different life was near the road compared to prior life in the mountains. He told us that: 'in the mountains life was better; we had more money [from opium] but nothing to spend it on; here in the lowlands we have less money [no opium], but more [desire for] things to buy'. The desire for things to buy is an unavoidable product of capitalist development that underpins the social and economic changes happening in Sing and Long (and throughout Laos). As we have been describing movement out of the hills is a key element of national development policies. So too is economic liberalisation that brings a host of outside traders, investors and labourers in to the towns and valleys of Sing and Long. Careful planning and adequate safeguards are necessary so that the 'desire' that underpins the whole host of social interactions occurring in the fields, shops, restaurants, bars and forests throughout Sing and Long doesn't create further dilemmas such as increased synthetic drug abuse and greater spread of HIV/AIDS/STDs. We hope this research goes some distance to providing the basis for activities geared towards assisting Lao communities achieve millennium development goals of poverty reduction, in particular in conditions of good health, in face of the burgeoning market for goods and ideas prompted by the upgrading of road 17B.

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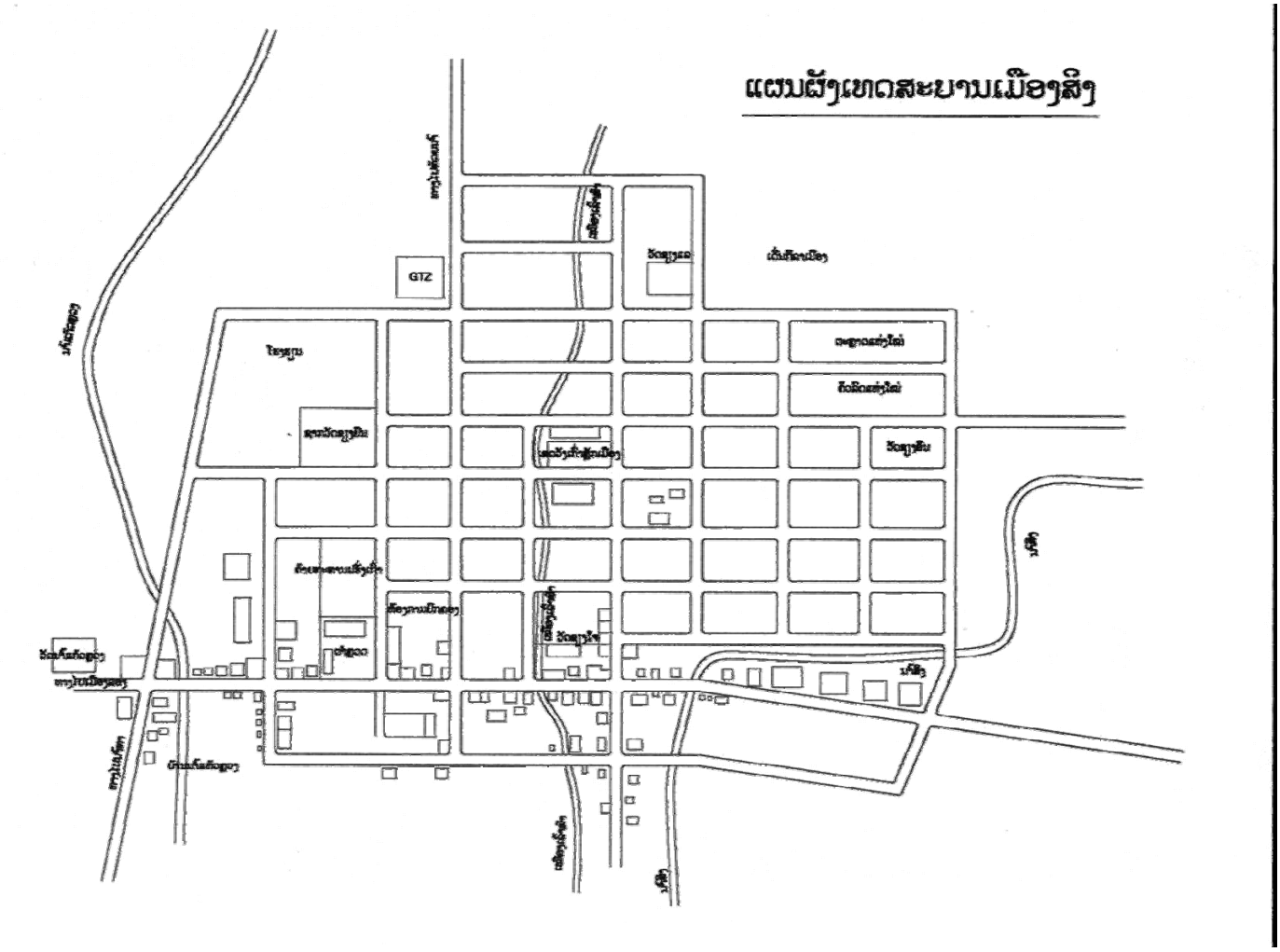
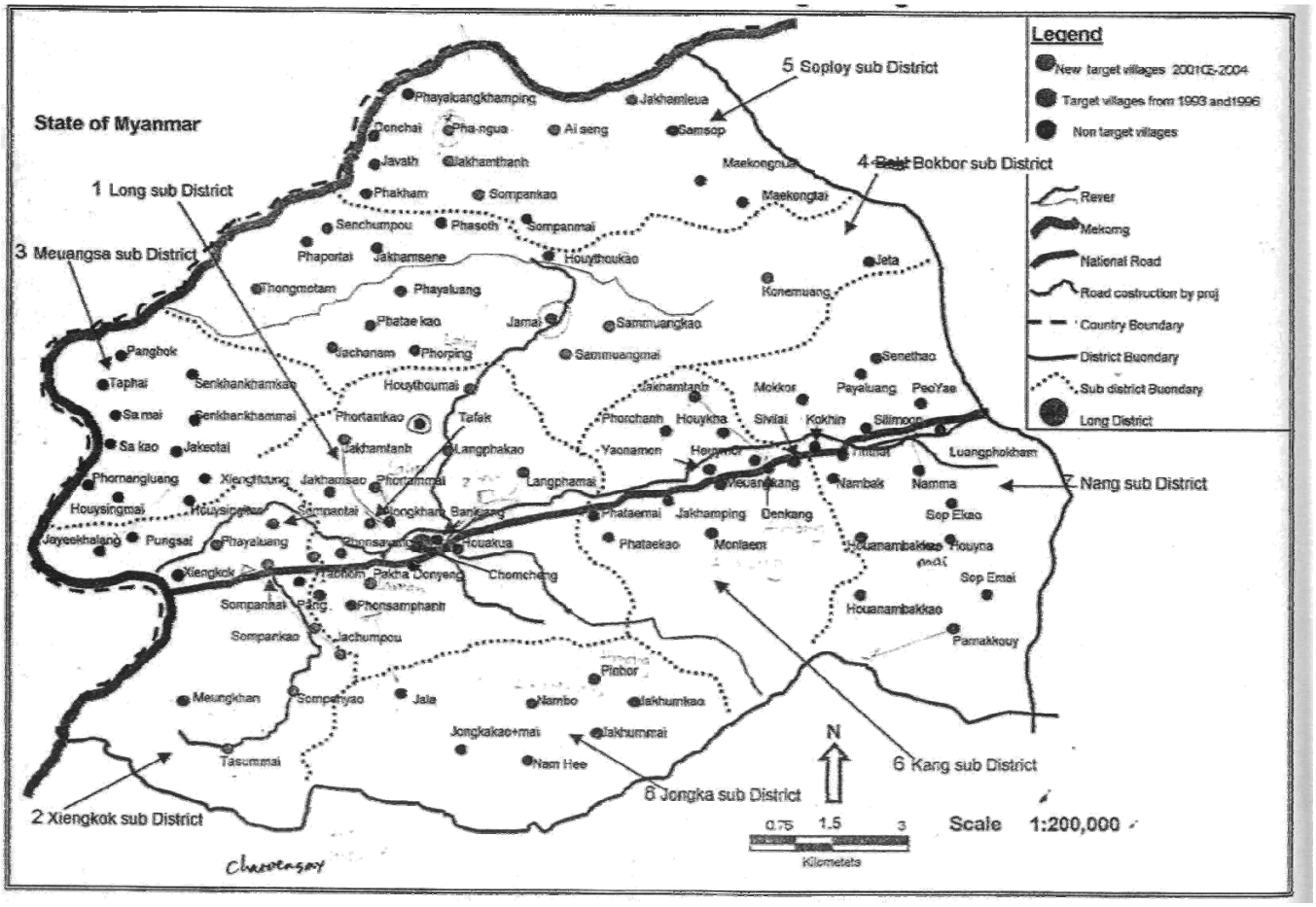
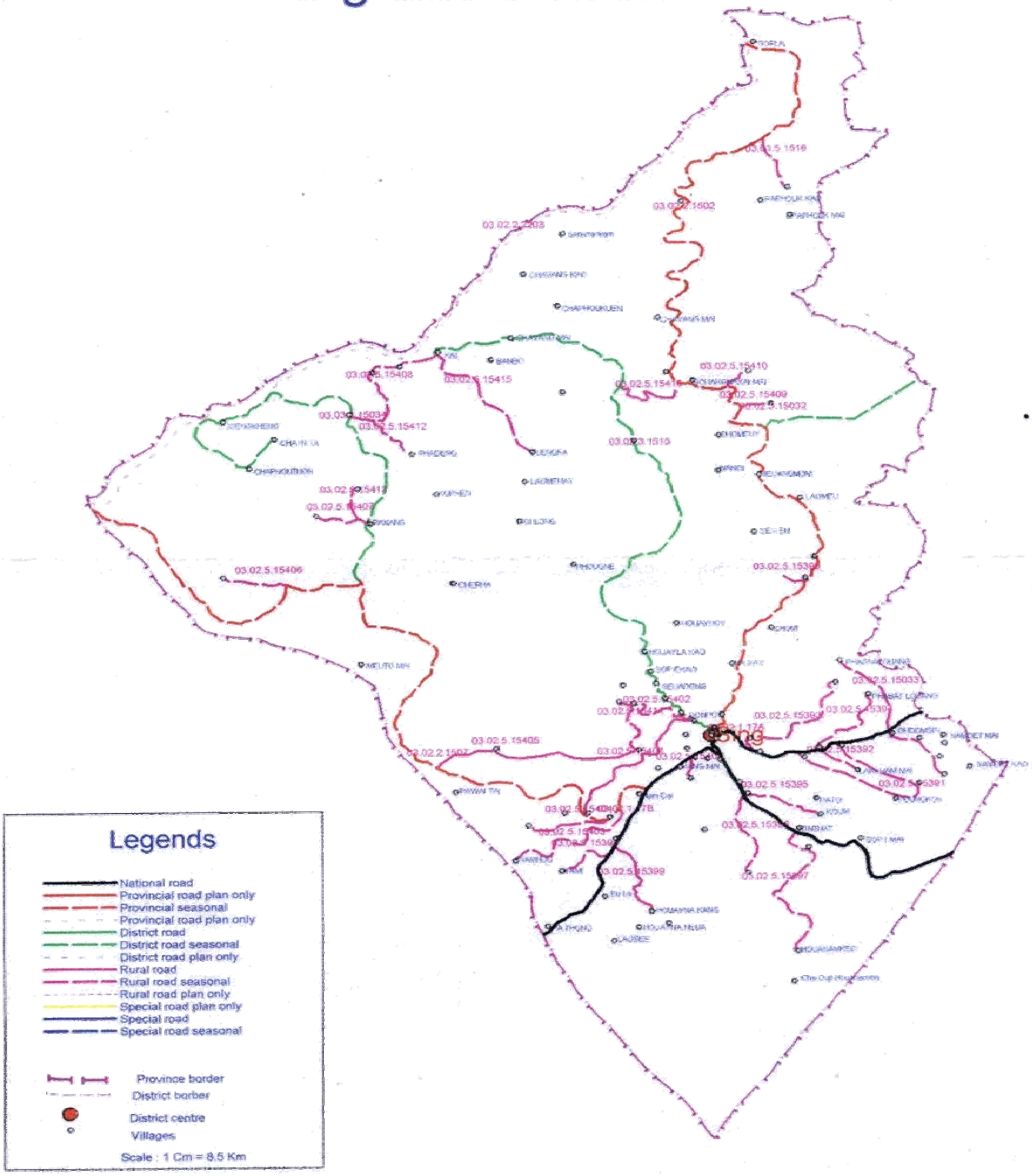
Map of Muang Sing township



Map of Muang Long District



Map showing the road network Sing district 2002



Annex 1

Goods Exported to Thailand and China from Muang Sing

Product	To	2001-2002	Price (kip)	2002-2003	Price (kip)
Paddy rice	China	4300 tonnes	3,870 million	2500 tonnes	3,000 million
Corn	China	500 tonnes	3.750 million	15,000 tonnes[1]	13,000 million
Garlic	China	60 tonnes	240 million	20 tonnes	150 million
Sugarcane	China	8000 tonnes	1,120 million	23,700 tonnes	2,844 million
Buffalo and cows	Thai	80 head	176 million	72 head	172.8 million
Firewood (*mai khi lek*)	China	300 (m2)	16 million	-	
Watermelon	China	2000 tonnes[2]	1,280 million	220 tonnes	210 million
Cardamom	China	7 tonnes	105 million	-	
Bark (*peuak meuak* used for glue)	China	40 tonnes	112 million	-	
Grass (for brooms)	Thai	30 tonnes	450 million	-	
Capsicum	China	-	-	300 tonnes	600 million

1. Includes corn exported through Muang Sing from other provinces.
2. 2002 figures include watermelon from both Muang Sing and Muang Long.
Source: Commerce Department Muang Sing 2004

Annex 2:

Numbers of students in Muang Long (1996-2001)

Academic year	Population (6-10 year old)		Student (6-10 year old)		Percent of ?		Percent of total Pop	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
1996-97	3.192	1.549	444	185	38,86%	29,30%	14,08%	11,96%
1997-98	3.131	1.332	810	306	45,32%	37,83%	25,87%	22,97%
1998-99	3.232	1.854	914	367	56,55%	36,03%	28,27%	19,79%
1999-00	3.820	2.331	1.115	462	55,94%	32,17%	29,18%	19,80%
2000-01	3.192	1.736	1.058	431	66,91%	44,06%	33,14%	24,82%

Statistics of primary education in Muang Long (2001-2003)

Academic year	School		Teacher		Student	
	School	Class	Total	Female	Total	Female
2000-01	34	102	79	19	2.195	807
2001-02	34	102	92	26	2.220	830
2002-03	40	124	114	41	2.734	1.052

Statistics of teachers and students of Muang Sing 2001-2004

Description	2001-2002		2002-2003		2003-2004	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
Primary teacher	183	65	189	74	187	75
Secondary teacher	-	-	-	-	53	18
Primary student						
Lao Loum	1.736	749	1.954	884	2.234	1047
Akha	1.579	575	1.628	632	1.668	679
Hmong	730	406	992	462	1.054	542
Khmu	40	24	57	28	68	32
Secondary student						
Lao	473	319	888	341	1.194	105
Akha	42	18	54	22	69	32
Hmong	115	40	149	63	226	97
Khmu	22	10	30	15	38	19

Annex 3: Agricultural and Livestock Products

Muang Sing: Non-rice crops

Non-rice crops (Area/ha.)	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Sugar cane*	320	320	335	553	753	537
Corn*	50	81	50	95	180	
Garlic/onion*	114	108	70	110	43	43
Cassava/taro	30	29	71	85	4	
Vegetables	56	103	80	84	37	
Eggplant/pepper	15	15	35	25	5	17
Sesame	4.5	9	10	16	16	
Soybean	25	51.8	30	60	7.5	
Watermelon*	88	60.9	152	210	40	74
Peanuts	23	67	25	70	7.5	
Tobacco	4	4	5	13	2	
Cotton	15.3	30	30	35	35	
Coffee	30	64	12.2	0	15	
Fruit	10	10.3	12.5	26.5	31	
Cardamom*	22.5	22.5	9	33	-	

*Grown almost exclusively for export.

Muang Sing: Livestock and fish

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Buffaloes	6309	6074	5473	5896	6676
Oxen	7680	7970	2140	8828	9526
Pigs	9946	9263	10542	11885	12785
Goats	257	469	563	766	769
Horses	66	69	72	72	75
Poultry	52,723	52,061	62,403	66,500	66,825
Fish ponds	327	550	1180	1482	1505

In 2000 25 horses, 400 buffaloes and 200 pigs were exported.

Annex 3 (cont)

Muang Long: Non-rice crops

Non-rice crops (area/ha)	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**
Sugar cane*	0	0	10	10	-
Corn*	20	5	44	99	-
Garlic	10	0	0	15	-
Onions	10	0	0	15	-
Vegetables	13	50	60	136	-
Peanuts*	12	27	34	10	-
Soybeans*	6	15	18	30	-
Watermelons	0.5	0	0	51	173
Cabbages	3	4	5	0	-
Capsicum	6	45	54	0	13
Tobacco	7	0	0	7	-
Beans	15	6	8	0	-
Eggplant	4	25	30	0	-
Cotton	2	-	55	55	-
Cassava	10	20	20	-	-

*Exports crops since 2000

Muang Long: Livestock

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Buffaloes	2847	2847	3659	3962	-
Oxen	4062	4062	4103	4158	-
Pigs	41383	4183	10924	11034	-
Goats	0	251	332	540	-
Horses	990	300	294	314	-
Poultry	33055	33055	45961	46267	-

Annex 4

Sugar Contract with Muang Sing growers:

- Three grades of sugar are purchased (150 yuan/tonne; 140 yuan/tonne; 130yuan/tonne). [Most villagers report they only get 130/tonne]
- Chinese pay for the transport costs (30 yuan per truck).
- There will be 2 forms of forms of payment; factories sometimes pay cash immediately, or alternatively within 30 -60 days (after this interest is paid according to bank rates).
- Lao cover the border duties
- Muang Sing growers are responsible for cutting and loading trucks; the factory will determine when the sugar should begin to be cut and when completed (if schedule is not followed the grower loses 10%).
- Lao are responsible to ensure that the road is passable.
- Sugar must be cut and loaded according to regulation and left clean and in correct lengths.
- If the factory does not pick it up in timely fashion they must pay 10% extra.
- If the sugar doesn't get to the factory in timely fashion they also pay a fee.
- Lao officials must be present when the sugar is weighed and records kept and 5 yuan paid for each truck. Chinese must pay 1 yuan/tonne servicing charge.

Apparently, the Chinese factory and delivery contractors also operate with an additional contract that includes other fines for sub-standard sugar:

If the sugar canes are not clean (2% deduction),
If leaves not trimmed before July (3% deduction),
If sugar is not dry enough or not adequate length (3-15% deduction),
If sugar is too dry (not picked up at all),
If cut before specified maturity deadline (30% deduction),
If sugar is burned for 1 day (15% deduction), 2 days (20% deduction),
If burned for 3 days none of it will be picked up (100% deduction)

Annex 5

Guest Houses in Muang Sing

Guest Houses in Muang Sing	Number	Number of rooms when built	Number of rooms in 2004
1994	1	5	Venue closed
1995	2	5,6	10,11
1996	2	4, 4	7 (one venue closed)
1997	1*	2	
1998	1	12	13
1999	1	19	19
2000	4	4,10,5,10	5,14,5,15
2001	1	22	6
2002	1	8	8
2003	2	10,8	10,8
2004	1	9	9
Total	19	141	140

*Specifically for Chinese visitors