

Fields of Life and Death: Cholangiocarcinoma, Food Consumption, and Masculinity in Buddhist Rural Thailand

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Abstract The Mekong region presents a record incidence of cholangiocarcinoma (bile duct cancer). Scientists identify correlations between the development of this aggressive disease and the consumption of raw fish in local dishes. While made aware of these correlations by comprehensive health campaigns, some villagers in Thailand's notoriously neglected Northeast refuse to cook the fish before consumption: a phenomenon that puzzles medical experts and policy makers. Based on ethnographic data, this paper suggests that practices surrounding the consumption of raw food in the area have become taboo. Rather than disappearing, they now play a key role in bonding rituals where rural masculinities are expressed via spectacles of risk taking that transgress normative ideals of manhood as epitomised by urban men and Buddhist monks.

Keywords Cholangiocarcinoma. Food consumption. Masculinity. Thailand. Isan. Buddhism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Fish in the Water, Rice in the Field. – 3 Dangers in the Fields. – 4 Ladies Worry, Men Risk. – 5 Into the Night. – 6 Mixing Cooked with Raw. – 7 The Man Who Eats *Koi Pla*. – 8 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

A faint squeak echoes down the corridor of a provincial hospital ward, reserved for cholangiocarcinoma (bile duct cancer) patients. A young nurse in a starched white headpiece reminiscent of a nun wheels in a metal table with drugs and assorted medical equipment. “How are you today, uncle (*lung*)?” she asks, using the kin term as honorific.

The old man to whom she speaks lies behind a turquoise curtain that folds like an accordion. I glimpse his yellowish skull sinking into laced-up turquoise pyjamas dotted with reproductions of the hospital logo. Seemingly oblivious, he stares at the overhead fluorescent light that obliterates the distinction between night and day. I do not know how old he is, although I suspect he is younger than I think. I do not know who he is, but the sight of relatives next to his bed reassures me he is not alone. I wonder what goes through his head. Memories, perhaps, of a world outside a hospital ward that smells of medicine and disinfectant. I imagine a lush rice field, near-candescent green against the blue sky. Crickets and cicadas break the silence with their chirping – *krik, krik, krik*, say people in the local Thai-Lao language – and a fish disturbs the water with a faint splash. That idyllic landscape, I remind myself, is also a place of death.

Cholangiocarcinoma is a silent killer in the Mekong region. In Thailand’s Khon Kaen province, situated in the Northeastern region of Isan, this aggressive cancer claims approximately 10,000 lives a year. By the time symptoms appear – abdominal pain, weight loss, itching, and jaundice – the only option is the removal of sections of the liver, which requires a high degree of skill. Even then, the surgery can be merely palliative. Beginning in the 1990s, scientists have investigated correlations between the record incidence of cholangiocarcinoma in Isan and the consumption of raw fish in local dishes such as *koi pla*, which people locally consider a delicacy. These fish often host parasites (*opisthorchis viverrini*) that colonise the liver, climbing up the bile duct and resulting, some thirty years later, in cancer.

A pioneer in the treatment of this aggressive form of cancer, the surgeon Professor Narong Kantikaew lost close family members to cholangiocarcinoma. An Isan native who is known affectionately by his patients as “Dr. Narong” (*mo* Narong), he believes that the regional pandemic could be eradicated if people used cooked rather than raw fish in their *koi pla*. The problem, he laments, is that they refuse, even when cautioned by both national and local health campaigns. *Koi pla* is ‘delicious’ (*saeb*) as it is, they repeat. This apparently simple utterance conceals unspeakable cultural complexity.

Based on anthropological methods of participant observation and multi-sited ethnography, this paper offers preliminary glimpses into the practices surrounding the consumption of raw food in Isan. Da-

ta collected during periods of fieldwork carried out in 2019 suggests that these consumptive practices, stigmatised as 'dirty' and 'uncivilised' in state-run campaigns and popular discourse, have become taboo. Rather than disappearing, they now play a key role in bonding rituals where rural masculinities are expressed via spectacles of risk taking that transgress ideals of manhood as epitomised by urban men and Buddhist monks.

2 Fish in the Water, Rice in the Field

The rice field (*thung na*) provides the backdrop to the lives of millions of people born and raised in the rural areas of Isan. In the fields, children watch as adults grow rice, entertaining themselves by playing with dogs and teasing majestic rhinoceros beetles (*maeng kham* in Isan language) with sticks. In rest huts (*krathom thiang na*) erected in the middle of the fields, they socialise throughout the teenage years, improvising witty sexual jokes as they roll balls of glutinous rice and down glasses of rice whiskey, the metallic sound of pop music playing in the background from cheap smartphones. As adults - men typically (if not stereotypically) driving taxis through Bangkok's congested roadways and women assembling circuits boards under factory roofs - they continue to call the countryside 'home' (*ban*): a place you never really leave and for which you ultimately long.

Images of the green fields also bespeak magic as appropriated by metropolitan elites. King Ramkhamhaeng (1279-1298), the compassionate sovereign *par excellence* in nationalist imagination, is said to have spoken of the land as blessed by "fish in the water and rice in the fields" (*nai nam mi pla nai na mi khao*). This idea of an exceptionally prosperous national soil has been reinforced in political discourse, as Buddhist kings, not so different from their Christian European counterparts (Mezler, Norberg 1998, 2), are traditionally believed to endow the land with fertility, a function of their heightened moral stature (Woraporn 2007; Harris 2000). In premodern times and beyond, the agricultural output of the nation has been seen as an index of the legitimacy of a ruler: good kings bringing about prosperity, bad kings, disaster. Known as 'men of merit' (*phu mi bun*), renegade prophets from the kingdom's periphery could go as far as to mobilise revolts by foretelling rotten harvests and epidemics: the cosmic signs of a king gone rogue (Koret 2007; Ladwig 2014).

Absorbing and transforming these tendencies, contemporary state propaganda, media and literature portray rural Thailand as a bucolic place where life goes on in harmony with timeless traditions, remote from the materialist temptations of cities. Such narratives erase the modern and cosmopolitan character of the countryside as well as the historical circulation of people, objects and ideas between villages

and cities (Rigg, Salamanca 2011). Ultimately, they emasculate rural Thais as political subjects, legitimising their exploitation by elite groups (Bowie 1992; Phillips 2019). In the bitter politics of the new millennium, urban conservatives have accused social movements with support from Isan peasants of immorality, dismissing their demands for improved life standards and greater political representation as frivolous desires - sins (*bab*) in the Buddhist worldview (Funahashi 2016, 119-22). The paramount expression of these discourses is the ideology, promoted by the publicity apparatus surrounding the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1946-2016) in response to the financial crash of 1997, that the rural poor should build immunity from economic instability by becoming 'self-sufficient' (*pho phiang*) - that is, able to survive off the food from their own fields. Moulded from the romantic western re-imaginings of Buddhist ideas of restraint from accumulation (see Schumacher 1973), these discourses compel the less privileged to accept their circumstances as the fruit of their karma, implying the moral imperative to content themselves with "however little [they] have" (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board of Thailand 2007).

Rural subjects, while recognizing this line of narrative as faulty in specific political contexts, may replicate it in others. Affected by the squalor of city life outside the villas and high-rise condominiums of the better-offs, some Isan migrants themselves look back at the village as a refuge, musing on a kind of poverty in which one can survive off the land with dignity. The notion that fish are always awaiting in the water and rice in the fields is perhaps not even entirely fictional. Periodic droughts and floods aside, the poor who return home normally do find enough - even if just enough - to eat. According to Pasuk and Baker (2000, 69-104), the fields enabled the survival of the scores of migrants who headed back to Isan in the wake of the financial crisis of 1997. What propaganda and related narratives avoid mentioning, however, is that the fields do not only feed. With the same darting fish, refreshing water and fragrant rice, they also kill. And this, everyone knows every bit as well.

3 Dangers in the Fields

"The fields are dangerous (*antarai*)", exclaims Grandma (*yai*), a farmer in her early seventies I have known for over a decade. She glances out her window at the rice paddies that shine green in the rainy season, and goes on about the chemical pesticides and fertilisers contaminating the water therein. Mixing Isan language with central Thai for me to understand, she describes the water as being so polluting that it can make farmers' legs 'rot' (*pueay*). In fact, anything that goes in or comes out of the water is either dead or deadly, she insists - in-

cluding the glutinous rice we are eating. She pauses, raising a rolled pellet to imply that danger lies even in those pristine grains. She next speaks about 'leptospirosis' (*leptospirosit*) and 'parasites' (*phayat*).

I first met Grandma when I was conducting fieldwork among political activists in Isan who belong to the social movement of the 'red shirts' (*suea daeng*). This time, I have come to ask for her advice on setting up a research project on the relationship between dietary habits and the high incidence of cholangiocarcinoma in the region. Before I could even mention my research focus, Grandma launched unprompted into a tirade about the dangers of the fields. In so doing, she spontaneously situated the parasites - identified as the culprit of bile duct cancer in medical discourse - as but *one* in a greater constellation of risks, a major one, in her estimation, being the very physical contact with the water in the fields.

As is typical, Grandma refers to herself as *chao na*, literally a 'person of the fields'. She is not your stereotypical member of the rural poor, however. Inhabiting a modest if spacious wooden house with tiled floors, she counts herself among the many Isan peasants who early in the 2000s asserted themselves as belonging to an emergent middle class (*chon chan klang*). As Walker (2012, 22-3) explains,

peasants in Thailand are, for the most part, no longer poor. They are now middle-income peasants. They are not necessarily well-off, nor do they enjoy the consumer comforts of the urban middle class, but dramatic improvements in the rural standard of living have raised the most of them well above the water level of outright livelihood failure. In most areas of rural Thailand, the primary livelihood challenges have moved away from the classic low-incoming challenges of food security and subsistence survival to the middle-income challenges of diversification and productivity improvement.

In fact, Grandma and her husband, Grandpa (*ta*), are entrepreneurs in their own right. They own the land they farm and outsource work in the fields to external labourers. While thus seeking to maximise revenues by engaging in commercial agriculture, Grandma and Grandpa earn secondary income by driving village children to schools in the nearest provincial city aboard an old van. Their daughter, a single woman in her early forties, helps keep things afloat by selling homemade snacks (*khanom*) at a nearby wet market (*talat sot*). The past fifteen years of political and economic instability have taken a toll, but finding enough food to eat is not an issue for the family. During the hot season, when the heat becomes unbearable, they can even afford to turn on an air conditioner for some hours every day. In that period, schools are closed, and Grandma spends her free time at home eating sweets. A diabetes sufferer, she insists that it is the doctors' job to keep her sugar levels down. She can afford the medicines.

Douglas and Wildavsky (1982) argue that material advancement, once hailed as a panacea to all problems, has revealed to be a major cause of anxiety in industrial societies. “What are Americans afraid of? Nothing much, really, except the food they eat, the water they drink, the air they breathe, the land they live on, and the energy they use. In the amazingly short space of fifteen to twenty years, confidence about the physical world has turned into doubt. Once the source of safety, science and technology have become the source of risk” (Douglas, Wildavsky 1982, 10). Grandma, who embodies Thailand as a so-called “developing country” and a burgeoning “ageing society” (Worawet 2008; Sutthichai, Suvinee 2008), shares the same fears.

Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) suggest that the very concept of risk is linked to modernisation, the product of a society that is fixated on controlling the future. A modern person, Grandma also focuses on the management of risk. In her narrative, there are different kinds of risk. Some are inescapable, such as those that derive from the consumption of polluted glutinous rice, a staple of Isan cuisine. Others, however, are avoidable. She further discerns between those that are worth taking, and those that are not. Engaging in commercial agriculture is among the first, her economic wellbeing being dependent on embracing the risks of entrepreneurialism. As argued by Walker (2012, 467), Thai peasants “explicitly refer to the advent of contract farming as a process of experimentation, often stating that they are uncertain about what results they can expect and that they are just ‘trying out’ a new crop or agricultural input. Some even talk of ‘playing’ with alternatives, conveying a sense that engagement with private capital involves a significant element of risk taking, perhaps even gambling”.

Grandma also willingly takes risks that are inherent to a desired lifestyle, such as consuming sugary foods, an assertion of one’s status (Mintz 1986). In fact, Grandma’s overall engagement with risk is essential to sustain the standard of living to which she has become accustomed. At the same time, she stresses the importance of preventing one’s legs from rotting by sending external workers – migrants from less developed countries in Southeast Asia, she says – into the fields. Risk management, social aspirations and class identity are clearly interconnected in her narrative. When I describe my research project, both Grandma and her daughter, who has been sitting silently throughout our conversation, fiercely attempt to dissuade me. Only Grandpa says nothing, staring at the television as we speak.

“Be very careful (*rawang*)”, echoes a young nurse, an Isan native and personal friend, as we talk over grilled chicken at the canteen of the regional hospital where she works. Speaking in central Thai under a dark cloud of flies dancing in the fluorescent light, she repeats Grandma’s warnings about the dangerous fields. Employing the semantic register of a learned person, she even lists additional con-

cerns: 'bacteria' (*baektiria*) and 'dengue fever' (*khai luead ok*, literally 'fever that makes blood come out'). She cautions that I equip myself with knee-high rubber boots and mosquito spray for this research. Under no circumstance should I ever expose my skin to the water.

After my friend and I have lunch, we go to meet Ton, a computer technician working in an office next to the oncology department. A soft-spoken young man with short hair, Ton holds a degree in information technology from a well-known provincial university. His Facebook page features photographs of him holding hands with his girlfriend, a good-looking young woman who, judging from the way she dresses, is neither high city nor countryside. Originally from a neighbouring province, Ton spends his free time going to the movies at a shopping mall in the city and catching monstrous fish and frogs with friends in a nearby village. He nods patiently as my female friend explains the scope of my research, enumerating once more the dangers of the fields. Waiting until she finishes, he then looks at me and asks: "Are you free next weekend?"

4 Ladies Worry, Men Risk

On Saturday, Ton picks me up on his black Japanese scooter bike. I am wearing long trousers and high rubber boots. He is in shorts and flip-flops.

"No boots?" I ask.

"I'll put them on later," he lies.

We ride helmetless against the traffic on a four-lane road, and flip a U-turn under a pedestrian bridge surmounted by a royal icon glittering in the late afternoon sun. Ton spots a dirt road seemingly out of nowhere, and makes a sudden right turn. A couple of minutes after riding through thick vegetation, we arrive at the small village (*mu ban*) where he spends his weekends: a few wooden houses surrounded by fields. He hurriedly introduces me to his friends - two brothers about his age - and their parents; then he digs into the soil with a hoe, looking for worms.

"It's for bait", he says as he picks them up with his fingers and places them in a plastic bucket. I did not realize we were going to fish. I squat down to help, and feel the damp, cold dirt slipping under my nails. Is it contaminated? I wonder. Worms covering the bottom of the bucket, Ton grabs a dozen rods - short wooden sticks with nylon lines attached - and hands another dozen to me. Without saying a word, he heads off into the family's rice field. Trailing behind on the elevated pathway, I look left and right, glancing into the dark, poisonous water.

“Look”, instructs Ton as he threads the first worm onto a hook, penetrating its body twice without killing it. He sticks the first rod onto the mud, leaving the worm jiggling on the water’s surface. At the end of the operation, his hands are dry.

Moving casually through the field, he plants additional rods, sometimes using a hand to clear the water of algae. At one point, he slips on wet mud, one foot splashing into the water. I mentally curse him for not wearing footwear. Minutes later, I slip as well, the water flooding my boot. Water squishing with every step, I think that not only is such protection useless in the fields, but it can inflict even worse harm. I begin wondering if my foot will rot.

“Look around, smell the air”, says the IT expert. “Nice, no?”.

All around us are the lush rice paddies, green against the darkening sky. The silence, almost reverent, is broken by the chirping of crickets and cicadas: *krik, krik, krik*. A fish disturbs the water with a faint splash. Ton smiles. How can this be a place of death, I ask myself. My brain warns me of the dangers, reminds me of the words of Grandma and the nurse. Yet my senses insist that I am safe. Obviously, I tell myself, my foot would not rot, just like Ton’s never did. Once I return to the village, I can always wipe the boot with some tissues – the ubiquitous rolls of toilet paper, set on tables as napkins – and dry the sock with a fan. “While the validity and personal relevance of second-hand information is open to question, people more readily trust the evidence of their senses”, writes Whitmarsh (2008).

We place the last rods as the sun sets over the fields. Ton pins his last ones several meters from a large tree, and quickly moves away. I do not ask why he refuses to get closer. I know a tree inhabited by ghosts (*phi*) when I see one. As we walk back to the village, he glimpses a tiny crab in the water, and picks it up to show me. It is brown, with one pincer bigger than the other.

“This is good in *som tam*”, he laughs, referring to Thailand’s famous spicy papaya salad.

I think this is the right time to ask his opinion about the consumption of *koi pla*. Letting go of the crab, Ton replies that he is too ‘scared’ (*klua*) to eat any. He has seen many terrifying television campaigns warning of the dangers of having raw fish, he explains. Nonetheless, he admits, he continues to eat raw crab and shrimp “even if they also have parasites” because he does not perceive them as dangerous.

“The campaigns only talk about fish”, he adds stressing the apparent irony.

I reply that, as far as I know at least, the campaigns do not focus on crabs and shrimps because these contain no harmful parasites.

Having returned to the village when it is dark, we rest in a communal hut overlooking the fields to chat with Mom (*mae*) and Dad (*pho*). Again challenging a trite commonplace, they also outsource

much of the field labour, dedicating themselves primarily to small commerce. Specifically, they produce and sell baskets and mats. They tell me proudly that their children, the two brothers, have both been able to secure modest office jobs in town. While we speak, I see a thick bag labelled “pig food” jumping around in the yard. Dad, who is busy smoking a cigarette, distractedly asks Ton to take care of it.

The soft-spoken young man walks toward the bag. He releases the knot, and pulls out a large white duck, holding its beak in his right hand, its wings in his left. I reckon we are going to have a big dinner. He asks the brother wearing a green t-shirt that reads “ARMY” to hold the duck’s legs, and slits its throat with a long knife, letting the blood flow into a clay bowl. Few minutes later, they let go of the animal, which crumples to the ground.

“Ton”, I shout out as he turns to help Dad light the fire coal briquettes, “It’s still alive!”.

Unperturbed, Ton grabs a log and beats the duck several times on the head – the long white neck plunging into the ground with each blow, only to come up defiantly.

“It’s still alive”, I repeat every time he attempts to walk away.

This script goes on unvaried until Ton, probably annoyed by my complaints, tries to drown the duck in a bucket of water. Panting, the animal’s head emerges again and again. I begin to wonder if it will ever die. Almost half an hour after he had initially slit its throat, Ton sticks the duck headfirst into a pot of boiling water. This, he explains, will soften the feathers. When he pulls it out, the duck is clearly dead. I have seen larger animals – pigs and ostriches – get slaughtered before, but never have I witnessed such a long death. I am not even sure of the exact point at which the duck died – drowned in the bucket or boiled the pot. In any case, neither Ton nor Dad seems interested in marking a clear line between life and death. Purity and pollution, the opposites in Douglas’ (1984) classical work on the binary between that which heals and that which harms, and on the rituals that ensure their separation, mix in ambiguous ways.

Ton sets the steaming body on a piece of cloth, and Dad squats down to pluck it. Stripped of its feathers, the duck now appears in all its glory, displaying the musculature of a formidable adversary. Taking turns under Dad’s supervision, the brothers proceeded to cook it in a pot with toasted sticky rice and spices (*lab* style), while Ton selects some spice: leaves from a nearby bush. Dad encourages me to help by stirring the pot, mincing the cooked meat with a butcher’s knife, and adding condiments according to taste.

“Why do the guys do the cooking?” I discreetly ask Mom, who sits apart stroking the family dog. Try as I might, I cannot reconcile this domestic scene with the much-celebrated ideal of the female benevolent caregiver (Van Esterik 1986; 2000, 76; Angeles, Sirijit 2009; Harrison 2017; Ratchaneekorn 2019).

“Men cook what they kill”, she replies with a smile.

When understood as a continuum with killing, I note, cooking becomes quintessentially male. A taboo, killing is associated with the dangers of hunting as well as, within the Thai cultural context, with violating the first precept for the Buddhist laity: the prohibition against the taking of life. As in other societies, masculinity asserts therefore itself via the infringement of taboos and the risks attached (Plummer 2013; Douglas 1992).

5 Into the Night

Before we eat, the brothers run into the fields, Ton and I hurriedly following suit. Armed with powerful electric torches, we enter a dark world of predator and prey. The risks of which women spoke by day come alive under our lights, which illuminate the seemingly mythical creatures of children books. The eyes of a shrimp that glitter red in the water. A leach that swims near our pathway, sinuous like an octopus. Mosquitoes that buzz around us, attracted by the smell of blood. Even the ghosts of the tree are perceptibly present, hiding in the long shadows cast by our torches over the reeds. As we patrol the paddies removing terrified fish from hooks and replacing rotting worms with live ones, we marvel at the sight of danger – far more real now than in the day, yet manageable and ready to be conquered. Asserting ourselves over the wild, the game of masculinity is easy for us.

The anthropology of Southeast Asia posits an indigenous classification of space that rests on the duality of centre and periphery. A constant in the cosmologies of the region, the opposition between the safety of the centre – the village in this case – on one side and the dangers of the periphery – the wild – on the other, mirrors the universal polarity of purity and pollution theorised by Douglas (1984). It commands gendered prohibitions resonance that tend to grant men freedom of movement while simultaneously restricting women to the domestic domain (see Vera-Sanso 2000, 114-19). The ethnic Akha people of Northern Thailand, for example, deem the wild to be so polluting that they enclose their villages between two gates – log frames aimed to keep dangerous spirits outside (Sukanya, Chomnard 2005, 66; Tooker 1996). Traditionally, men may leave the village to venture on hunting trips in the forest. Upon their return, however, they must purify themselves by passing through one of these gates.

Writing about the rice field in Thailand’s Isan region, Baumann (2020) problematises the supposedly insurmountable duality of centre and periphery. To him, the field is a liminal space, neither centre nor periphery, located between the domesticity of village life and the wild of the forest (Baumann 2020, 52):

The ideal village is surrounded by rice fields (*na*), and thus is spatio-symbolically separated from the forest. But the *na* is more than just a semantic dividing line; it is the ambiguous sociospatial realm in-between forest and village. While villagers seem to elaborate upon the opposition of village (*mu ban*) and forest (*pa*) spaces in most contexts, this opposition is mediated by the rice fields (*na*) in-between on a scale that operates along domesticity as its central value (Stanlaw and Yoddumnern 1985, 152). The opposition of forest and village is thus practically meaningless without the ambiguous rice fields in between that separate village and forest, while they simultaneously relate both sociospatial realms. The sociosymbolic classification system operates, then, not on a dual but on a ternary organizational logic. Ambiguity, according to this logic, is not just a residue of a dual opposition that needs to be resolved, but a social reality as such.

In the shades of the night, I argue, the field sinks into an enhanced dimension of wildness, shifting further and further toward the periphery. In Thai cosmology, the night has the power to alter normative relations between centre and periphery, ultimately offering opportunities for reversal (Siani 2017, 136-56). When the sun, symbolic of the monarch in court cosmology and astrology, goes down, and the national anthem blares from loudspeakers nationwide freezing every good citizen to attention, the state-backed rules that govern proper conduct in the day dissolve into danger and transgression. Unorthodox religious masters like roadside fortune tellers come out of hiding. Spirit mediums become possessed. Police extort bribes on the roadsides. Seedy massage parlours, invisible during the day, switch on colourful neon lights. Gangsters seize the opportunity by crowning themselves kings of the underworld. Similarly, at night, the rice field turns into a world replete with risk and the potential for men to assert their power. The rural counterpart to the strong big men (*phu yai*) of the metropolis, Ton, a mild IT guy by day, can now prove his worth. Made invincible by the light of his torch and the hooks of his rods, he is king of the wild.

6 Mixing Cooked with Raw

Back in the village, we place our baskets (*khong*) of fish next to the dining table and sit down to dinner. The baskets, explains Mom, are designed to keep the fish alive while we eat. That strange feeling of hovering between life and death returns as uncooked fish, a key expression of the wild according to Lévi-Strauss (1990), mixes with the hearth, where non-consanguineous family relations in Southeast Asia are forged through the sharing of cooked food (Carsten 1997). The periphery has effectively been summoned to pollute the centre.

But the transgression does not end here. As the brothers fill the men's glasses with ice cubes and beer, Dad places the cooked duck in the centre of the table only to pour the blood previously collected by Ton back onto it. The initiative is shocking. After having finally killed and cooked the animal, he is bringing it back to life and rawness – the line between raw and cooked, life and death, periphery and centre, becoming increasingly blurred. I realise that the patriarch has just pushed the bar further, compelling us, if only through good manners, to ingest the duck raw/live, dunking pellets of glutinous rice into its blood. Mom, who placidly eats her own cooked bloodless duck from the separate plate that was put aside for her, encourages me to partake.

From entering the wild to feasting on raw duck and glutinous rice, masculinity tonight is demonstrated through the defiance of norms that define the polite man from the centre. As argued by Lefferts (2005, 247), food is a fundamental tool for social distinction in Thailand, individuals from Bangkok and the surrounding areas using it “to mark and discriminate against Thai-Lao who live at the Kingdom's edge”. In the past, Isan food was even condemned as ‘non-Thai’ (*mai thai*), a threat to nation-building (Asa 2021). Also the way we eat – rejecting forks and spoons in favour of dipping glutinous rice into the succulent pap of duck and blood – is a display of ‘countryside’ (*ban nok*) mannerism, abhorrent to your average elite person. Raw food in Thailand is also thought to be consumed by ghosts, lower beings in Buddhist cosmology. Red Fanta is offered to spirits nationwide as a modern, less gruesome substitute for sacrificial blood. Moreover, in Isan folklore, bloody meat is believed to be consumed by *phi pop*, malevolent ghosts who possess unvirtuous individuals (Somchai 2012; Pathlada, Suwathana 2020, 229). In popular culture, these ghosts go as far as feasting on humans (see, for example, Ancuta 2017). Lefferts (2005, 255) goes on explaining that, in Isan, “issues of identity and resistance have become intimately connected with these foods”. Tonight, peripheral masculinities are expressed precisely via transgressive idioms of food consumption.

In the middle of the meal, the young men rise for yet another fishing spree – raw and cooked, life and death, periphery and centre continuing to mix at dinnertime. All tipsy, we separate into pairs, taking different pathways into the fields. Having entered into an unspoken competition with the brothers, Ton and I, hunting partners for the night, exult at every fish we catch, laughing as we hear our rivals scream in excitement from the other side of the paddy. The paths of the two teams meet deep inside the reeds, allowing us to bond as we count fish and compare sizes. When a large fish bites a bait left by the brothers, we finally all run into the water to prevent it from escaping. Covered in mud and bitten by mosquitoes, we are united against a common foe: the fish, the water, the parasites, the mosqui-

toes, the leeches, the ghosts, and whatever other risk that threatens to emasculate us.

Roaming the paddies, we also assert our masculinity as transgression of the Discipline (*vinai*) observed by those men who enter the Buddhist monkhood. The contrasts are multiple. Monks, higher beings in Buddhist cosmology, must eat their food strictly before noon, cooked and offered by dutiful lay women (Van Esterik 1986). They are prohibited from eating raw food altogether. Monks must also avoid alcohol. Barring special circumstances, they must remain confined in the temple at night. Finally, monks are barred from leaving the temple during the rainy season for they might inadvertently step on crops, implicit violation of the prohibition against the taking of life. Especially in rural communities, short-term ordination into the monkhood (*kan buat*) is a customary rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960) for young men, a desired prerequisite for entering into marriage.

Becoming a monk, however, is not enough to become a good husband. Tambiah (1976) notes that the ideal men, Buddhist kings, must reconcile the opposites of monasticism and warriorship by oscillating between being pious renouncers and rightful conquerors according to context (*kalathesa*). "Kings must be good killers before they can turn to piety and good works" (Tambiah 1976, 522). Similarly perhaps, if on a lesser scale, in addition to entering the monkhood, ordinary men must prove their worth by drinking and mastering violence for example by joining the military. Challenging the wild, fishing and consuming raw food at night appear to serve as supplementary or alternative spectacles of conquest.

Around midnight, as conversations die out, I sense it is time for me to go. Intoxicated, Ton returns me to our original meeting place, skittering across puddles along the roads intermittently illuminated by the occasional street light. As I watch him flip a U-turn back to the village, I realise I was courteously ushered out before anyone ate the fish we caught. Maybe they will consume it raw, I think; maybe cooked. Stigmatised in state campaigns as unsanitary, dangerous and low-class, the consumption of raw fish is a highly guarded practice; one in which, according to fellow researchers, people tend to deny indulging in. In the sober light of day, I therefore look for someone who eats the fish raw, and say they do.

7 The Man Who Eats *Koi Pla*

Not far from the hospital, a dark-skinned man walks into a fresh market on which a light rain shower has just fallen. A striking figure, he flaunts stubble and a black leather jacket in suffocating heat - an amulet dangling on his bare chest. People in the market, mostly women, dodge the unsmiling figure as he draws near. He points with his

chin to small fish (*pla siw* and *pla soi*) at a stand, implicitly instructing his wife, who trails a couple of meters behind, to buy. Refusing to engage with the female vendors, he repeats the same behaviour at a nearby vegetable stand. He lets his wife carry the scant shopping bags while he leads the way into a muddy alleyway.

Seated crossed-legged on the floor of their modest concrete house, the man silently scales the fish; then minces it with a machete. He pours the pinkish mush into a metal bowl, and squeezes a lime (*manaw*) until the meat turns grey, as if it were cooked. He chops spring onion (*ton hom*), challot (*hom daeng*) and cilantro (*phak chi farang*), and throws them in with fish sauce, ground dry chillies, sugar, and a generous helping of sodium glutamate, mixing the lot with a metal spoon.

“*Nam lai lai*”, I admit as the tantalising smell of *lab* fills the room.
“I am salivating!”

Only then does the man break into a smile, and starts to talk.

Khun Thiang is a dispossessed ‘person of the fields’ in his early forties. He makes ends meet by collecting trash around a provincial city while his wife works as a janitor at an inexpensive apartment block nearby, popular among university students. A friend of a friend, Khun Thiang has prepared a tiny portion of *koi pla* just to show me what it is like. Under normal circumstances, he stresses, he would never buy the fish he cooks. He only catches it. In fact, he says that he only eats *koi pla* once or twice a year with his close circle of male friends as they reunite in the fields to celebrate the harvest: an expression of fertility and potency. This occurs at the end of the rainy season, when the paddies are drained. On this occasion, the men catch plenty of fish, preparing and eating *koi pla* at night with flowing rice whiskey (*lao khao*). He tells me that is one of the few chances he has to spend time with his childhood pals.

Khun Thiang’s mother, a petite woman in her sixties wearing a traditional long skirt (*pha thung*), looks at him with admiration. She adds that women including herself used to have *koi pla* decades ago, before it was known to be dangerous. Luckily, nothing happened to her, she smiles. Emphasising that she has given up the dish altogether, she explains that men are immune to cancer (*mareng*) because alcohol, which they ingest in vast quantities along with *koi pla*, renders the food harmless. Khun Thiang’s wife chimes in, claiming that, as a woman from a younger generation, she has never had *koi pla* at all.

“Women can’t eat it”, she asserts, remarking that she drinks no alcohol either. Aside from being a commonplace violation of the most Buddhist precepts for laypeople, alcohol consumption and the deriving loss of control are primarily identified with men. Like Grandpa before him, Khun Thiang remains silent as the women speak.

8 Conclusion

The engagements with the field and the consumption of raw fish take place in a gap between scientific abstraction and lived experience which makes risks worth taking. Ultimately, the night, the wild, the alcohol, the comradery and the total immersion in the senses outweigh the words of alarm of judicious grandmas. Even they, indeed, continuously take risks, economic and social advancement requiring embracing the uncertain. Indeed, while crude state-run campaigns depict the consumption of raw fish as invariably lethal, people know full well that not everyone who eats *koi pla* develops cancer. Medical narratives, as appropriated by villagers and retold through the lens of gender, provide men from the so-called periphery with irresistible trials of masculinity. The social, economic and educational divide between the urban policy makers and the villagers adds politics to this gap, the practices described ultimately doubling down as acts of resistance. Even the normative code of behaviour epitomised by the Buddhist monkhood offers exciting opportunities for transgression. The temptations to substitute systemic knowledge with personal experience become overwhelming. A liminal space where life coexists with death, the field is rife with opportunity for experimentation and cultural transformation.

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