

The King of Fruits Needs Space

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Field Notes



Fruit orchards in Trat Province, manually weeded (on the left side of the road) and weeded using herbicides (on the right side of the road). © Watcharapol Daengsubha. All rights reserved.

Fruit orchards in Trat Province, manually weeded (on the left side of the road) and weeded using herbicides (on the right side of the road). © Watcharapol Daengsubha. All rights reserved.

by Judith Bopp

Durian Webs in Trat Province

On a particularly hot and dry morning in early May, my friend—a local farmer—and I loaded a canoe into the car and made our way to the Huai Raeng Reservoir in Thailand's Trat Province, not far from the Cambodian border. Parked along the shore when we arrived were several pickup trucks with their occupants gathered around each in small groups. After a short while, they began to board and then depart in the motorboats they'd

left idling in the nearby shallows. This high traffic at the reservoir surprised me, and I was even more surprised to learn where the boats were heading: to a small, seemingly unimportant island at the center of the reservoir. Why now? Why this island? They are here for one reason, and one reason alone: Durian.



(Left) Boats used by workers to reach Durian Island in the center of Huai Raeng Reservoir, Trat Province. (Right) Workers loading pickup trucks with Durian from the island. © Judith Bopp. All rights reserved.

Durian, “The King of Fruits” in Thailand, is an ever-popular food among the Thai, as its royal title imparts. Attributing royal titles to fruits is a long-standing practice in many Asian countries. This tropical fruit has a dedicated community of fans that seasonally worships the fruit for—or perhaps despite—its pungent smell and unique taste.

Here in Trat, a province in eastern Thailand bordering Cambodia, Durian plantations are exploding, becoming increasingly more integral to the local landscape and representing a general trend in Thailand toward large-scale fruit monocultures ushered in by the rising demand for tropical fruits as value-added export goods. At a share of 90 percent, Thailand currently leads the global export market for Durian. Their main market is now China, where the spiky fruit has recently risen to fame.¹ In 2023, China imported Durian worth more than 2.5 billion euros from Thailand. This corresponds to an increase of 81.7 percent from 2022. And the high-speed rail link between Laos and China, opened in 2021, will only increase their ability to deliver more products through the Thai–Laotian border crossings.²

Trat, one of Thailand’s less economically sourced locales, has for some time dealt with a degradation of their agricultural lands as a result of intensive, harmful agriculture processes. Farmers also seasonally struggle with water availability, especially those who do not collect rain and surface water in their own ponds.

Decades ago, spikes in the demand for raw rubber led Trat's farmers to turn forests and existing farmland into large-scale rubber plantations, hoping to garner steady, year-round income. With the promising Durian trend, however, many of those rubber farmers have started to shift to cultivating this latest “cash crop” in the hopes of higher profit. Although rubber trees have also been grown monoculturally, the ever-increasing production of Durian has begun to greatly interfere with the already vulnerable landscape: as is the case here, on this remote island—which for all intents and purposes is really more of a hill—at the center of the Huai Raeng Reservoir, where workers make a daily multimodal commute to check on the trees and pick the first fruits of the season. This is in spite of the fact that this setup is particularly harmful to the reservoir and downstream water bodies, as the agrochemicals used across the sloping farms continuously trickle downhill.



Exposed to the elements: Durian trees, approximately two years old and planted on sloping ground, representative of landscape transformations in Trat Province. © Judith Bopp. All rights reserved.

In February, Thai news channels covered the case of Durian orchard encroachment into the surroundings of the Huai Raeng water reservoir induced by Chinese capital. A joint investigation by the National Anti-Corruption Commission and the irrigation office in Trat

revealed that about 130 *rai* (equal to 51 acres or 21 hectares) of adjacent forestland was newly prepared for Durian plantations while no “invaders” were found. A second article published a few days later reported new Durian plantations on an island in a water reservoir in the Trat-adjacent province of Chantaburi, pointing to the hazard of agrochemical contamination for downstream users of the reservoir water.

Monocultures Interacting with Local Ecologies

Durian Island, as I call it and the second news article happens to do as well, is representative of the landscape transformations that Durian monocultures have established across this region. In the quest for cultivatable land in a region where there is little room left for expansion, new plantations are often placed on sloping grounds where they are exposed to the elements and the passersby’s eye. This precarious position results in top-soil erosion from rain, wind, sun, and heat. The already low organic matter in the soil, along with the soil’s compaction through prior intensive use, lowers its capacity to absorb and retain water when it rains. Agro-biodiversity that would support water retention is absent from these monocultured slopes. The Durian trees here are planted in neat rows with small drainage channels to conduct water and mitigate landslides. As a result, the plantations are “designed to maximize the surface water flow,” my friend tells me. Not in a good way. The fast runoff of water along the surface in the advent of heavy rains can cause the adjacent canals and rivers to overflow. Sudden flooding disconnects districts in Trat from the region’s main infrastructures and leaves households inundated for days on end—with the most recent, significant flooding occurring in July 2024. Although unusually heavy La Niña rainfalls in combination with the provincial irrigation authority’s simultaneous drainage of a water reservoir triggered this substantial flooding, such an event mirrors the ecological perils of these kinds of agriculturally engineered landscapes.

On top of all of this, the Durian is a delicate tree, a king that demands doting caretakers. Each tree needs thorough care throughout the season, such as intensive irrigation, pruning, and weeding. When farmers begin their Durian cultivation the soil is usually infertile, and the saplings are forced to source their nutrients from chemical fertilizers, rendering the soil no more than a substrate. Without the protective collocation of diverse plant varieties, the Durian tree is prone to insects that damage crops and to diseases, such as the fungal outbreak in 2018, which was suspected to have caused a dieback of Durian trees by affecting the plant roots, root collars, and leaves. Regardless of



*Mature Durian tree producing fruit in
Trat Province. © Judith Bopp. All
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the fungicides applied, the dieback spread fast and resulted in great losses for the farmers³—losses few can afford.

Farmers' Risk in Volatile Markets

“Paeng go plook. Took go kon.” (The price is high, so we grow. The price is low, so we cut.)

This is a common Thai phrase I heard during my travels through the country. It reflects a mindset common among cash-crop farmers who orientate their production to the current market trends: When the market price for a crop is high, they follow that trend and shift to that crop. When the market price drops again, they abandon it to start over with the new “trendy” crop, just as what happened in the course of shifting from rubber to Durian. While this flexibility can offer economic opportunities, farmers risk failure when they grow only a single crop. “It is like gambling on a single

horse,” my friend observed, as farmers are forced to incorporate fluctuating trends in the food market and price politics into their livelihood decisions.

Powerful middlemen grade the goods and dictate prices according to current market opportunities. Apart from their harsh price politics, timing seems to be farmers' most delicate concern, as anticipation is needed of the short window of time for fetching the best seasonal selling price. Local farmers are not often concerned with additional expenses such as transportation costs, as traders usually pick up the fruit directly from the farm, have them graded and sorted, and then pay the farmers. As a result, the best grade is sent to China or the markets in the shopping malls that are frequented by Asian tourists, and the lower grade stays with the farmers in the local market. The larger traders will then sell their excess of lower-grade produce to other middlemen for them to distribute it wherever they find the opportunity. My friend's own experience with growing Durian illustrates the concern this causes for the local market: “Once we could sell the fruit, the price went down so bad. [After paying the workers,] we get only two baht per kilogram from seven years of work and investment. We made a great, great loss.”

Considering the long time span it takes a Durian tree to reach maturity until the first harvest—seven years on average—the investment in Durian plantations is an uncertain and risky gamble on an unpredictable future market. Ultimately, most monoculture farmers need a second income, and they will seek offseason work across a variety of sectors, whereas most organic farmers retain a year-round income from growing a range of crops to take to market. The uncertainty of monoculture production, both at the local and international level, is heightened by Thailand’s neighboring countries’ (e.g., Malaysia) recent attempts to secure their own niche in the global Durian export market. Often, it is not even Thai middlemen grading and reselling the harvest but Chinese traders who make the profit by buying directly from the farm gate.

Durian: A Fashion Crop?

Durian, I claim, is what I would call a “fashion crop,” which might ultimately prove to be a fad that surrenders to the momentary, media-driven taste of consumers. Though Durian has a rather pleasant, custard-like texture, its taste is contested: People either like or dislike it. Unlike other cash crops, Durian has reached iconic status on social media, making it an attractive crop to invest in. The recent Chinese market-fueled Durian hype has stimulated the fruit’s media representation in Thailand more than other tropical products. During peak seasons, Durian stalls pop up in shopping malls and city markets frequented by Chinese and other pan-Asian tourists, and Durian farms in the countryside offer tours and Durian tastings, which Trat’s neighboring provinces strategically include both in their tourism schemes.

Durian could soon become one of Thailand’s soft power icons; one of the “authentic” Thai cultural products that the government eagerly pushes into the market as one feature of their soft power strategy with the knock-on effect of stimulating the local economies of lesser-known provinces. Historical precedent already suggests that this soft-power food-based marketing strategy works in Thailand. The previously unknown Thai iced-coffee creation *es yen* went viral after Korean K-pop star Jung Yong-Hwa posted a photo holding his cup of the drink, inspiring Korean travelers to consider Thailand in the quest for the famous brew. Durian could become *es yen*’s successor.

While the Durian fashion could potentially bring tourists to Trat, the Durian growers are unlikely to be the ones who will benefit. More importantly, the expansion of Durian monocultures will likely be restrained by the aggravation of farm ecologies caused by intensive agriculture in the area. The present scenario of many of Trat’s Durian farmers demonstrates that the decision to monoculture Durian lacks foresight and is of uncertain

viability in the long run. The impermanence inherent in the Durian trend increases farmers' chances of failure in terms of money and the time they invest in the long period before initial harvest.

The mechanisms behind these trends are somewhat intangible and unpredictable, particularly due to social media's ability to swiftly foster new opinions and trends. It is in the nature of trends that they eventually end, as the Durian trend might—with significant drawbacks for farmers.

“Territorialization” and Trend-Driven Ecological Destruction

Durian monoculture farming bears with it an essence of territoriality: The “King of Fruits” was sent to expand into both the ecological and the cultural spheres, transforming the local landscapes and altering farming practices. The Durian Island in Trat, which as the recent news illustrate is not an individual case, reflects that expansionist practice. For its monetary value, several occurrences of nocturnal Durian plundering from local farms have forced Trat's police to establish what they call a “fruit-guarding” patrol. In one such an event, a farmer lost crops worth approximately 28,000 euros.

Moreover, Durian has taken on a diplomatic role in Thai and Chinese relations. Thailand's geopolitical situation requires good terms with Eastern and Western powers. With pan-Asian tourism as both an economic pillar and a means to diplomacy, the Thai government has eased foreign investment and trade, e.g., by allowing Chinese traders to maintain Durian farms with adjacent warehouses and packing facilities aimed at direct export to China. This means profit from Durian plantations in Trat is often not earned by local farmers or Thai middlemen but by Chinese traders.



Opening of a homegrown Durian. © Judith Bopp. All rights reserved.



Durian plantations with raised beds and drainage channels along a roadside in Trat Province. © Judith Bopp. All rights reserved.

The benefit of Durian expansion is hypothetical since it is based on unpredictable factors. Ultimately, the local population is left to deal with ecological damage like degraded soil, water shortage, groundwater pollution, or flooding, as they experienced in July 2024. The impermanence exacerbates this scenario. Trat's local population mostly remains passive regarding resolving these issues, even though the crop's financial benefits barely reach the pockets of Durian farmers; and Durian farms only provide seasonal work for local farmers for a window of about three months.

The Durian serves as a microcosmic example of the larger issue of monocultures in Thailand and other regions, being ecologically destructive and putting farmers' livelihoods at risk for the purpose of export growth and political diplomacy. Moreover, weather fluctuations such as an extended heat wave in May 2024 jeopardizing the harvest are likely to increase in frequency. Durian is likely to remain the "King of Fruits" locally in Thailand. However, its capacity to sustain a fad-driven pan-Asian market is yet to be proven. Meanwhile, individual farmers and traders continue to invest in Durian plantations, and landscapes transform.

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What are farmers' considerations in this setting? What style of farming would be more beneficial and viable for farmers? And how do they maneuver household decisions

about continuation of farming through the lens of ecological, socioeconomic, and political factors? These are open questions that I will address in forthcoming essays.

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1. *Durian Global Trade Overview 2023* (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2023), <https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/176a0f58-e47f-4546-9dd0-4843cc8a84d2>. ↩
2. *Durian Global Trade Overview 2023*. ↩
3. Pongpisutta, Ratiya, Pisut Keawmanee, Sunisa Sanguansub, Paradorn Dokchan, Santiti Bincader, Vipaporn Phuntumart, and Chainarong Rattanakreetakul, “Comprehensive Investigation of Die-Back Disease Caused by *Fusarium* in Durian,” *Plants* 12, no. 17 (2023): 3045, <https://doi.org/10.3390/plants12173045>. ↩

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