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**'Itsara' (Freedom) to Work?:
Neoliberalization, Deregulation and Marginalized
Male Labor in the Bangkok Taxi Business**

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‘Itsara’ (Freedom) to Work?: Neoliberalization, Deregulation and Marginalized Male Labor in the Bangkok Taxi Business

INTRODUCTION

Something [the government] is going to have to face sooner or later is the number of taxis. There are just too many and new ones are registered all the time. No one wants to be the unpopular one and say we need to limit the number of taxis – return to the quota – but the situation cannot continue. Taxis are clogging the streets and the drivers are the ones who are hurt.¹

President of a Bangkok Taxi Cooperative, January 2005

I never take a break in twelve hours. I drink M150 [energy drink] to stay alert and keep driving. My nephew drinks coffee but I don't like the taste. I usually eat in the taxi too, but not when I have passengers – it would be strange plus some of them don't like the strong smell of our [Northeastern] food.

Som,² age 43, taxi driver for 18 years, March 2005

In May 1992 the Bangkok automobile taxi business was ‘liberalized’ through legislation and the long-running quota system that tightly controlled the number of taxis was abolished in favor of an open-supply approach (Sedha-udom 1995). Within months of the policy change the number of taxis on the streets of the Thai capital skyrocketed, as did demand for taxi drivers. Within a decade, Bangkok went from conditions of artificial taxi shortage to a state of saturation. Drivers, who work as independent contractors and are largely internal migrants drawn from the rural underclass, have faced growing competition and declining real wages; conditions that have intensified over the past five years of political crisis and economic uncertainty in Thailand. One of the major outcomes of restructuring was the further movement of economic risk away from taxi firms and directly onto taxi workers.

In this paper I argue that Bangkok taxis and taxi drivers provide a window into the way in which neoliberalism, defined here as both a policy doctrine and as a set of social structures, has been encountered, adapted and incorporated into Thailand’s development trajectory in two interconnected ways. The first is in the way in which the taxi business has been ‘neoliberalized’ through regulatory reform. Since legal restructuring in the early 1990s, the Bangkok taxi system has undergone a dramatic expansion and transformation that has altered the most basic operations of the business. Touted as a market-driven neoliberal success story, a closer examination of the impacts of reform on the taxi workforce uncovers a more nuanced and unstable picture of liberalization, one that includes both new opportunities and new opportunity-costs for drivers.

¹ All informant quotes are translated from the Thai by the author.

² Unless otherwise noted, informants’ names have been changed.

Second, I examine how the 're-placing' of economic risk onto taxi workers was not just the result of policy shifts and changing market conditions, but also a consequence of the narrative re-positioning of economically and socially disadvantaged male labor through the systematic conflation of the 'traditional' Thai value of *itsara* (freedom, independence) with the construction of new neoliberalized labor subjectivities. Furthermore, I argue that since reform, taxi driving has become an 'always-available' occupational option for unemployed and underemployed men, and as such functions as a discursive 'safety-valve' that contributes to the reproduction of economic marginalization and social inequality in Thailand. In addition, the figure of the 'taxi driver' is increasingly held up as the 'common' or 'working' man by politicians and pundits, and regularly invoked as the prototypical 'man on the street' expert by economists and journalists. As a consequence, over the past two decades, the figure of the taxi driver has become a significant site in cultural and political struggles over the shape of Thailand's future. Furthermore, the outcomes of this struggle are far from pre-determined, and the stakes are high, for taxi drivers, internal economic migrants, and for Thai society as a whole. I therefore conclude with some brief considerations of the future of the Bangkok taxi business and the implications for taxi labor.

My analysis emerges out of two periods of research; the first in 2004 and 2005 for a total of eleven months; the second totaling around 4.5 months in 2011 and 2012. In both periods, I employed a range of qualitative research methods, including archival research, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and ethnographic observation. In addition, I conducted surveys of drivers in 2005 and 2012 order to provide more in-depth descriptive statistical data on taxi drivers' backgrounds, migration histories and current working conditions. These surveys also provide a crosscheck on data obtained through other methods, and will provide useful longitudinal data once analysis is complete. I initiated the first period of fieldwork with a set of specific research questions about the restructuring of the taxi business and its impact on drivers, but these questions were open-ended and left room for the interviews and ethnographic observations to subsequently determine the direction of research. The centrality of the cultural concept of *itsara* (freedom/independence) for taxi drivers in describing their work was one such unexpected direction, which has led to the analysis of the interplay of individual and cultural narratives shaping, perpetuating and challenging social relations of inequality in specific contexts.

TAXI DRIVERS AND INEQUALITY IN THAILAND

In contrast to the transportation workforce in many large cities in the Global North, taxi driving in the Bangkok is done primarily by Thai citizens rather than by transnational migrants. Nevertheless, Bangkok's taxi drivers have traditionally been internal migrants, and most have origins in either the Northeastern region (known in Thai as *Isan*) or from the provinces and rural districts in the Central region surrounding the ever-expanding Thai capital. Numbers are difficult to verify, but an estimated sixty to seventy percent of drivers I queried in both 2005 and 2012 were born and raised in the Northeast, and the majority of these drivers are male migrants from rural village backgrounds and have completed relatively low-levels of formal education.³ In addition, the overwhelming majority

³ In the 2005 survey of taxi drivers personal histories and working conditions, educational attainment was divided into five categories. With 71 respondents the breakdown of each category is as follows: Not answered: 1 respondent, No formal education: 1 respondent, Primary School: 40 respondents, Secondary School (not specified if completed 9th or 12th grade): 22 respondents, Associate Degree or Technical College Study: 1 respondent, Undergraduate Study: 5 respondents. In the 2012 survey with 88 respondents the breakdown of each category is as follows: Not answered: 0 respondents, No formal education: 1 respondent, Primary School: 36 respondents, Secondary School (not specified if completed 9th or 12th grade): 38 respondents, Associate Degree or Technical College Study: 10 respondents, Undergraduate Study: 2 respondents.

are men, and despite small increases in the number of female drivers in recent years, it continues to be a male-dominated field. Many workers enter the taxi labor market through well-established village and kin-based migration networks that stretch back several generations. Data collected during both research periods conform to this broad description, although, as I discuss in the conclusion, preliminary analysis of 2012 data suggests that some shifts in these demographics may be emerging. However the shifting demographics of taxi labor are difficult to trace with any precision, and the general characteristics as I describe here continue to be central in understanding the relationships between legal restructuring of the taxi business, changing labor conditions, and drivers' responses.

The above characteristics take on increased significance when they are put into the larger historical and geographical context of poverty, relative inequality and class stratification in Thailand. Since 1970, the number of Thais considered to be living below the state defined poverty line has dropped steadily,⁴ however, income inequality within Thailand increased substantially in the 1970s and has remained consistently high since the 1980s (UNDP 2010).⁵ By one common measure, the Gini coefficient, inequality has increased in Thailand from around 0.40 in 1970 to approximately 0.50 in 2002 (peaking at 0.53 in 1994) (UNDP 2010). In addition, the ratio between the average income of the top fifth and the bottom fifth of households is between 13-15 in Thailand, compared to 9-11 for its regional neighbors (UNDP 2010).⁶ Furthermore, inequality in Thailand has a distinct regional geography that is marked by a strong urban and rural divide. In 2002, the overall rate of poverty incidence in Thailand was measured at fourteen percent, with a nineteen percent rate of poverty in rural areas contrasted with only a six percent poverty rate in urban areas. The gap becomes even larger when Bangkok, the dominant urban center is compared with Northeastern Thailand, the poorest and most populous region of Thailand. Bangkok's poverty rate in 2002 was measured at only two percent with a rate of twenty-two percent for the Northeastern region (NESDB 2004).⁷ Thus, characterized by large income disparities between the prosperous and the poor, the urban center and the rural provinces, Thailand has become and continues to be, in the words of two of Thailand's most prominent political economists, one of the world's 'most unequal societies' (Phongspachit & Baker 1998:6).

⁴ According to the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), Poverty incidence in Thailand decreased from 33 percent in 1988 to 10 percent in 2002 (rounded to the nearest whole percent) according to official measurements. Revised measurement methodologies put forth by the NESDB estimate that the poverty level for the entire country has dropped from 46 percent in 1988 to 14 percent in 2002 (NESDB 2004).

⁵ Some indication that growth in inequality has leveled off and may even be closing slightly, however it is too soon to tell if this trend will continue (UNDP 2009:80).

⁶ In addition, while the Gini coefficient for Thailand increased from 0.40 to 0.50, it is striking that the reverse trend can be seen in the Philippines and Malaysia during the same time period (UNDP 2009: 79).

⁷ These percentages are based on the revised methodologies for calculating poverty proposed by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) in 2004. The 2002 percentages using the previous methods for calculating poverty incidence are: 4% for urban, 12% for rural, 2% for Bangkok, and 18% for the Northeastern region. In addition, it should be noted that the Northeastern region does have three urban areas of over 100,000 residents (Nakorn Ratchasima, Udorn Thani and Kon Kaen) but it is notable that when poverty rates in the Northeast are disaggregated into urban and rural categories, the rural Northeastern poverty rate *increases* to 24% (Source NESDB 2004).

Persistent and increasing inequality has a number of implications for understanding the role that taxi drivers play in Bangkok's economy and, by extension, within Thai society more broadly. Although taxi drivers make up only a very small percentage of the overall Thai workforce, the number of taxis - and taxi drivers - grew rapidly, and has continued to grow steadily, since implementation of industry reform in 1992. With more and more taxis on the streets of the capital with each passing month and year, the men who drive them have become both *less* and *more* visible within the urban Thai landscape. On the one hand, taxi drivers are just one more group of internal and international migrants who work as low-level service providers to keep the metro-region 'working' on a daily basis and, as such, they make-up part of the larger 'backdrop' of contemporary life in Bangkok. On the other hand, as their participation in recent political conflicts dramatically illustrates, the presence of this particular group of workers in the capital has been increasingly difficult to ignore, as drivers are highly visible in the urban economy as front-line service providers who cater to both middle-class Thais and to foreign residents and tourists. In addition, the intimacy of the taxi exchange brings drivers into regular and unmediated contact with the people that they serve. As a consequence, over the past several decades, and particularly in the twenty years since legal reform of the capital's taxi system, the figure of the 'taxi driver' has become culturally and politically significant focal point in debates on development, labor and social stratification in an increasingly 'globalized' Thailand.

BANGKOK'S AUTOMOBILE TAXI SYSTEM: NEOLIBERALISM THROUGH RESTRUCTURING SUPPLY

The 1992 Bangkok automobile taxi reform consisted of three major regulatory changes. First, the supply of taxis was 'liberalized' by abolishing the licensing quotas and lifting any restrictions on the number of taxis operating in Bangkok. The number of taxis from that point forward was to be determined solely through market competition. Second, strict limits were placed on the number of years that automobiles could be operated as taxis.⁸ Finally, all taxis were required to install an officially inspected meter and, more importantly, to actually use that meter for fares within the Bangkok city limits⁹ (DLT(d); Seddha-udom 1995).

These changes took place during a period of intense political crisis and unprecedented economic growth within Thailand; a period that saw a number of initiatives and regulatory changes based on neoliberal policy prescriptions, particularly in the banking and financial sectors (Phongpaichit & Baker 1998, 2000). The restructuring of the Bangkok taxi business, although rarely considered alongside these more high-profile forms of neoliberal economic policy intervention, was nevertheless another form of 'on-the-ground' neoliberal engagement in Thailand. In addition, Bangkok's taxi 'neoliberalization' must also be placed in the context of a wave of similar urban taxi supply reforms which began in the United States at the end of the 1970s, where over two dozen cities enacted some form of partial or complete deregulation over the next two decades. This deregulation model then spread and was adopted by other municipalities in countries in Canada, Europe (The United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden), the Antipodes (Australia and New Zealand), and in Asia (Japan, South Korea and Thailand) (Bergantino & Longobardi 2000). The economists, policymakers and advocates who pushed these reforms drew explicitly on neoliberal arguments to call for the elimination of medallion and quota systems in taxi licensing in order let the free market regulate supply and to eliminate rent-seeking behavior within the industry (see: Moore & Balaker 2006, and

⁸ The initial limit was six years, later extended to nine years, and finally, following taxi driver protests at the start of the economic crisis in 1997, extended to twelve years, where it remained until 2012, when it reverted back to nine years (DLT(d); personal communication).

⁹ In 1997 a fourth regulation was added requiring all new taxis to have a two-way radio installed in the cab (DLT (b)).

Schaller 2007, for overviews). Accordingly, changes in the Bangkok taxi system were built upon already established neoliberal models in urban areas in other regions by abolishing the vehicle quota system and greatly simplifying the vehicle registration process.

This movement towards taxi deregulation should also be placed within the context of broader 'global' currents of neoliberal thought and policy influential at the same time. In their widely cited article 'Neoliberalizing Space' (2002), Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell divide the global neoliberal 'timeline' into the two broadly defined periods; the 'jungle law' period of the 1970s and 1980s, followed by the 'market rules' period beginning after the crises of the 1990s. These two periods roughly correspond to de- and re-regulation, or in their terminology, 'roll back' and 'roll out' neoliberalism (Peck & Tickell 2002: 389-40; see also Peck & Tickell 1994). Movements to deregulate taxi supply beginning in the 1970s in North America and then diffusing outwards, fit in well with their concept of 'rollback' neoliberalism.

However, there are dangers in interpreting deregulation in a place like Thailand as a form of 'roll-back' neoliberalism. Although Peck and Tickell take pains to point out that their analysis is just a starting point (2002:382), their timeline is derived from the American and British examples and do not fully engage with the long history of American neo-imperialism and economic hegemony that positioned the 'developing world' in a subordinated structural position within the global political-economic system following the second world war.¹⁰ The democratic Keynesian welfare states and the social contracts that such regimes had with their citizens not only did not exist in most of the 'rest' of the world, but in fact depended on neo-imperial practices by the core states and the supranational agencies that sought to direct and exploit both production and consumption in 'developing' countries while maintaining political regimes thought to be 'favorable' to US interests (Herod 2001, Slater 2002, Harvey 2005).

Thailand is a compelling case study of a society within the United States' neo-imperial sphere of influence.¹¹ During the better part of the twentieth century successive military dictatorships augmented their political control and their personal fortunes through Thailand's status as a 'special friend' to the United States during the Cold War era (and beyond). In return for aid and military support, the military controlled governments consistently followed policies designed to encourage foreign trade and investment. These policies directly and indirectly discouraged the kinds of state interventions, financial regulations and welfare entitlement programs that formed the building blocks of the social welfare states of Europe and North America (Phongpaichit and Baker 1998). Thus, in Thailand, as in many other places in the so-called 'developing' world, there was simply less to dismantle during the first 'stage' of the 'neoliberal offensive' identified by Peck and Tickell; rather the Thai state has always served as a means for the extraction of key resources for the benefit of both national and global elites (Ibid.).¹²

¹⁰ In later work, in response to the many scholars who commented and utilized their work, Peck & Tickell address these and other issues. See, for example, Peck, et al. 2010, and Peck & Tickell 2012

¹¹ Since 1997, Thailand, like the rest of the region, has increasingly been in a Chinese sphere of influence (Charles Keyes, personal communication 2010) although the American influence remains strong, particularly (and not coincidentally) among the Sino-Thai elite who continue to actively seek undergraduate and advanced degrees from universities in the English-speaking world and particularly in the United States.

¹² That doesn't mean that the IMF didn't try. Thailand was required to slash spending on education, health care and other social services as part of the financial bailout package following the 1997 crisis. Analysis of the impacts of these cuts can be found in Phongpaichit and Baker 2000, and in Kittprapas 1999.

In Thailand in the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, instead of the dismantling or 'rolling back' of a (largely nonexistent) welfare state, there was instead a deepening *engagement* and a continued *extension*. This process of engagement took place both through specific policy initiatives as well as through a process of constant reiteration and popularization of the discourse of neoliberal globalization as the correct and only path to development in Thailand (Phongpaichit 1980, Dixon 1996, Phongpaichit & Baker 1998). The 1992 liberalization of the Bangkok taxi business is an illustrative example of this type of engagement and extension of neoliberalism in action in the global periphery. Taken together, the provisions that made up the 1992 regulations signaled a major shift in the taxi business, but it was the first one - the elimination of the taxi quota - that engaged directly in the logics of 'roll-back' neoliberalism. It also had the most immediate and dramatic impact on drivers, passengers and on the cityscape as a whole.

Under the new deregulated supply system, any car that met certain basic requirements could be registered as a taxi with the installation of a few key pieces of equipment and an approved paint job. An official taxi license was no longer required; the cost of entry into the field of taxi ownership became equivalent to the cost of the vehicle, necessary modifications, and the registration of the vehicle as a taxi. The cost of a taxi 'license' (now effectively the cost of registration) dropped from 600,000 to 2,000 Thai baht¹³ virtually overnight (Seddha-udom 1995:4).¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, the number of taxis in circulation quickly increased in response to these changes and to meet pent-up consumer demand. The total number of new taxis registered more than tripled, soaring from 5,906 to 19,468 between 1992 and 1993. In 1994 an additional 7,675 new automobile taxis were registered, and in subsequent years, while registration has tapered off from that initial surge, the number of new registrations continue to remain high.¹⁵ Currently there are over 100,000 taxis registered Bangkok (Transport Statistics Sub-division, n.d.) a number that, as I discuss below, that many taxi insiders feel is unsustainable.

In addition, the deregulation of the taxi supply, while it has led to increased opportunities for those with the social and economic capital to take advantage of them, has also led to a significant entrenchment and enhancement of the 'down-streaming' of financial risk away from firms and onto individual taxi drivers (Molé 2010; Kalleberg 2009). One of the major outcomes of the elimination of the taxi quota has been a huge surge in the number of taxis operating on the street and competing for fares. As a consequence of the resulting intensifying competition, taxi drivers have responded by both working harder and working longer in order to meet their daily expenses and maintain their incomes.

Yet, as long-time and retired taxi drivers attested, these insecure working conditions all pre-date restructuring and in that sense are not new ('Informal workers' 2012). Both before and after reform in 1992, taxi driving in Bangkok has been a form of 'casual work.' In the introduction to their edited collection, *Casual Work and Poverty in Third World Cities*, Ray Bromley and Chris Gerry state that, '[c]asual work is defined as any way of making a living which lacks a moderate degree of security of income and employment'(1979:3). Published at the end of the 1970s, they a trend towards the increasing 'casualization' of work in many cities and many occupations in what was then termed the

¹³ From US\$ 24,000 to US\$80 in 1992 exchange rates.

¹⁴ The second and third regulations were aimed at increasing both the physical and psychological comfort of passengers. Taxis could no longer be driven until they fell to pieces, and the use of a standard meter removed the uncertainty and anxiety associated with haggling over the price of a fare.

¹⁵ The final three months of 1992 (after deregulation) accounts for over half of the yearly total (3351 vehicles out of a total of 5903). Furthermore the 1992 total (5093) was more than twice the 1991 total (2406) (Department of Land Transport (c)).

Third World, and we might call today the Global South, a trend that has since intensified in both the 'First' and 'Third' worlds, and that is now recognized as one of the major outcomes of what are now variously described as 'post-Fordist production regimes,' 'neoliberalism' and the 'informalization' and 'precaritization' of labor (Jenkins 1998; Mythen 2005; M. Mills 2004; Hewison & Kalleberg 2013; Vosko 2010;).

However, while the 1992 reform did not create these labor conditions in the Bangkok taxi business, they did extend and intensify the structural impacts of 'casualization' and 'precaritization' for workers at the point of service, in this case, for drivers. The old quota system, while highly problematic in many ways, did provide a form of indirect job and wage security for those workers that were able to gain entry into the taxi workforce through established labor market networks. With the deregulation of the taxi supply, this security, however informal, was lost and it suddenly became much easier to *become* a taxi driver, but more difficult to *be* one, as long-time and recent taxi drivers alike have faced growing competition for fares and have experienced an increase in uncertainty in their earnings. In response, drivers reported that they must work longer hours, take fewer breaks and hustle more and in new ways in order to find the fares they need to make their payments and still bring home enough money each day to feed their families.

Wit, a lean Northeastern man in his fifties who had been driving a taxi for 31 years when I met him in 2005, spoke of these struggles. In our interview, Wit discussed his plans to 'retire' from driving just as soon as his youngest child graduated from the Polytechnic College near his home village in the rural province of *Roi Et*.¹⁶ In his opinion, the increased competition following deregulation, coupled with the requirement to use the meter, had made earning a living too difficult. As he put it,

You have to rent a new taxi – passengers don't like the old ones. That costs more. And you have to cruise the roads all the time to find passengers. That costs more because of fuel – fuel is expensive. It's very difficult. I want to stop all that and come back to farm full time. I don't like the city. I'm a country person, a son of *Isan*.

As Wit noted, passengers greatly prefer newer taxis, putting the drivers of older vehicles at an even greater competitive disadvantage, especially during the night and other non-peak hours. Thus, while the liberalization of the taxi supply in 1992 did deliver on some of the promised benefits of deregulation, including increased opportunities for ownership,¹⁷ the cumulative impact has been of intensifying workload and eroding real wages. Interviews accounts from both drivers and garage managers in 2005 and 2012 largely confirm that in the opinion of these 'industry insiders' that a saturation point was reached sometime in the early to mid-2000s at the point at which the continually growing supply met and then surpassed the much less rapid growth in demand for taxis.¹⁸ Thus, no matter how long or how efficiently a driver works, the operating constraints of the taxi trade (a taxi can only be in one place at a time and can carry one fare at a time), coupled with

¹⁶ A large number of taxi drivers in Bangkok come from communities from this rural Northeastern Province. Certain villages and districts in the province have well-established labor networks that channel village men into taxi work.

¹⁷ Although individual taxi ownership has increased to approximately half of the taxi fleet with the expansion of access to credit over the past fifteen years, owning a taxi, particularly a new taxi, is still out of reach for many drivers, and the trend towards ownership favors workers who already have relatively more economic and social capital to draw from (see Hickey 2010).

¹⁸ This saturation point is much lower during the night shift when there are fewer customers. Often more than fifty percent of the cars on the road late at night are taxis looking for fares. On the other hand, some drivers prefer to work at night because the weather is cooler and there is less traffic.

intensifying competition for fares, means that there are structurally determined limits to how much money a taxi driver can possibly make within any one shift. Even if these limits are overcome temporarily, for example by contracting to take a single fare on the three-hour journey to the resort city of *Patthaya* for a substantial fee, over time and on average, these structural limits will continue to have a determining effect on a taxi driver's average daily income.

Drivers and garage managers alike identify 'the system' (*kanrabiap*) as the primary culprit for the unchecked growth of taxis in the Thai capital and the resulting negative impact on drivers' incomes and working conditions. Nevertheless calls from inside the taxi trade for reintroducing the quota system or for putting in place other measures to provide real income security and regulated social benefits to drivers have gone largely unheeded. In the conversations and interviews where drivers and taxi garage owners did mention the need to introduce formal benefits to drivers, such as making drivers eligible for social security and government disability programs, their statements were always delivered in the context of frustration and resignation that 'nothing ever changes.' In 2012, in follow-up interviews with a number of taxi cooperative officials, this frustration was articulated even more strongly, a topic I return to in the conclusion.

NARRATING COMPETITION: *ITSARA* (FREEDOM) AND DISCOURSES OF THE TAXI DRIVER AS ENTREPRENEUR

Interviewer: You say driving a taxi is *itsara* [free, independent]. What is *itsara* about it?

Driver: [chuckles]. It means that I am independent. I work when I want to. I go home when I want to. No one tells me 'go here' or 'go there.' I just go.

I: But isn't it hard work?

D: Sure. You have to be smart. Other jobs, [waves hand dismissively], you don't have to think, the boss just tells you 'do this, do that.' No choice. When you drive you have to think – use your brain – you have to think, 'What will make me money today?' Some people say it's too hard, but not me.

Interview with taxi driver (seven years)
at the Department of Motor Vehicles in *Roi Et* province.

The progressive re-placing of economic risk onto taxi labor that resulted from legal reform and industry restructuring should be understood as not just the result of policy shifts and changing market conditions, but also as a consequence of a discursive 're-positioning' of economically and socially disadvantaged male labor through the systematic conflation of the 'traditional' Thai value of *itsara* (freedom, independence) with the construction of new, neoliberalized, labor subjectivities. In other words, the structural intensification of risk for drivers accomplished through the deregulation of the taxi supply was accompanied by a parallel 'down-streaming' of accountability, and the discursive relocation of blame for failure away from the internal logic of the system and directly onto the groups and individuals who do not, or cannot, successfully compete in the new arena.¹⁹ Since

¹⁹ For discussions of this dynamic of 'downstreaming' risk and accountability onto workers in very different occupational and geographical settings, see: Birkbeck 1979; Peletz 1995; Gowan 2000; Halpin and Guilfoyle 2004; Gray 2009; Zhang 2008.

reform in 1992, what I term the *itsara* discourse – a discourse which equates personal effort and responsibility with professional success and self-worth – has been put forth as the accepted narrative to explain and rationalize the success or failure of taxi drivers as *individual workers*. As I analyze below, the *itsara* discourse draws on both older Thai cultural and gendered norms and in the very specific narrative logic of globalized and nationalized forms of neoliberal governance in the 1980s and 1990s, and then find its more contemporary form in the ‘self-made (Thai) man’ promoted by (then) Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his *Thai Rak Thai* administration in the early 2000s.

In response to the question ‘Do you like driving a taxi?’ The most common answer I received was the Thai version of ‘It’s a living,’ (*tham dai*)²⁰ usually accompanied with a shoulder shrug or a quick shake of the head. In follow-up questions, nearly every driver responded to inquiries about the positive aspects of driving with some variation of the phrase: *pen itsara* (it’s free). In Thai, *itsara* means both ‘free’ and ‘independent’ and like the words ‘free’ and ‘freedom’ in English, the term has a variety of usages and connotations depending on what, or who, it is describing. Since this response was so common, I began asking drivers to define what *itsara* means specifically in terms of their daily work. Drivers’ answers encompassed both practical and more philosophical understandings of this concept and their explanations intersected with both ‘traditional’ Thai cultural and religious values as well as with the emerging neoliberal discourses of the ‘self-made man’.

First, and most importantly according to drivers, taxi driving is *itsara* because one can simply start and stop driving at any time, for any reason. Since deregulation, becoming a taxi driver is as easy as obtaining a commercial drivers license and finding a rental garage to take one on as a driver. Taking a break from driving, moving on to other things, or quitting outright, is just as easy. Drivers make arrangements with garages to take time off, find relatives and friends to take over ‘their’ shifts, or simply walk away from a garage one day after work and never go back.²¹ Yet while drivers repeatedly invoke this definition of *itsara* to describe the appeal of driving over other possible work options, in practice, drivers who rely on taxi work as their major source of income are increasingly working year-round, and working more days in a row than ever before. In other words, for the majority of taxi drivers, the costs associated with taking advantage of the ease of entry and exit into the taxi labor pool are rapidly increasing. The divergence between the discourse of *itsara* and the reality of increasing competition can be seen most clearly by contrasting drivers’ statements identifying the *itsara* of a flexible schedule as a major benefit of taxi work with the reported number of days worked each week (6.4 average of days/week) month (average 28 days/month), and number of months worked each year (average 11 month/year),²² in the 2005 survey on drivers’ labor histories and

²⁰ *Tham dai* translates to “[I] can do [it],” with the implication in this context that the speaker is not terribly enthusiastic about “it” but does not actively dislike “it” either.

²¹ These types of flexibility are, of course, more difficult for drivers who own their taxi to take advantage of, nevertheless they can usually make arrangements to rent their taxis if needed.

²² This average is slightly misleading as out of the 67 respondents who answered, 44 reported that they worked 12 months/year.

working conditions.²³ Thus, even after accounting for some exaggeration in self-reporting, it is clear that most drivers feel that they can take advantage of this particular type of *itsara* only rarely, if at all. A second important aspect of the *itsara* of taxi work is closely related to the first. I was regularly told that one positive aspect of taxi driving was that one's wages were dependent on one's own individual efforts. In other words, unlike hourly or fixed-waged work, a driver's income is, at least in theory, only limited by the time and effort that he is willing to put into his work. Drivers who work harder and, as it is increasingly emphasized these days, smarter, will see greater profits at the end of each shift. The cash-and-carry nature of taxi work, with drivers taking home earnings in cash at the end of each day, tends to psychologically reinforce this equation of effort-equals-income. In this way, then, drivers have, or perceive that they have, a greater degree of control over their earnings than they would in other forms of work available to them.²⁴ The majority of drivers acknowledged that there are structural dynamics within the taxi system that effectively limit the amount of income they can expect to earn; a commonly repeated sentiment was, 'I work all the time and I'm still poor.' Nevertheless, such realistic assessments of these systemic limits on personal incomes co-existed, seemingly with little or no cognitive dissonance, with regular assertions that a driver's income is directly proportional to hard work and personal effort. Findings in labor literature indicate that such assertions of control and personal choice can be important to the self-perceptions of those who are defined as 'self-employed' and who occupy increasingly precarious positions in the labor market, while at the same time, articulations of personal precarity can also serve as a form of 'grassroots' structural critique (Hotch 2000:149; Molé 2010: 38; see also: Halpin & Guilfoyle 2004).²⁵

Clearly having and being *itsara* was something that my research informants articulated as an important, even crucial, aspect of their work as taxi drivers.²⁶ Like all abstract concepts, the meanings of *itsara* are multilayered and refracted through the historical development of particular forms of national, class and gendered identities, the promotion of certain national priorities as put forward by the state apparatus, and by the shifting terrain of national, regional and global political-economic regimes and processes. I argue that *itsara*, as a term that encompasses the freedom of self-determination coupled with an accompanying sense of personal responsibility for one's choices, has emerged an important 'traditional value' for Thais, and particularly for Northeastern Thais who make

²³ Preliminary analysis from the 2012 survey shows that these numbers have not changed significantly. The average number of days/week worked reported was 6.7/7 (with 84 of 88 respondents answering). The average number of weeks/month worked reported was 28 (unfortunately, only 12 out of 88 respondents in the 2012 survey replied to this question as compared to 67 out of 71 respondents answering in 2005). The average number of months/year worked was reported in 2012 as 11 out of 12 months (again, with a low level of response - only 23 out of 88). As noted above, the average number of months worked per year is somewhat misleading as there were a number of outliers pulling the average down: one respondent reported working only 2 months/year, and one additional respondents reported working only 6 months/year. By contrast, over half of the respondents, 15 of the 23, reported working 12 months/year. The low level of response is attributed to the high number of 2012 surveys that were self-administered by drivers when compared to the 2005 survey which was administered by the author or by a trained research assistant. Nevertheless, when combined with interview and observational data, the numbers remain relatively consistent over time.

²⁴ See Lan (2001) and Zhang (2008) for discussions of similar dynamics of increased precariousness and labor rationalization in different labor markets.

²⁵ A third aspect of *itsara* was also cited as important: the fact that drivers do not have a boss watching them all the time. This particular meaning of *itsara*, freedom from surveillance, is closely related to the second meaning identified above, which equates individual effort, and personal choice, with personal income and economic success. Although this third aspect has important implications, particularly concerning the gendered and ethnic positioning of drivers, they are not central to my discussion here.

²⁶ For a discussion of how a similar term (*Ziyou*) operates among porters in Chongqing, PRC, see Zhang 2008.

up the majority of Thai migrants working in low-paying, lower-skilled jobs in both Bangkok and abroad.

I put ‘traditional’ in quotes however, because the concept of *itsara* has never existed in a political or cultural vacuum. I agree with Philip Hirsch (1990, 1993) and others (see for example Kemp 1991) who have argued that the ideal of the self-sufficient ‘traditional’ Thai village of *samaikon* (past times) was always more of nostalgic national construct than lived historical reality. Since the emergence of the modern Thai nation-state in the mid-nineteenth century, rural areas have been constituted by, and rural citizens have actively participated in (albeit from a disadvantaged and marginalized position), the formation of the state and the development of the ‘modern’ outwardly focused capitalist economy (see also Mills 1999, Walker 2012). In light of these aspects of Thai socio-political history, I argue that the cultural conception of *itsara* and its eventual status as a significant personal value among taxi drivers, and within Thai society more broadly, emerged out of the first semi-feudal and later increasingly market-oriented labor relations between the rural peasantry and the urban, and later national, elite, and has therefore always been explicitly tied to larger political-economic flows.

It also has a gendered dimension. The historical shortage of labor to work the land, serve the rich, and staff armies was also reflected in the development of the *sakdina* labor system, in which all male subjects were required to pay regular tribute to their lord or patron either in cash or, more commonly, in a set period of dedicated labor (Rabibhadana 1975; Bowie 1995; Loos 2006: 35-36). Later, as Thailand’s economy became increasingly tied to the emerging global capitalist system, subsequent generations of rural men continued the practice of migrating to Bangkok and elsewhere in order to sell their labor for wages. As Thailand, including rural Thailand, has become progressively incorporated into capitalist modes of production, migration to engage in labor for cash has come to be seen as crucial by rural Thais who want to participate and succeed in a ‘modern’ (*thansamai*) and ‘developed’ (*phattana*) Thailand (see discussion in Mills 1999: 12-17). As a consequence of this long-standing pattern of ‘going forth’ (*ok pai*) to labor, short-term migration among rural males has long been the cultural and economic norm. Going out in the world on one’s own, to gain personal experience and to provide for one’s family, in other words: to migrate, has developed into an central and enduring, cultural practice among Thai men, and particularly among rural Northeastern Thai men²⁷ (Kirsch 1966; Klausner 2000a; Klausner 2000b; Kitiarsa 2005; [author] 2013).

Thus for Northeastern men, temporary or cyclical migration can be read as both a ‘traditional’ expression of adult independence and economic responsibility, as well as an increasingly important means to attaining the cash resources necessary to purchase the commodities that have come to powerfully signify ‘modern-ness’ and personal success in contemporary Thailand (Kirsch 1966; Lightfoot & Fuller 1984; M. B. Mills 1997; Kitiarsa 2009). For these men, the value of *itsara* is one that combines the freedom to manage one’s own time and labor in any way that one sees fit to do so coupled with belief in the need for a high level of personal accountability regarding the outcomes of those choices in ways that are compatible and even complimentary with their gendered identities as masculine family providers through the act of migration. For many male migrants, taxi work offers, at least in theory, a high degree of flexibility and independence; a flexible schedule, the potential to earn more by working harder, and the ability to make a myriad of both large and small independent decisions during each working day without outside control.²⁸

²⁷ I analyse the interrelationship between migration, masculinity and identity in more depth elsewhere (Hickey 2013).

²⁸ This notion of personal freedom coupled with individual responsibility also has important spiritual resonances with Buddhist concepts of the noble path to Enlightenment. Buddhism plays an important cultural role in Thai society and in the personal belief systems of many Thais (Hirsch 1990:155-6; Keyes 1983; Turton 1991).

Critically, these expressions of drivers' (masculinized) *itsara* are not only tolerated within the taxi trade, but are strongly encouraged and considered to be *essential* attributes for a successful driver. A successful taxi driver works independently and must be able to make a large number of both small and large decisions about how to allocate his labor most effectively on any given work day. He must be able to adapt to changing circumstances and size up new and potentially profitable – or dangerous – situations quickly in order to take the course of action that will benefit him the most. It is particularly notable that these aspects of *itsara* bear a strikingly resemblance to core neoliberal concepts stressing the free agency and subsequent responsibility of the individual to shape his or her own economic destiny (Isin 2004; Hamann 2009; Read 2009; G. C. Gray 2009). The co-optation of key local cultural concepts and already functioning local systems as an expansionary and disciplinary strategy of expanding capital and neoliberalizing state policies a familiar one, as demonstrated in the growing body of work on the ways in which multinational corporations and national elites drew on familial structures and cultural norms to control and discipline young female factory workers in Southeast Asia and other regions over the past three decades (Ong 1987; Wolf 1992; Mills 1999; Thaweesit 2000; Silvey 2003; Rahman 2009; Dedeoğlu 2010; Feldman 2013).

We can see such a process at work in the narrative refashioning of poor, migrant taxi drivers into the new neoliberal pioneers of the Bangkok streets. For example, it was this image of the taxi driver as an independent self-motivated small businessman that in the early 2000s that Thaksin Shinawatra, the then Prime Minister, held up as an example of the kind of initiative and drive needed to move the Thai economy forward and to enhance the country's standing in the world community. After some initial missteps early in his first term, Thaksin²⁹ actively courted taxi drivers in a number of ways, including staying with a migrant taxi driver and his family in a heavily televised visit to the Northeastern province of *Roi Et* in January 2006 (Rojanaphruk 2006), and in two open 'town hall' style meetings held for drivers in large arenas in Bangkok in May 2004 and December 2005, each drawing thousands of drivers and attracting an radio audience of ten of thousands more (Taxi *tuk-huay* 2004; Bangkok Pundit 2005, Chartmontree 2005). At both events, Thaksin made speeches that drew parallels between his own socio-economic narrative (as a telecommunications billionaire with a privileged background) and that of the 'typical' taxi driver. He made these linkages through a distinctly neoliberal worldview, one that stressed the importance of the entrepreneurial spirit and of individual effort in the pursuit of economic goals.³⁰

Thaksin's words reflected and intensified other forms of national and international governance and market discourses circulating in Thailand by re-positioning taxi drivers as small businessmen or entrepreneurs who thrived on flexibility and who were constantly seeking to gain the competitive edge by adding value to their services. Furthermore, the choice of taxi drivers for these mass events was highly calculated on the part of the Prime Minister and his team; in both instances he used these spectacles as a venue to was also sending a powerful message to supporters and detractors alike and used drivers as a potent synecdoche for his large and electorally dominant, rural, migrant, and working-class political base. Based on these heavily circulating socio-political discourses, and specifically endorsed in the mid-2000s by the then Prime Minister, it would seem that taxi drivers exemplify an ideal type of worker within the outwardly focused development trajectory pursued by

²⁹ Thai's are formally referred to by their given names rather than by their surnames, a convention I follow here.

³⁰ I am not arguing that Thaksin Shinawatra actively promoted neoliberal economic policies during his tenure as Prime Minister and in fact, there is significant evidence to suggest that the opposite is true (see Hewison 2010 for discussion). However, Thaksin regularly invoked the *terminology* and *rhetoric* of neoliberalism, particularly as it referred to individual initiative and desirability of business-style leadership over inefficient government bureaucracy, as a part of his political persona and public platform (see Phongpaichit & Baker 2009 and McCargo & Pathmanand 2005 for discussions).

the Thai state at least since the 1950s and arguably since the 1850s (Phongpaichit 1980; Phongpaichit & Baker 1998; Dixon 1999), but, surprisingly, that is not so. Indeed, these men are *not* considered ideal workers and in fact the successful (male) taxi driver embodies precisely those characteristics that were *not* in sought in the employees driving the Thai economic boom and in the subsequent crisis and recovery of the early 2000s, or in the uncertain political and economic climate that pervades Thailand today.

In fact, and in contrast, multinational corporations setting up production and assembly plants in Thailand and elsewhere in the 1980s and 1990s were looking for a very different kinds of qualities in their potential employees. As a now substantial body of research has documented, transnational corporations relocated to the developing world in order to take advantage of low wages, minimal regulations, and favorable tax and labor laws (Standing 1999; Caraway 2006; Bair 2010). The preferred labor pool for these new factories were young, unmarried women who were portrayed as being culturally conditioned to accept the authority of older (male) authority figures, as well as being particularly suited to performing highly precise and repetitive tasks for long-stretches of time. Young women, often still in their teens, were also sought after because corporations could claim that this group of workers were not the primary breadwinners for their families, in this way justifying lower wages. These women, it was further posited, would leave the workforce in a few years when it was time to marry and start a family. Thus there was no reason to train workers in new skills, and no need to guarantee employment. In this way corporations kept labor costs low, turnover high and kept their workers low-skilled, unorganized, and insecure (see for example: Ong 1987, Pearson 1998; Wright 1997; Smith & Pun 2006; Pepper 2012).

Rapid economic growth in East and Southeast Asia in the 1980s and 1990s was fueled, in large measure, by the labor of these new female migrants, and for the first time that this particular sector of the population entered the formal workforce in large numbers. In Thailand, the dominance of Bangkok in the economic life of the country resulted in concentrated growth, resulting in factories, business parks, and entire satellite towns mushrooming in a sprawling ring around the capital and running down the highways linking the capital to the eastern seaboard. Young Northeastern Thai women began to migrate in large numbers to seek work in the rapidly expanding manufacturing sector (M.B. Mills 1999; M. B. Mills 2005b; Thaweessit 2000; Phongpaichit & Baker 1998).

In response, a research literature emerged analyzing the economic, social and cultural forces at play in this huge shift in the gendered division of labor in Thailand and elsewhere in the region, and particularly the choices and limitations that these new workers face in negotiating and balancing their changing roles and shifting priorities (Ong 1987; Wolf 1992; Thaweessit 2000; Mills 1999; Silvey 2003). The impact of this shift on those populations and workers, and particularly marginalized groups of male workers, who have been bypassed in these processes of global labor restructuring,³¹ has received less focus, and it is here that taxi drivers provide an illustrative example for further analysis. It is in this gap between the idealized figure of the taxi driver as the new neoliberal small-businessman and the reality of Thailand's place in the era of flexible and geographically mobile production, that the discourse of *itsara* circulated by and about taxi drivers deflects attention away from the structural 'excessing' of a specific and historically marginalized population of workers in the Thai state's program of export-oriented outward-focused development (Brown 2007; Merrill 2011; Yates 2011). And it is in re-directing focus away from the structural causes of their marginalization,

³¹ The question of excess and surplus populations under neoliberalism has recently received more theoretical attention, most notably in the 2011 special issue of *Identities*, in which Gavin Smith and a number of respondents explore Smith's proposed framework for theorizing the relationship of what he identifies as the 'selective hegemony' of neoliberalism to groups of people with 'no productive function.' (Smith 2011; Collins 2011; Shenton 2011; Susser 2011; Robotham 2011). See also Li 2009; Mitchell 2009; Watts 2009.

and ‘re-placing’ responsibility for success and failure directly on the shoulders of individual workers, that the *itsara* discourse has the potential for obscuring and possibly diffusing potentially destabilizing class-tensions within Thai society, although in recent years it has become undeniably apparent that those class-tensions were not diffused, but could only be deferred and papered-over by those in power for so long before they erupted into widespread political unrest.³²

‘WHY DON’T YOU DRIVE A TAXI?’ TAXI DRIVING AS ALWAYS-AVAILABLE LABOR OPTION

Like the newer female factory workforce, the majority of Bangkok’s taxi drivers are Northeastern Thai migrants from rural backgrounds. However, at this point the similarities between them end. Taxi drivers are, as I have already noted, overwhelmingly male, and therefore considered under prevailing national and transnational gender ideologies to be more ‘naturally’ independent and less willing to submit to authority than their female counterparts (Pearson 1998; Mills 2003; Salzinger 2004; Rahman 2009). They are also, on average, in their thirties and forties, and it is not uncommon to meet drivers in their fifties or older.³³ Age is an extremely important factor in establishing relative status within Thai society, and as Thais grow older they both expect and receive additional respect

³² In Thailand, as in many other parts of the globe, there has been a surge in street occupations in recent years, followed by state counter-measures of varying degrees of violence to end these protests and “take back” the streets. In Thailand in 2009 and 2010, massive street protests by so-called “red shirt” supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra, the Thai Prime Minister ousted in a 2006 coup d’etat, ended in military action against the protesters and to the death of 98 people (mostly civilian protesters) and the injury of thousands more. As a group, Bangkok taxi drivers tend to be strong red shirt supports, and small groups of drivers have been key participants in a number of protests and street blockades during this time period. The political crisis in Thailand that led to these events is complex. In brief, Thai telecommunications billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra was elected prime minister in 2001. Thaksin rode to victory based on the rural electorate in the Central, North and Northeastern regions, where a number of populist initiatives, such as the million *baht* village program, proved to be enormously popular. In response, disillusioned segments of the Bangkok middle and upper class formed the core of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) “yellow-shirt” movement. In September 2006, bolstered by ongoing “yellow-shirt” rallies in Bangkok, the Thai military staged a coup and Thaksin was forced into exile. When a Thaksin-backed political party won the 2007 post-coup election, PAD protests resumed. Throughout 2008, PAD protests continued, even as an opposition protest movement, known officially as the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), and unofficially as the “red shirts,” emerged and begun staging their own regular and much larger counter protests and rallies in Bangkok. The majority of UDD members, who came out in support of Thaksin and the new government, were working class and poor Thais, many of them migrants from the countryside working in the capital. In late 2008 the pro-Thaksin government was disbanded by a constitutional court and the PAD-backed Democrat party was able to form a coalition government. In the two years that followed, the UDD held repeated mass demonstrations in Bangkok and in provincial cities, culminating in extended occupations of key commercial areas in the capital in both 2009 and 2010. Following the crack-down, protests on both sides have subsided somewhat, but the situation is not resolved, nor does a genuine or peaceful reconciliation appear to be likely in the foreseeable future. In 2011, Thaksin’s supporters reorganized into yet another political party (Puea Thai), which went on to win the third election since the 2006 coup. Thaksin’s younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, is the head (or figurehead) of *Puea Thai* and the current Thai Prime Minister at the time of writing. Some excellent resources and analyses of the political situation in Thailand include: Connors and Hewison 2008; Connors 2008; Ukrist 2008; Glassman 2010; Winichukul 2008; Phongpaichit and Baker 2009, 2010.

³³ In a survey of seventy-one drivers with sixty-nine responding with information on age the breakdown was: 4% ages 20-29, 36% ages 30-39, 39% ages 40-49, and 20% age 50-59. The average age was 43. These percentages may skew slightly older as 32 respondents were from the Don Mueang Airport Taxi Association, which tends to attract members who are slightly older than average and who own their own taxis.

and deference from members of subsequent generations (Limanonda 1995; Pinyuchon & L. A. Gray 1997). In addition, most drivers surveyed or interviewed in the both fieldwork periods were married³⁴ and had at least one child,³⁵ and as such they are considered 'heads of household' both under general cultural definitions as well as formal Thai law (Mahawitthayalai Chiang Mai 1991; Pinyuchon & L. A. Gray 1997).

Furthermore, as noted, this particular demographic of Northeast village men has a well-established historical pattern of migration to Bangkok and other areas for temporary and seasonal labor (Textor 1961; Kirsch 1966; Lightfoot & Kumnuansilpa 1984; Chamrathirong et al. 1988; Pejaranoda et al., 1995; Garip & Curran 2010; Hickey 2013). These combined factors all make this cohort of men poor candidates for factory work and for the majority of the emerging jobs in the Thai tourism and service economy. In contrast to their migrant female counterparts, taxi drivers tend to be established family men with clear financial responsibilities, have accumulated a range of life and labor experiences, have well established information networks, are used to acting on their own authority, tend to be politically active and have leadership roles in their rural communities.

It is also important to note that this sector of the workforce has long served as surplus population and as a reserve labor pool within the broader Thai economy.³⁶ Rural Northeastern men, unable to work their land for a good portion of the year, have migrated to Bangkok and other areas in Thailand (and abroad) to find employment as laborers since the middle of the Twentieth Century. Migration patterns were cyclical: men would migrate to the work, and when it was time for planting or the harvest they were expected to collect their wages and return to their villages back in the Northeast (Textor 1961). But while their labor was not replaced or eliminated by the transition to global flexible production regimes and the feminization of export production in Thailand, this sector of the labor market was nevertheless 'bypassed' by this shift, and it is in this way that as a group, these men have been even further displaced and marginalized within the Thai development project (see discussion in M. B. Mills 2005a). Considered to be *too old*, *too established* (i.e. married with family responsibilities) and *too male*, and therefore insufficiently docile to be desirable as workers in the new assembly plants and tourist resorts, they nevertheless continue to occupy a subordinated socio-economic class position as rural migrant men within the neoliberalized, urban-based and increasingly globally-oriented culture (Kitiarsa 2005).

Before reform in 1992, driving a taxi was an attractive but relatively inaccessible labor option for migrant men of rural backgrounds and with low-levels of formal education. But after deregulation went into effect, any able-bodied Thai citizen of legal driving age could enter the field of taxi driving with little difficulty. As a consequence, driving a taxi has become a kind of 'always possible labor option' – a type of discursive occupational and societal safety net – for men from a broad cross-section of Thai society. In other words, if other opportunities do not pan out, or one's options are limited by a low-level of education and a lack of resources, there is always the option of driving a taxi until one's luck turns or the economy improves. Based on participant observation, interviews with drivers and others involved in the taxi business, and a large number of conversations with Thai friends and acquaintances, I learned that while driving is considered fairly low-skilled, low-status service work, nevertheless it is viewed by most Thais to be an honest and respectable way for a man

³⁴ In the 2005 survey of 71 taxi drivers, 94% were currently or had previously been married. In the follow-up survey in 2012 of 88 taxi drivers, 93% were currently or had previously been married.

³⁵ In 2005, out of a sample size of 71 drivers, 88% had at least one child, for married drivers that percentage increases to 94% with at least one child. In 2012 out of a sample size of 88 drivers, 87% had at least one child, for married drivers that percentage increases to 93% with at least one child.

³⁶ For a discussion of surplus labor under neoliberalism see: Shenton 2011.

to make a living. Thus, unless a man is particularly lazy or overly proud, driving provides an alternative to remaining idle or unemployed, no matter what his personal situation or the state of the overall economy. In this way, taxi driving has come to function as a potent symbolic 'absorber' of excess male labor, and particularly migrant male labor, in the Thai workforce. Since the relative number of taxi drivers is low when compared to the size of the overall workforce,³⁷ taxi driving as this last-resort/best-option 'absorber' of (poor male) labor serves mainly a discursive function rather than an actual one, a fact that nevertheless does not negate or even necessarily diminish its narrative social power.

In the course of my fieldwork, I observed many instances of the operation of this narrative function in the national media. In one daytime television comedy about the lives of a group of people all living in the same run-down apartment building, one of the characters declares, 'If I don't win [the lottery] this week, I'll just become a taxi driver.' At the end of the episode, after he has presumably been unlucky once again, there is short scene of him behind the wheel of a rental taxi. In the popular movie *Khlong* (The Box) (2002), the protagonist's wife berates him incessantly for his dreams of becoming a famous songwriter. During one of her rants she asks, in exasperation, 'Why don't you just drive a taxi?' And in acclaimed director Wisit Sasanatieng's cheerfully absurdist film *Ma Nakon* (Citizen Dog, 2004), the naïve and generally bemused Pod leaves the countryside at the behest of his dead grandmother (who has been reincarnated as a talking gecko) to move to Bangkok to work his way through the limited jobs open to him; first as a factory worker in a sardine canning plant, then as a security guard for an office building, before finally becoming a taxi driver for the remainder of the film.

Cultural forms and products targeted to rural and working-class Thais, and particularly within the context of Northeastern Thai regional popular culture draw even more heavily on the image of the migrant taxi driver as an industrious, hard-working 'everyman.' Taxis and taxi drivers often feature in the widely circulated and tremendously popular *Mo Lam* and *Luk Tung* (Thai 'country' music) karaoke videos, and highly classed and gendered advertisements for products such as energy drinks and lager beer often feature taxi drivers or are directly marketed to them. Similarly promotions, giveaways and sponsorships for these products regularly target taxi drivers; an obvious recent example featured the giveaway of a limited number of special 'Carabao Daeng (Red Buffalo) Taxis' by the popular roots-rock star turned energy drink entrepreneur Ad Carabao to struggling but worthy taxi drivers. These drivers, represented by their life sized cardboard likenesses grinning broadly, in turn featured heavily at concerts, festivals and other events sponsored by the company (see [author] 2013).

Thus, while their labor continues to be crucial to the day-to-day functioning of Bangkok, the men who drive taxis are drawn from a segment of the labor force that is increasingly marginal to the globally focused trajectory of the Thai development project. Through the twinned processes of the deregulation of the Bangkok taxi business and the reworking and co-optation of the 'traditional' meaning of *itsara* (freedom) into a distinctively neoliberal subjectivity, the very characteristics that make these particular workers peripheral to the new production regime are reworked into the necessary requirements for success as a taxi driver. Through this reworking of *itsara*, taxi drivers are transformed into self-employed small-businessmen and independent entrepreneurs who have

³⁷ The total size of the male workforce for the entire country was approximately 19.5 million men in the first quarter of 2005 (NSO 2009), while estimates of the total number of the automobile taxi labor force in Bangkok range between 60,000 and 100,000 workers (according to newspaper accounts, interviews with cooperative and company officials, and Department of Land Transport estimates). This estimate does not include *tuk-tuk* and motorcycle taxi workers (or other transportation workers).

become solely responsible for their own individual success or failure under the new rules of economic engagement.³⁸

It is in this way that very qualities that define taxi drivers as being or having *itsara* become the very same qualities that relegate this particular group of male workers to the margins of Thailand's export-led global production strategy. Taxi driving remains a highly visible and easily accessible occupational option for these 'excess' workers, and thus operates as a sort of social and political 'safety valve' within Thai society, ready to absorb a theoretically unlimited number of workers into the deregulated and ever expanding taxi ranks. In this way a large and potentially idle segment of the labor force – made up of adult (poor migrant) males – is discursively redirected into work that is 'appropriate' to their gender, age, and class status. Furthermore, *itsara* has been refracted and reworked through popular and state-promoted discourses so that the historical, cultural, and regional meanings of the term are realigned with the modern ideal of the autonomous liberal subject. Not only does taxi driving become an ever-present potential work option for these men, it is cast as an option that is in generally in line with Thai cultural values and appropriate gender roles. In other words, taxi driving is portrayed and comes to be perceived as a good job option, or at least a better job option, than many of the other types of work available to these marginalized workers.³⁹ Over the past few years, however, the limits of the open-supply taxi model have become increasingly apparent, and is steadily moving into crisis, with implications for both the ability of drivers to make a living and for the current system to serve Bangkok's taxi transportation needs. I turn to that topic in the final section.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF TAXIS AND TAXI DRIVING IN BANGKOK

I end with a brief discussion of some preliminary findings from the follow-up research conducted in 2011 and 2012 as they relate to the larger discussion of neoliberalism, economic restructuring and discursive positioning of labor in the Bangkok taxi business. First, there are strong indications that the predictions made to me by taxi insiders in 2005 were accurate; namely, that continued unchecked growth of taxi supply would lead to growing problems for the business and for drivers. In 2012 follow-up interviews with three taxi cooperative presidents, all noted that it had become increasingly difficult to recruit and retain rental drivers, as more experienced and ambitious drivers had moved towards purchasing their own vehicles, and that new renters were finding it more and more difficult to make a living driving. At the same time, incentives remain high on both driver-owners and garage-owners to invest in newer taxis, as new taxis are preferred by customers and by renting drivers alike. In addition, I received a number anecdotal reports from drivers and others associated with the taxi business that many rental garages have become less particular about

³⁸ As media scholar Toby Miller (2010: 98) writes in a different, but highly resonant, context: "We inhabit a world where flexibility is the mega-sign of affluence, and precariousness its flipside: one person's calculated risk is another's burden of labor, inequality is represented as the outcome of a moral test, and the young are supposed to regard insecurity as an opportunity rather than a constraint."

³⁹ It is, however, necessary to note an important caveat; namely that while taxi drivers are certainly influenced by these reworked and re-circulated notions of *itsara*, they by no means do so wholeheartedly or uncritically. Indeed, my research informants were keenly aware of their marginalized positions within Thai society and within the economic system, and many were openly critical of the current direction of Thai development. As such taxi drivers themselves are not simply passive recipients of dominant discourses but rather are rather active agents in incorporating, reworking and resisting these representations to various degrees and in shifting circumstances, and they are likewise meaningful participants in shaping and defining their own subjectivities and their 'place' in the world. I discuss taxi drivers' cooptation, adaptation and resistance elsewhere ([author] 2013).

accepting new drivers, and less careful about screening these applicants⁴⁰ – and while this process was always an informal one, it was widely regarded in 2005 to be an effective one for screening out undesirable drivers – leading to an increase in the number of both minor complaints about driver conduct and the much more serious issue of criminal acts being committed by drivers, including armed robbery, assault, rape and blackmail.⁴¹

These anecdotes, together with the claims of cooperative officials, are lent credence by statements made by the head of the Department of Land Transport in an unusually frank 2009 article ('No easy solution' 2009).⁴² Written as a follow-up on the apprehension of a previously convicted rapist who assaulted several Thai women while working as a taxi driver, the piece quotes the Department of Land Transport (DLT) chief Chairat Sa-nguacheu, as stating that 'The requirements to register a taxi aren't onerous and only 80 Land Transport staff handle all the work.' While the DLT chief singles out independent owner-operators as the core of the problem because many of them rent out their cabs to other drivers 'without traceable records' ('No easy solution' 2009), the report makes explicit the relationship between the deregulation of the taxi supply and the difficulties in monitoring taxi drivers, noting that 'The Land Transport Department is reviewing taxi operations based on the 'free market' policy' and quoting Mr. Chairat as saying 'We may not be able to do anything much about limiting taxis on the streets. Whenever we act, we face strong opposition from the current taxi drivers, and there are thousands of them. Any business has its own flaws' ('No easy solution' 2009).

Taxi drivers also noted, both in interviews and through survey responses, that their incomes were increasingly difficult to maintain, and that their expenses and overall working conditions either had not improved, or were in some cases declining (see also: Suvansombut 2011). A number of factors were cited as contributing to this situation, including the ongoing Thai political crisis, the global economic downturn, as well as much more immediate causes such as the 2011 floods and the proliferation of mini-van services to Bangkok suburbs and nearby provinces. However, the growing number of taxis and the relatively steady level of consumer demand, was also noted by many drivers as part of the problem.

The increasing economic pressure on taxi drivers and the glut of taxis in the Thai capital has also led to growing political debate and increased media attention in several interconnected areas. Complaints filed by disgruntled taxi passengers with the DLT increased noticeably in the second

⁴⁰ Preliminary analysis of data collected in 2012 also suggests that there are a growing number of drivers who either drive part time to supplement their incomes as civil servants or low-level office workers, or who have turned to driving after being laid off from white-collar jobs since 2008. In 2005 interviews, garage owners and cooperative officials reported similar patterns following the 1997 Asian economic crisis, with a number of white-collar and urban workers turning to driving as a stop-gap measure in the wake of the crisis. However, my data also strongly support the statement that low-skilled, mature married men from the rural Northeast province still tend to dominate the taxi trade, a fact that is particularly interesting when we consider the high-profile role of automobile taxi drivers in the red-shirt protests of 2009 and 2010 and the implications of the ongoing political crisis for thinking about social stratification and the contentious class politics in Thailand today.

⁴¹ For some examples of these incidents, see: "Lottery maniac" 2013, "Dept Land Transport" 2013, "Taxi driver sought" (2013), "Airport vultures" (2012); "Police to strictly" (2012); "Taxi driver poses..." (2012). It is, however, difficult to confirm that such incidents are increasing, and serious crimes perpetrated by taxi drivers, while frightening, are still relatively rare. However the perception that such crimes are increasing in both number and severity is real both in the media and amongst drivers and other taxi insiders.

⁴² See also: "House committee" (2012).

quarter of 2012,⁴³ and by far the most common grievance was that of drivers refusing to take passengers to their destinations and, in some cases, even abandoning passengers along roadsides midway through the trip rather than completing a journey that was deemed to be unprofitable (Kitjakosol 2012). The increase in fare refusal⁴⁴ is usually attributed in the media to the growing difficulty for drivers to meet their daily expenses and their need to maximize fares in order to do so, and drivers and officials alike cite rising fuel costs, low and low meter and fare rates, and taxi oversupply as the underlying culprits ('Retail price' 2012; 'Land Transport' 2012; Tan 2013). Drivers have called for a freeze on fuel prices⁴⁵ and for an increase in the meter rates to combat the problem, while the government has responded with a crack down on illegal fare refusal, launching stings and fining drivers for violations of the regulation (Praiwan 2012; 'Operators demand' 2012; 'Taxi drivers to protest' 2012; 'Taxi drivers face' 2013).

The problems described above point to an emerging situation in which the Bangkok automobile taxi system is moving steadily, if slowly, into a deeper state of crisis. The neoliberalization of the taxi supply in 1992 has, two decades on, led to a state of oversupply, with largely negative impacts on workers in the form of increasing competition and growing income insecurity. So long as the negative consequences of supply deregulation could be re-placed and 'down-streamed' both materially and discursively onto labor, there has been little incentive to revisit the 1992 reform or to re-regulate supply. However, over the past few years, the increasing competition have begun impacting passengers and negatively reflecting on the city's reputation, revealing structural contradictions at the heart of the taxi industry that are increasingly difficult to ignore, and making the discursive fiction of taxi driving as an 'always-available labor option' for excess male labor increasingly difficult to sustain. As in other industries and at other scales, and against a backdrop of workers and consumers who are calling for change, officials are grappling with the consequences of market-led neoliberal restructuring and reconsidering the value of governance and regulation within the Bangkok taxi industry. The future is uncertain, but in the next few years the Bangkok municipal government and the Thai state will likely be forced into another major regulatory reform of the Bangkok taxi business. Whether such changes will benefit taxi labor or push them further into conditions of precariousness is much more difficult to assess.

⁴³ There were 5793 complaints to the Department of Land Transport between January and March 2012, and 7058 complaints from April to June 2012 (Sereemongkonpol 2012). Some of this increase may be attributable to the encouragement on the part of the DLT to file such complaints, however an undercurrent of dissatisfaction on this issue has been building for some time (see "House committee", 2012).

⁴⁴ Fare refusal is illegal but widespread. Prior to 2012 it was largely ignored or resulted only in warnings to those drivers who were caught or whom had complaints filed against them (Kitjakosol 2012).

⁴⁵ Bangkok taxis use either LPG, or, increasingly NGV/CNG (compressed natural gas for vehicles) rather than gasoline.

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