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2008

Development and its Discontents: The Case of the Pak Mun Dam in Northeastern Thailand

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Erik Martinez Kuhonta

"It isn’t fun to be in Bangkok. If the dam hadn’t been built across our river, our shadows would never have fallen on the gates of Government House."
— Sompong Viengchan, a leader of the Pak Mun Dam group

(Bangkok Post 13 August 2000)

In the standard analysis of Thai political economy, the late 1980s and early 1990s are regarded as the height of Thailand’s modern economic boom. From 1988 to 1990, Thailand registered double-digit growth rates — 13.3, 12.4 and 10 per cent respectively — ranking it among the world’s most dynamic economies. This period, however, was not just a time of economic expansion, but also a time of increasing resistance to that expansion. While Thailand’s middle class began to see solid gains in their incomes thanks to the economic boom, marginalized peasants in the north and northeast of the country were engaged in a protracted struggle against the Thai developmental model.

This developmental model has centred on export-oriented industrialization and agribusiness, the latter being central to the Thai agrarian transition. The exploitation of natural resources has been a crucial element of this model because such resources are necessary to feed the engines of industry and agribusiness. From dams to wastewater plants to eucalyptus plantations, economic growth has required the appropriation of land, forests, minerals and water. As large development projects, whether built by the state or the private sector, have seized control of these natural resources on which peasants depend for their livelihood, a fierce struggle has ensued.²

Geographer Philip Hirsch (1990) has characterized Thailand’s pattern of development as ‘incorporative’, whereby peripheral people and resources are pulled into the path of economic growth; however, ‘incorporative’ fails to capture the more political dimensions of this form of development. What has been occurring in Thailand is more than the incorporation of the periphery into a developmental model, but the very displacement of the periphery in favour of the instruments of modernity. This is the perennial struggle of development, whether experienced by an early modernizer such as eighteenth-century England or the late modernizers of the Third World. In the past two
decades, this tension has boiled over in Thailand precisely because of the country’s economic take-off.

Not only has development in Thailand steamrolled over the peasantry, but it has also cobbled together a formidable modernizing alliance: state, domestic capital, and international financial institutions. This represents an important turning point in Thailand mainly because state and capital were never so closely aligned. In fact, until the mid-1970s, capital was a relatively weak force in society, largely forced to follow the dictates of the ‘bureaucratic polity’. However, as an incipient bourgeoisie began to emerge in the 1970s, it eventually took the lead over political power once Thailand moved towards a more democratic form of government.

The alliance between state and capital has not been just a case of businesspeople taking over public office. This alliance has also been a consequence of the state’s ideological commitment to industrial development and its belief that the agrarian sector should be eclipsed in favour of industry. Furthermore, state officials have often colluded with capital to enable massive resource exploitation because they have gained kickbacks by providing permits for resource extraction. The consequence of this formidable alliance has been devastating for the peasantry. Squeezed by both political coercion and capital, peasants have been forced to fight a rearguard battle armed only with the power of mobilization.

The scope of conflict between peasants and the state has ranged widely across Thailand. Dam-building has displaced tens of thousands of peasants throughout Thailand, but has been most contentious in the northeast. Struggles over land encroachment and salt mining have also been acute in the northeast. Battles over logging have been concentrated in the north. Threats to mangrove forests have involved parts of the southern coast. Natural gas pipelines connecting Burma to eastern Thailand and Malaysia to southern Thailand have incited civil society to action, while wastewater plants have rallied community residents in the outskirts of Bangkok. In these struggles, the number of demonstrations against the state has grown exponentially. In 1978, there were 42 demonstrations; in 1990 there were 170, and by 1994 protests had skyrocketed to 988 (Praphat 1998).

It is important to point out that resistance to state development in Thailand has historically come from two different streams of the peasantry (Baker 2000). On the one hand are small-scale, commercial farmers whose main concern is maintaining a viable income in relation to the price of their products and the cost of farm inputs. On the other hand are subsistence peasants whose livelihoods have been displaced by large projects, such as dams, wastewater plants, or other forms of land eviction. This latter group, whose concern is less about income than about food security, is the focus of this chapter. While both groups have been affected by agrarian transformations, it is the latter that has suffered more drastic changes and whose plight has caught the attention of the national media. In James Scott’s words, it is these subsistence peasants who are closer to ‘the subsistence crisis level… a threshold below which the qualitative deterioration in subsistence, security, status, and family social cohesion is massive and painful’ (1976: 17).

This chapter will analyse the Pak Mun hydroelectric dam as an illustrative case of developmental malaise, peasant resistance and agrarian change in Thailand. The dam is a classic example of Thailand’s developmental pathology: a rush to extract resources for industrial growth, failure to submit the project to public scrutiny, destruction of local communities and their livelihoods, and repression of those who would challenge a state project. Built at the head of the Mun River – the largest tributary of the Mekong River – in the northeastern province of Ubom Ratchathani, the Pak Mun Dam has been at the centre of debate over development policy since the late 1980s. The main rationale for the dam’s construction in 1991 was to increase power generation for electrification in the northeast, although additional benefits were envisaged for irrigation and tourism. The economic boom of the late 1980s led to a shortage of energy, which the Pak Mun Dam was meant to address. The dam’s impact, however, has been largely counterproductive, neither supplying the requisite energy levels nor improving the livelihoods of villagers. Rather, it has depressed the income of approximately 20,000 villagers in the province of Ubom Ratchathani. Fisherfolk have witnessed a substantial decline in the stock of fish; villages have been uprooted by flooding caused by the re-routing of water flows; and families have been split apart by the need to find employment in the urban economy.

For almost two decades the villagers affected by the Pak Mun Dam have ardently challenged the government’s policies, rallying in the province and with greater fanfare in Bangkok. Their protests have been supported by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academics and select members of the media and the middle class. The role of political parties, however, has been negligible. Except for the governments of two former prime ministers, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (1996–7) and Thaksin Shinawatra (2001–6), most politicians have shown little interest in solving the crisis. The Assembly of the Poor (AOP, Samatcha Khon Jon), an organization that in other countries might conceivably have formed the basis for a left-of-centre political party, has been split and weakened by the undersized Thai parliament.

Caught between the rudimentary institutions of a transitional democracy and a form of livelihood that is at odds with the modernizing impulse of Bangkok technocrats, the villagers of the Mun River have failed so far to achieve their ultimate goal – the decommissioning of the dam – although they have gained some concessions from the government. Their struggle, however, has highlighted other developmental dilemmas throughout Thailand’s vast periphery, where numerous local communities battle against state-sponsored projects. Thus, while discontent continues to simmer along
the banks of the Mun River, the crisis of Pak Mun has taken on wider meaning, standing as the symbol of local communities' struggles.

Before looking in-depth at the case of the Pak Mun Dam, I want to place this in a broader context by discussing the role of civil society in this struggle over development. Despite the dominance of state and capital, a tenacious resistance movement has emerged, sustained by NGOs, academics, and peasant organizations. These actors may not have levelled the playing field, nor have they won most battles, but they have experienced some limited success over the past two decades. More importantly, they have shown that open resistance to the state has not been futile. While scholars such as James Scott (1985) have made a compelling case for the value of 'everyday forms of resistance', resistance in Thailand has largely remained on the terrain of an open 'battlefield' and therefore needs to be assessed on such terms.

Civil society, resistance, and development

The more vibrant civil society in Thailand can be traced to the 1970s, during a period of democratization and social reforms. It was at this time that the NGO movement was born through the initiatives of Puey Ungpakorn, Rector of Thammasat University and Head of the Bank of Thailand. In 1969, Puey founded the Thailand Reconstruction Movement and in 1970, the Thammasat Graduate Volunteer Center. The goal of these initiatives was to send university students to the countryside to engage in volunteer development work. In 1974, another important initiative involving universities came about through the Mae Klong Integrated Rural Development project. The idea of this project was to catalyze action-oriented research within major universities.

The mid-1970s was one of the most turbulent periods in modern Thai history, with the rise and fall of a democratic regime between 1973 and 1976. During this period, farmers and workers mobilized to advance an agenda of social reform. The Peasants' Federation of Thailand was the most active association, representing the farmers of the north and northeast; however, by the time the military struck back with a devastating coup in October 1976, the Peasants' Federation had been severely weakened through assassinations and intimidation. Students and activists who had championed the rights of farmers and workers fled to the jungles in the northeast and took up arms with the Communist Party of Thailand.

In the early 1980s, pragmatic generals in the military began a process of political amnesty, calling upon students to return to the cities. As students gave up their ties with the Communist Party, some enrolled in graduate school to eventually become prominent academics, while others went into NGO development work, and a few eventually gained public office. The number of NGOs and people's organizations that has proliferated in the midst of all these struggles is enormous. Indeed, perhaps second only to the Philippines, Thailand now has one of the most vibrant civil societies in Southeast Asia. Some of the most important groups include the NCO Coordinating Committee on Rural Development (NCO-COD, established 1985) which is a major umbrella organization for NGOs, the Foundation for Ecological Recovery (1986), the Assembly of Small-Scale Farmers of the Northeast (1992), the Northern Farmers Development Network (North-Net,

concentrate on self-reliance and people's participation. The kinds of activities that these NGOs champion included integrated farming, savings groups, rice banks, buffalo banks, fertilizer banks, community revolving funds for village stores, and handicraft groups. The thrust of these activities was to stimulate and encourage local activities, indigenous knowledge and, in general, a return to the village community as the fundamental unit for human development. While the focus on livelihood problems remains a staple of current NGO work, the NGO movement eventually shifted towards more direct confrontation with the state over peasant interests rather than a simple 'horizontal' development effort. This shift became pronounced in the mid-1980s, particularly in the battle over the Nam Chaoan Dam.

The Nam Chaoan Dam was a project in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in Kanchanaburi Province in western Thailand. The dam was opposed by a broad coalition of middle-class forces, students, academics, NGOs, religious leaders, and some notable political elites, including former Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj (1975–6) and the ascetic Governor of Bangkok, Chamlong Srimuang (So and Lee 1999). Critics of the dam argued that it would flood and destroy the nature reserve. Under intense pressure, the government of Prem Tinsulanonda cancelled the project in 1988. The movement against the Nam Chaoan Dam succeeded because of the breadth of the anti-dam coalition, as well as the variety of tactics employed. One notable tactic was the effective manipulation of traditional rites and beliefs (Dome 2007). Anti-dam activists erected a shrine to the spirit of King Naresuan within the wildlife reserve in order to call forth the spirit of the king to protect the wildlife reserve zone.

Since the battle against the Nam Chaoan Dam, numerous other struggles have been waged between local communities and major development projects. A brief listing of the more prominent struggles would include: the case of tantalum mining in Phuket in 1986; the 1991–2 Khor Jor Kor Scheme to evict forest dwellers in the northeast in order to plant eucalyptus trees as a source for the lucrative pulp and paper industry; the polluting in 1993 of the Nam Pong River by a pulp and paper plant in the northeastern province of Khon Kaen; industrial poisoning in the northern province of Lamphun in 1994; the construction of the Yadana gas pipeline from Burma through rainforests in western Thailand; the proposed construction of the Prachuap Khiri Khan power plant in the south; and the Asian Development Bank-funded wastewater treatment plant in Samut Songkram, on the outskirts of Bangkok.

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strength stems from its ability to bring together several groups with outstanding grievances. But this also means that there has to be coordination among these groups for the movement to work effectively. Each group with a grievance is represented by a pho khrua yai, or a male group leader. The pho khrua yai coordinates between the villagers and the general assembly and represents villagers when negotiating directly with government officials. A nai khrua yai, or female group leader, is in charge of logistics during demonstrations.

The AOP’s strategy relies on sustained non-violent action, and both peasants and the NGOs involved are committed to resistance based on non-violence. Key advisers of the AOP stress the long-term staying power of this poor people’s movement as well as its autonomy from conventional political forces. Rejecting the need for political institutions, Wanida Tantivitthayaphitak, one of the most prominent advisers, articulates a common refrain among NGO activists: ‘It’s not worthwhile to set up a political party... More time should be dedicated to strengthening the people’s movement. Representative democracy is now a failure.’ (Thai Development Newsletter 1999a: 51). Another adviser, Lao-thi Nilnuan, also emphasizes the importance of the movement as an overarching force rather than simply a temporary fill of grievances. He comments: ‘Demanding for compensation claims or immediate solutions shouldn’t be the AOP’s objectives. Its direction must be sustainable and aim at strengthening its self-reliant movement’ (Thai Development Newsletter 1999b: 51).

To generate broader support and publicize its agenda, the AOP has made strategic alliances with other social movements at the international level (Thai Development Newsletter 1995a). It has joined the Via Campesina (a World Peasant Movement) (see also Yu Tuong’s chapter) and was elected as the International Coordinating Committee for Southeast Asia and East Asia. The Asian Cultural Forum on Development has also pledged to strengthen the AOP’s regional and international coordination. Rallies against the Pak Mun Dam, the core concern of the AOP, have been staged outside Thailand, including in front of the Thai Embassy in Washington DC, United States. Other international NGOs concerned with dams, such as International Rivers, have also taken up the cause of the Pak Mun Dam.

The importance of the AOP, then, is that it has aggregated the grievances of the rural (and to a lesser extent, urban) marginalized peoples in a broad overarching movement. Although the AOP may lack the resources that state and capital possess, it is an extremely well-organized association, strategically savvy, and committed to long-term resistance. As we will see next, in the battle over the Pak Mun Dam, the AOP has played a central role in mobilizing peasants and in bringing the world’s attention to this particular struggle. Since the turbulent mid-1970s there has been no poor people’s organization in Thailand with a similar scope.
The case of the Pak Mun Dam

The Pak Mun Dam (location shown in Figure 7.1) was first conceived by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) in 1970 as a hydroelectric project. Its chief purpose was to address the increasing peak demand for electricity in the northeast during the economic boom, especially during the dry months (January to May). In 1989, the cabinet of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan approved the construction of the dam and in May 1991 EGAT began construction, with the initial construction costs estimated at 3.8 billion baht (US $155.2 million). The project was completed in June 1994 with a total construction cost of 6.5 billion baht (US $250 million), an increase of 91 per cent in nominal terms. Compensation and resettlement costs totalled 1.1 billion baht (US $44.24 million). As part of these costs, compensation for fisheries amounted to 395.6 million baht (US $15.8 million) by April 1999 (Sakchai et al. 2000). The project received US $24 million from the World Bank as part of a loan for Thailand's power development programme. This loan constitutes 13 per cent of the total cost.

The dam is located 5.5 kilometres upstream from the Mekong River. It operates as a run-of-the-river hydropower plant, meaning that it does not function with an enclosed reservoir. The storage capacity of the dam is therefore based on the water levels of the river. During the dry season, the water level of the dam generally does not rise 106 metres above mean sea level (MSL), while during the wet season, the water rises to a level of 108 metres above MSL (Sakchai et al. 2000).

The socio-economic costs of the dam for local rural communities have been extensive. The dynamiting of the river, and the subsequent flooding of the riverbanks, has led to a loss of livelihood for many villagers through the reduction in fish stocks and the loss of fertile land. The dam’s impact on the river has sharply reduced the ability of fisherfolk to catch fish, while the loss of land, such as swamps, wetland forests, cultivation strips and paddy fields, has prevented peasants from raising a few crops or harvesting herbs and mushrooms. These all constitute basic needs for peasants who live by the Mun River (Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) 2000: 11). Thus the socio-economic and environmental impacts of increased energy needs have resulted in significant impacts on local rural villages.

The construction of the dam affected 238 households at the actual dam site. Additionally, after impoundment of the reservoir, 705 households were relocated because their land was inundated or surrounded by water. The actual total number of households displaced by the Pak Mun Dam was 1,700. By April 1999, 6,202 households were awarded some degree of compensation for loss of livelihood due to the impact on fisheries (Chayan 2000: 2). In total, the dam has affected more than 20,000 villagers around the Mun River.

Figure 7.1 Pak Mun Dam location, Thailand.
Map credit: Jean Michaud

The process of decision-making: planning the dam

The origins of the controversy over the dam can be traced to its planning phase. During the initial planning of the dam, EGAT made some effort to mitigate its anticipated, deleterious effects. In 1982, two separate reports were
commissioned by EGAT: an environmental and ecological investigation (EEI) and a resettlement planning (RP) investigation. Based on these reports, EGAT decided to move the planned construction of the dam away from the original site at the Kaeng Tana Rapids to Ban Hua Heo. This was done to avoid compensation to 3,970 households that would have been affected. In order to reduce the dam’s impact on village households, in 1985 EGAT lowered the reservoir of the dam from 113 metres above MSL to 108 metres above MSL. This then ensured that only 248 households would be displaced, down from an earlier figure of almost 4,000. Two other important modifications were also made: the dam was moved 1.5 kilometres upstream to avoid the submergence of the Kaeng Tana Rapids; and EGAT also lowered the reservoir to 106 metres above MSL during the dry season (January to May) to uncover the upstream Kaeng Saphue rapids. Hence, it could be argued that EGAT made notable efforts to address environmental and social concerns at the initial stage of the planning of the dam (Sakchait et al. 2000: xi).

However, once EGAT decided to build at the new site at Ban Hua Heo, it did not commission another environmental impact or resettlement study (Chayan 2000: 4). During and after the construction, three studies on the environmental and resettlement impacts were undertaken, but none was disseminated widely to the public. Furthermore, the first EEI and RP studies of the original site were not made accessible to the public nor to the villagers (Chayan 2000). EGAT’s planning style reflected a top-down process that was sorely lacking in transparency (Chanida, pers. comm., August 2000).11

EGAT’s strategy to ensure that the dam would be completed was based on gaining the loyalty of the subdistrict leaders (kannan) and the village headmen (pua yai baun) (Khun Bundeum, pers. comm., March 2001). EGAT courted the local officials by personally visiting them and providing them with food and drinks. It gave them promotional posters and banners to place at the front of their homes, and it assured them that they would personally gain greater employment opportunities. EGAT also selectively gave more information to local leaders than to the villagers and often neglected to mention the harmful consequences that would ensue from the construction of the dam (Chayan 2000).

Moreover, EGAT actively employed a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy among villagers. It persistently lobbied villagers to support the dam by enticing them with money and by supplying blatant disinformation on the effects of the dam. Many of those who initially supported the construction of the dam believed that it would bring electricity and a better income. When villagers realized that this was not happening, that much of the river ecology was being destroyed, and that they were not even being paid as promised, many switched sides, joining those who had opposed the dam from its inception (Khun La, pers. comm., March 2001).12 Commenting on how the dam has split villages and families, Khun La, an adviser to the AOP, noted that villagers within families are now fighting amongst each other about the relative benefits of the dam. In the past, there was more cooperation and communal support. There was little need for law or the police. Now anything small that happens has to be mediated by the police’ (ibid.).

EGAT’s use of its financial and institutional influence, coupled with its hierarchical and tightly circumscribed administrative planning, thus led to major long-term problems. First, no baseline study of fisheries was undertaken because EGAT did not assume that the dam would have a negative impact on fisheries. Without a baseline from which to assess the difference in the level of fish after the construction of the dam, EGAT officials were naturally more sceptical of the villagers’ claims. Second, because this was the first run-of-the-river dam being built in Thailand, the effects of flooding and resettlement were not thought to be very grave. Finally, in its preliminary studies, EGAT assumed that the villagers were primarily rice farmers – rather than fisherfolk – and therefore failed to address the integral relationship between villagers and the river. Had there been greater openness and consultation with villagers and environmental agencies at the earlier planning stages, it is possible that some problems could have been foreseen. In particular, the oversight of the impact on fisheries looms as a major error given the magnitude of the eventual losses.

Resistance to Pak Mun Dam

Much of the battle against the dam and acts of resistance played out initially through demands for compensation. This was, however, a particularly taxing process for villagers, as they found themselves severely disadvantaged by a lack of formal, political representation. Several problems should be highlighted. First, the committees established to address compensation packages were composed of local elites (kannan and pua yai baun) and bureaucrats, who made it difficult for the villagers to gain a fair hearing. Second, compensation packages were often inconsistent and difficult to implement. Third, as discussed above, EGAT had made no baseline study of fisheries and was therefore unsure whether to accept the figures given by the villagers estimating the loss of fish. Finally, the lack of an actual economic valuation of villagers’ social systems and cultural values made it impossible to gain compensation for the dam’s impact on community life.13

Compensation can be categorized into three types according to how villagers were affected by the dam: (1) those affected directly by the dam construction; (2) those impacted by inundation and resettlement; and (3) those affected by the loss of fishing during construction.14 For each form of compensation, villagers had to bargain arduously with EGAT. For many, it took years of negotiations to reach a fair compensation, if one was ever achieved.

With regards to the first type of compensation – to take one example – a group of villagers from Ban Hua Heo directly affected by dam construction were promised new housing, land for agriculture, and money (135,000 baht per household). Several problems, however, ensued in the actual
implementation of the compensation package. For some villagers, EGAT was unable to find agricultural land. For others, the land was not appropriate for agriculture. Other problems in the resettlement of villagers included the fact that drinking water was not accessible and that the houses constructed by EGAT were too small. Another group of villagers from Ban Hua Heo were simply provided with 135,000 baht to relocate. They discovered that this was not enough to buy titled land in their new area. Therefore, they decided to move to the state forest reserve, where many of the villagers had lived before it had been claimed by the state. This move was declared illegal by the state and led to further confrontation between villagers and local authorities. EGAT then offered these villagers land to resettle, but this was rejected on the grounds that there was not enough land for farming (Chayan 2000).

For the villagers whose land was inundated – those in the second category of compensation above – it is instructive to see how committees to assess compensation actually formed. Two committees were established on 15 May 1992 that assessed the rate of compensation for assets lost by inundation. The governor of the province of Ubon Ratchathani was the head of both committees. Out of these two committees, seven subcommittees were formed, of which none included villagers. On 15 December 1993, another committee was created with two subcommittees. In the first subcommittee, the district officer (nay ampo) was the chair, while the subdistrict head (kaannam) was the representative of the villagers. In the second subcommittee, one representative from each of the three districts was appointed as a committee member. None of the representatives on these subcommittees were supposed to be on the side of the villagers were considered to be genuine representatives by the villagers themselves. In fact, all of them were believed to be EGAT supporters (Chayan 2000: 7).

The issue of land is particularly problematic because it reflects the compounding of several unsolved problems confronted by the rural poor in the face of agrarian change and state development. Villagers around the Mun River do not have titles to land that they have inhabited for generations. This makes it more difficult for them to claim their rights against the state. When they are displaced, often they find that they cannot farm on land that has been allotted to them, partly because much of the land in the northeast is not fertile and partly because most of the villagers who have been displaced are more inclined towards fishing and foraging in the forests than farming. When villagers then decide to find their own plot of land in the national forest, where they are more likely to be able to make a living, they run up against the iron hand of the state that has claimed authority over all public land. Many of these villagers – now labelled as encroachers – are sued by the state for trespassing (Khun La, pers. comm., March 2001).

Finally, the third form of compensation for the loss of fisheries was the most contentious, since it was this particular problem that had been neglected by EGAT in its earlier estimations. The first plan drawn up by EGAT sought to compensate villagers for the loss of fisheries during the three years of construction. This plan would then allocate funds based on a village's proximity to the dam. Villagers designated in zone 1 (closest to the dam) would receive 90,000 baht (US $3,600) while those in zone 5 (furthest from the dam) would receive 15 baht. This scheme was clearly unsatisfactory to the villagers and led to a one-month protest at the Provincial Hall. After about two years of negotiations, EGAT proposed in 1995 that each household would receive 30,000 baht (US $1,200) for compensation over three years of construction and an additional 60,000 baht (US $2,400) to assist in developing new occupations. Although this compensation was implemented, by this time many villagers, now exasperated by the government's seesawing, were calling on the state to provide compensation for the permanent loss of fisheries and for the complete decommissioning of the dam.

In an act of open resistance, in March 1996, the AOP held its first major rally over 26 days at Government House (the complex of offices of the prime minister). About 10,000 villagers joined the month-long protest. Although Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa initially equivocated about meeting the protesters, he eventually decided to do so. The cabinet also made several important concessions. It agreed to grant land rights documents to all who could prove claims to land. Those who could not prove ownership of land would receive Sor Por Kor deeds or be allowed to lease lands at low prices. Other concessions that overlapped with the grievances of the Pak Mun Dam villagers included compensation for those displaced by the Sirindhorn Dam and the suspension of future dam projects. The concessions made by Banharn's cabinet were significant, but they did not last after Banharn's government collapsed in November 1996 amid factional rivalries and allegations of corruption.

In 1997, a 99-day protest in Bangkok put more pressure on the new government of Chavalit Yongchaiyudh (Praphat 1998). In part because Chavalit was a native of the northeast, he appeared much more willing to address the grievances of the villagers. Sidestepping cabinet ministers who evinced little interest in the problems of the poor, Chavalit assigned a group of young, reform-minded, deputy ministers, including Chaturon Chaisang and Adisorn Piangket, to negotiate with the villagers. These young ministers made a genuine effort to give the villagers a fair hearing. At one of the meetings in March, the discussion centred around the need to clearly assess the impact of the dam on peasant livelihoods. EGAT and the Fisheries Department claimed that the quantity of fish and the income from fishing had remained stable or even increased since the dam's construction. The NGO representatives for the AOP responded that their interviews with fishermen indicated that the opposite had occurred. While the NGO representatives admitted that it would be difficult to prove conclusively whether there were more or less fish after the construction of the dam, since no scientific studies had been conducted before the construction, they argued that fisherfolk's own testimony should be considered as expert information.
every time the state builds something people always complain to the
government, or EGAT, or us. First, we should consider whether this
group of people have a right to petition or not. If you accept that they
do, then second, is their petition plausible?

(_ibid.: 167)

To this Deputy Minister for Science Adison replied:

Here in Thailand everyone has the right to petition. It’s part of our
democratic system. You probably shouldn’t ask such questions. People
have a right to petition directly to the government, because I’m well aware
that district officials cover things up, or even EGAT covers things up.

(_ibid.: 167)

On 11 April 1997, Chavalit’s cabinet agreed to a major resolution that was co-
signed by Deputy Finance Minister Chaturon and the AOP adviser Wanida
Tanthiwitthayaphitak. This resolution included measures to protect villagers’
lands, compensation for villagers affected by farms and reforestation pro-
grammes, and a pledge to listen to local opinion before initiating construction
on other projected dams. At the negotiation table, Chavalit was clear about
his intentions: “I bring a sincere heart to this negotiation with the people. I
will do anything I can for the benefit of the people” (Bangkok Post 4 May
1997). In May, the villagers returned to their province believing that this
agreement would finally stick.

Yet with the financial crisis then burning down Thailand’s economy, and
Chavalit’s incapacity to douse its flames, Chuan Leekpai’s Democrat Party
took charge in November 1997 and summarily revoked the resolutions of
the previous cabinet. Faced with a difficult political situation, the AOP pursued
a dao krachai (scattered star) resistance strategy of establishing protest villages
in areas where the AOP had bases, including at the Pak Mun Dam site itself.
This strategy, however, failed to yield any response from the politicians and in
March 2000 the siege of Bangkok’s government resumed. More than 3,000
villagers set up permanent camps outside Government House. Pressured to
respond to the renewed mobilization, the Chuan government formed a ten-
member committee (five of whom had been nominated by the AOP) to
address the AOP’s sixteen demands. On 6 July 2000, the committee recom-
manded to the Ministry of Interior the opening of the sluice gates; however,
Chuan ignored the recommendations. Ten days later, out of rising despera-
tion, 225 protesters scaled the walls of Government House but were eventually
beaten back by riot police.

During this period, the AOP turned towards high-profile theatrics in order
to garner the attention of the national media to its resistance measures, and
thereby broaden its appeal. Wanida, the main AOP adviser, observed: ‘When
we are to mount a demonstration, we need to gauge if the media will be
interested to cover our activities’ (Rungrawee 2004: 549). At times, the
AOP would raise the stakes through acts such as the sealing of Government
House or occupation of the Pak Mun Dam itself. These acts were done with
the knowledge that confrontation would generate more media exposure. The
AOP also undertook dramatic political events that were tailor-made for
photojournalism (see Figure 7.2). In one instance, an activist from the
Student Federation of Thailand suspended himself from the dam under
which was a huge banner stating in English ‘No Dams’. This event was
featured on the front page of The Nation on 1 June 2000.

An even more creative effort to gain the media spotlight, conducted this
time by the villagers near the Rasi Salai Dam, also on the Mun River, was the
enactment of a morning ritual to worship the goddess of the river, phra mae

Figure 7.2 Assembly of the Poor protests for the media at the Pak Mun Dam.
Photo credit: Assembly of the Poor, Thailand.
khongkha. In this ritual, villagers waded into the river and prayed to the goddess every morning. What was remarkable about this act was that this ritual, although related to Isan (northeastern) culture, was in effect manufactured as a tool for social resistance. 'A village leader gave me a call to consult about what they should do, as his fellow villagers were intensely demoralized,' recalled Chaimarong Setthachuea, an adviser to the AOP and head of the South East Asian River Network. He continued:

Then, I asked him if there was any activity they could create based on their own traditional beliefs. He said villagers believed that every river had a phra nae khongkha who guards the river. At that time, I happened to see a photograph of a ritual called sattayakroa [performed at the Narmada River Valley in India] on a website. So, we borrowed the form of this ritual from the sattayakroa; however, its content was essentially based on the villagers' own tradition.

(recalled in Rungrawee 2004: 555)

This ritual, serving both as an act of collective solidarity and as a vivid picture of dissent, ended up on the front page of the Khao Sod newspaper on 24 May 2000.

One analyst of the AOP has noted that its tactics have often veered towards confrontation that could lead to violence (Rungrawee 2004). Although the movement remains non-violent, it has to some extent benefited from rising tensions because the media is more likely to cover an event when the likelihood of a physical clash is imminent. Veteran Thai analyst, Chris Baker (2000: 18), has argued that the AOP's mobilization has involved a process of 'invasion, siege, and peace treaty'. The AOP has repeatedly trooped down from the northeastern plains and surrounded Bangkok's Government House. Under the Chavalit government, the 'invasion' and 'siege' did lead to a 'peace treaty' with significant concessions, but Baker notes that 'in this public drama, the role of violence was inverted. Injuries received counted as victories, injuries inflicted as defeats' (Baker 2000: 22–3). For the AOP, the compiling of the sufferings they received during their protests, including physical injuries from scuffles, deaths attributed to stress, suicide and miscarriages, were further proof of the righteousness of their struggle.

The scaling of Government House and the subsequent beating and arrest of the protesters was widely covered in the media and raised the stakes of the struggle. The government was under increasing pressure to respond in some way, and accepted the call to organize a televised debate with the AOP. The terms of this debate were extremely important if it were to yield any positive results for the AOP and, after much negotiation, the AOP agreed to a debate at Thammasat University in August 2000 in which Banthorn Ondam, a leading adviser to the AOP and former university lecturer, would moderate. While the debate did not resolve any major issues, it was significant in that the government had for the first time granted the villagers a televised public platform on which to air their views.21 Wattana Nakpradit, an adviser to the AOP and a member of the NGO Friends of the People, observed that 'a public conference is critical. If the public understands [the problems of the poor], it will strengthen [their cause]' (Wattana, pers. comm., June 2000).

Despite the AOP's inventive tactics and increasing national exposure, the Chuan government refused to budge. Compared to his predecessors, Chuan's reaction was much harsher and more dismissive. Reflecting his legal background, Chuan repeatedly argued that the protesters must follow the law and could not expect the government to cave in to their demands simply because of their mobilizing and resistance tactics. He refused to meet the protesters, accusing them of being manipulated by a 'third hand' (generally meant to mean foreign NGOs). Instead, he focused his attention on rescuing banks and financial companies drowning in debt in the wake of the financial crisis. One AOP leader summarized the different prime ministers thus:

Chuan just did not want to talk to us. He was just too conservative. Banharn was a little better. At least he accepted we have a case in principle. But nothing came of it. In the end, he's just a wealthy businessman. Chavalit has done more. He has gotten down to details.

(The Nation 23 April 1997)

Thaksin Shinawatra's resounding victory in the January 2001 polls was greeted by many political analysts and AOP advisers as a positive development for the Pak Mun villagers (Bangkok Post 4 April 2001). Elected on a populist platform, Thaksin pledged to have the sluice gates opened on a trial basis for four months during the rainy season (July to October) to see whether there would be a significant increase in the stock of fish. In direct contrast to the plodding, legalistic style of Chuan, Thaksin made good work of his campaign slogan of 'khii mai, tham mai' ('think new, act new'). He appeared extremely responsive to the demands of the AOP, and personally met with the protesters camped outside Government House on 10 February 2001, one day after officially becoming prime minister. After meeting with the prime minister, the protesters decided to return to Ubon Ratchathani, hopeful that there would be meaningful change.

In October 2002, protests resumed after the four-month trial period came to an end, and after the cabinet voted on 1 October to maintain the four-month opening of the gates, rather than a year-round opening. While the opening of the gates for four months did lead to the return of 184 species of fish and to the rise of the average yearly household income from 3,045 baht to 10,025 baht this was still significantly less than what the fisherfolk had earned prior to the construction of the dam, estimated to be a yearly income of 25,742 baht (Ubon Ratchathani University 2002). Villagers have consistently claimed that the four-month period was insufficient to allow the fish stocks to be replenished.

Tensions came to a head in December 2002 as the protest camp outside
Government House in Bangkok was vandalized in the early morning of 5 December and the protest site by the Pak Mun Dam (shown in Figure 7.3) was burned down ten days later (Bangkok Post 16 December 2002). Once again, Thaksin met with the villagers, offering them over 7,000 baht worth of food as well as personally providing ice cream, and promising that the government would review the cabinet decision made in October (Bangkok Post 9 December 2002).

On 20 December 2002, Thaksin convened a televised conference at Government House, in which all sides of the debate were allowed to air their views. EGAT first provided its argument, followed by presentations from various research groups, and then by the Pak Mun villagers. Although Thaksin refused to allow NGO representatives to attend the meeting, this was an important opportunity for the villagers to gain some degree of legitimacy and a second chance to express their views on national television.22

The pivotal moment in this conference was the report of the Ubon Ratchatani University research team. This research team had been commissioned by the government and for the first time officially recommended to the government that the gates be opened permanently.23 Until then, the report from this research group had limited itself to the more modest task of assessing the costs and benefits of four possible scenarios. The shift in the opinion of the rector of Ubon Ratchatani University was just as critical. Prakob Virojanakul had earlier agreed with the cabinet decision to keep the gates open for four months, but at the conference surprised many by unequivocally supporting the villagers:

The university is in favor of helping the people to solve their problems once and for all by opening the dam sluice gates year-round. This is because EGAT can solve the technical problems, but the villagers cannot change their way of life. Their only mistake was that they were born poor and lacking opportunities. Every party will win (if the dam gates are opened). EGAT wins by helping the government solve the longstanding Pak Mun problem. What the villagers will get, however, is only what they have lost. Nothing more.

(Bangkok Post 21 December 2002)

Following the conference, Thaksin decided to travel and see the dam firsthand. He chose to take a helicopter trip with two villagers as well as a boat ride on the river. After the trip, Thaksin still refused to commit himself one way or the other, arguing that he had to make a decision that was in the best interests of the country even if it disappointed minority interests (The Nation 25 December 2002).24 Finally, on 15 January 2003, Thaksin decided not to repeal the cabinet decision of 1 October 2002 and thus to allow the gates to be open for only four months of the year. He concluded that the majority of people in Ubon were in favour of the dam and that the government-commissioned study by Ubon Ratchatani University was incomplete.25 The

compromise that remains in place as of 2008 is to keep the sluice gates open for four months of the year.26

Conclusions

A central question that needs to be asked in conclusion is whether open resistance to state projects has netted any political gains for the peasantry—those often the most directly affected by key features of the agrarian transition. The question can be answered in two ways. First, if one assesses the actual outcome of demonstrations and negotiations, the solution has not been optimal for the poor. Although the sluice gates are open for four months of the year, fisherfolk have consistently argued that this is not enough to bring back the earlier supply of fish, and local livelihoods have not improved. Yet one cannot also conclude that this situation means that resistance has been of no value. While not optimal for the poor, the current solution is a compromise that has forced the state to backtrack to some extent.

The second way to answer this question is to assess whether a different form of peasant resistance, such as the everyday forms discussed in other chapters of this book, including pilfering, foot-dragging and petty arson, might have yielded different—perhaps better—results. With an absence of comparative cases, one can simply think in counterfactual terms. Is there something about small-scale acts of resistance that might have enabled a different outcome? In many cases, where small-scale acts of resistance have
led to significant political change; this has come when individuals or groups could take away something from their adversary, whether the landlord or the state. In Vietnam, for example, Benedict Kerkvliet (2005) has shown how peasants’ refusal to work within agricultural cooperatives gradually undermined the government’s collective economic system (also see Tran Thi Thu Trang’s chapter in this volume).

However, in a situation where the struggle is over the appropriation of resources, it is difficult to see how one can avoid open confrontation. As state or capital actively take over natural resources, peasants’ options are very limited. Precisely because their livelihoods are based on subsistence through natural resources, it is essential that they fight back to retain control of their basic needs. For peasants engaged in commercial agriculture the situation is somewhat different. The state wants agricultural products to enter the market, and if state behaviour tends to be excessively repressive, farmers can ‘defect’ from the state. However, for peasants whose lives depend on natural resources and who are not involved in commercial agriculture, the only real option appears to be open resistance.

Open and organized resistance, then, may not have achieved the ultimate goal sought by the Pak Mun villagers – decommisioning the dam – but it has clearly achieved some limited success. Although Scott (1985) has argued that, given the odds against which the subaltern class struggles, there is something to be celebrated in their everyday acts of resistance, what this case study has shown is that there is still something to be gained from open confrontation that most likely would not have been achieved through the use of ‘weapons of the weak.’ Rather than submitting that open rebellion may be futile, we should acknowledge that piecemeal gains can be made through sustained civil action in certain contexts. In the end, the struggle over the Pak Mun Dam may not be a case of the glass being half full, but it is also not quite half empty.

Notes

1 I thank Panmate Rangsiinturat and Cleofe M. Kuhonta for valuable research assistance; Patcharin Lapanan and her anthropology team at Khon Kaen University for facilitating my trips to the Pak Mun Dam; Michael Montesano for inviting me to present an earlier version of this paper at the National University of Singapore; Princeton University for funding support; and Sarah Turner and Dominique Caouette for comments that have helped in revising this paper. Note that Thai names are referred to in the in-text citations and in the references by their first names.

2 For a sampling of general texts on the political economy of resource conflict in Thailand and Southeast Asia, see: Hirsch and Warren (1998); Parnwell and Bryant (1996); Rigg (1995); Lim and Valencia (1990); Hirsch and Lehmann (1989).

3 The concept of the bureaucratic polity comes from Rigg’s classic study (1966).

4 Paizk advances this argument in a brilliant essay (1999).

5 NGOs in Thailand generally spurn the idea of forming a political party or of allying with one particular party. This is due to the volatility of the party system and a certain amount of distrust of politicians (interviews with NGO members, Bangkok, December 2000).

6 An excellent analysis of this period is provided by Girling (1981).

7 Chaturon Chaisang, the deputy finance minister who negotiated with the AOP under the Chavalit government, and who has been sympathetic to the cause of the Pak Mun Dam, was a student activist in the turbulent 1970s (see Asia week 5 November 1999).

8 For a concise analysis of the tensions in the NGO movement – whether to focus on community development or a broader national policy – see Sanitsuda (1994).

9 The literal translation is ‘male head cook’.

10 In my trips to the Pak Mun Dam village site in 2001, I observed impressive coordination among the villagers and NGOs. In the mornings, NGO activists registered villagers’ complaints and names to create a systematic record that would then be presented to the government.

11 Chanida (August 2000) of Focus on Global South comments that ‘villagers are up against an arrogant state agency. EGAT is traditionally very secretive about its electricity figures’.

12 In my trips to the villages around the Mun River, villagers pointed out how their communities had become politically and geographically riven. Some groups of villagers who sided with EGAT stayed close to the river, while others who opposed the dam were displaced further away from the river.

13 Important lessons have been learned from the Pak Mun Dam. Suthawon Sathirathai led a research team that combined institutional questions with economic valuation in assessing the social and economic impact of the proposed Kaeng Sua Ten Dam in the province of Phrae, northern Thailand. Suthawon provided an economic value not just for the loss of forest that would ensue from the construction of the dam, but also from the loss of non-timber forest products, such as bamboo shoots, mushrooms, ants’ eggs, labour skills, eco-tourism and spiritual and cultural activities. This policy report was submitted to the Department of Irrigation (interview with the author in Bangkok in October 2000).

14 The third category overlaps with the first two, since most villagers are fisherfolk.

15 This was noted by villagers interviewed by the author at the Pak Mun Dam, March 2001. One resettlement site with EGAT-constructed houses was virtually empty because villagers had chosen not to move into the new houses.

16 Criticism in the media that villagers were just interested in financial compensation also led to a shift in the nature of the demands. Instead of pushing for financial adjustments to the compensation packages, villagers made claims for total compensation for loss of livelihood. The dam’s impact, they argued, had not just depressed their income, but had had systemic effects on the social and economic structure of the community.

17 Sor Por Kor is a land title as well as a land reform programme. Land under the Sor Por Kor programme was supposed to be given to poor people, but it was mired by accusations in the 1990s that relatives of government officials of the Democrat Party were being given Sor Por Kor land titles.

18 Chuan Leekpai was prime minister of Thailand from September 1992 to May 1995 and again from November 1997 to February 2001.

19 Interviewed by the author with two villagers, Khun Kamta and Khun Saengwadi, from the district of Khong Jim in the province of Ubon Ratchathani at the protest site in Bangkok, July 2000.

20 One of the scuffles was with Samak Sundarravej, a cabinet minister in the 1990s, and prime minister following the December 2007 elections.

21 The excitement at this debate was palpable. The government had bussed in many rural people who protested on the grounds of Thammasat University in favour of the dam. Some of them appeared to be itching for a fight, but the police kept
things relatively calm between both groups (fieldwork observations in Bangkok, August 2000; see also Matichon 19 August 2000).

22 Thaksin accused NGOs of inciting protesters and of being funded by foreign organizations (see Bangkok Post 17, 18 and 19 December 2002). For an extensive report on the relationship between government and NGOs, see Bangkok Post (5 January 2003).

23 This report had already been made public in September 2002.

24 Journalists and activists noted that Thaksin continued to delay his decision even when there was clear evidence of the high costs and low benefits of the dam. See The Nation 14 December 2002.

25 Thaksin argued that a survey run by the National Statistical Office showed that 41 per cent of the people living by the Mun River wanted the government to open the sluice gates for four months only (see Bangkok Post 8 January 2003; Inter Press Service 16 January 2003).

26 Surayud Chulanont, prime minister of Thailand during the 2006-07 military regime, also visited the Pak Mun Dam site but did not change government policy.

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—— (2002b) ‘Protests see PM on his turf’, 18 December.

—— (2002c) ‘Little hope talks will bear fruit’, 19 December.

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Chanida Chanyapate Bamford (Focus on the Global South) (2000) Interview with author, Bangkok, August.


8 State–society relations and the diversity of peasant resistance in Việt Nam

Trần Thị Thu Trang

Introduction

The Vietnamese peasantry made its mark in history by successfully resisting the exploitation of colonialism and imperialism in 1954 in the north of the country and later in 1975 in the south. The tenacious resolve of this otherwise destitute social group to overthrow its oppressors has attracted much attention from scholars studying the politics and movements of resistance emerging in the so-called ‘developing world’. After independence in 1954, however, Vietnamese peasants in the north engaged in different forms of resistance under the newly independent state. These included everyday forms of resistance during the central planning and collectivization period from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, and more open and collective protests since the economic reforms initiated in the 1980s. Despite the seriousness of rural poverty and a long history of struggle, these instances of resistance remain localized and small-scale, rarely spreading beyond district or provincial boundaries, and even more rarely targeting the central government. This rather stable political environment is surprising considering several upheavals in neighbouring countries such as those in Thailand, the Philippines and Burma over the last 50 years (Vasavakul 1995), as well as the political crises in former socialist countries in the 1980s and 1990s.

This chapter builds upon field research findings in a Mường rural community in Hòa Bình province, Việt Nam, conducted from 2001 to 2004, as well as relevant literature, investigates changes in rural resistance by looking at why and how resistance takes place and against whom. In other words, it studies the causes, forms and targets of peasant resistance, and why these have changed over the last 50 years. In order to answer these questions, I adopt a conceptual framework that provides a coherent and flexible understanding of resistance while emphasizing the particular interaction between structure and agency in specific contexts. I then utilize this to analyse peasant resistance in Việt Nam covering the periods of collectivization from the 1960s to 1980s, and of reform from the early 1980s onwards. The chapter underlines that the interactions between structure and agency influence how peasants perceive the causes of their difficulties, and whether or not they decide to engage in