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This Mekong Today feature article summarizes an M-POWER working paper which examines water development schemes implemented onto the landscape of northeastern Thailand, or Isan. Under political pressure, as well as economic and social challenges the problem has been dubbed ‘panha phaktawan-ok chiangnuea’, “The Northeast Problem”. The paper argues that the modern Thai

state has been deploying water resource management as one of their political tools to cope with various challenges that relentlessly emerged within the region. As a consequence, various governmental water resource development projects, assisted by available modern hydrological technologies and knowledge, have been extensively implemented to depoliticize the regional problems. This is believed to be fundamentally caused by water shortage, while at the same time strengthening the region as part of the country’s progress into modernism.

The first part of the paper draws on several cases of state’s water schemes, implemented both in symbolic and pragmatic domains. This is to explain how water resources can be used by state bureaucracies for their political advocacy and legitimization. The paper examines hydrological

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1 This working paper is part of my ongoing postgraduate research at the Australian National University (ANU). The funding for fieldworks, seminars, and conferences came mainly from Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience (M-POWER).
development through the concept of ‘anti-politics machine’ proposed by James Ferguson. Along with the regional investigation, it introduces a Mekong riparian ‘community’, Ban Nawaeng and its extended cluster Ban Nawaeng Mai, villages of the northeast of Thailand where my field research took place. The paper illustrates how the ideological and political schemes of hydrology have been put into operation in the context of Isan regional development and the said villages in particular. In so doing, it juxtaposes the regional making process of Isan as a hydrological-oriented development space with the local scene of village’s water resource transformation. As the paper argues, rather than effectively solving the real water problems, Isan water development ended up working to expand and reinforce the power of state to have control over other politically high-stake issues. Here, the persistent natural droughts and social disparity in the Northeast may not totally be a failure of the state to exercise their power. Rather, the success lies in the very nature that the water schemes allow them to exert their political authority and ideology into a risk-prone region without causing too much resistance from the locals.

In the case of Isan water development, the success and failure of development projects can not be easily evaluated in terms of its outcome because problems are publicly announced as draught, irrigation underutilization, agricultural underproduction, and poverty. The promise of water resource development to green the region as well as the irrigation plan for agriculture intensification and poverty reduction are only a schematic point of departure that, to a greater extent, allows other political ‘side effects’ to emerge and operate. To equate with the case of Lesotho studied by Ferguson, water development here in the Northeast should be considered not as a machine to alleviate poverty that is incidentally involved with the state bureaucracy. In fact, we can see that water schemes have been used as a machine to expand and intensify the authority of state and military powers into the northeastern region in order to build up national security, e.g. the Accelerate Rural Development’s anti-communist insurgency, have paved the way for certain kinds of political accomplishment, such as: the case of military-run Greening Isan project and the New Aspiration Party. The politics behind most of the water problems, however, has been subsided by technical solutions and the management by authoritative expertise. Local perception toward state’s water development projects would always gear into the line of ‘development’ which renders only technical progressiveness and non-political betterment. The water projects in Isan, as an anti-politics machine, successfully run as a ‘suspension of politics from even the most sensitive political operations’.

The second part of the paper examines two water development projects ‘provided’ for the villagers of Ban Nawaeng in Ubon Ratchathani focuses on their effects within the community and on the multitude of government agencies surrounding the projects. Both projects were designed to supply water for agricultural development in the vicinity of the communities. The first project is a reservoir emerging from an earth dam to hold back water from a local creek. The second scheme is an electricity-run pump irrigation pulling water from the Mekong into agricultural fields in a distance. In exploring these irrigation development endeavors, the aim is not to examine them in terms of their ultimate success or failure. Rather, my intention is to look at what and how these projects flowed, and were shaped, across multi-layered agencies. As the paper examines concurrent effects surrounding the projects at the local level, it shows that there is no such thing as a ‘purely’ technical domain. Rather, the projects are inevitably caught up in local politics and social processes.

Power is, somewhat, like water in motion. It is never fixed and, in any account, materializes into one particular form. As per ‘scientific fact’ of hydrology, water is always transformed into different shapes and forms due to its surrounding effects. In ‘social reality’, likewise, power also
performs the similar kind of nature within our fluid society. Employing such nature of ‘water in motion’, in the third part the paper looks at how power can be observed as a dynamic process that shall always be altered through different times, agencies and contexts. Due to its liquidity, I argue, power can flow, infiltrate, and can even be intercepted by social agencies holding distinctive elements and influences. I opt to use the term ‘hydraulics’ here to signify the operation and movement of power through, or pertaining to, the maneuvering process of water projects operation.

Part three of the paper offers some empirical insight into the dynamics of powers in relation to community struggle and the flowing process of state’s water development. In so doing, I trace historical and ethnographic accounts of the development of the water project called fa hui Tat, a series of weirs under construction along the local Tat creek. Along with historical and ethnographic accounts, I paid particular attention to a close reading of the project’s documents produced in accordance to the project’s initiation, planning and implementation. This approach, as anthropologist Tania Murray Li suggests, is aimed at discovering ‘what these programs sought to change, and what was excluded from their technical domain’. In other words, the close reading of the project’s documents allows us to ‘expose multiple gaps: gaps between one document and the next, gaps between the world conveyed and the texts and the world to be transformed, as well as gaps between what the programs proposed and what they delivered’. In addition, as pointed out by Andrew Walker in his recent book Tai lands and Thailand: Community and State in Southeast Asia, it is productive to study a project’s formation such as a project proposal as a localized field in which ‘power and resources can flow between the various elements assembled’. As he argues, writing projects (khian khrongikan) is an approach in which local people ‘render themselves legible in the eyes of the state officials who are desperate to find non-problematic sites for the disbursement of their budget allocation’. This part deals with such flows of the project’s proposal and
the way in which the community renders itself legible to catch the state’s attention. In doing so, I argue that power and resources can be initiated and, to a certain extent, is trickled down to the hands of villagers involved.

The water project in Ban Nawaeng consists of the old existing weir built by the villagers and the newly proposed ones which, recently, was approved to be built on the same creek which drains into the Mekong mainstream. While the first weir was set up by the Nawaeng community, it has undergone improvement during the previous year using community development funds provided by the local government. The newly proposed project, however, was initiated by the villagers of Nawaeng Mai, the extended community of Ban Nawaeng. This project, however, was later transferred to be the main responsibility of the irrigation authority. Under such a shift from local initiation to the state agency’s implementation, the project’s size, location, and other technical structure have been redesigned by water project ‘experts’ hired by the state agencies. However, it is not the state agencies alone that can effectively devise the ‘technical domain’ of the water development schemes with their ‘government through community’. As the paper suggests, there has always been local influences and manipulation in designing and crafting the nature and outcome of water projects. Based on the ways in which rural villagers bind themselves to the state through the initiation of, and participation in, development projects, this paper shows the manifestation of how power was transmitted among various agencies through the liquidity of social and political connection.

All in all, my primary goal in this paper is to show that, on one side, the technicalities of modern hydrological projects is not the only factor determining the initiation, implementation, and the effectiveness of each water development project. There has been much more social and political factors that hinder the efficacy of the projects’ technicality. This, then, reminds us not to overemphasis on the ‘scientific hydrology’ too much that we cannot see the effects of social contexts where the projects are going to be implemented. The policy makers should be aware of their own political position, the bias of employing technical solutions, as well as the limited legitimacy of scientific knowledge in the improvement of water projects. On the other side, I would like to point out that the ongoing fantasy cherished by some ‘community’ advocacies especially those who work on the issues of rural development. Based on several studies on community development, it is argued, often illustrate the dichotomized picture of state as the rule and locality as the resistance. In addition, there has often been a portrayal of community as idealistic, traditional, simplified, and fragile to the state’s power and to the world changing outside. I show here that the community is by no mean static or in absolute harmony. Rather, it is a fluid society that always transforms throughout the morphology of the state and globalization. The last part of the paper liberates such an idea by showing how the community reconstructs itself to deal with the state and their desire to participate in modernity and development. As articulated through the community’s writing of project proposal, the strategically simplified narrative on their community proved to be a useful apparatus in rendering themselves legible to the eyes of the bureaucrats. The project proposal was where the villager could express themselves as a benign community consisting of people with the will to improve, being agricultural-oriented, and being loyal to the state’s development agenda. In addition, the proposal was a strategy in which they can draw boundaries and indicate development facilities that serve to their benefits. It was also a community where narrative of resource utilization was simplified as to match externally oriented goals.

In addition to the re-creation of community through the simplification process of representation, we also see here that often times the community being actively created as a result of dialogue with state power. The people of Ban Nawaeng seek more involvement with the state agencies as long
as they see their involvement as productive. The formation of the local people’s group, the writing of development proposal to many government agencies, the engagement with local government agencies’ activities, the patronization of political relations with the authorities and local MPs are all testament of how the villagers of this recently-administered community represent themselves through the political channels they found useful in order to establish dialogues with the state.

The ways in which local people make themselves legible to the authorities suggest to some critical reflection on the book Seeing like a State by James Scott in which it exposes how the state sees the community through a simplified lens. Learning from the case of Ban Nawaeng here, it is not only the state officials that ‘aspire to a uniform, homogenous, and national administrative code’ kind of community, but the villagers themselves have also played a crucial role in constructing their community in a way that not only suits the state’s expectation but also serves their own aspirations in community development. It is this kind of strategically simplified representation, the channels of political connection, and the local ambition to participate in state’s creation of ‘modern community’ that the hydraulics of power is actively maintained. To reiterate, it is these social motions through the maneuvering processes of the water projects’ operations that shed the light to the way power can be perceived not as static and possessed only by the state. Rather it is a power that anyone who knows the morphology of it can manipulate and tap into for one’s own benefits. ■