Representing Community: A Water Project Proposal and Tactical Knowledge

Jakkrit Sangkhamanee

In Thailand, researchers have often drawn attention to how local knowledge can be used to critique the state’s control and monopolization of science-based policy-making, for example, with respect to community forests, river basin development, land use, and coastal and marine environments (Anan 2000; Missingham 2003; Pinkaew 2002 and 2005; Reynolds 2002; Yos 2003). Local knowledge is also used to justify new social movements and redefine or renegotiate identities of rural communities.

The past decade of water development in the Mekong region has seen the emergence and increasing role of diverse local research efforts in development and natural resource management. One example is Tai Baan, “villagers’ research”. By focusing on subsistence economics, nature conservation, and moral traditions, Tai Baan research successfully suggested communities as being inherently resilient, apolitical, and communitarian—especially in cases where development projects threatened local livelihoods (see also Scurrah, chap. 3). Tai Baan research initially focused on fisheries, but later included other aspects of riverine ecology related to livelihoods such as plants and vegetation, fishing gear, riverbank agriculture as well as other social, economic and cultural issues (SEARIN et al. 2004; CCCN and SEARIN 2005; Living Rivers Siam et al. 2008; SEARIN 2006a and 2006b).
While this packaging of local knowledge may empower communities in their advocacy efforts, it also legitimizes only those forms of knowledge that seem to be “politically relevant” to activists or social movements. Forsyth and Walker (2008), for instance, point out that there is a real risk that such knowledge becomes “selectively packaged” so as to exclude what are seen to be discordant elements. What is needed, they propose, is a much more open approach to local knowledge.

There needs to be a more flexible and broader definition of local knowledge. In particular, local knowledge is seen here not only as empowering resistance to unwanted state projects, but also as a way to pursue local development with state support. To this end, this study offers some empirical insight into the dynamics of local knowledge and practices in relation to one community’s struggle for control and decision-making over their water resources. This study also shows how power was exercised and its effects transmitted across various agencies through the writing of a project proposal and accompanying actions that connected it to social and political processes. The analysis illustrates several ways in which the community rendered itself “legible” and attractive to the state. Local knowledge in this case was strategically used as a political apparatus not to resist but to engage with the state’s development projects. Villagers reconstructed their community in a way that suited not only the state’s expectations, but also served their own development aspirations.

Research Design and Method

The ethnographic analysis that follows derives from my fieldwork in Thailand between February 2007 and June 2008. During this period, I spent most of my time in Ban Nawaeng, a northeastern (Issaan) village in Ubon Ratchathani province where the Mekong River marks the border of the community as well as the nation-state. I chose Ban Nawaeng to avoid conducting research in communities that have already been exposed to “political advocacy” in development conflicts which had led NGOs and academics into the areas and, to a certain extent, made some impact on people’s perceptions, livelihoods, and ways of articulating their “local knowledge” and ideas of community development.

Put differently, unlike many other villages, especially those in southern Ubon Ratchathani province along the Mun river basin that have experienced such influence in the past few decades, advocacy NGOs and academics have not been active in Nawaeng. Studying an area like this allows us to experience the community’s situation from the narratives and everyday practices of villagers themselves. I knew from my own experience that in areas where there were conflicts between a community and a state agency over development projects, researchers often end up talking to local NGO staff or leaders or designated village advocates whose well-trained narratives were very much framed in the same anti-state manner. There is a need, I argue, for an open-minded research approach in order to understand the issues of community development and resource management that are always dynamic and actively respond to political and economic changes. Ban Nawaeng is also an ideal village that can be seen as a typical Mekong community, yet one that is relatively less influenced by the academic romanticism and “political radicalization” over development in Issaan (Somchai 2007).

In what follows, I provide an ethnographic account of the development of a water project. In addition to the ethnography of community action in relation to water development, I also pay particular attention to a close reading of project documents produced during the project’s initiation, planning and implementation. This approach, as Tania 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 project 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” (2007: 123). As also recently pointed out by Andrew Walker, it is productive to study a project proposal as a localized field in which “power and resources can flow between the various elements assembled.” Writing project proposals, he argues, 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” (Walker 2009a: 8).

The Fai Maeo Proposal

In March 2007, the villagers of Ban Nawaeng Mai planned to build a series of multipurpose weirs along a local creek called Huai Tat that empties into the Mekong. During the planning process, the villagers were
it needs to be arranged by “the careful recitation of correct language” (Walker 2009a: 7). In addition, the proposal was drafted by reconstructing the idea of community and its relation to the environment, development, migration, and national symbols such as HM the King. Here, the village was selectively represented and simplified as a “strategic community”, not as an entity in resistance to the state, but as a productive space for maneuver in the state’s development projects. Given my interest in how the rationale for the fai maeo project was formulated within the context of strategically simplified community, I translate the whole message here:

Despite the fact that Nawang subdistrict is an area adjacent to Mekong River, in the dry season, however, the amount and level of water in the river is low. As a consequence, farmers do not have sufficient water to use in their fields. This has resulted in a lack of local agricultural employment during the dry season and further helps drive the migration of people to Bangkok for work. In response, local people, village leaders and the village committee mutually conducted a primary site survey (thamkan samruat phuenthi buangton). It was found that the lower stretch of Huai Tat is a suitable location for constructing a public-purpose fai maeo. The construction of the Fai Maeo is aimed to benefit agriculture and cattle in the dry season. In addition, the project will create a natural breeding and nursing area for aquatic animals in which, later on, the conservation of freshwater fish can be put into action in accordance with the initiatives of HM the King (tam niao phraratchadamri). In this regard, the people of village 12, Ban Nawang Mai, of Khemarat district of Ubon Ratchathani province, together set up this fai maeo project and would like to request government agencies responsible for water resource development to consider providing a budget to support the proposed plan accordingly.

I would like to focus on several interesting “local” discourses here. The first is the strategic use of community simplification. The villagers themselves commence their proposal by stating that the community is simply an agricultural one. Consequent to that, the lack of a reliable water supply could then be highlighted as the main cause of out-migration of the community members. As several studies have shown, however, the out-migration of the northeastern people to Bangkok and other big cities is not solely a result of the lack of water and agricultural difficulties (Mills 1993; Suchada 2000; Kanokwan and Thawat 2006; Flech & Molle, chap. 11, this volume). By using such selective reasoning, and linking it with the decline in the community’s resilience, the narrative successfully draws us
into its strategically simplified representation of the community. This kind of selectivity in the narrative—pointing to the decline of a community with the development policy singled out as a cause of the problem—is often used similarly by academics and activists to challenge national policy, the roles of government agencies and development experts. However, such selectivity should not be viewed solely in negative terms. In some contexts, local villagers often employ the selectivity of narrative about community decline as a strategy for political mobilization and resource negotiation.

Another discourse is a narrative that demonstrates villagers' "technical" knowledge of local water resources. This articulation of knowledge, however, needs to be done in such a way that the state's technical knowledge would be recognized, and at the same time not compromised by local knowledge. "Despite the fact that Nawaeng subdistrict is an area adjacent to the Mekong River," the proposal tactically states, thus both setting up an image, and emphasizing the potential, of year-round water supply in their locality. "However," the narrative continues, "the amount and level of water in the river is low and as a consequence farmers cannot draw up sufficient water to use for their agriculture." The statement deliberately chooses to point to a natural phenomenon beyond human and state control. By ascribing the water problem to the supposed natural phenomena of declining Mekong water levels, the villagers can, firstly, avoid criticizing the ineffectiveness of the state's project (i.e. the dam) that had been "given" to the local farmers in the early days. In this way, the villagers can also objectively continue to say that they have already "conducted a primary site survey" and found "a suitable location in constructing a public-purpose fai maao." At this juncture, the local "technical" of the villagers' survey and feasibility appraisal can be rightfully inserted into their water development discourse while avoiding any condemnation of the ineffectiveness or failure of previous state-led projects.

The third discourse concerning the development of the weir on Tat creek is the articulation of the villagers' collective will to improve their livelihoods. Project proposals often gain legitimacy from creating a plausible framework of collective action and united purpose. The Nawaeng Mai villagers' proposal articulates the united will of the villagers to grow a second crop, prevent out-migration, generate local work, as well as communally conserve natural aquatic resources. Here we see that it is not only state and development agencies that always expound the rhetoric of the "will to improve" (see Li 2007): local discourse also stresses the same spirit. However, villagers' actions and the effect that comes after the will can be distinct from its original claim or intention. The issue of local practice concerning the will to improve according to state development policy and objectives is a sensitive issue. As the case of Ban Nawaeng Mai shows, the villagers, as a group, call for support from state agencies for their local irrigation project by claiming their will to pursue the same development agenda that the state has been promoting during the past decade. Similar to the states' intervention programs, within the locally initiated development proposal and its aims, however, there lies a gap between what is promised and what is eventually delivered. The gap can be found in the documents used for their proposal, in the dynamics of their agricultural practice, as well as in the political-economic environment.

Another appealing discourse manipulated by the villagers for their water development is the employment of the term fai maao as the name of their locally initiated project. The fai maao project was designed as ferro-concrete weirs, each about 1.5 m high. The three weirs together would store about 15,000 m³ of water that could be used to irrigate agricultural lands covering 1,000 rai in the vicinity of Ban Nawaeng Mai, Ban Nawaeng, and the other nearby villages—a total of 465 households. The anticipated cost was about 195,000 baht to be obtained from the district office of Khemarat. The name of the project, fai maao, is new to local usage. In fact, the term was coined by the Royal Project in the north of Thailand to identify a certain type of small-scale weir traditionally developed by the Hmong, who are also widely known as "Maao." Fai maao, to the people here, is an articulation of their strategic enthusiasm for water management following HM the King's water management model as well as to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the reigning monarch in that year. Indeed, besides the deployment of fai maao here, the people of Nawaeng Mai also expressed their enthusiasm for the overall notion of "sufficiency" development proposed by the King and carried out widely by government agencies during the past decade. In addition to the use of this well-perceived term, the proposal also stresses the importance of fai maao in promoting a "sufficiency economy" in their community as, ironically, the external support provided for the project is expected to "stimulate the local economy and improve income" of the villagers.
Proposal in Action

Late in June 2007, the school football field in the village was transformed into a community ground to host an important visit of the chairman and council members of Ubon's Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO). Along with the visit, the chairman of the PAO also brought with him a mobile service under the banner “Caravan for People Project.” The “caravan” consisted of various booths for government agencies involved with different kinds of development services. The services, ranging from healthcare, livestock treatment, agricultural consultation, local industry promotion, and rural education support, were all provided onsite for free to the people of Nawaeng Mai. Facing the football ground, a large stage was set up as a venue for a whole day of entertainment. Some time before noon, the stage was occupied by the PAO chairman, his council members, Khemarat district chief, the chairman of TAO as well as the village headman of Nawaeng Mai (Figure 2.2). Many came to welcome the chairman; there was a general commentary on the area by the subdistrict head. The recently released motto of the district was cited to express the issues deemed important to local people: "a community of development, harmony, rich traditions, and a self-sufficient lifestyle."

Figure 2.2 Local Officials on stage during the “Caravan for the People” Fair

Not only was popular rhetoric used to attract government agencies, the people of Nawaeng Mai also employed a map to strategically convey the necessity of having a water project in the area (see Figure 2.1). It is interesting to see here how the map is projected and what items are included by the people of Nawaeng Mai. The hand-drawn map shows, at the very first glance, a large area of rice paddy fields. Next to the paddies, there is Tat creek, which drains into the Mekong itself. The size of the creek, as it appears on the map, is exaggerated: it is drawn about half as wide as the Mekong itself when, in fact, it is less than 5 m wide. On the left side, the map shows a cluster of village households, with the house of the village headman being clearly marked. This crowded residential area portrayed on the map, in fact, includes those houses located in the area of other adjacent villages to create an impression of greater density. In addition, the map is cropped into a section where the nearby reservoir and other existing water projects can be excluded from the scene. In other words, the map shown here can be viewed as a simplified representation signifying, to use Haughton’s term (2009), a “community of common interest.”
Dressed up in yellow, and also blue, shirts—the auspicious colors symbolizing HM the King and the Queen, respectively, as well as the loyalty of those who wore them—the chairman commenced his speech by referring to the rural development works carried out by the King throughout his reign. The chairman also commended the motto and the desire of the villagers in taking an active step to improve their living standards, while still holding on to the concept of “sufficiency” proposed by HM the King. The chairman further elaborated the importance of development and reassured the people that he would continue to support projects following the path laid down by the King. Citing his own Caravan project as an example, the chairman emphasized the PAO’s proactive policy in the eradication of poverty, illicit drugs, agricultural problems and household suffering. At the end of his speech, the chairman affirmed his enthusiasm for agriculture intensification as the way forward for community development. To encourage people to grow a second crop each year, the chairman proposed that he would provide several on-farm machines such as tractors and mobile water pumps for communal use to any village that showed its capacity to grow a second crop in the next few years. At the end, the goodwill speech was followed by an eel-catching game, to improve relations between the chairman and “his people.” Ten minutes of catching eels from muddy ponds ended up, intentionally or not, with the chairman catching the most eels and hence being declared the winner. Everyone was happy with the result.

The visit of the PAO chairman brought to the community not only a one-day show about various government services and promises of livelihood enhancement projects. It was also an excellent opportunity for the village headman to discuss local problems and development plans with the chairman in person. It is common knowledge throughout the province that the chairman of the Ubon PAO has power not only from his own position in local government. He is also a brother of a well-known local MP who manages the biggest construction company in the province. At the caravan fair, the headman of Ban Nawaeng Mai brought a copy of the project proposal that he and his village committee had submitted to the Khemarat district office about five months before. The Caravan event had opened up a space for the headman to approach not only the district chief but also the chairman of the PAO and his council members simultaneously.

Six months after the talk between the leaders of Ban Nawaeng Mai and the seniors (phuyai) of the province, the headman announced the approval of the fai maeo project. The villagers, however, had not simply been waiting for the result of their proposal. From time to time, whenever they attended meetings in town, village leaders who also held positions in the TAO would stop by the district office, or at the Office of Civil Works in Ubon Ratchathani, to ask about the proposal’s progress. The headman also often visited the construction company, run by the local MP. These efforts, combined with regular phone calls by one of the Strong Community Group members who continually presented his informal reports on grassroots political issues to the local MP, helped accelerate the project’s approval.

Besides fostering their connections with the authorities, the villagers also attended to their domestic affairs in order to present themselves as a strong and benign community. On several occasions in village meetings, the subdistrict head had explicitly expressed to his fellow residents that he would like to see the communities under his responsibility declared drug-free areas. Nawaeng subdistrict had been listed as one of the sensitive areas for cross-border drug trafficking. The community began a school campaign to educate local youth about the dangers of, as well as the laws against, trading in illicit drugs. The village committee also initiated the rotation of community guards for night surveillance along the Mekong riverbank. By showing such eagerness and active conformity with the state’s immediate concerns, the village hoped to please high-ranking provincial officers and hence garner more support for development projects. Through their consistent visits to many state agencies and the reciprocal actions with the state’s campaigns on local issues, the local leaders had endeavored, over several months, to keep their project at the forefront of official attention. Finally, these actions gained traction and the fai maeo project was approved by the Regional Irrigation Office in Ubon Ratchathani.

Nationally, several tumultuous political events were going on at the same time, especially in Bangkok, between 2006 and 2008. On the night of September 19, 2006, a military coup d’état overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. After the coup, the military junta called for a nationwide referendum for a new constitution. In Ban Nawaeng, information booklets and copies of a draft constitution were widely disseminated to villagers a few weeks before the referendum. In August 2007, a national majority of voters accepted the military-drafted constitution in the hope that the nationwide general election would be
held soon after. Sixteen months after the coup, a national election was
held, on December 23, 2007, which elevated the People's Power Party led
by Samak Sundaravej—a political proxy of the now-fugitive Thaksin—to
form a coalition government. Samak took office and the new parliament
was convened on January 21, 2008. Under the newly elected government,
one of the local representatives from Ubon Ratchathani became an MP and
was assigned the position of Deputy Minister to the Ministry of Interior.
This newly-assigned Deputy Minister was, in fact, a brother of the chair
of the Ubon Ratchathani PAO, who had visited Ban Nawaeng only several
months before the national election.

It was not very long after that the local MP became Deputy Minister
of the Interior in February 2008 that the proposal for the construction of
the fai maeo started to materialize. However, as the villagers were later to
learn, the project changed from its original name of fai maeo to fai huay
Tat, or the "weir of Tat creek". This was to correspond to the larger size
of the newly proposed capacity of a reservoir that was expected to hold
about 700,000 m³ to 1,000,000 m³ of water. The former concept of fai maeo
as a small-scale and locally devised one, obviously, could not fit with the
grandness of the new scheme. In addition, by some bureaucratic alchemy
of development authorities at the national level as well as in Ubon, the
project, with its locally proposed budget of 195,000 baht, was revised into
a 20 million baht scheme. All in all, the village leaders claimed this was a
positive result gained from local participation in the process of initiation
and planning a development project.

Not only had the leading figures in the village participated in deciding
the reservoir size, they had also been involved with the selection of
project location. The Strong Community Group had led the technical
officials to the three construction sites as drawn in the proposal map.
During the site survey along the creek, the site near the confluence with
the Mekong was considered the most appropriate location. Prior to the
official survey by irrigation engineers from the provincial office, the
villagers had gone to the site to mark rocks and trees along the creek to
signify the areas where the Mekong waters would inundate during the
rainy season every year. When the engineers and other irrigation officials
came to the site, the villagers were ready to present their information,
along with the assertion that the marked area was exactly where the new
weir should be constructed. The reason for this, the villagers claimed, was
that the designated area could receive water from three sources into its
reservoir. These three sources were from the upstream of the creek itself,
the irrigation water that flowed from the canals and agricultural fields
into drainage canals and emptied into the swampy forest, and lastly,
from the annual inland Mekong flood. Given the local point of view and
information presented, the officials saw no reason to reject the rationale
and responded with positive assurances. Several months thereafter,
when land was cleared for the construction of the weir, it was in the exact
location proposed by the group of villagers (Figure 2.3). As we see here,
"local knowledge" was well received and incorporated into the "technical"
design and construction of the state project.

Figure 2.3 The Construction of New Tat Creek Weir in Ban Nawaeng Mai

Conclusion

In a recent book on communities and states in mainland Southeast
Asia, Walker (2009b, 2009c) argues against the presumption that exists
among scholars and activists working on community development issues
that there is a dichotomy between state power and the local nature of
community development. Studies on community development, he argues,
often portray the state as ruling and locality as resisting. Walker proposes that rather than being destroyed by the “penetration” of state authorities, these communities have been, or are being, created as a result of dialogue with state power (2009c: 23). Such creation of what he terms “modern communities” can be observed from the process of participation in rural improvement projects initiated by both the government agencies as well as by locals with support from the government. “These projects,” Walker writes, “are sites of institutional elaboration where forms of community organization represent the blurred interface between state and locality” (2009c: 11–12). In other words, in many contexts of “modern community,” the boundary between state officials and local residents is negotiated, indistinct, and dynamic.

The concept of community may be notoriously slippery to define (Reynolds 2009: 27). But for villagers, it is precisely this “slipperiness” that serves them well in facilitating the flow of power and resources into their locality. As we have seen, Ban Nawaeng Mai strategically described itself simply as a community. This could not have been done if the concept of community was too rigid. As articulated through the writing of a project proposal, the strategically simplified narrative of community proved to be a useful apparatus in rendering the village both legible and welcoming in the eyes of the state. The proposal was where the villagers could express themselves as a benign community consisting of people with the will to improve, agriculture-oriented, and loyal to the state’s development agenda. In addition, the proposal was a strategy in which they could draw a boundary and indicate useful development facilities. Finally, the narrative of resource utilization was simplified to match externally oriented goals.

In addition to the creation of a modern community through the process of simplified representation, we also see here that the community was being actively created as a result of its dialogue with state power. As in other cases of community dealings with state development schemes (Li 2005, 2007; Forsyth and Walker 2008; Walker 2009a, 2009c), the people of Ban Nawaeng Mai sought more involvement with the state agencies as long as they could see a productive outcome. The formation of a local group, the circulation of the development proposal to several state agencies, the engagement with local government agencies’ activities, and the willingness to show their political support for authorities and local MPs are all testament to how the villagers of this community represented themselves to the political channels they found useful in order to establish a dialogue with the state for achieving particular ends.

We see here how power and resources can be manipulated through the way in which a community constructs itself to match the eyes and mind of the state. The ways in which local people make themselves legible to the authority also reveals how the state can see community through a simplification lens (Scott 1998). Learning from the case of Ban Nawaeng Mai, it is not only the state officials that “aspire to a uniform, homogenous, and national administrative code” (Scott 1998: 35). Villagers themselves have also played a crucial role in constructing their community in a way that suits not only the state’s expectations, but also to serve their own aspirations for development. This study shows exactly how local people employed the popular narrative based on selective features of community “deterioration” to construct a space for political mobilization and participation. The aim, in this case, was not to challenge or resist the state. Rather, it was a strategy to assert their participation in the state’s development schemes.