


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The uncertain world: The gift of development on the Mekong

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Abstract

Development promises change. It is fundamental to the word both in English and in Lao: an improvement towards a pre-determined goal, but it is a process that is never entirely complete. In the Lao-speaking parts of Thailand, promises of development have formed the key commitments of particular regimes: military and monarchical, neoliberal and capitalist. Each presents a future that is nationally focused, guided by a paternalistic hand, be it that of a general, monarch, or tycoon. Spirits, too, play into such regimes, ensuring that development projects will fulfil their promises and that more such projects will come.

But what happens when these goals shift towards distant centres of power? Here, I examine the magico-religious aspect of these promises. As large-scale hydropower on the Mekong, part of Chinese infrastructure projects, throws the river into chaos, new regimes of development arise. In the realm of popular religion, the link between spirits and development, too, has altered, with old powers' promises growing stale, and new ones yet to appear.

And between these two conflicting orders of power—orders that collapse state and religious dimensions—emerge different pathways towards navigating the uncertain world: an appeal towards other sources of monarchical authority, a search for survival in a newly shifting and globalized realm, and a waiting for a future as yet unrevealed.

Keywords: Hydropower; development; Thailand; animism; rivers

Introduction

Mae Rum leads me up a winding path to a lookout over the Mekong River.¹ I am annoyed. She has promised to show me 'a papaya as big as a person', but this promised papaya has revealed itself to be a large papaya *tree*, and not an astronomically large fruit. The latter would have been much more impressive. Further, she has enlisted me to carry all the fruit she plucks on her trip, unceremoniously rolling the papaya down

¹Pseudonym, as is 'Ban Beuk'. Thai names are multiple—there is one name on the census registry, and another is used in popular conversation. In Lao-speaking areas, older women often take a new name on the birth of their first child, e.g. 'Mother of Rum'.

the hill towards my lagging feet to catch, pick up, and tuck under my arm. It is not yet noon, and I am sweating.

At the top of the hill, and the end of her garden, we reach a broad, flat lookout and peer out across the border, into Laos. ‘The army made this, out of their own generosity, so the villagers could have such a nice view.’ I have my doubts. I imagine that the army would have cared little for building lookouts for villagers, such as those in Ban Beuk, Mae Rum’s hometown in the far northeast of Thailand, to see the mist roll in off the Mekong River as Rum imagines; rather, this is a key artillery position overlooking the passage. But, for Rum, it is a gift; ‘It is development (*man kheu phatthana*²),’ says Rum.

But for whom? To what end? In this article, I look at the notion of the ‘gift’ of development and the changes this idea has undergone, from an era where development was thought of as the result of the benevolence of charismatic leaders—from semi-divine kings to spirits that reign over particular reaches of the river—towards a ‘self-propelled’ movement into an uncertain world, one fraught with danger but with the potential for riches.

The gift of development

During the reign of Bhumibol Adulyadej, the royalist clip played before every film shown in theatres—and for which viewers were required to stand—epitomized this notion of development as a gift from a higher power. The camera swept over hydropower dams and lingered on the wonder on villagers’ faces when seeing electric lights flare into operation. While in the early 2000s the clips presented Isan villages displaced in time, as electrification had happened a generation or more ago in most Isan villages, it was during King Bhumibol’s reign in the 1980s that Ban Beuk’s roads were paved and electricity lines installed. Controversial tycoon Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s attention to the region, too, was framed as his generosity—a framing that may have served to speed his ousting at the hands of the military, with the accusation that he had sought to play the role of monarch. But recent developments have been more ambiguous. In the years since Bhumibol’s reign, the effects of these hydropower projects have come home to Mekong populations and, along with a military suppression of Thaksin’s elected government and the pro-Thaksin movement (a movement in which many in the village participated), led to a souring of the notion of Bangkok-led, royally mandated development among many.

Gifts, though, keep coming—unasked-for and, often, unwanted. New projects abound on the Mekong, both those based in Bangkok as well as in China. The Thai term *krengjai* evocatively captures the feeling of unease upon receiving a too-generous gift—one wonders what unspoken expectations come along with such a gift.

But the logic of the gift from on high was not the only model of development on the river—another path to prosperity was a more independent, often precarious, ‘self-propelled’ notion,³ one where the state retreats and allows a heady mix of private

²มันคือพัฒนา

³Aihwa Ong, ‘Chinese modernities: Narratives of nation and capital’, in *Ungrounded empires*, (eds) Aihwa Ong and David Nonini (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 173.

industry to emerge. For many of my interlocutors, the lure of migrant labour, especially in the wake of the collapse of the fisheries, became compelling—here, at least, was failure or success resting not on the generosity of one's lord, but on a canny navigation of shifting currents.⁴

The word 'development' carries with it a host of historical and political valences, especially in the Mekong watershed in Thailand—the Lao-speaking Northeast or 'Isan'. Isan was, in the 1960s, a base for the Communist Party of Thailand, and development projects at the time were often done via the Thai state in tandem with American anti-communist forces,⁵ which emphasized building ideological bulwarks against communism via a kind of trinity of development, Buddhism, and royalism. In recent years, another ethos of development has entered the region, via the Shinawatra regimes' focus on transforming Isan residents into credit-fuelled, self-motivated, mobile entrepreneurs. Andrew Walker describes this new Isan force as 'middle income peasants', a decentralized but highly globally interconnected population with its own political ambitions—and new-found power.⁶

'Development' in anthropological literature brings to mind the expansion of state control,⁷ the expansion of capitalist interests,⁸ and, especially on borders, new sources of productive friction.⁹ Many authors have pointed out how such discourses amplify a system of dependence, vulnerability, or intensification of state or capital interests, and such critical approaches seek to find a solution to the inequalities of development in a larger-scale overturning of hierarchy.¹⁰ But in these analyses, the route to its critique emerges as a Marxist question on the contradictions of capital and power. Thus my scepticism at Rum's characterization of the 'gift'. But to understand her and her fellow villagers' perspective, we must see development as a gift; if development is done with royal/divine knowledge, as royalists see it, it is also done with benevolence. And, similarly, new forms of development have their risks and rewards: even if development in its 'self-propelled' form exposes villagers to the sharp edges of the market, it does so in the name of freedom.

What happens when such moral regimes shift? New labour regimes, as Chris Lyttleton describes, come with new regimes of desire—but also new crises.¹¹ These can

⁴Claudio Sopranzetti, 'Framed by freedom: Emancipation and oppression in post-Fordist Thailand', *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2017).

⁵Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, 'Intelligence memorandum: Northeast Thailand', United States Central Intelligence Agency, 1967.

⁶Andrew Walker, *Thailand's political peasants: Power in the modern rural economy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

⁷James Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine: Development, depoliticization and bureaucratic power in Lesotho* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); James Scott, *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁸Arturo Escobar, *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁹Anna Tsing, *Friction: An ethnography of global connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Franck Bille, 'Skinworlds: Borders, haptics, topologies', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2017); Thomas Nail, *Theory of the border* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁰Arturo Escobar, 'Sustainability: Design for the pluriverse', *Development*, vol. 54 (2011), pp. 137–140; Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine*, p. 8.

¹¹Chris Lyttleton, 'Stimulating circuits: Chinese desires and transnational affective economies in Southeast Asia', in *Chinese encounters in Southeast Asia*, (eds) Pal Nyiri and Danielle Tan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), pp. 214–233.

extend beyond the economic and social towards the existential—Funahashi describes the speechlessness engendered by a shift in the ethos of labour in Finland and a disruption in the idea of the gift,¹² as labour moves from a regime in which one gives the gift of work to one where such a moral economy is stripped clean, and one must learn to motivate, promote, and stand up for oneself—gifts are wasteful expenditures of energy. Such a shift suggests a change in regimes of development, as Rum’s notion of the gifts of a kindly military and monarchy shifts to a world where profit is available everywhere—for those who can understand and navigate a changed world. But what emerges on the Mekong is no Finnish speechlessness; rather, as Peter Jackson eloquently describes for the case of Bangkok’s middle and elite classes,¹³ new economies are infused with new religiosities.

The uncertain world

‘Too little water today’, fishermen often commented to me, or, simply, ‘lots of water’, noting the erratic ebbs that came suddenly, or, at other times, the dry-season pulses that had little connection either with rainfall or with fishermen’s memories of what the river should look like at this time of year. What they had to do with, rather, were electricity demands in far off Bangkok or China. Especially after the closure of the Jinghong Dam in China’s Yunnan province, fish catches had cratered, something not insignificant for a village in which fisheries provided some of the most stable livelihoods, especially for older men, who could no longer pursue migrant labour as their younger counterparts did. Multiple species of fish disappeared, including the enormous Mekong Giant Catfish—the pa beuk¹⁴—replaced by a hybrid species released as a means to ensure continual catches.

These dams are a part of the Belt and Road Initiative’s (BRI) efforts to reshape the fluctuating world of the Mekong into a controlled river mobilized for profit and sustainable hydropower—profit that heads to regional or national capitals. But such a vision carries with it unmentioned downstream effects, from ecological collapse to increased dangers to navigation—in short, an increasingly uncertain river.¹⁵ Controversies grew especially heated in the wake of the collapse of the Xe Pien Xe Namnoy dam,¹⁶ which shattered owing to poor construction and flooded several villages in Laos. But more than simply the threat of collapse, since the closure of the

¹²Daena Aki Funahashi, *Untimely sacrifices: Work and death in Finland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

¹³Peter Jackson, *Capitalism, magic, Thailand: Modernity with enchantment* (Singapore: ISEAS Press, 2022).

¹⁴Its ‘disappearance’ is a matter of conjecture. No pure beuk have been caught in the years since the dams, in a region once famed for them. See F. H. Giles, ‘An account of the ceremonies and rites performed when catching the pla buk, a species of catfish inhabiting the waters of the River Mekong, the northern and eastern frontier of Siam’, *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1932), pp. 90–113.

¹⁵Andrew Alan Johnson, *Mekong dreaming: Life and death along a changing river* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

¹⁶GRI, ‘Laos dam collapse reveals dangers of hydropower infrastructure in a changing climate’, Global Resilience Institute, Northwestern University, 2022, available at <https://globalresilience.northeastern.edu/laos-dam-collapse-reveals-dangers-of-hydropower-infrastructure-in-a-changing-climate/#:~:text=A%20report%20by%20the%20intergovernmental,and%20potentially%20increase%20poverty%20levels.%E2%80%9D,> [accessed 4 June 2024].

Xayaburi Dam in Laos, the Mekong has changed dramatically.¹⁷ Now, its water runs clear, without the life-giving silt of prior times, and its flow is marked by record dry-season lows interspersed with dry-season floods raising the water two metres or more overnight. Its impact was a clear sign of the environmental change on the river, but also of the new world of development, marked not by hierarchy and obligation but uncertainty.

Jerome Whittington describes uncertainty as a key feature built into hydropower development.¹⁸ Facing a lack of data on both the ecological as well as social factors surrounding Mekong dams, developers see uncertainty as a feature, not a bug, of new projects. However, those living in the shadow of such projects must deal with this uncertainty, and the detritus of being under the shadow of wealthy or influential others was an issue that many in Ban Beuk understood on an intimate level.

Here, then, is an intimate knowledge of gifts and what comes with them. On one level, the gift is elegantly wrapped—the BRI continues to emphasize prosperity and jobs, electrification, and the management of the river. As a Chinese article on the new Nam Ou hydropower project puts it: ‘The once-dark villages now have electricity around the clock, looking like a brand new world. At night light shines out of the windows of every household, and villagers can watch TV at home, and store fish in their freezers. They have switched to business from farming, and the village fair has become a bustling market.’¹⁹ But such characterizations only tell one side of the story. Missing here is the uncertain world: the absent fisheries, the displacement, the outflow of criminal activity, and deregulation in areas thought to be beyond state control. Increased activity on the border, at least at Ban Beuk, has meant other consequences: methamphetamine—*ya ba*—was heavily trafficked across the border at Ban Beuk, although its popularity was greater among urban labourers and university students and not my interlocutors. Elsewhere, in special economic zones—some not far from Ban Beuk—the border provides an area of loosened labour laws, where the state partially withdraws its authority and private companies wield more power.²⁰ These, too, can include drug, human, and labour trafficking, call-centre and cryptocurrency scams, and casinos, creating the suspension of state authority and libidinal zones for Chinese, Thai, and Lao officials and businessmen.²¹ They are the unspoken costs of larger projects.

¹⁷Brian Eyler, *Last days of the mighty Mekong* (New York: Zed Books 2019); Pon Souvannaseng, ‘Fast finance and the political economy of catastrophic dam collapse in Lao PDR: The case of Xe Pian Xe Namnoy’, *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 97, no. 2 (2024), pp. 261–283.

¹⁸Jerome Whittington, *Anthropogenic rivers: The production of uncertainty in Lao Hydropower* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

¹⁹Ma Liwenbo, Liu Xiangchen and Souksanith Sisoulath, ‘The Nam Ou River Cascade Hydropower Project: Epitome of China-Laos friendship’, Chinese Ministry of Commerce, 2023, available at <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/beltandroad/la/enindex.shtml>, [accessed 4 June 2024].

²⁰Stephen Campbell, *Border capitalism, disrupted: Precarity and struggle in a Southeast Asian industrial zone* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2020); Pal Nyiri, ‘Enclaves of improvement: Sovereignty and developmentalism in the special zones of the China-Lao borderlands’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 54, no. 3 (2012), pp. 533–562.

²¹Michael O'Regan and Jaeyeon Choe, ‘Reframing and reconceptualizing gambling tourism in Macau as a Chinese pilgrimage’, *Tourism Geographies*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2017), pp. 508–528; Louisa Schein, ‘Gender and internal Orientalism in China’, *Modern China*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1997), pp. 69–98; Sebastian Strangio, *In the dragon's shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

What is to be gained here by looking at development not through the eyes of interested officials, but in conversation with those who see both the possibility and the hidden costs of the gift? It is my contention here that the discussion of development, seen from the banks of the Mekong, must take into consideration not only a political-economic question, but also the system of hierarchical obligation between authority figures²² and their subjects—what elders (*phi*, elder sibling, social superior) owed to their youngers (*nong*),²³ and vice-versa. It raises questions about relations and exchange between categories of beings—spirits and humans, kings and commoners—and complicates sovereignties that extend beyond the human and towards the divine.

It is to the moral, religious, and ethical dimensions of development that I now turn—to the role of kings and spirits, mediums and nagas that govern the way that gifts flow through these changing environments and trajectories of development. I argue that, like the epidemic of speechlessness among Finnish white-collar workers that Funahashi describes, a shifting moral regime is also at hand on the Mekong, one that requires us to think through development as a question of religion and ethics as much as infrastructure and economy.²⁴

Masters of the waters

Just down the hill from Rum's lookout, in a glade behind the temple, is where a lord (*jao*) holds court. This is not Bhumibol or his successor, Vajiralongkorn, but the master of a conical island midstream in the Mekong—a ghostly king, who descends to inhabit the body of a frail older woman whom I call Mae Oi. A long time after entering her trance, which involves dancing to the music of the *khaen*, a Laotian wind instrument made of bamboo, Oi departs, and the king takes over her body. He drinks whisky by the pint and smokes chilli-laced cigars, vices that, according to Oi, leave no trace upon her body when he exits.²⁵ But what he is really there to do is to answer questions from those in the village. How to handle a buffalo theft? Can he help a student get into a technical school? And, significantly, what to do about the dams on the Mekong?

The lords of places are a common feature in many parts of Southeast Asia, and especially in northern and northeastern Thailand and Laos.²⁶ Here, particular geographic

²²Holly High uses the term 'masters' as a translation of the Thai/Lao term *jao* (or, in her transliteration, *caw*). เจ้า can mean both 'master of a language', 'owner of an object or property', or 'lord, king, or queen'. See Holly High (ed.), *Stone masters: Power encounters in mainland Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2022).

²³As an example, in a 2023 meeting in which the new Thai government sought to improve ties with China, the Thai prime minister, Srettha Thavisin, in saying that the two countries were natural siblings, felt the need to clarify that China was the *phi*. Thai Rath, 'นายกฯ โชว์วีซี ได้เบอร์โทรสายตรง-จีน' รับปาก แก้เครื่องยนต์ 'เรือดำน้ำ' [PM shows off direct line to China: Receives promise to fix submarine issue], 19 October 2023, available at <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/2734043>, [accessed 4 June 2024].

²⁴Julia Cassaniti, 'Up in smoke: Cosmopolitical ecologies and the disappearing spirits of the land in Thailand's agricultural air pollution', in *Cosmopolitical ecologies across Asia: Places and practices of power in changing environments* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

²⁵Lao has no gendered pronouns. I change my English pronouns here to indicate that Mae Oi's body is now possessed by a male spirit.

²⁶Michael Rhum, *The ancestral lords: Gender, descent, and spirits in a northern Thai village* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994); Rosalind C. Morris, *In the place of origins: Modernity and its mediums in northern Thailand* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Andrew Alan Johnson, *Ghosts of the new city: Spirits, urbanity and the ruins of progress in Chiang Mai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

features have animate beings living within them,²⁷ beings that claim the title of *jao* and exert a kind of hierarchical position vis-à-vis the animals and people in their domain. Here, I follow recent scholarship²⁸ that points out such beings as a part of a social world,²⁹ arranged into nobles and commoners, *phi* and *nong*.³⁰ Following Julius Bautista, I treat such beings ‘as they are’,³¹ as a part of the web of powers that villagers must navigate,³² and which, like human lords, if correctly cultivated, promise a source of future prosperity.

What the *jao don* is, then, is a sovereign, a being that, like the *neak ta* of Cambodia, is ‘neither superstition nor supernatural, but foundational’, something that, via the exercise of charismatic power (*barami*), ‘shapes claims to kingship and territorial sovereignty’.³³ And like a king, he shares much with his human counterparts. He holds a certain sway over a population and geographic location. But these systems, too, are vulnerable to the waxing and waning of power. Lutz, for instance, describes the decline of a particular lord of a hill in Khmu parts of Laos.³⁴ Sert, the divine lord of the region, claimed a store of power based on a hidden stash of gold within a mountain declared off-limits to his subjects. Chinese development projects ignored this, and simply placed power lines directly across the mountain, demonstrating Sert’s withdrawal from his relations with humans (or his non-existence), and villagers were thus free to farm on its formerly forbidden flanks. His power thwarted, the lord departed or was no longer needed.

Something similar is happening here. As notions of Bangkok-centred development like Rum’s become soured with the increase of negative downstream effects (literally and figuratively), villagers turn to these chthonic lords for aid. And, like with the Khmu, things do not go as planned. Here, too, is an indication of agency for all: state, village, international community, and divine beings.

Returning to the banks of the Mekong, Mae Oi’s island master (*jao don*) had agreed to intercede with a Laotian spirit lord to gain some benefit for his subjects. He raised an invisible handphone to his ear and called the ‘Laotian island master’ (*jao don lao*)³⁵—an entity new to all of us in the glade—to work out a deal. He argued with the Laotian

²⁷High specifically names stones, although in Ban Beuk these features included islands and deep-water pools. See High (ed.), *Stone masters*.

²⁸Ibid., p. 12.

²⁹Courtney Work, ‘The dance of life and death: Social relationships with elemental power’, in *Stone masters*, (ed.) High.

³⁰Guido Sprenger and Kaj Arhem, *Animism in Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

³¹Julius Bautista, *The spirit of things: Materiality and religious diversity in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: SEAP Press, 2012).

³²Hjorleifur Jonsson, ‘Revisiting ideas of power in Southeast Asia’, *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 32, no. 1 (2022).

³³Courtney Work, ‘Chthonic sovereigns? “Neak Ta” in a Cambodian village’, *Asia-Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 20, no. 1 (2019), pp. 74–95.

³⁴Paul Lutz, ‘The party-state has come’, in *Stone masters*, (ed.) High.

³⁵The use of the word ‘Lao’ here needs some unpacking. Villagers in Ban Beuk spoke the Vientiane dialect of Lao, but would often distinguish themselves as ‘Isan’ (Northeastern) and not Lao, invoking the political divide between the two countries as a reason for their separation. Upon further questioning, people would generally admit that the two languages, Isan and Lao, were nearly indistinguishable outside of some Central Thai or Teochieu loanwords (e.g. *kwaytiao* instead of *feu* for noodle soup), but point to prosperity and years under Bangkok as key differences.

river lord only to return with a dry statement, 'this is what they need for their own development' (*jam pen pheua kan phatthana prathet*). But the argument raised the dual nature of development: one truth for those in palaces and office buildings—or divine realms—and another with which local people simply have to deal. Here, the two river lords enact bureaucracy and the kinds of high-stakes negotiations carried out by nation-states, but in another realm. It is notable here that the workings of power do not distinguish between the divine and the national—each exists here as a source of potential.³⁶

The men with whom I was sitting erupted in a burst of mockery, causing the island master to backtrack. The master responded that he heard the men's plight, and returned to his phone call. After some consultation (to which we could only hear one side given that the phone was a supernatural one), he responded that he could negotiate with the Lao river lord to provide a gap in the dam; a hole through which water could still pour. It seemed a compromise—Laos could have its electricity and the villagers could have their water.

But his audience was uninterested in such compromises. This call brought howls of outrage: a dam with a hole in it? 'It will burst!' A man whispered to me: 'Do you really believe this? Some people say that she is just a crazy old lady.'³⁷ One migrant worker, heckling the river lord's performance,³⁸ provoked Mae Oi into calling him out of the crowd and to the makeshift stage, where he was forced to pay respects lest he be struck down in a car accident. His respectful prostration was to be accompanied by a payment of a hundred *baht*,³⁹ money that the man borrowed from me. The money meant little to the migrant worker, rich by community standards, and his show of getting the money from me demonstrated to all that he did not need supernatural connections when he had an international one. One hundred *baht*, while a reasonable sum to Mae Oi, meant little to him. While performing his prostrations, he grinned at the rest of the men, and laughed as he sat down again next to me.

Here, then, is an appeal—a failed one—to royal authority in the name of development. It is not a decoupling of the supernatural from development itself. In contrast to the island master and his appeal to place-based authority is another: the Black Naga, to which I will turn shortly. But first, I must deal with the island master's temporal counterpart—the king in Bangkok.

In an image from the mid-twentieth century, the Thai king Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, stands in a pale blazer in front of a tropical hillside. He is unassuming, but remote as he stands apart from the five men staring at him expectantly. He is young, with his black hair faintly receding and his eyeglasses perched resolutely on his nose as he stares down at a pile of charts and maps. Looking towards him are a collection of representative officials: two men in military dress, two in suits, and a last one in an engineer's jumpsuit, all standing at attention. It is an old picture, with the blurry

³⁶See Benedict Anderson, 'The idea of power in Javanese culture', in *Culture and politics in Indonesia*, (ed.) Claire Holt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 1–70.

³⁷I use 'she' here as the man referred to Mae Oi as *nying*, woman, in the next statement and I thus infer that he meant Mae Oi, not the island master—whose existence or at least presence on that day, I also infer, he was doubting.

³⁸'If you're calling Laos, you need to dial the international calling code first!'

³⁹About US\$ 3.

colourfulness of late 1960s film, but it is one that is immediately recognizable to nearly any Thai citizen. So too the power dynamics involved—here are the symbols of the Thai state: the doers, patiently awaiting the judgement of the thinker. The king, according to this and other images put forward by the monarchy, is not learning from the assembled team, rather, the king is ‘verifying’ what he already knows and informing the experts about it.⁴⁰

It is a common enough image, one of a number snapped from a handful of excursions that the Thai king made to the countryside, especially during the mid-twentieth century. Here is the king pointing again to a map while a general looks on, concerned. Here he is *again* with a map while an elderly villager looks over. On the back of the 1,000-baht banknote, here is the king, camera around his neck, looking over a hydropower project.

Each image suggests a story. The king immediately sees the problem and suggests a solution. At times, the mild-mannered king grows impatient at the poor foresight of his bureaucrats. He does not need to learn. He cannot be wrong. He knows, because he feels the pain of his subjects, and he enacts rainmaking missions, bridges, temporary flood-relief dams (*fai*), opium replacement projects, arriving immediately at the scientifically correct path and seeing through the venality of public officials or environmentalists for opposing his plans (for instance, to construct a series of hydropower dams on the jubilee dates of his coronation).⁴¹

This image of the Thai king, what Hewison terms the ‘total standard view’ of the monarchy,⁴² as the mild-mannered but serious man sweating over maps in the tropical sun, recalls a monarch far from either the European-style dilettante royal that Bhumibol first presented himself as, or even the righteous Buddhist *dhammaraja*, who exists at a remove from worldly matters. Here is a man who sweats and works. His work is, clearly, development in its most technocratic sense. This ‘Developer King’⁴³ invents new rice aeration projects, enacts irrigation plans, and designs high-yield rice crops. His name graces the Bhumibol hydroelectric dam (built in 1958). He is the king of waters—indeed, David Blake cites Bhumibol’s water-management portfolio as central to the cultivation of his royal image.⁴⁴

Here is a blending: the divine and the mundane, and, in the media depicting the everyday lives of the royals under Bhumibol, the domestic—a dynamic familiar to post-industrial royal families far beyond Thailand. This blending of divinity and mundane expertise is central to the royalist perspective on development. Until the numbers of college graduates became too great and the king’s health too poor, each higher degree was handed personally from the monarch to a graduate (and in many cases even now is handed from a lesser royal), indicating that knowledge passes not from professor

⁴⁰Sarun Kittikarn, ‘Entertainment nationalism: The royal gaze and the gaze at the royals’, in *Saying the unsayable: Monarchy and democracy in Thailand*, (eds) Ivarsson Søren and Lotte Isagar (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2010).

⁴¹See Paul Handley, *The king never smiles: A biography of Thailand’s Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁴²Kevin Hewison, ‘The monarchy and democratisation’, in *Political change in Thailand: Democracy and participation*, (ed.) Kevin Hewison (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 58–74.

⁴³Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *A history of Thailand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁴David J. H. Blake, ‘King Bhumibol: The symbolic “Father of Water Resources Management” and hydraulic development discourse in Thailand’, *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2015).

to student, but is a gift from monarch to subject. Knowledge here is a quality that is granted, that moves through the system of power—it is *panya* (wisdom), not the product of study and critical thought, but the result of a moral status;⁴⁵ thus the king, as the source of such gifts of knowledge, should have total knowledge. Recall the relationship between royalty and knowledge in an earlier period in Thai history. Upon the arrival of Europeans who sought to impress their knowledge of astronomy on Siam by introducing the idea of a round globe, the Thai then-king informed his advisers that these foreigners had said nothing new. Instead, the king berated his councillors for not listening to him each time he had previously told them that the world was round ‘like an orange’.⁴⁶ Knowledge is always in the royal domain, though bureaucrats, being human, fail to distribute it where it needs to go.

Here, there is fusion of the origins of knowledge—even technical knowledge—in worldly study and divine natures. ‘Divine’ here is to be taken—partially—literally. The king’s title, Rama, refers to the martial avatar of Vishnu, a deity that holds a powerful place in Theravada Buddhism and especially in Thai kingship. Palace officials are quick to note that the king is not *actually* a god (*thep*), rather, he is a *supposed* god (*samuttithep*). This ‘supposed’ quality, however, is often elided in public use. His wisdom is often presented as uncannily astute.⁴⁷ What he touches holds a magical quality—newspapers run stories of houses that burnt to the ground, leaving only a portrait of the monarch, amazingly untouched.⁴⁸ In descriptions of his rainmaking projects, the royal office is coy with its language: to one audience describing cloud seeding and to another invoking the king’s intercession with heavenly beings.⁴⁹ In 2011, in his final years, his daughter invoked an outflow of blood from the king’s colon as a reflection of how the king’s very body bled for his polity during catastrophic floods.⁵⁰

I wish to underline the similarities of the island master and the Thai king. Here, the land and infrastructure of the country, especially as relates to water, and the body and mind of the king are one and the same. Thongchai Winichakul describes in a similar way how the ‘geo-body’ of the nation became a metonym for the body of the monarch, with distant provinces like ‘the tips of fingers’ and Bangkok at its heart.⁵¹ By inserting himself as an avatar not simply of Rama, the defeater of evil, but also a buddha-to-be and thus a font of wisdom of all sorts—scientific knowledge, prosperity, moral guidance, and religious acuity—Bhumibol fuses the nation and his own body. Moral conduct, nationalism, technological development, and divine providence

⁴⁵Daena Aki Funahashi, ‘Rule by good people: Health governance and the violence of moral authority in Thailand’, *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2016), pp. 107–130.

⁴⁶Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: The history of a geo-body of a nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994).

⁴⁷Ivarsson Søren and Lotte Isagar, ‘Introduction: Challenging the standard total view of the Thai monarchy’, in *Saying the unsayable*, (eds) Søren and Isagar, pp. 1–26.

⁴⁸‘Patihaan fai phao baan—Ruup nai luang mai mai [Miracle! Fire burns house—Picture of the king does not burn]’, *Daily News*, 18 January 2008.

⁴⁹Peter Jackson, ‘Virtual divinity: A 21st century discourse of Thai royal influence’, in *Saying the unsayable*, (eds) Søren and Isagar, pp. 29–60.

⁵⁰Andrew Alan Johnson, ‘Moral knowledge and its enemies: Conspiracy and kingship in Thailand’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 86, no. 4 (2013), pp. 1059–1086.

⁵¹Thongchai, *Siam mapped*

become one and the same, with Thais possessing varying qualities of this knowledge in a unilinear scale, beginning with Thailand's 'underdeveloped hill tribes (*chao khao*)' and leading to the palace.

For royalists, such as Fa, whom I interviewed at the Chaipattana (Victory of Development) Foundation, an NGO founded by Bhumibol in 1988, reconciling the divine nature of the monarchy with Thailand's development (focused on the United States and Japan as exemplars) was inexorably tied in with the figure of the monarch. Struggling with a translation for the Thai term *barami*,⁵² which Fa held to be central to Bhumibol's ability to develop the Thai nation, she dismissed my suggestion of 'charisma'. 'Bad people can have charisma. Dictators.' Fa suggested 'greatness' instead, but was still dissatisfied with this attempt to capture an English equivalent for *barami*: the personal magnetism, wisdom, religious power, and righteousness of the monarch. Om, another royalist, responded to a slightly cutting remark I had made about Bhumibol being the wealthiest monarch in the world in a country with abject poverty, with the retort: 'and to think, he uses all that money to help the Thai people!'. Monarchy, nationalism, benevolence, and divine grace are all, at least for these two people, tied. As a dam retains and releases water to those downstream, development belongs to the king, and it is through his grace that the nation receives it. The comparison seems strange until one realizes that most major hydropower projects are held the names of the royal family.

The terms for development are multiple—there is *phatthana*, which implies a physical development, and *charoen*, which indicates something more spiritual, something linked to Buddhist enlightenment. One might distinguish between development and prosperity—the terms are close enough that 'this country has *phatthana*, but not yet *charoen*'⁵³ is both understandable as a critique but also close enough to be a joke—there is development, but no prosperity. The terms are used religiously in ways that extend beyond Bhumibol's dynasty, though no less towards similar sources of royal power. When I conducted field research in Chiang Mai in 2006–2007 there were several groups of spirit mediums channelling the authority of gods from other ages (*yuk*), with names such as the 'group for development (*phatthana*)', whose aims were to fuel development by contacting Hindu spirits (*thewadda*).⁵⁴ Further, *kho hai charoen* ('may you develop/prosper') was a common part of a blessing bestowed by these supernatural lords upon their supplicants. Development is a power that stems from outside, and

⁵²*Barami* has seen a great deal of work, especially as relates to 'animist' practices in Cambodia. See Work, 'The dance of life and death'; and Anne Yvonne Guillou, 'Khmer potent places: *Parami* and the localisation of Buddhism and monarchy in Cambodia', *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 18, no. 5 (2017), pp. 421–443.

⁵³See Andrew Alan Johnson, *Ghosts of the new city: Spirits, urbanity and the ruins of progress in Chiang Mai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014).

⁵⁴Justin McDaniel cautions against referring to *thaevadda* (e.g. Shiva, Indra) and other Hindu-derived practices (e.g. forest hermits) as 'Hindu', reminding scholars that such practices have been a part of Buddhism since the beginning. But the association is not mine—these groups explicitly wore Indian dress and, when possessed, mimicked Bollywood dance movements. However Thai the origins of *thaevadda*, it was the positioning of these spirits as both Indian and autochthonous that held fascination for these groups. Justin McDaniel, 'This Hindu holy man is a Thai Buddhist', *South East Asia Research*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2013), pp. 191–209.

trickles in via the arbitration of prestigious, *barami*-possessing mediators.⁵⁵ Or at least it should.

But such is a model of development as a gift, as something handed down from an elder to a subordinate. What, then, about new paradigms of development on the river, those that emphasize increased agency in a more precarious world?

Glitches in the floating world

The Belt and Road Initiative promises development from a different ‘elder’—an international, China-centred community. But this is not simply royalism redux—instead, BRI initiatives include hydropower far upstream, out of the reach of the Thai monarchy, and in places that do not bear the names of the royal family and their attendant regimes of *barami*, but rather Chinese place-names: Nuozhadu, Jinghong, Manwan. Special economic zones along the river, too, capitalize upon mobility, providing new sources of migrant work. Claudio Sopranzetti, describing the lives of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok, emphasizes the attraction of these new forms of capitalism⁵⁶—one’s prospects may be less certain, but one’s failure or success (so the imagination goes) depends on one’s own skill and luck, not on one’s origins.⁵⁷

And, like the island master, new religious forms emerge to mirror these new pathways towards development. An older medium—a man, dressed in the style of Khmer ascetic in contrast to Mae Oi’s Laotian-style mediumship—had set up practice in the mouth of a cave overlooking the river. He spoke Central Thai as well as the local dialect, and wore stark white clothing and a string of Mahayana (Chinese-style Buddhism) prayer beads around his neck.

The Black Naga—the name of the man’s possessing spirit—promised to assist his devotees along these new paths to prosperity. He took clients from villages up and down the riverbank, promising labour contracts in exchange for a cut (in addition to traditional offerings, such as pork heads).⁵⁸ His practice parallels new ways of being in a new economy, as capital and rhizomatic connections between individuals and labour circuits matter more than shows of local devotion. Here, too, we see the enchantments of the market and, if not a guarantee, at least assistance in navigating their fraught waters.⁵⁹

For Lauren Berlant infrastructure is ‘the lifeworld of structure’;⁶⁰ it is what makes structure take hold. Factory farms, highways, refrigerated trucks, and supermarkets allow for a certain kind of industrial agriculture and consumption to take place. Berlant’s definition is broad enough to include ideologies as well—families,

⁵⁵Work, ‘The dance of life and death’; Guillou ‘Khmer potent places’.

⁵⁶Xi Jinping has sought to frame the BRI as a new form of self-directed development, but I have not heard anyone refer to China as a source of *barami*, nor have Chinese framings of the BRI made much headway in my field site. Chinese effects upon the river are known more from Thai NGO discourse, or from simple observation, as I describe here.

⁵⁷Sopranzetti, ‘Framed by freedom’.

⁵⁸Indeed, he promised me an academic position, a prophecy that may well have been fulfilled.

⁵⁹Jackson, *Capitalism*.

⁶⁰Lauren Berlant, ‘The commons: Infrastructures for troubling times’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2016), pp. 393–419.

for instance, enable and normalize certain things. Development discourse, similarly, arranges the proper channels for newness to manifest—change is given via an unquestioned authority towards locals who should feel appreciative. But what we can see here is that development is always beyond, always within the realm of the foreign, mediated by those with the power to exist in two worlds and safely move newness from the outside to the local, whether they are kings, spirit mediums, or engineers. Berlant's infrastructure is, when working, static: a place like Ban Beuk is *developing*, not yet developed. It will never develop; even were it to look like Bangkok, Bangkok would have pulled ahead and the process would continue. It is constantly moving towards Bangkok, towards Singapore, or other loci of developmentalist dreams, but can never pull abreast (or much less ahead); its residents are objects, not subjects—they are acted upon, not actors. In this scenario, development acquires an air of the sacred, a becoming. Development is structure before the structure, the imagining into being of a thing before it is put in place, a gift from above. It is inevitable, and one should be grateful.

In this, the BRI echoes the map in the king's hand, but substitutes a rising China for the monarchy, without the attendant structure of gifts and grace. A centralized power desires a particular way of being, one that will allow a new infrastructure to become. Rather than seeing resources such as the Mekong as national patrimony, or the consequence of local chthonic power, to be guided by a royal hand (be it Bhumibol's or the island master's), the BRI and Black Naga alike present the Mekong as a current in an ever-changing circuit of potential, navigated by individuals. But the infrastructure that it brings carries with it sour notes—labour scams, pollution, and, of course, the downstream effects of hydropower.

Berlant discusses glitches in infrastructure; moments when new futures are imaginable. The failures of development on the Mekong seem to be just such a glitch—development does not lead to prosperity for the community, but to its atomization and scattering. It is a new glitch—recall Mae Rum's rosy assessment of development projects from the 1980s as gifts from a central authority towards a grateful periphery.

To take Berlant's notion of the gift, and Funahashi's speechlessness in the face of the gift's failures, as development is one imaginary towards prosperity—in Thai terms, if *phatthana* anticipates *charoen*—development's failures proffer not an alternate imaginary but open the field of possibility wider. Development as a freely given gift may not exist, but development itself is still there for the seizing.

But in this self-propelled world, all recognize that China will do what China wishes—changes will come whether or not they are desired. With a new, rootless, self-propelled notion of personal development along the lines of individual desire, many fishermen had already ceased going to the island master's shrine; most that I knew favoured the shrine of the Black Naga. Instead of hedging around impossible demands to end the forward motion of development, the Black Naga's medium promised villagers that they could profit despite development's detritus. They could secure labour contracts, harvest hybrid fish after the pure strain fish perished—in other words, reshape themselves even as the world has been reshaped around them. On the Mekong, then, reactions to the glitches in development take multiple forms.

For one, the initial reaction to glitches is to deny their existence, an approach especially evident in authoritarian Laos. Whittington notes how construction companies

intentionally or unintentionally intimidate those who speak out.⁶¹ After an NGO aired a video critical of dam projects and featuring a villager complaining about the decline in fish, Lao Communist Party officials and dam developers identified the recalcitrant villager and went to his home. Faced with such a delegation, the villager recanted his protest and claimed to have been misrepresented—a claim that was taken by the foreign development agencies as a sufficient exercise of community consultation. Glitches, in other words, do not exist. It is the jealous, imperialist, foreign powers that imply glitches.

Or, alternately, as the Black Naga suggests, glitches are moments of opportunity. Watching the water from the Thai bank, a young man, born in the village but now working in Bangkok, expressed his take: '[Fishing] is an old way of life. We don't want to do what our grandparents did. This is development.' In other words, unprofitable (in terms of income) activities should naturally pass away in favour of those that yield (monetary) profits, identifiable and taxable by the state. Glitches may happen, but they are the sign of a past way of being that must necessarily give way.

Finally, the beleaguered island master presents another response to a glitch: a restoration fantasy in which a compromise can be reached between two gift-giving sources of *barami*.⁶² The dam must be built, but perhaps a kingly kindness could create a hole in the dam. The harsh edges of development can be shaved off and made less painful. One's way of life might simply be injured, and not destroyed. The fishermen's reaction to this—mockery—made clear their take, though others in the medium's audience were more sanguine about it.

Conclusion

I turn finally to Lert, a shrimp fisherman whose house clung to the ever-fluctuating riverbank, and which was flooded after a release of water from Jinghong. Lert's reaction was simply to wait.⁶³ The river was unpredictable, and ultimately unprofitable, and he had lost faith in the island master and the Black Naga alike—the dam continued despite the island master, and labour connections promised by the Black Naga were replete with corruption and scams. Nor was he able to see his livelihood as something that should pass by in the wake of progress. An alternate future, for Lert, was unimaginable, but necessary. Better, then, to wait for the unanticipated, for the yet-to-come.

Nils Bubandt, in *The Empty Seashell*,⁶⁴ describes the crisis that modernity brings to eastern Indonesia. Rather than giving surety and comfort to a town plagued with witchcraft, modernity instead opens the door for more uncertainty. As it decomposes traditional ways of knowing, modernity and Christianity expand the world of

⁶¹Whittington, *Anthropogenic rivers*.

⁶²Michael Herzfeld notes how the powerless can often find sources of resistance in conservative, traditionalist languages to combat these very sources of power. See Michael Herzfeld, *Subversive archaism: Troubling traditionalists and the politics of national heritage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

⁶³Or, in addition, to get the story out. Lert was adamant that I tell his story as often as I could and to as international an audience as I could; I do so now.

⁶⁴Nils Bubandt, *The empty seashell: Witchcraft and doubt on an Indonesian island* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

witchcraft—the world of the unknown. An unspeakable future opens—one echoing the unspeakable future that Lert waits for (see Funahashi on speechlessness⁶⁵).

Indeed, this is the counterside to both models of development. If development is the desire for infrastructure, the motivating force, then a directionless waiting for something else seems the only alternative. Lert's acquaintance, Mon, in a town down the road, had been dragged from his home by soldiers for opposing a gold mine in the village, and Lert did not have Mon's family connections that might ensure that he would be, as Mon was, released the following morning. He had also become disillusioned about working abroad after being scammed of several tens-of-thousands of dollars by a labour recruiter, so he saw little point in seeking to profit from a changed world. Rather, he sought to wait until the world itself changed, until a new future became thinkable again.

I have chosen to look at a small town on the river, and a relatively unremarkable one. This is a deliberate choice. Groups based in Chiang Khong, such as the Chiang Kong Conservation Group headed by Niwat Roykaew, or smaller groups based in Nong Khai have received public attention and acclaim, and mobilized popular support against projects like the BRI-associated blasting of rapids between China and Laos. But, while activists occasionally visit Ban Beuk (some in town had ties with a Nong Khai-based group), what these actually mean for the lives of fishermen is less clear. There is a world of difference between a public figure with a global audience and a fisherman seeking to simply make do with a changed world.

Here, I have charted the cargo cult of development, one that is articulated in quasi-religious terms, and which has become central to how development is understood on the river. Development, here, is not infrastructure itself but a desire for it, the reaching towards a new future that must, following the crypto-colonial,⁶⁶ royalist logic that has pervaded Thailand for the past few centuries, be filtered from above. But clearly something is changing here. Along with more widespread questioning of monarchical authority comes a questioning of larger projects. Bangkok, and the Thai royalty, were always, according to my interlocutors, 'far away', but they are no longer. Now, outside forces are obvious to all in the changing Mekong flow, in the clearness and emptiness of its waters. The outside forces that benevolent authorities claimed to be able to mitigate have impacted on the land to the point that the very way the world works has shifted. Development no longer remains a vague aspiration—it is here, and as it manifests, it gives birth to an uncertain world.

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⁶⁵Daena Aki Funahashi, 'Being noted', in 'Taking note: Complexities and ambiguities in writing ethnographic fieldnotes', (eds) Magdalena Zegarra Chiappori and Verónica Sousa, *American Ethnologist*, 26 August 2022, <https://americanethnologist.org/online-content/collections/taking-note/being-noted/>, [accessed 4 June 2024].

⁶⁶Michael Herzfeld, 'The absent presence: Discourses of crypto-colonialism', in *Enchantments of modernity: Empire, nation, globalization*, (ed.) Saurabh Dubhe (London: Routledge, 2011).

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