

**Discursive Competence and the Micropolitics of
Empowerment in Rural Thailand**
**บทบาทของความสามารถทางวาทกรรมในระดับจุลภาค
ของการให้อำนาจแก่ท้องถิ่นในประเทศไทย**

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วิจัยนี้ทำการศึกษาการสร้างการให้อำนาจในโครงการที่ประชาชนในชุมชนท้องถิ่นมีส่วนร่วมในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือของประเทศไทย ชาวบ้านในชุมชนนี้ทำการวิจัยเกี่ยวกับนิเวศวิทยาและชาติพันธุ์วรรณาด้วยตนเอง เพื่อเป็นวิธีการต่อต้านการเข้ามาล่งล่าของอำนาจรัฐ 'การสร้างอำนาจ' ใน บริบทนี้ประกอบด้วย การเข้าถึงและการสร้างรูปแบบวาทกรรมที่เป็นทางการ และทางวิทยาศาสตร์ ซึ่งรูปแบบของวาทกรรมนี้ได้มาจากประสบการณ์และความรู้ของชาวบ้านในท้องถิ่นนั้นและได้รับการ 'ขัดเกลา' ให้เป็นภาษางานเขียนในเชิงวิชาการการสร้างรูปแบบภาษาของวาทกรรมที่กล่าวมานั้น จำเป็นต้องอาศัยที่ปรึกษาโครงการที่เป็นนักวิชาการ เจ้าหน้าที่องค์กรเอกชน และผู้ช่วยวิจัย บุคคลเหล่านี้ไม่ใช่มีเพียงแค่ว่าทักษะด้านภาษาเท่านั้นในการสร้างวาทกรรม แต่ต้องมีสถานะทางสังคมด้วย เพราะเป็นสิ่งจำเป็นในการสร้างความชอบธรรมให้กับการสร้างวาทกรรมนั้น จุดมุ่งหมายที่สำคัญของโครงการวิจัยที่บ้านก็คือ การกระจายอำนาจและการมอบอำนาจให้กับท้องถิ่น โดยเปลี่ยนรูปแบบของอำนาจจาก 'บนลงล่าง' เป็นจาก 'ล่างขึ้นบน' แต่เมื่อทำการศึกษาการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์

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ระหว่างที่ปรีชาโครงการและชาวบ้านแล้ว พบว่า รูปแบบของอำนาจก็ยังคงเป็นแบบ 'บนลงล่าง'

Abstract

This paper examines the production of empowerment in a local community action project in Northeastern Thailand, in which local villagers undertake their own ecological and ethnographic research as a way to resist intrusive state practices. Empowerment in this context consists primarily in access to, and production of, literate, formalized forms of discourse that authenticate local villagers' experiences and knowledge, and produce written research reports-a process which involves 'translating' between everyday discourse and formalized discourses of science and bureaucracy. Access to such forms of language depends on project advisors-academics, NGO workers, activists, and research assistants-who not only have the linguistic skills to generate the discourse, but also have the social status necessary to legitimately embody it. The overarching aim of such Thai Baan projects is political decentralization and local empowerment-a change from top-down models of power to more grassroots, bottom-up forms of power. But examining typical interactions between advisors and villagers-i.e. through finegrained micro politics-we see how difficult it is to escape the top-down nature of political power.

Keywords *Formal discourse, scientific discourse, literacy, empowerment, Thailand, community action, ecology*

Local Empowerment: Thai Baan Research

This paper examines the production of empowerment in local community action projects ('Thai Baan' projects) in Northeastern Thailand, in which local villagers undertake their own ecological and ethnographic research as a way to resist intrusive state practices. Empowerment in this context consists primarily in access to, and production of, literate, formalized forms of discourse that authenticate local villagers' experiences and knowledge, and the production of written research reports-a process which involves 'translating' between everyday discourse and formalized discourses of science and bureaucracy. Access to such forms of language depends on project advisors-academics, NGO workers, activists, and research assistants-who not only have the linguistic skills to generate the discourse, but also have the social status necessary to legitimately embody it. The overarching aim of such Thai Baan projects is political decentralization and local empowerment-a change from top-down models of power to more grassroots, bottom-up forms of power. But examining typical interactions between advisors and villagers-i.e. through finegrained micro politics-we see how difficult it is to escape the top-down nature of power.

The programs I address here all fall under a loose rubric of community action projects called 'Thai Baan', meaning 'villager' in the Isan (i.e. northeastern Thailand) variety of Lao. There are several such research projects currently underway in northeastern Thailand; they are similar in conception and involve a number of the same players, but they are not officially affiliated. Data for this paper derives specifically from three such Thai Baan research programs in Isan, along the Mun river - one focusing on the wetlands area between Warin Chamrap and Ubon Ratchathani municipalities; one at the Rasi Salai dam in

Skriquet province, and the last at the Pak Mun dam, where the Mun river meets the Mekong in Ubon Ratchathani province. In one project (Warin Chamrap) I served as a project advisor; in the other two I did not serve in any official capacity, so the data I present stems from my observations of project functions which I attended and from secondary sources. At the time of my visits, the project at the Rasi Salai dam was nearing the end of its research period; the one in Warin Chamrap was just getting underway; and various struggles regarding the Pak Mun dam were ongoing (and have been for years), and is the project from which Thai Baan research originated (see Figure 1 below). I will devote a short section here to providing some background on Thai Baan research, since it becomes pertinent to the discussion of language, literacy and social empowerment that follows.

Figure 1: Southern tier of NE Thailand ('Isan') depicting location of Thai Baan Projects discussed here.



1. Rasi Salai (dam)
2. Ubon Ratchathani (wetlands)
3. Pak Mun (dam)

The northeastern region of Thailand ('Isan') has, since the inception of the Thai state, been the poorest and least developed region of the country. Water in Isan is scarce and soil is poor. Major rivers which run through the region-notably the Mun and the Chi-drain into the Mekong river and provide thousands of rural villagers along their banks water, fish and other resources; these rivers are subject to frequent state development projects which, somewhat ironically, often do more damage to local livelihoods than they do good. The ecosystems of these rivers are as fragile as they are diverse; rural cultures along the river have adapted over centuries to a complex river ecology that offers potential sustainability but little in the way of surplus. Central Thailand has tended to look down on Isan as economically and culturally inferior and has taken heavy-handed measures to 'alleviate' problems.

Lao speakers are considered by Central Thais to be rustic and rural, and not too bright. These sorts of stereotypes, based on language and the economic underdevelopment of Isan compared to the fast modernizing central region, only exacerbate government officials' tendencies to ignore the point of view of northeastern villagers (even, in many cases, when officials themselves are from the northeast), and to push ahead with technocratic development schemes largely insensitive to local social ecology (Cohen, 1991; Keyes, 1967; for a general anthropological discussion see also Scott 1998). Isan villagers have actively resisted and protested against intrusive and deleterious government projects, and the idiom of their protests has taken a variety of forms from armed rebellion to millennial Buddhism to communist insurgency. In recent decades, resistance has taken on the discourse of ecology, spawning protests against the mass planting of eucalyptus in 'denuded' forest land, the dumping of pollutants and waste water, and a host of water management projects

throughout the region-especially along the Mun river. The most (in)famous of these protests is the ongoing resistance to the Pak Mun Dam in eastern Ubon Ratchathani province.

Funded in part by the World Bank, the Pak Mun dam began service in 1994. The government argued the dam was needed to generate electricity and manage water, and environmental safeguards were purportedly taken to ensure that fish stocks would not be degraded. These safeguards came in the form of 'fish ladders' designed by the Japanese in which the fish, by navigating a series of steep twists and turns, could eventually swim across the dam to breed-the dam was thus purportedly ensured to be environmentally sound. But the fish ladders proved useless², fish stocks declined precipitously, and local villagers -those whose land was not inundated by the dam to begin with-found themselves with no livelihood. Rather than give up and join the swelling ranks of urbanized Isan proletariats, Pak Mun villagers protested-and have been protesting for well over ten years. The Thai government counteracted Pak Mun Dam protesters not only physically through the use of force and violence, but discursively by labeling them a 'mob' (using, in fact, the English borrowing). The term insinuates that villagers were violent, lawless, anarchic, and uncivilized. A mob does not think, and as such villagers were depicted (from the government's point of view) as being ignorant of the technical, economic, and environmental reasons motivating and, through the state's eyes, justifying the dam. The government further insinuated that the 'mob' was being seduced by an 'invisible third hand'-namely NGOs-and had no actual legitimate grievances of their own.

² It may even be the case that EGAT knew the fish ladders would not work before installing them - showing that their environmentalism was for public posturing and not genuine ecological concern.

The Pak Mun struggle, of which I will have more to say below, is still at an impasse. However, an important development did arise. The protesters of Pak Mun formed an important component of the emergent Assembly of the Poor in Thailand, a network of local action projects in which villagers, in conjunction with NGOs, student activists, academics and journalists, fight in unison for a variety of causes throughout rural Thailand (Missingham, 2003). The assembly helped villagers get organized, and to become a more viable political force. Baker (2000:26-28) makes the important point that in modern (-izing) Thailand, village life has changed; villages have become, in many senses, urbanized while still retaining links to the countryside. He writes: Villagers may derive a majority of their income from the urban economy, but who want to protect the rural base which still serves as their social security and cultural anchor. Baker points to this as a new kind of hybridized post-peasantry which retains vestiges of the self-sufficient style of peasant production, side by side with close involvement in the urban economy, largely through the sale of labour. It combines rural residence with constant rural-urban migration, and consumption of national and global culture. Strategically, the Assembly uses both the street and the mediascape to open up space in national politics for rural demands and questions the assumption that the countryside can still be managed through official paternalism. One of the discursive strategies the assembly deploys derives from their rural 'cultural anchor'; namely a discourse of the romanticized countryside as a place of peace, harmony, cooperation, and the location of true 'Thainess'. Another is a discourse of science, especially ecology, and the framing of their traditional knowledge in modern ecological terms. Such discourses are clearly discerned in the Thai Baan research to be

discussed here, and serves both as a rallying point among villagers and as a political stance for villagers vis a vis the government.

After many years of struggle, the government agreed to open the Pak Mun dam gates for one year to study the impact on the river ecology. From 2001-2003, at least four research programs were started to assess the ecological and socioeconomic impacts of the dam (Kanokwan, 2005). One was conducted by researchers at Ubon Ratchathani University; another by EGAT; another by the World Commission on Dams; and the fourth by impacted villagers themselves, with the support of SEARIN, an NGO linked to the International Rivers Network. Villagers in this project participated in identifying and quantifying fish stocks, and collected information on village fishing technology and local customs governing economic resources. Villagers thereby produced their own environmental impact report, in scientific form, that highlighted the environmental degradation the dam was causing and which competed with the reports made by other agencies. Rather than being a mob, these villagers began generating data (kho mun), and thereby made claims to being legitimate producers of scientific discourse.

This model of research quickly developed into what is now called Thai Baan research, and it has been replicated in a number of community action projects across the northeast (and beyond), including those at Rasi Salai and Warin Chamrap to be discussed here. Meant to be a form of 'counter-hegemonic' participant research (Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, in Thai Baan 2004:4), the results are, as Lang (2003:229) puts it, 'truly impressive'. The overarching methodology is to make villagers into researchers, and at the same time, from the point of view of the social scientists working on the projects, not to treat the villagers as simply informants. Villagers, in short, are meant to be empowered by being

active participants in the construction of powerful discourses (in this case, science) affecting their livelihoods. The ecological knowledge of lifelong fishermen, in particular, proved impressive, displaying a sophisticated understanding not only of fish types but of fish behaviors and ecological features. This has led some to claim that information collected by the Thai Baan researchers was far more detailed and nuanced than that of the other EIAs, which focused mainly on fish numbers (e.g. Lang ,2003: 231).

Thai Baan is meant to be effective for two reasons. First, it gives villagers access to the means of producing formalized discourse that may gain the ear of the state; second it galvanizes villagers as a political force by casting their struggle in terms of common Lao/Isan identity, grassroots democracy, and rights to livelihood. Of these two processes, how villagers create and deploy formalized discourse forms the substance of the present study. The key features I will discuss in relation to the Thai Baan projects include the access to scientific literacy and the production of formalized, written documents; and to a lesser extent the pitfalls of formal discourse and social legitimacy that arise in face-to-face interactions with representatives of the state. Although Thai Baan projects purport to be building grassroots empowerment, a close analysis of interactions in the program show that top-down power still pervades even the most mundane interactions, calling into question just how empowered villagers become. The present critique is not meant to disparage Thai Baan projects or participants - I am an enthusiastic supporter of both - but rather to examine, and thereby hopefully improve, the problems of power and representation at the microinteractional level.

To make the problem more concrete, consider the research report compiled by the Thai Baan project at the Pak Mun Dam, which describes the activities of participants this way: (Assembly of the Poor, 2002:1)³:

To assess fisheries impacts [sic], 20 experienced fishermen in the Pak Mun area collected fish samples from the Mun River. They took photographs of the fish, categorized and identified them. The fishermen discussed the fish one by one based on over 50 years of collective fishing experience and the wisdom they learned from their ancestors. The group made additions and correction [sic] as necessary. Research assistants recorded the final data, which was reviewed and carefully checked by researchers.

The village fishermen are here depicted as the core producers of the research; they are the active ones, whereas the project advisors take on a much more marginal, supportive role. Consider the processes ascribed to the two groups in the text above:

Table 1	
Village fishermen...	Advisors...
Collected samples	Recorded final data
Took photographs	
Categorized fish	
Identified fish	

³ A note on this reference: this quote comes from the printed version of the Thai Baan report produced in 2002. This differs from the version currently posted on the SEARIN website listed as 'Thai Baan 2004' and also in the bibliography.

Discussed fish	
Learned from their ancestors	
Made additions	
Made corrections	
Reviewed final data	
Checked final data	

Clearly, the research report is attributing the production of the research to the village fishermen. All we see advisors do is record the final data, which appears to be an insignificant-almost menial-supportive task. Is this an accurate - and complete - account of the division of labor in the production of knowledge? How are knowledge, language, identity and discourse assembled to produce power, and to what extent can villagers themselves assemble it? In other words, how and to what extent does this process of producing formalized, scientific discourse empower villagers?

Formal Discourse and Social Power

To answer these questions, I turn first to the nature of formal discourses and how they are embedded socially. Scientific discourse, and other formal discourses (e.g. bureaucratic discourse) that villagers have need of deploying, are in part linguistic means for establishing or maintaining sociopolitical power.⁴ Social actors able to produce such discourse can gain access to sociopolitical power-although perhaps not automatically, since they must also be perceived as legitimate producers of formal discourse by occupying particular subject-

⁴ Using formal language to secure social power is not only a characteristic of bureaucratic and scientific discourse, but of religious and ritual language, among others.

positions in relation to the discourse (Bourdieu, 1991). As an example, medical discourse is empowering, but primarily for those recognized to be in the subject-position of 'doctor', and to varying lesser extents for those occupying other social roles also related to the field of medicine. A patient who garners thorough information about their own condition is likely to be more empowered and more in control of their own fate than they were without such knowledge, but they are still less powerful than doctors, since the latter occupy a privileged subject position in the discourse.

Formalized, scientific discourse has several characteristics that must be considered here. First, it is typically written discourse, so that questions of literacy come into play, as does the use of the national language (Thai), which is the region's literate language. Second, scientific discourse may start as oral language (especially true in the case of ethnographic data), and then be formalized - so the processes of formalization become of interest. Third, the form of the discourse itself-i.e. the linguistic realization of scientific or bureaucratic fact-makes it linguistically resistant to challenges; as a depiction of the 'way things are', such language is devised to be beyond negotiation. As Rick Iedema (1999) writes, 'formality indexes interactional closure: it limits the possibilities for the renegotiation of agreements and decisions.' Such closure occurs both at the level of linguistic form and in its use. Certain linguistic features render formal discourse epistemic, orienting the production of discourse and subsequent action towards closure and authority. Iedema's article presents an account of how this process occurs in a bureaucratic context (see also Iedema, 1997; Sarangi and Slembrouck, 1996; Herzfeld, 1992; Shuy, 1998); Latour (1986, 1987) has shown a similar process at work in how scientific facts are fashioned; Halliday and Martin (1993) show how scientific discourse is (mis)taught in school; Bernstein

(1972, 1996) pioneered studies of how particular forms of 'elaborate' discourse characterizes education and the implications it has had for social class.

As Iedema shows, the epistemic quality of language may be realized in lexicogrammar. But it may also be realized in other features of the socialscape -genre, the medium [mode] of language, the interaction order, social role and identity, and, I would add, even the choice of code in a bilingual context. Both Iedema and Latour show how epistemic language is created in practice among human agents occupying particular social roles-in these cases bureaucrats or scientists. Scott (1998) shows how state officials systematically ignore local constructions of knowledge and privilege only those put into the form of formalized discourse (see also Foucault, 2003:179-182). But what if you are not a bureaucrat or a scientist? What access-if any-do the socially disempowered have to the power embedded in formalized discourse? Who can legitimately formalize discourse? How do the disempowered go about negotiating formal language if they have not been trained in the requisite literary skills?

The production of formalized discourse hinges on a number of technical factors. First, it relies on the recontextualization (Bernstein, 1990; Iedema, 1999:13) of discourse from one form into another-in Iedema's work, we see the voices of a number of bureaucrats transformed into a single, written document; in the current paper, we will see how the voices of villagers are recast into scientific reports. Formalized discourse relies heavily on the linguistic transformation of deontic discourse into epistemic discourse through a process of demodalization and generalization. Thus, for example, a modalized deontic statement such as I need some money, so I should cut down that eucalyptus tree and sell it might be transformed by a social scientist into a demodalized, epistemic statement: Peasants, due to their appropriation into the national and global economies,

rely on cash crops such as eucalyptus to supplement their subsistence resources. This process of discursive translation, arguably the backbone of social sciences, transforms the modalized, situated, actionable statement of a farmer into a naturalized, social-scientific fact. Fairclough (2003: 31-33) characterizes such recontextualization as a transformation from a 'practical genre' (what a real person does in a real situation) to a 'genre of governance' in which the demodalized form gets depicted as a naturalized order, or as he succinctly puts it, the way things are.

Halliday (in Halliday and Martin, 1993:39) shows how scientific language in English insulates itself from negotiation: through a process of rank-shifting (in which a higher-ranked linguistic constituent becomes a lower-ranked one), clauses are 'downgraded' to phrases and words. The example phrase Halliday gives comes from Stephen J. Gould, in turn citing Darwin (the phrase of interest is italicized): 'instead of Darwin's gradual rise to mounting complexity, the 100 million years from Ediacara to Burgess may have witnessed three radically different faunas.' If we dispute this proposition (perhaps by saying: no it didn't), what we are contesting is the process 'may have witnessed' from the overall clause, not the implied assertion concerning Darwin's stance towards complexity. The key insight here is that clauses represent arguments - they can be negotiated - whereas words and phrases do not. That makes them more difficult to challenge.

I should emphasize that most of the linguistic work in this vein pertains to English; work on Thai/Lao is in its infancy, and we must be careful about just how portable features of English scientific grammar are when we are focusing on Thai/Lao. Features like nominalization and the translation from 'practical genre' to a 'genre of governance' hold for Thai/Lao as they do for English, but the specificities of grammar and argument structure in Thai/Lao will be left for

another paper. In short, this paper will not explore Thai/Lao grammatical resources in any depth; rather it focuses on social dimensions: the access to literacy, and the face-to-face interactions surrounding the production of scientific discourse.

While recognizing the relevance of linguistic form, we should be careful here about assuming that there is something inherently powerful in epistemic discourse itself. Language is, after all, a tool mediating human agency, and not agentive in and of itself. Such is the problem, for example, with speech act theory and performatives, in which an utterance itself is regarded as powerful and as 'doing something'. Bourdieu (1991:107-9) critiques Austin and Habermas for this position by pointing out it is not the words themselves that are efficacious, but the social position of the person uttering them. Political leaders, religious authorities and scientists may use epistemic discourse to present the world as 'the way things are' but this does not mean the socially subordinate necessarily believe it in any hegemonic sense; they may simply not have the power to openly resist it (Scott, 1990; Herzfeld, 1992). And whether they believe it or not, the underlying relationship is still that of one social actor or group of actors (e.g. state officials) using language to orient or restrict the actions of others (e.g. subordinated peasants being 'developed'). In short, we can not decouple the discourse from those who produce it nor the context(s) in which it appears -which by extension suggests that simply producing formal discourse may not be enough for rural peasants to become socially empowered.

We should also reiterate that the endpoint of formalized (bureaucratic/scientific) discourse is typically a written document-a policy statement, a scientific article, a report-and as such we must consider various facets of literacy and the written mode. Halliday (1989:93) suggests that 'writing creates a world of things; talking creates a world of happening'; the insight here being

the durability of the written over the spoken word. What affordance does a written medium provide formalized discourse? 'The way things are' may be more persuasive if etched in stone or printed on paper than if spoken aloud; there is a clear link between the meaning of a given text and the durability of its medium (Scollon and Scollon, 2003:135). More durable forms of linguistic expression undergird more permanent institutions, enabling more extensive hierarchies of social power; such durability of medium and expression helps set off 'macro' social agents from less empowered 'micro' social agents (Callon and Latour, 1981). Oral discourse concerning science or bureaucracy is typically efficacious because it refers to some authoritative written text (Besnier, 1995:163-4)-even if these texts were at some point themselves based on oral discourse in some form (Iedema, 1997:73-4).

If a written form is integral to formalized discourse, we must also ask the broader question: what access do rural villagers have to literacy and how is it practiced? Literacy is not everywhere the same phenomenon (Scribner and Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 1995; Besnier, 1995), and to understand both its functions and its realization in social life, we must examine literacy in light of the practices in which it is embedded. This leads to a further wrinkle in the current analysis. The villagers under study are Lao speakers inhabiting a region of what has become the Thai state. Although the Lao language of neighboring Laos has a functioning orthography, in northeastern Thailand this orthography is not used; Lao is experienced for these villagers almost entirely as an oral language. Villagers' use of literacy may thus depend on their mastery of the national language, Thai, which leads to a number of important issues having to do with language ideology and identity politics.

Research reports: who produces the scientific discourse?

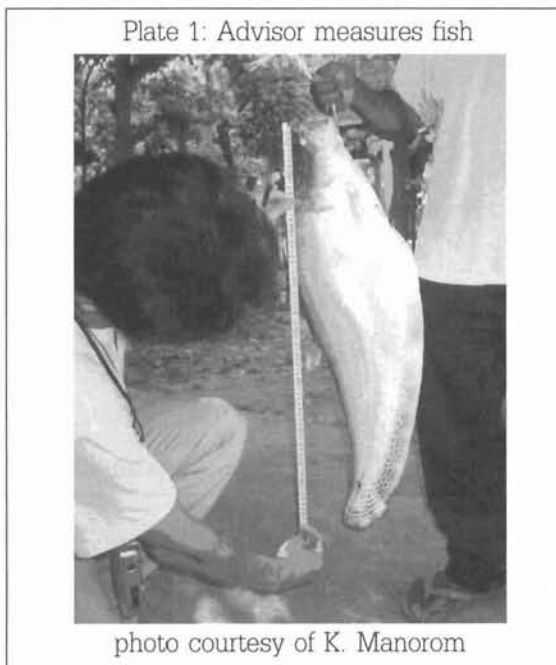
Of the different technical and discursive aspects of Thai Baan research reports, I wish to focus on two: the creation of taxonomies, and the translation of everyday life into scientific findings. Taxonomies play a key role in scientific discourse, in which scientific classification offers 'different pictures of reality, based on different organizing criteria' than taxonomies based on 'common sense' (Halliday and Martin, 1993: 169). Already, then, we are faced with something of a dilemma, since the purpose of Thai Baan research is to authenticate villager's 'local wisdom' as scientific, i.e. every bit as valid as other scientific studies. What we have then is not so much a reclassification of items into different categories, but the presentation of local categories in a form that matches other scientific taxonomies. According to the Pak Mun report's introduction, these categories were chosen by the villagers themselves (Thai Baan, 2004:7). I cannot attest to the veracity of this claim in the Pak Mun case, as I wasn't present at planning meetings. In subsequent Thai Baan projects, however, at which I was present at planning meetings, the research categories were largely preordained and made to appear as though they derived from villager experience. I will have more to say on that below.

I don't think it necessary to belabor the point about whether the information collected qualifies as genuinely scientific in Martin's sense, because in any event the taxonomy is not very elaborate. The fish taxonomy at Pak Mun, for example, was created using spreadsheets, in which the column on the left side of the form lists fish species according to 'local name' (156 entries in all), and the row headers at the top of the chart subdivide these fish names along three criteria:

1. type of migration (i.e. whether migrated from Mekong, or originated in Mun river; and whether)
2. habitats (e.g. rapids, caves, pools)
3. spawning grounds (e.g. rapids, caves, pools)

Boxes are then ticked along each row, indicating whether a given type of fish migrates, where it lives, where it spawns. In its present form, the information highlights thematically the list of fish, and does not offer much in the way of subclassification. Once collected, of course, this data can be rearranged to highlight different classification schema. It could be reorganized thematically by migration, for example, which could then inform an argument against the dam as an obstacle to fish movement. It could be reorganized into habitat, undergirding an argument about the deleterious effects of blasting rapids on fish habitats. The ability to reorganize data this way is an affordance of the medium-i.e. the table or spreadsheet-and as a tool it requires a user to understand the link between the information, the representational medium, and the connections between the categories of information and the processes in question (e.g. the dam's effect on fish migration). In interactions I had with villagers at the Warin Chamrap and Rasi Salai projects, I saw no evidence that they understood the use of such spreadsheets and taxonomies in these terms. Unaccustomed to reading tables, they had difficulty gleaning information from the sheet when I asked basic questions about it, and they did not comprehend how or why taxonomic information would be reorganized. This is not to suggest that villagers are not intelligent; it is to suggest that they are unfamiliar with the specialized discursive tools of science, and did not appear to improve these skills even after the generation of the research report.

Practices concerning data collection for the spreadsheets was also problematic. Based on my discussions with project advisors for both the Warin project and the Rasi Salai project, villagers were often imprecise in their entries, to the dismay of the advisors. Filling in the sheet for every fish catch was deemed unnecessarily troublesome, and villagers would often fill in their forms en masse from memory later. Precise fish measurements were often taken by project advisors rather than villagers, as in Plate 1 below, in which it is the project advisor on the left who is actually taking the measurement.



With the categories of the taxonomy being devised beforehand (at least in subsequent Thai Baan projects; maybe also in Pak Mun project), with the utility of reorganizing the taxonomic information remaining largely a mystery, and the lack of interest in, or appreciation of, precise data, I think one would be

hard pressed to assert that villagers have mastered the scientific discourse represented in the mediums of data collection. These skills rested with project advisors, and I witnessed very little transference. If we were to revise Table 1 above, we might do so this way:

Table 2	
Village fishermen...	Advisors...
Collected samples	Designated pertinent categories
Took photographs	to match the issues concerning
Categorized fish	the dam
Identified fish	Designed the research
Discussed fish	instruments
Learned from their ancestors	Measured fish
Made additions	Photographed fish
Made corrections	Recorded final data
Reviewed final data	Collated the data
Checked final data	Wrote the text of the final report
	Produced scientific discourse

The other dimension of the research reports I want to address is that of generalization, in which 'practical genres' of everyday experience are translated into 'genres of governance'. Whether in the form of statistics in sociology or ethnographic authority in anthropology, translation from lived everyday experience into a genre of governance is a key procedure underlying social science. In the Thai Baan reports, this is most clearly seen in the 'social' research findings, conducted by project advisors. For example, the final report for the Pak Mun project summarizes the status of communities living along the river once

the dam gates were opened (Assembly of the Poor, 2002:6):

- Out of a total of 7,286 households, 6,915 households returned to fishing in the Mun river (94.9%).
- 1,587 households depend solely on fishing for their income (21.5%)
- 4,772 households depend on both fishing and rice farming for their livelihood (65.5%)

Here the collection of data, its collation, and translation into sociological statistics was all performed by advisors, not by villagers. Even the taxonomical categories-households and the classification of different modes of production -are predetermined by the research advisors to be the pertinent ones. Quantification of this sort is an important part of scientific discourse, but, like the taxonomies, not one which villagers actually produced themselves. Villagers, in short, did not authenticate their own experiences, culture, or social organization into a social science text, it was done for them, and thus in this regard at least the Thai Baan research still closely resembles more conventional forms of anthropological or sociological research.

Micromanaging Empowerment

I wish to turn now to a closer look at specific interactions in the Thai Baan research process, to see from another angle to what extent villagers produce their own scientific discourse. As mentioned above, the popularity of the Thai Baan research model has quickly led to the replication of its form and content. The same categories used in the Pak Mun research, with slight modifications, were also used in the Rasi Salai project and in Warin Chamrap -thus in later projects at least, the idea that villagers devise their own pertinent research categories is not true.

To see how the questions are formulated and then made to appear as though they originated with villagers, consider the orientation program for village researchers at the Warin project. In this session, we deployed an exercise geared towards 'brainstorming' and creating a 'conceptual diagram' of ecological issues in the area under study. This was an initial step towards the formalization of local knowledge, in which villagers were being encouraged to make semantic and logical classifications out of daily activities and ecological features of their locale. Villagers were divided into small groups and each given a large square of butcher paper. They were to map out, graphically and textually, the ecological resources associated with the wetlands in which they lived and which the project was designed to protect. The aim was to establish the scope of the project, for the villagers to view ecology as the nexus bridging their livelihoods, culture, and activism, and to get everyone on the same page, as it were. A schematic model was taped to the whiteboard, in which the word *kut* (meaning something like small inlet or lagoon—a key feature of the local wetlands in the Warin project area) was written in a big circle in the center of the page. The idea was to draw connected circles, each depicting different social and ecological categories associated with the *kut*. A circle on fishing, for example, might include the sorts of fish villagers catch in the *kut*, the equipment they use, and the most salient problems they face since the dams and levies were built. They were to map this out for a large number of categories concerning many aspects of life on the river—ostensibly categories that they found pertinent in their own lives, but actually ones which the advisors had seen in previous Thai Baan projects and the details of which they had hashed out in a meeting the day before. Advisors, in other words, knew what they wanted the villagers to produce and guided them into producing it; it was thus something of a

pedagogic exercise in which advisors would lead the villagers through the initial stages of formalization.

With the blank sheet in front of them, the villagers were unsure of what to do. Each group started with a different approach, hesitantly, unsure of how to proceed. They talked among themselves, but no one could agree on what to write, and several lost interest. Some started graphically, but in a different form from the model on the board; others simply wrote down some text summarizing some of the problems they faced (e.g. 'there's no more fish to catch'). One group drew the circle and wrote *cut*, but then spent the next ten minutes making elaborate curls and designs on the letters. The project advisors joined the groups, one in each, and began by offering assistance-but eventually ended up largely micro-directing the entire exercise. For example, one advisor, unsatisfied with the simple text villagers were jotting down, drew a small version of the envisioned network in a corner of the group's butcher paper for them to replicate in larger form (Plate 2):



Plate 2 An advisor draws a model in the corner of the page for a villager to emulate



Plate 3 An advisor corrects spelling, as a student copies text into her notebook

In another group, comprised of variously aged schoolboys, the advisor took on a more parochial role and elicited the desired information through directed questions and answers. Similarly, a third group comprised mainly of grade school students became completely hung up on a spelling problem, and could not seem to proceed. The advisor remonstrated, suggesting that spelling it incorrectly was fine for the time being. But to no avail—conditioned by several years of stiffly formal schooling their group was stuck and would not continue until they got the proper spelling. The advisor finally capitulated and spelled the word for them (Plate 3). One schoolgirl in this group busied herself feverishly copying the text of the butcher paper into her notebook, replicating similar 'literate' activities she performs in school.



Plate 4 In the beginning, the advisors shaped the exercise, guiding villagers through the process



Plate 5 By the end, advisors were doing much of the production, too.

As the exercise wore on, advisors became increasingly proactive in actually producing the pictures and text (Plates 4-5), and what they didn't write themselves they explicitly controlled by steering the villagers' production. Just

how much of the work was genuinely the villagers' depended on the advisor in their group. Some advisors elicited information through directions and rhetorical questions and had villagers transcribe the results to paper, while others simply instructed their group what to write or even wrote it for them. In at least one case, an advisor grasped a student's writing hand and moved it himself until - an episode which serves perhaps to epitomize the activity overall. At the end of the exercise, each group went to the front of the room and presented their butcher paper, and were applauded by the other participants. They presented without the advisors, who had quietly shifted their role into that of audience, seated in a semi-circle to create a stage area. This subtle reconfiguration of the interaction order is telling, implying as it does that the work was somehow the villagers' all along, and that the advisors were merely facilitating. Now, the 'creators' of the work were to present it to the advisors.

The point of the exercise was to get the villagers thinking about the scope of the project and the interconnectedness of its ecological components. Perhaps at some level it succeeded. But it also set a precedent at the microinteractional level that would be repeated throughout the project: that advisors shaped the form of all the meanings in play, whether in the research forms, the finished reports, the workshop activities, or even organization of the meetings themselves. In other words, advisors control what is a legitimate meaning and what is not, what constitutes data and what does not, and the minutiae of how such meanings and data are to be produced. They accomplished this by maintaining strict control over the interaction order, the purpose of the exercise, and the form of the final product - all in all what Scollon and Scollon (1980) might term a very 'focused' interaction. I did not see any evidence that these 'formalizing and organizational skills were transferred; villagers were

completely dependent on the project advisors for what were ultimately the literate, discursive products of the activity.

These observations are not intended to denigrate villagers, or to depict advisors as secretly or latently power hungry. Indeed advisors often expressed their exasperation at feeling like they needed to micromanage participants to ensure the success of a given activity. Villagers for their part often participated in earnest, but were not confident in their own skills, did not understand what the goal of a given activity was, and are conditioned to deferring to more competent others in issues of literacy. Some of the village participants on the Warin project stated they thought it was strange that members of the University would come to help them, but that they were then nevertheless required to do so much of the literate work that the University team was already so good at.

Both advisors and villagers agreed with the overarching goals of the program—that political power should be decentralized and villagers should have a more prominent voice in decision making. But in the minutiae of the concrete interactions instantiating this goal, with few exceptions, we see that villagers rely almost entirely on the program advisors for their production of formalized discourse; lacking command of the scientific discourses and organizational modes themselves, they cannot authenticate their knowledge and experiences into viable taxonomies, social scientific facts or ethnography. Their relationships with the program advisors is thus far more asymmetrical than their titles as 'researchers' would suggest. In his study of the Assembly of the Poor, Missingham (2003:54) arrived at a similar conclusion: 'NGO activists exercise power and influence in these meetings and the movement as a whole that far outweighs their small numbers and contradicts such democratic rhetoric.'

The two angles covered here--examining who actually constructs the scientific discourse in the reports, and the interactions between advisors and villagers in the project--suggests that villagers are not developing the ability to produce scientific discourse or to discursively authenticate their own experiences by themselves, and hence are not personally empowered. In a research model designed to counteract the large-scale top-down power of government paternalism, we find instead small-scale top-down power between advisors and villagers. Locally empowering research is meant to be counter-hegemonic vis a vis the government, but it introduces its own hegemony concerning what counts as scientific knowledge, what form it must be packaged in, and who in the end really produces it. Coming to such conclusions about local empowerment projects is unpalatable, and will likely be criticized and resisted by advocates of the research. I would reiterate that, despite being critical, I support Thai Baan research and its goals of local empowerment, activism, and participatory democracy. However, I also believe the empowerment taking place in the projects I observed is being exaggerated, that it is in those respects a false sense of empowerment, and ought to be examined and improved.

Without being able to wield scientific discourse on their own, villagers will not be treated as legitimate producers of this discourse when speaking to state officials. Missingham (2003) describes in detail a meeting he attended with Pak Mun villagers in Bangkok during the large scale Assembly of the Poor protests. This meeting predates the other ethnographic examples cited here by several years, but the meeting was a poignant one, and the issues that were raised are still entirely pertinent to Thai Baan research today. Villagers, along with several activists and NGO workers, left their protest site in downtown Bangkok to meet with officials at the Ministry of Science, Technology and

Environment.⁵ The meeting was the chance for villagers to face officials directly, to present their research findings, and to make their case for compensation for the income lost as a result of the Pak Mun dam. Missingham (2003:162-168) shows how this meeting became a struggle over "the forms of knowledge that would be accepted as legitimate and authoritative":

Having won the right to negotiate through their demonstrations, villagers still found their right to petition attacked or undermined by state bureaucrats. Closely related to this struggle was a conflict over what constituted 'expert knowledge' and valid 'data' on the effects of the dam on Mun River fisheries.

The role of advisors in the meetings above became critical during the meeting. As in the projects described earlier, advisors shaped villager 'practical' discourse, spoken in Lao, into 'data' within a 'genre of governance' spoken in Thai:

What emerged during this round of negotiations was a fuzzy division of labor between activists and villagers. Villagers' delegates spoke largely in terms of their personal experience and gave accounts of the dam's effects on their lives and livelihoods. They asserted they knew from firsthand experience, as well as anyone, the effects of the dam on the river. Activists, on the other hand, tried to present arguments to 'frame' the villagers' testimony and support its legitimacy and validity.

Gaining access to officials, however, proved to be no guarantee of success. although the villagers had data to present at the meetings, and although they had advisors to shape their formal discourse, officials still clung to their

⁵ Now called the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment

own data and their own formalized discourse:

EGAT⁶ and Fisheries officials continued to reject, or simply ignore, the villagers' claims. EGAT showed a promotional video about the fish breeding program and fish ladder that was added to the dam in 1995. The Fisheries Department Official reported that, 'We have data that in 1991 the total fishing income of the population for the three districts ... was about 3 million baht in value. At the present time, during the period from May 1995 to May 1996 we calculate that the value of fish caught was about 5 million baht.'

No detail appears to have been provided on where the Fisheries Department data came from or how it was collected, how prices were calculated, nor what accounted for the difference in income between 1991 and 1995--although those at the meeting were seemingly meant to conclude that the dam actually provided more fish than in pre-dam times. The thrust of their argument seemed to rely on their social position as technocrats, a status they assumed legitimated the data. An activist speaking on behalf of the villagers countered this by insisting that the villagers' data be treated as 'expert knowledge':

Maliwan tried to turn the discussion back to the issue of expert knowledge and gave a sophisticated and succinct summary of the NGO's perspective. 'Large fish provided the livelihood for local villagers before dam construction. You have spoken about experts and data. We have expertise and data here. This is research,' she said, holding up a slim report prepared by activists and Mun river fishers. 'But whose information should we believe? The people who know well, those who

⁶ Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand

remember, should be the experts. I know for certain it's not the technical experts, because they didn't go there then. But the local fishers there caught and ate the fish continuously. So who will you believe, the experts from which side?'

A villager then followed up the activist's claims for expert status with a strongly modalized, deontic appeal:

'EGAT must compensate for what has been lost and destroyed by the dam. Just as EGAT must compensate for land flooded, so it must compensate for the fisheries destroyed.'

The meeting produced no tangible results for the villagers, stonewalled as they were by the government officials. This episode suggests a crisis in authenticity - villagers did not sufficiently embody the scientific data they purportedly produced, relying instead on the project advisor to present the data for them. Its authenticity thus devalued, the government officials could continue to believe (or at least claim) that the NGO advisors were essentially putting words (and, concomitantly, political agendas) into villagers' mouths. As lowly peasants, they were not deemed to have a legitimate scientific voice, and they could not verbalize scientific discourse on their own in the meeting; instead they fell back into reporting local knowledge as personal experience in a practical genre. As Scott (1998:323) writes, "One major reason why *metis* [Scott's term for local, practical knowledge] is denigrated, particularly in the hegemonic *imperium of scientific knowledge*, is that its 'findings' are practical, opportune, and contextual rather than integrated into the general conventions of scientific discourse."

The point of the Thai Baan project is to authenticate local metis into scientifically valid language. In the meeting Missingham describes, however, the research volume containing their scientific account is apparently never even opened. Instead, villagers are judged on the basis of the face-to-face encounter, in which they manage to produce only emotive, deontic demands. Bourdieu (1991:113) points out that discourse must be uttered by 'the person legitimately licensed to do so, the holder of the skeptron, known and recognized as being able and enabled to produce this particular class of discourse.' Villagers, through their Thai Baan project, may try to claim production of scientific discourse, they may contest their right to be legitimate producers of scientific discourse, but in the end they are not recognized as legitimate. Speaking Lao instead of Thai, and in a practical genre rather than a genre of governance, exacerbated this perception of illegitimacy. Formal discourse, in other words, is a function not only of its lexicogrammatical realization, but of its human embodiment.

Lang (2003: 233) argues that Thai Baan research 'represents a crisis of authority for [government] experts' knowledge and their traditional privileged social status'. I think that overstates the efficacy of Thai Baan research projects, although I hope that in the future Lang may be proven right. Empowering villagers with scientific discourse may help them frame their arguments in a currency state authorities value, but it does not guarantee them the state will listen. The root problem, it seems to me, is that villagers do not actually learn to produce scientific discourse, so much as the research project gives them temporary access to it via project advisors.

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