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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Within a few weeks after Thailand’s latest military takeover on 22 May 2014, the song titled “Returning Happiness to Thailand” would go off constantly on television channels, and there were not that many left airing.

We will fulfill our promise
Give us a little more time
Then the beautiful land will return
We will do it honestly
You only need to trust and have faith
The land will be well soon
Let us return happiness to you, the people

Reputedly written by the then-junta leader and now-Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha, the song would play whenever the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) interrupted television programming in order to decree a new law, call more individuals to report themselves to the military headquarters, or communicate to the people. After several months of political stalemate and street protests that at times turned deadly, the military junta presented itself as the champion of peace and order—and happiness. The pop-like lyrics of the song hailed the ideal listeners into an affective union between the heroic military and the people in distress. More versions sung by legendary Thai rock stars as well as soap opera celebrities would follow. That NCPO’s first action, apart from the song and political suppression, was the swift payment to rice farmers owed them by the previous government scored another point for its legitimacy. Nationwide poll results in July proclaimed that 90% of people in Thailand were now happier than before the coup.

Really, the happiness song sounded quite good and everyone, including myself, could sing to the tune. That did not mean we were happy—but who is this ‘we’ anyway?
This work seeks to shed light on some constellations of the ‘we,’ which I will call village publics, and some constellations of the ‘I,’ which I will call villagers-citizens. Through ethnographic engagement with a handful of people in one village, I seek to offer a description and analysis of everyday gatherings in the time of military rule. These everyday gatherings consist of some people unhappy with the military junta, some indifferent, some ambivalent, and relatively fewer people happy with the political situation. Unlike the military-controlled nationwide polls, my work is not statistical, and I do not proclaim to say that what I will describe represents the general feelings of any social group. The force of my argument, however, lies in the complexity of understanding how people actually respond when they are hailed by the state in various manners and moments, an example of which is the above happiness song. I found that there are various forms of public gatherings in everyday life—drunken socializing while airing political grievances on a bamboo bench in front of grocery stores, dinner circles where family and friends share gossip about village monks on drugs, distracted villagers talking among themselves during village meetings with bureaucratic officers—where people constantly construct their ambiguous and ambivalent senses of membership and belonging to the state. These gatherings so often go unrecognized, not only by political elites and state officers, but also crucially by political analysts and scholars who seek but fail to understand the complexity of rural villagers’ political subjectivities. I advocate for the recognition of these publics as politically legitimate forms of cultural citizenship. But be mindful, though politically legitimate, these publics were not necessarily “political”—they happened under the prohibition of political gatherings of more than five people!
To speak more in the general, this work is about villagers in Thailand’s northeastern region, commonly known as Isan. The region’s population makes up a third of Thailand’s population, about twenty out of sixty five million people. Due to the sheer number of Isan’s rural-based population, they have become a decisive force in nation-level elections; yet they remain in various ways second-class citizens. In the past several years, starting after the previous coup d’etat in 2006 that seized power of popularly elected Thaksin Shinawatra’s government, many rural-based people from northern and northeastern provinces have joined people from various classes and places in mobilizations against military dictatorship and advocacy for a stable electoral democracy. Through casting the ballots and facing the bullets in street protests in the past several years, they have become commonly known as “red shirts people” (*khon suea daeng*). While many of the people I engaged with in the field identify as red shirts supporters, none has physically been in a protest site with other red shirts protesters—they have vicariously participated through group television watching. My original plan was to observe and participate in political television watching in a village. But as the coup d’état had just happened, the political channels were of course shut down.

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1 When I refer to “rural-based population,” this term includes urban dwellers or migrants who are from rural villages and who still call themselves villagers (*chao baan*). Anthropologist Mary Beth Mills’s short article “Questioning Thailand’s Rural-Urban Divide” aptly cautions analysts against framing Thai political conflict in terms of urban vs rural divide as it “reinforces longstanding social hierarchies by obscuring the inequalities that cut across both urban and rural Thai settings” (2014).
It is my political conviction, as a red shirt supporter, that analysts and scholars seeking to understand Thai politics must learn to learn from rural villagers. Following the trajectory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s discussion of the subaltern (1988, 2004), I hope to not merely study villagers in the sense of their exclusion from political recognition, but more crucially “to learn to learn from them” in order for Thai society at large to develop “habits of democratic behavior” (Spivak 2004). This is not to say corny things like “the answer lies in the village.” Rather, recognizing rural villagers’ otherwise trivialized publics could help in a development of more democratic forms of publicity that are translatable between village conversations and the bourgeois public sphere, as well as a development of more inclusive modes of communication between villagers and public authorities, like policymakers, bureaucrats and police officers. Furthermore, paying attention to the perspectives and practices of villagers could help in going beneath the rural-based populations’ widespread silence in response to the coup. While some attribute the lack of widespread resistance to the fact that the red shirts leaders and urban-based coup protesters were rounded up by the junta, this explanation does not help us understand what has been going on in this silence in rural areas. And for some readers who may be opposed to my political leanings, I still believe that learning from what I have learned could help you nuance and enrich your understandings of democracy, corruption, the state, and the public sphere. In fact, my closest informant is against red shirts people.

Following anthropologist Jakkrit Sanghamani (2012), I seek insights into people’s political subjectivities from everyday life rather than from their participation in social movements (see, e.g. Pinkaew 2013), or solely from their structurally determined socioeconomic location. Before I plunge into the thick of everyday life, though, let me provide a general overview of the
theoretical components of my work, to clarify what I mean when I use terms like “democracy,” “cultural citizenship,” “publics,” “the state,” and “northeastern Thailand.” I would like to begin by giving an account of dominant discourses on citizenship in Thailand.

Anti-representative democracy: “elevating subjects to citizens”

In this section, I will provide a critical history of anti-representative democracy, an idea premised upon the notion that the majority of Thai people are not yet ready for representative democracy and thus need to be trained, educated, elevated into citizens. While the goal of this idea of democracy is ultimately autonomy and self-governance, the means to realize it contradictorily treat people as politically deficient subjects in need of education and training. Through an analysis of representative figures, I will show how anti-representative democracy works to exclude the majority of Thai people today from full citizenship.

Let me start with the current Chair of the Constitution Drafting Committee Bowornsak Uwanno, an eminent law professor who had also participated in the drafting of previous constitution after the one before that had been annulled by the 2006 coup. The Thai Constitution, unlike the one of the United States, has undergone many cycles of annulment by coup and subsequent rewritings: there have been 19 constitutions since the beginning of Thai democracy in 1932. At the time of writing (April 2015), the twentieth constitution has been drafted and made public for final stages of deliberation and, possibly but not surely, popular referendum.

On 21 April 2015, Bowornsak Uwanno announced to the press that the new constitution’s rationale was to “empower citizens” (tam hai ponlamuang pen yai). Notably, this empowerment of citizens is directed at curbing the power of politicians, whose authoritarian tendency has
proven detrimental to Thai democracy. Already evident in the current draft, the new constitution does not require that Prime Minister come from elections, reinstates appointed positions in the Senate (only 77 out of 200 will be elected positions, one from each province, although prior to running they must be approved by a “Committee of Virtuous People”), and sets up new administrative bodies with the power to veto executive decisions: all these effectively eroding the executive and legislative powers derived from popular elections (Siripan 2015). It is worth quoting at length Bowornsak’s discourse on the new constitution, which appears on the news site Matichon Online:

Thai political culture is not the same as that of farang (Westerners; white people) or their knowledge of democracy, because democracy (prachaathippatai) is not an idea and behavior that Thai people have had from the past. All forms of elections have been modeled after farang, whether it is a one-constituency-one-representative election that was taken from America [sic], or a parallel party list is also farang’s idea.³

The cultural opposition between “Thai” and “farang” underlying Thai-style democracy dates back to the turn of the twentieth century. At the height of European colonialism and imperialism, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, reigned 1868-1910) considered parliamentary democracy a foreign seed: it was like “trying to grow wheat in the Siamese soil fit only for rice” (Thongchai 2011). By rejecting the historical existence of the idea and behavior of democracy among Thai people, Bowornsak perversely banishes recent flourishings of local administrative autonomy and electoral participation from the realm of Thai culture. Bowornsak continues,

We used those forms in the 1997 Constitution so as to strengthen the Government and build leadership capacities for the Prime Minister. This has resulted in the Government’s tyranny of the majority, which spread its wings to intervene in

³ The party list model, borrowed from Germany, works through a nationwide count of popular votes for political parties who have their own lists of representatives.
checks-and-balances organizations and mass media, acts that have brought about deep conflicts to this day. It is so because of the culture of authoritarianism deeply rooted in Thai society.

It is clear that the implied target of the charge of “tyranny of the majority” was Thaksin Shinawatra’s governments (2001-2006); the epithet was popularized prior to the 2006 coup d’état by the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), also known as the “yellow shirts people” (khon suea lueang) who mobilized against Thaksin’s authoritarian use of power based on his control over the Parliament majority. Absent from this critique is a consideration of the people who the “majoritarian tyrants” represent.

The claim that the authoritarian culture is deeply rooted implies that it goes back farther in time than just the 1997 Constitution. In 1932, a group of young civil and military officers who called themselves The People’s Party (khana ratsadoon) seized power from the monarchy and inaugurated the history of democracy in Siam/Thailand. The revolution, led by young officers educated in France, have often been discredited for prematurely importing democracy before the time was ripe (ching suk koon haam). When I was a high school student in Thailand, the official history curriculum included the regretful remarks of the revolutionary mastermind Pridi Banomyong who, about a decade after the revolution, said that he had been too young and naive to have staged the revolution. This discourse of 1932 revolution as premature not only blames the foreign-educated young officers; significantly, the prematurity of revolution is thinkable only from the premise that the people were not yet mature, that they needed to be educated before they were ready for democracy.

The idea that the people are not yet ready (yang mai proom) for democracy runs deep in Thailand today, with the “not-yet” mapped on to people from the countryside, especially those...
from the Northeast. In its most benign form, this idea characterizes the northeastern majority as ingenuous villagers duped by self-serving politicians through their ostensibly benevolent policies. At its worst form, it makes the people into “red buffalo” (*kwaay daeng*) who are stupid, lazy, and greedy: stupid for the incapability to grasp the politicians’ evil and unquestioningly follow those politicians, lazy for their dependency on “populist policies” (*nayobaay* *prachaaniyom*), and therefore greedy for their seduction into consumerism and materialism, abandoning the principles of “sufficiency economy” (*setthakit por-piang*) inherent in the image of their former subsistence agriculture.

If the cause of democracy’s failure is the culture of authoritarianism coupled with the unreadiness of the people, then the way to fix this is to eradicate authoritarianism from the political class as well as to make the people ready for democracy. The ideological opposition between “citizens” and “politicians” then becomes clear. Let us hear more from Bowornsak Uwanno, who turns to elaborate the “measures to reduce the risks arising from Thai politicians’ authoritarian culture,”

For the elevation of subjects (*ratsadoon*) to citizens (*ponlamuang*) who would see politics to be relevant to themselves, be responsible for the country, preserve their rights and liberty, be enthusiastic about the country’s governance, taking part in scrutinizing politicians and state officials, this constitution draft seeks to empower citizens in various ways. For instance, it obliges the state to organize education and training for citizen-ness at all levels, increases rights and liberty for citizens, enables them to propose a law, enables citizens to rank party list representatives in a new “open list” system, makes referendum to truly become a right of citizens.

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4 Against this claim of rural-based people as not yet ready, anthropologists Claudio Sopranzetti and Eli Elinoff, in their 2013 editorial “Provincializing Bangkok,” have called for a reexamination of this temporal politics through attending to how people have always already constructed their “now.”
The constitution is written for 65 million people, not for politicians who number only 5 thousand. [emphases added]

Most ironically, the first measure to “empower citizens” that comes to Bowornsak’s mind is an educational program to inculcate “citizen-ness” (khwaam pen ponglamuang) at all levels. I render the term “citizen-ness” and not “citizenship” to call attention to the fact that in this case being a citizen is less about entitlement to rights than about duties to comply, character to conform. The current draft of the constitution, notably, rearranges articles on citizen-ness and civic duties to come before articles on rights and liberty (Siripan 2015). In Articles 26 and 27, qualities of the citizen include: “good values, discipline, unity, hard work, self-reliance, proper payment of taxes, aversion from hate-mongering” (Siripan 2015). In practice, this educational program could look like curricula of civic duties in schools, training sessions and workshops in villages, and campaigns laden with values like anti-corruption, moderation, and nationalism in mass media.

Indeed, the prescription for the state to educate the people about what it means to be a citizen reproduces the same discourse of the people as not yet ready for democracy.

The hard opposition between “citizen” and “politician” articulated by Bowornsak works to disprivilege modes of political belonging that do not make such an opposition (see Walker 2008). Through this ideological opposition, any citizen who does not want to see an erosion of executive power of their representatives is thereby demoted into the status of a “subject” (ratsadoon); their citizen-ness becomes questionable. Curiously, there is no mention of electoral democracy here, as if political representativity were inherently detrimental to the agency of citizens. Due to this absence, electoral democracy is implicitly constructed as an arena of second-class citizenship, where people passively accept the actions of their representatives.
The rhetoric of “rights and liberty” uncannily leaves unsaid the erosion of a right to vote as well as freedoms of speech and of assembly.

The passive-voice form of the last sentence of the extract is also telling: it masks the number of people writing and approving the constitution, which is ironically less than the 5,000 of politicians. The Constitution Drafting Committee consists of 36 people hand-picked by the NCPO, and the National Reform Council that will deliberate on the draft consists of 250 individuals, many of whom come from the Army. This passive construction renders invisible not only the imposition but, more crucially, the various subaltern publics calling for electoral democracy in the current climate of military government and martial law.

It is useful here to return to the 1932 revolution to establish a historical continuity. One day before the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, King Prajadhipok (Rama VII) contemplated about “giving” the people democracy and a constitution. The benevolence implied in this act mirrors the good intentions of elite lawmakers like Bowornsak Uwanno. Relating this scene of kingly contemplation in a 2009 lecture, prominent political scientist Anek Laothamatas retells an analogous project for “empowering citizens”:

His Majesty was still thinking the same, that is to say to give the people democracy and a constitution, but the Siamese people at this time were not yet ready for democracy. But as he wanted them to be ready, he proposed two measures to quicken the readiness.

- Firstly, “political education” must be created.
- Secondly, “local democracy” must be created.

His Majesty wrote the words “political education” and “local democracy” in English. Interestingly, His Majesty used the word “local democracy” in the sense that today we use to call local administration organizations. His Majesty did not use the term local government or local administration which indicates that His Majesty was interested in the local in a democratic aspect. In His Majesty’s opinion, he thought that democracy in the local must be created first, so as to make it a school training subjects (ratsadoon) to become citizens (ponlamuang),
or a democracy training school. From that point would Thai people be ready to be
democratic at the national level. [Anek 2011:8-9]

Anek’s nostalgic invocation of the King’s benevolence betrays that democratic citizenship is
constituted by monarchical subjection: the very document that serves to recognize people as
citizens entitled to rights and liberty also subjects them under the Monarch’s insightful
patronage. Alas, if only the impatient revolutionaries had waited for the King to bestow
democracy when the people became ready!

Through King Prajadhipok’s discourse, Anek Laothamatas advances a distinction
between “local democracy” and “local administration” in order for a reimagination of what
democracy could mean beyond merely representative democracy via local and national elections:

Thai people especially of this generation have adopted the idea of representative
democracy. The more we say it, the more pathetic (anaat) it becomes, as we have
been hardwired to think in only one way. Whenever someone proposes something
strange, we would think that it is not doable. We think that:
- Democracy means no military coup
- Democracy means there are elections
- Democracy means the majority gets to rule
- Democracy means let other people govern us
- Democracy means... blah-blah-blah [Anek 2011:16]

In its stead, he proposes ideas of self-government, marshalling such wide-ranging political
thinkers as Emiliano Zapata, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Iris Marion Young (2011:16-21).

Ironically, this lecture was given in 2009, some time after the 2006 coup d’état, when
representative democracy was regularly breaking down. The call for democracy beyond elections
has been well received, as evident in Bowornsak’s account of the new constitution, yet the call
for electoral democracy itself has been reduced to something alien in Bowornsak’s formulation
and tedious discourse in Anek’s.
More ironic still, the dichotomy between representative democracy and self-governance articulated by Anek Laothamatas works to trivialize hard-won structures of local administrative autonomy and local representation. Brought about by efforts at administrative decentralization that crystallized in the 1997 Constitution (Pinkaew 2013), local administrative organizations have replaced appointed local assemblies with popularly elected posts with the power and money to decide on and execute local projects. In rural and semi-rural areas these projects tend to involve infrastructural developments like roads, water and waste management, and public buildings.

The current military junta has rolled back this relative administrative autonomy. In Declaration No. 85 on 15 July 2014, the NCPO revoked all future elections to be held for posts in local administrative organizations; once the current serving boards finish their term, the positions will be filled by bureaucratic selection of qualified individuals who have an equivalent of a college degree and who have served in civil service. This anti-representative and anti-democratic move was buttressed by popular accusations of widespread political corruption in local and provincial administration, most notably by Secretary of The Prime Minister’s Office Panadda Disakul through his Facebook account around the same period. While charges of corruption are in many cases well-founded, the recourse to anti-representative and anti-democratic military junta disenfranchises Thai citizens of their right to local representation and accountability. Despite the promise of the return of happiness, local enfranchisement is not going to return in any foreseeable future.

In summary, the project to train subjects to become citizens has haunted the imagination of elite political thinkers throughout the history of democracy in Thailand. Its most recent
articulations pit representative, electoral democracy against more authentically Thai or well-suited forms of democracy. When anti-representative democracy comes packaged with the imagination of Thai people as not qualified for citizenship, a critical reappraisal of citizenship and democracy thus becomes necessary. And it is to those competing voices in Thai debates on democracy that I now discuss.

Rethinking the “new citizens” concept: a contribution to the critique of actually existing non-democracy

Propelled by the current crisis in Thai democracy, there has been a considerable proliferation of scholarly literature that grapples with structural changes that lie under the surface of color-coded politics between red-shirt and yellow-shirt camps, to put it schematically. Much of this scholarship is divided along color lines as well. Theorists I will be in conversation with are generally sympathetic to the red shirts movement. That being said, the arguments I will develop, recognizing the reductionist tendencies of color-coded politics, will not revolve around the question of why someone is red or yellow. Rather, I will advance a critical rethinking of the “new citizens” concept, to be developed in subsequent chapters of this work under the term villager–citizens.

To do so, I will sketch out the terrain on which the “new citizens” concept was planted by a group of Thai scholars, then introduce into the field relevant anthropological and sociological perspectives on citizenship and the public sphere, and finally situate my intervention. I will name village publics as a conceptual catch-all for unofficial and unrecognized forms of publicity through which people negotiate their political subjectivity as “new citizens” or, in this work, villager–citizens.
The work that is commonly cited for thinking about structural change in Thailand, especially in rural areas, is James C. Scott’s *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976). Explaining a different rationality that emphasizes risk aversion rather than profit maximization, Scott posits that “subsistence ethic” underlies peasant economic behavior, that peasant society is sustained by patron-client relations and corporate community structures, and that peasantry has a state-avoiding character. Many of the contemporary studies of Thailand take Scott’s book as their starting point—only to repudiate it.

Representative in this vein is the research initiative seeking to understand the changes underlying the current Thai political crisis. Sparked by the massacre of red shirt protesters in April and May 2010 that left about a hundred dead and two thousand injured, a group of scholars conducted a scholarly inquiry into the changing landscape of Thai political constituencies. This research initiative included several ethnographic as well as statistical studies in different regions of the country. The group was led by economist Apichat Satitniramai, anthropologist Yukti Mukdawijitra, and anthropologist Niti Pawakapan. In their landmark 2013 report “Re-examining the Political Landscape of Thailand,” Apichat et al posit that “new citizens,” emerging from poverty in the last two decades, now occupy a central place in national elections with their “new needs and aspirations for a set of public policies that is different from the ‘old middle class’” (2013:1). Due to two major developments of the past two decades, one socio-economic in the diversification of livelihood strategies and the expansion of the service sector and the informal industrial sector, and the other political in the introduction of local administrative autonomy as well as expanded capacity of electoral democracy, this emerging lower middle class has developed new political subjectivities that are distinct from the established middle class.
Scott’s book is premised upon not any peasant but a poor one, whose life condition is precarious: the (poor) peasant is “standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him” (1976:1). As this condition is no longer true for most Thai agriculturalists, the book is thus refuted. No longer poor, they have developed “new needs and aspirations” and therefore seek to realize their political goals through their most effective channel: electoral democracy. In the same vein as anthropologist Andrew Walker, whose book *Thailand’s Political Peasants* (2012) argues that peasants in Thailand now are no longer state-avoiding subsistence agriculturalists but highly diversified, risk-taking producers who bind themselves to the state, Apichat et al. seek to dispel the patron-client relations (*rabop uppatam*) as a framework to explain Thai political corruption (see also Scott 1972, Veera 2009). Instead, they offer a non-derogatory interpretation of contemporary vote-buying practices and political relationships between politicians and their constituencies.

However, Scott himself does recognize that his argument of safety-first, risk-minimizing rationality of the subsistence ethic may not be applicable to peasants with high incomes (1976:25), but then he goes on to point that there is not a fixed line beyond which the subsistence ethic would evaporate:

> It is not possible, or necessary in this context, to fix the upper threshold of income and security beyond which risks are far more rational. On the basis of the Thai example, among others, I am persuaded that safety-first behavior characterizes not only the poorest peasants but much of what is known as the middle-peasantry as well. [1976:25]

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5 Here, Scott refers to Moerman’s *Agricultural Change and Peasant Choice in a Thai Village* (1968).
Apichat et al.’s category of the “emerging lower middle class” is built on the sole basis of UNDP from 2010 statistics which reveals that 35% of the Thai population now has an income greater than 5,000 baht a month (around 150 U.S. dollars), and that only about 10% of the Thai population falls below the poverty line (2013:42). While it may be true that the vast majority of Thais are no longer poor or live in precarious conditions, the insistence on a new citizenship of an “emergent lower middle class” threatens to trivialize persistent claims to peasant-ness (chao naa) or villager-ness (chao baan) as well as enduring forms of social gathering that persist beyond poverty and subsistence agriculture.

My point is not that these scholars are wrong, but that their “new citizens” thesis, if taken at face value, could lead to unhelpful political myths that disregard the complexity of historically sedimented political subjectivity. It is my argument that the complexity of political subjectivity needs to be reckoned with, rather than glossed over, in order to truly understand the constitution of contemporary citizenship. For example, the term “cosmopolitan villagers” introduced by anthropologist Charles F. Keyes (2012) is sometimes superficially referred to by nonscholars in order to declare, simply, that villagers are “no longer” rural, even though Keyes’s discussion actually reinstates the moral importance of the villager identity amid increasing physical, economic and social mobilities.

To be fair, ethnographic studies under the research initiative have dealt with structural complexity quite well. For instance, Prapas Pintobtaeng’s study of rural change in a Thai village (2012) further proposes that rural Thais now assume a new kind of “right to subsistence” to be provided by the government, instead of solely by the local community as in Scott’s formulations (1976). Jakkrit Sanghamani’s study synthesizes antagonistic theses of Scott’s “moral economy of
the peasant" and Popkin’s “political economy of the rational peasant” into his own tentative formulation of a “moral political economy of aspirations” in modern Thai rural society (2012: 19).

Still, due to the commitment to making important arguments about how Thai society has changed, the emphasis often falls on shifting political structures more than it does on enduring forms of identification or on finely-detailed micro-political interactions between individuals. I will zoom in, slow down, and make more modest but also more complicated argument about the ambiguities and ambivalences around the contemporary constitution of citizenship.

In order to make this intervention, I am informed by anthropological perspectives on citizenship. The concept cultural citizenship, introduced by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1997), starts from the recognition that, substantively, citizenship does not follow the neat assumption that every citizen is equal before the law. The distinction between formal citizenship and substantive citizenship points to the experiences and practices of exclusion and marginalization of non-citizens and second-class citizens (Rosaldo 1997:27). The concept of cultural citizenship enables Rosaldo to elucidate how culture and citizenship are intertwined, especially in the case of Latinxs who experience and at times contest white supremacist assumptions and practices in constructions of citizenship in the United States.

The cultural citizenship concept is later enriched by anthropologist Aihwa Ong. Relying heavily on Michel Foucault’s conception of power, Ong theorizes cultural citizenship as “subjectification” which denotes a “dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the state and civil society” (1996:737). What this means is that the process of becoming a citizen simultaneously involves both consent and coercion, even in the absence of
repressive state apparatuses. I find her formulation quite useful in its capacity to encompass claims to an authentic identity as well as impositions by the dominant ideology, but it does so in such a way that does not oppose one to the other. Throughout this work, I use cultural citizenship as a lens to understand how my informants make themselves and are made into villagers–citizens, an unstable condition that slips back and forth between, on one hand, villagers defined as politically limited yet authentic and, on the other hand, citizens entitled to civil and political rights and social benefits from the state. The ambiguities and contradictions in this condition will be explored in detail in Chapter 1 on the bio-politics of health and hygiene, and in Chapter 2 on sufficiency economy and populist policies.

As much of my analysis is microcosmic in scale, involving sentence-by-sentence interaction between individuals, I employ Louis Althusser’s notion of *interpellation* to capture moments of recognition and misrecognition where ideological state apparatuses, the cultural institutions like schools and religion that operate more by ideology than by direct repression, constitute people as subjects (1976). The paradigmatic example of interpellation is that of the policeman in the street hailing “Hey, you!” to someone—the moment that person turns around is a moment of interpellation. When the Thai military junta speaks through the song lyrics, “Let us return happiness to you, the people,” people are also interpellated to become subjects under military rule of happiness. But, as already noted that many of us were not all that happy with the

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6 Political theorist Chairat Charoensin-o-larn has pointed out that in the current political divide in Thailand, “Thai people have become what Althusser terms the ‘ideological state apparatus.’ They must police one another to ensure that people on the other side of the divide hold the ‘right’ idea” (2012:93).
coup, there is always the possibility of misrecognition and talking back. Judith Butler's revision of the interpellation concept is important here: Butler argues that interpellation is not a one-way operation; as a performative, it opens up opportunities for appropriation and subversion (1993:122). While Althusser mentions that nine out of ten times, the person hailed by the policeman would quite tragically turn, I beg to disagree: not only did we turn less to the junta's hails, but when we did turn we also turned in ways not congruent with the intent of the one who hailed. In Chapter 4, I will analyze the dynamics of interpellation and subversion in village meetings where state officers “explain the coup” and ask villagers for their proposals for national reform. In and beyond these meetings, there are various public and semi-public spaces where villagers work out their understanding of themselves and the world.

The attention to the cultural constitution of citizenship also opens up a reconsideration of the public sphere. When one starts from the premise that exclusion and marginalization are constitutive of citizenship, one needs to revise the notion of the public sphere as a basis for democracy. I borrow the title of this section from political theorist Nancy Fraser's 1990 essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” where she provides a Marxist-feminist critique of Jürgen Habermas's formulation of the bourgeois public sphere (1989). Instead of one singular public, Fraser advocates for a conception of the public sphere where competing publics and counterpublics are legitimate (1990:65-70). Rosaldo, articulating the cultural citizenship concept, similarly rejects the urban public square model as the final goal of democratization (1997:28). Differences in terms of gender, race, class, citizenship, among other axes of inequality, figure into who gets to participate and be more listened to in such spaces (see also Fraser and Gordon 1992, Kipnis 2004, Cody 2011).
I offer a descriptive account of village publics through participant-observation in everyday conversations that at times turn into political discussions. In Habermas’s terms, these village publics would belong to the historically suppressed category of “plebeian public sphere” as opposed to the “liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere” which is Habermas’s subject matter (1989:xviii). At times, village publics go directly against dominant publics, and thereby assume the character of what Fraser calls subaltern counterpublics: “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1990:67).

Despite all the differences, village publics remain authentic publics in that they are the medium for everyday sociable conversations and political discussions that give rise to political subjectivity. As such, village publics “put the state in touch with the needs of society,” to use Habermas’s phrasing (1989:31). However, the position of the villager in society is generally subjugated; therefore, the project of recognizing village publics will seek to address how the state has failed to come in touch with villagers’ real needs and desires. In this vein, I will also learn from village publics’ democratic, consensus-based habits in order to imagine a more inclusive communicative society.

My call for recognizing these social gatherings as legitimate publics is not only motivated by my political commitment; calling them publics also points to the ways some people, especially adult men, have greater access and centrality in such spaces. The etymological connection between the terms public and pubic (Fraser 1990:60) points to the aged and gendered construction of publicity. Admittedly, this gender and age slant is reflected in my account of
village publics as well. However, the prominence of adult men’s voices in village publics does not come with the attendant assumption that women are politically irrelevant. I learn from anthropologist Katherine Bowie who, discussing matrilocality in Thailand, insightfully comments on women villagers’ political, yet covert, importance both in everyday life and village elections: “in the politics of matrilineal kinship, conflict is the arena for ignorant, drunken husbands and sons-in-law; resolving conflict is the arena for knowledgeable, sober wives and mothers” (2008:148). The voices of women in this work will thus be particularly significant in enriching an understanding of villager-citizens’ political subjectivity.

I have been talking at length about citizenship in Thailand in general, but my work in fact focuses on people in particular social positions: villagers in northeastern Thailand, also known as Isan. An overview of relationship between the village and the state in Isan is indispensable for the full appreciation of the contradictions in the condition of villager-citizenship. Now, I turn to sketch out the history of relationships between the village and the state in northeastern Thailand.

The village and the state: Isan as an Other within

The term “Isan” is in itself meaningful only in relation to the central Thai state: Isan is a loanword from Sanskrit meaning northeast. Situated to the northeast of Bangkok, Isan is a plateau bounded by mountain ranges on one side and the Mekong River on the other. Ethnically and linguistically diverse, northeast Thailand has Lao-speaking people as its largest ethnic makeup. Since the consolidation of the Siamese/Thai modernizing state, Isan has always been
thought of as part of the Others Within, an “Isan problem” (Keyes 2014). After a historical review of the relationship between Isan and the Thai state, I will turn to investigate the dialectical relationship between the village and the state.

In the late nineteenth century, as the British Empire was conquering the Burmese kingdom to the northwestern frontiers of Siamese influence and the French Empire was subjugating Indochina to the east of the Mekong River, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, reigned 1868-1910) successfully consolidated the Siamese state’s power. In place of existing forms of governance, be they regional monarchies in the North or a sultanate in the Deep South or local lordships in part of Isan, the King created a centralized bureaucracy. In the northeast, the replacement of local lords by bureaucrats was a major cause of uprisings in 1900-1902 (Keyes 2014:8), much studied for their radical potential for a Thai-style anarchism epitomized by Chatthip Natsupha (see, e.g. Chatthip et al 1998). There were also the integration of the sangha (the Buddhist monastic order), the introduction of compulsory primary education, the supremacy of the central Thai language as the official language of the nation, the construction of railroads into the provinces (which effectively facilitated in the suppression of rebellions, especially in Isan).

Keyes succinctly summarizes the “Isan problem” today by turning the tables: “The problem today should be seen, I now maintain, as lying not with the questionable loyalty of the rural people of northeastern Thailand but with an inadequate appreciation by the elite and urban middle class of the legitimate desire of northeasterners to have a significant voice in national politics” (2014:xiii).
Politically, this was the first time that in rural villages, like the one where I did my fieldwork, the position of village headman (puayai baan) was created by the state bureaucracy and regulated by state laws. It was at once a technology for social services and political control (Hirsch 1993:44). The degree to which village headmen complied with the bureaucratic apparatus varied through time and place, but in general they increasingly became compliant channels for state power (Chaiyapong 2012).

Praised for abolishing corvée (a form of compulsory labor for royal public projects) in 1905 and later slavery, King Rama V also inaugurated a distinct kind of economic relationship between subjects and sovereign: land rent in kind and labor in public works gave way to land tax. Peasants, whose labor was ‘freed’ from local lords, passed from being prai⁸ ‘bondsmen’ to chao baan ‘villagers’; they were now subservient to the Thai state (Keyes 2014: 8).

Culturally, the introduction of a centralized bureaucracy and compulsory education provided a model of assimilation that has become foundational in what constitutes citizenship and social mobility in Thailand to this day, including for rural villagers. Bureaucracy and education have also perpetuated the structure of domination and discourses of difference between cultured and civilized Thainess and rural villagers’ un- Thainess and backwardness. Influential literary works about the oppression of Isan villagers were taken by the national elite, intellectuals, and social justice activists to reproduce the mythic discourse of Isan villagers as stupid, poor, and sick (ngo jon jep), in need of sympathy and help (Chusak 2008). Images of

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⁸ There has been a resurgence of the terms prai and ammaat (bureaucrats/aristocrats) mobilized by the red shirts movement, to explain the contemporary double standard in state practices, biased against rural-based populace, the majority of voters in Thailand.
dark-skinned villagers proliferate in contemporary national campaigns against alcoholism, which target those villagers trapped in the vicious cycle of being poor, getting stressed, and turning to alcohol (*jon khriat kin-law*). Isan villagers’ ways of living, eating, dressing, speaking—and electing politicians—were and are conceived of as inferior in the eyes of the elite, old and new. Chapter 1 will go more deeply into the issue of eating raw fish and drinking alcohol.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Northeast came to be understood as one of the poorest and most underdeveloped region in Thailand. After World War II, when Isan was construed as seedbeds of communist infiltration, with the support of the U.S. the Thai state poured into Isan nationalist-royalist propaganda, interregional roads, U.S. military bases, local development projects, and in the most marginal places military raids against communist insurgency. Many northeastern villagers, including some that I got to know during my fieldwork, volunteered to join the military reserve to “fight communism” in the Vietnam-American War. From this, one can start to see the complicated two-way relationships between Isan villagers and the Thai state. As Isan was being “developed,” it was also being distinguished from communist Laos, materially and ideologically. I will flesh out this “ideoscape” (Appadurai 1990:7) of democracy and its other more fully in Chapter 3.

In the late twentieth century, the Green Revolution, an agrarian transition brought about by a dramatic increase in technological innovation in agriculture, compelled rural peasants in Thailand and the Global South in general to become more immersed in the global market of agricultural products (Turner and Caoutte 2009). Cash crop production or commercial agriculture, especially of particular kinds of marketable rice, replaced subsistence agriculture as the major economic activity; migration to urban centers and overseas to work also became major
sources of income for many rural villagers. In Thailand, increasing government subsidies and commercial opportunities for rural farmers led to increasing wealth for many.

Parallel to this historical sketch, there has also been developments of the imaginary of the village. Jeremy Kemp has explicated on the “dialectics of village and state” in modern Thailand, wherein administrative necessities bounded the village as a category, in turn giving rise to new forms of state institutions in the villages (1991). Interestingly, later critical theorists, seeking to recover precapitalist forms of community, takes the state-produced village to be a unit of closed corporate community (see Wolf 1966) where promordial solidarity and statelessness prevailed (Kemp 1991). At the same time, the village is also a site of local belonging and authenticity vis-à-vis other villages or places (see, e.g. Utong 1989). “Isan,” widely taken up by northeasterners as markers of identity, is not necessary a sign that refers to Bangkok as the center. Indeed, it is worth asking if the Isan identity is felt to be more “Lao” than “Thai.” Whatever the case may be, one needs to be careful not to homogenize the village simply because of claims to village solidarity or authenticity. As in any community, the village is a site of conflict and contestation. As Nancy Fraser puts it, a public is always constituted by conflict, thus multiple competing publics in any given community.

Finally, after all this talk about state apparatuses and subjectification, it is provocative to ask, on the back of one’s head: does the state actually exist in rural Isan? This is a question that I entertain throughout the process of writing this work, and the answer remains open-ended. The scholarly literature on geographically distant places in Southeast Asia, epitomized by James Scott’s *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, emphasizes hill and rural societies’ autonomy from the state. More recently, anthropologist
David Graeber’s essay “Provisional Autonomous Zone: Or, the Ghost-State in Madagascar” (2007) argues that in a Madagascan rural village the state does not exist; villagers simply engage in a “scam” to propitiate the government with its bureaucratic trappings while actually as a community they govern themselves and put the state outside communal affairs. Referring to Max Weber’s classical definition of the state as the upholder of order through the monopoly of the legitimate threat of violence, Graeber then illustrates that the community actually takes the matter of enforcing order in its own hands, despite the occasional instrumental involvement of state institutions like police stations (2007:163-5). Whether there has been peaceful self-rule in rural Isan or not, these arguments are certainly provocative. At the very least, they illuminate how the mere presence of state institutions does not necessarily mean that state power is operating. In rural Isan today, what counts as part of a state apparatus could be complicated. As a result of constitutional reforms in the 1990s, the institutions of local administration now gained a modicum of autonomy in terms of local elections and decision-making in local development projects, financed by the flow of taxes from the state. The political and financial strengthening of this local administration has sparked tensions with the long-standing bureaucratic administration, which has remained relatively distant and top-down, from its conception during the reign of King Chulalongkorn to the current rule of the military junta. Are local administrative institutions really part of the state or are they not? Whatever the answer may be, the coup d’etat and its subsequent decrees abolishing local elections and replacing them

9 Weber states “A compulsory political association with continuous organization will be called a ‘state’ if and in so far as its administrative staff successfully upholds a claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order” (1968 I:54).
eventually with appointed bureaucrats certainly certify the provisional character of such an “autonomous zone” if there was ever one. Graeber qualifies his discussion of village autonomy in the following: “Their autonomy was tentative, uncertain. It might be largely swept away the moment a new invasion of guns and money restores the apparatus; but then again, it might not” (2007:172). In Thailand, the coup effectively restored the state apparatus, spatially through military posts in cities, institutionally through the expansion of state power. Even then, domination is never total. Flirting with this idea of tentative, uncertain, I will be flirting with this idea of tentative, uncertain autonomy throughout this work. In Chapter 5, I tell a story of a police–military arrest of village monks and who were using methamphetamines. The encroachment of repressive state officials and the reactions from various villagers elucidate complex attitudes toward the state. Whether and when the state really exists is something I leave for you to decide.
METHODOLOGY

With approval from Swarthmore College Sociology and Anthropology Department’s Review Committee, I conducted the main part of my data collection from May to August 2014. I titled this project “Everyday Life on the Margins of a Social Movement: A Study of Politicized Villagers in Northeastern Thailand.” My field research was mainly an ethnography of the everyday lives of Lao-speaking villagers in a Northeastern Thai village, utilizing the methods of participant observation and direct observation. Prior to the fieldwork I had been a semi-speaker of Lao, but I became fluent in Lao within a week or two. Other than that, linguistic issues were minor as the vast majority of village inhabitants could speak both standard Thai and Lao. In addition, I did seven semi-structured interviews with key informants and local authorities, made audio recordings of three public village meetings and transcribed them, and collected some documents from the local administration authority and relevant news articles from mass media for later analysis.

As I was preparing for my fieldwork, the Army shut down political television stations and seized power. This turn of events forced me to change my research plans. I had planned to observe the rally for one day, in order to later compare and contrast such mobilization with rural villagers’ indirect participation with the United Front for Democracy (also known as red shirts) rally and the movement at large through watching allied television channels. As there was no longer the political television programming, I broadened my focus of study.
Ethnographic work in Ban Non Daeng

On most days starting from 26 May to 9 August 2014, I did my ethnographic research in Ban Non Daeng. A densely-populated village of three thousand inhabitants about a dozen miles from Sisaket, my hometown, Ban Non Daeng could be described as an urbanized village. Electricity, running water, sewer, motorcycles, and pickup trucks were accessible to virtually every household. The village had a few dozen grocery stores, several rice milling facilities, a few motorcycle repair shops, a few beauty salons, two small gas stations, a public school, a Buddhist temple, a reserve forest housing guardian spirit (*puu-taa*), and surrounding agricultural fields with abundant natural water resources. I got to know of this village because Max, a friend of mine, was from this village. Max and his parents hosted me during the days and nights I stayed. Their modern-looking house, built from expensive teak, was situated outside the village proper — far enough to be away from daily interactions with villagers but close enough to hear the village radio broadcast at dawn. I had a room of my own, with an air conditioner and a bathroom, on the second floor of the house. Max’s family was informed of my research plans in advance, that I would like to observe and participate in UDD TV watching with villagers. Neither Max nor his parents supported UDD or the government, but his grandparents identified themselves as red shirt supporters, even as they had never been to a rally.

My main research site, a village grocery store, was operated by Max’s grandparents, who I will call Maeyai and Poyai, the Lao terms for grandmother and grandfather, respectively. In the first week of fieldwork, I asked Max to introduce me to his grandparents at the grocery store. Each day in that first week, for about an hour or two in the late afternoon, I familiarized myself with Maeyai, Poyai, their regular customers, and the rhythms of everyday life in that part of the
village. Mostly, I sat on a bamboo bench in front of the store. The flat square-shaped bamboo bench, which could fit about two people sitting on each side, had previously been the space where “red shirts” villagers would gather every evening to socialize under the television box, which always showed the programmes from the channel Asia Update, a UDD TV station. They would socialize, talking and drinking rice whisky that they bought from the store. Poyai, a well-regarded villager for his work ethic and self-taught mechanical expertise, also a regular drinker and a “red shirt leader,” would always sit there, talking politics with other regulars. Maeyai was the main person managing the store, sometimes until 10 or 11 at night when the houses had already gone dark and quiet. This everyday gathering had already changed prior to my arrival: when I got there, there was no Asia Update, no political radio channels, and some regulars had stopped coming to talk for fear of military scrutiny and repression.

After the first week, I started to go unaccompanied to the grocery store, riding a motorcycle or driving a car from Max’s house to park on the two-lane street. Gradually, I became acquainted with several regular customers, most of whom lived close to the store, less than a two-minute walk. Regardless of the distance, some villager customers walked to the store, while some rode bicycles or motorcycles. When I sat on the bench observing and talking, from time to time I would take out my smartphone to take short notes. As my social acquaintance spread, I also felt gradually more comfortable in walking around and talking to more villagers.

During the next two months, I recorded a total of forty-six entries of daily field notes, focusing on my participant-observation in Maeyai’s grocery store and in dinner conversations with Max’s family. I stayed on and off in the village: some nights, I stayed in Max’s house; other
nights, especially on weekends, I would drive back to my hometown to be with my family. I usually typed up my field notes late into the night in Max’s house.

Summer months were considered to be leisure time by villagers. After the yearly harvest and sale of shallots, jasmine rice, and chili peppers, villagers had less work during the rainy season from June to September. There were leisurely or non-work activities that I participated in, for instance mushroom picking, dessert making, religious ordination ceremonies in the village temple. Such leisure allowed me to enter into the social flow of the everyday without seeming too out of place.

In late June, the military junta, having now established itself as the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), mobilized the bureaucratic system to send delegates to hold local village assemblies in order to explain the reasons the Army had taken power and the demands villagers had for political reform and socio-economic development. I had the chance to observe three such assemblies, each lasting for about three hours. In two assemblies I made audio recordings of the procedures; in the other I tried to take verbatim notes. In both cases, I took detailed notes of the aural, visual, and spatial aspects of the assemblies. In particular, situating myself in the in-between spaces, I paid close attention to the relationships between the front-center of the assemblies (where the bureaucrats sat, went through their schedule, and wrote summary points on big sheets of paper) and the back-periphery of the assemblies (where villagers were generally less engaged with the assemblies sat, and where they needed microphones to speak to the delegates). Although I did not observe all the seven assemblies for the seven village subsections, the three that I attended provided a sufficient sample of how different such an assembly could turn out to be even with the same bureaucrats holding meetings.
in the same village. The detailed and extensive data collected from these assemblies amounted to about a hundred pages in transcription.

At the end of my fieldwork, in late July and early August, I conducted seven interviews. Three of them were semi-structured interviews with local authorities and politicians in front of their house or their place of operation (not their “office”). In these interviews, topics in common included the interviewee’s roles as a civil servant and as a local authority, their life trajectory prior to becoming a local authority, their views on democracy and political corruption, their views of the problems of the village around debt and drugs, and their opinion of the national political situation. The other four interviews I conducted were unstructured interviews with key informants on various topics such as the village’s past and local and national politics. All interviews except one went longer than one hour.

After the ethnographic fieldwork, I did additional archival research to collect more sources more historically expansive and ideologically polyvocal than most of what I followed on social media. In Ban Non Daeng, at the end of my stay, I photocopied a set of documents from the local administration office and the subsection headman. Documents included general demographic information, statistics of income and debt of each household, development plans gathered from village assemblies, bureaucratic records of each activity carried on in a village subsection, and accounting books recording loans from the government. Later, in Bangkok, I spent a few days amassing Thai-language sources otherwise unavailable outside university libraries in Thailand. These sources include: older accounts of areas around Baan Don Daeng, as well as Isan more generally; anthropological approaches to the study of rural society; manuscripts of studies of the red shirts movement; etc. I also brought Thai books that have been
pivotal in framing outsiders’ (including Bangkokians’ and foreigners’) understandings of Isan.

Many of these sources complemented data gathered from my ethnographic work; others helped
guide my theoretical approaches.

My subject positions – “they all know about me more than I know about them”

My subject position in the field crystallized in moments of surprise. As I wrote in the first
entry of my field notes, “they all know about me more than I know about them.” My family
history and Max’s subject position in village life, as well as interrelated aspects of gender,
language, class, body, generation, and place, constituted my subject position, or rather positions,
in relation to each individual villager. These complex positions, necessarily partial, posed
methodological limitations as well as enabled my research to become politically relevant.

My first realization upon arriving at the village was that everyone knew who my mother
was: they were all patients in my mother’s clinic in the provincial city. Indeed, the evening
before the day I started my fieldwork in the village, a couple of villagers visited my mom’s clinic
in the provincial city. They turned out to be Max’s family, taking Poyai to see my mom for his
stomachache. In the visitation, they invited mother to visit their house which —to my mom’s
surprise— cost more to build than her own house had cost. (The next day, my mom and I went
together to Max’s house. Max’s mother showed my mother the house and many photo albums.)

I also found out that many adult villagers knew who my mother’s mother was: many of
them had bought mackerel from her fish stalls in the city decades back, when the city was much
less developed and my mother had just finished her medical studies and established her clinic by
my grandmother’s business. Incidentally, my mom’s clinic was situated precisely where the
minibuses from Ban Non Daeng were stationed (and still are). Many of the villagers from Ban Non Daeng, I discovered, were my mom’s regular patients in the clinic, as well as regular customers of my grandmother’s business. It was these villagers whose patronage had made possible countless opportunities that had eventually brought me to write this senior thesis!

Therefore, it became normal practice that Poyai and other villagers would introduce me as the doctor’s son to some other person curious about my frequent presence in front of Maeyai’s grocery store. Alternatively, many villagers saw me first as a friend of Max’s who was there on some kind of vacation or leisure (len). Max was well-known by most adult villagers.

The association of me with my mother’s profession significantly informed my subject positions in the field. Being a doctor’s son (luk khun-moo) brought with it associations of wealth, education, cosmopolitanism, and hygiene, among other things. When I explained that I was doing “research” (ngan wijai), some villagers thought I was doing some kind of medical investigation. My position as a student and researcher was refracted through the meanings of being the doctor’s son, the meanings of being an undergraduate student in the United States, and the meanings of what “study” and “research” had looked like in the village.

My association with Max, on the other hand, brought me in line generationally. I adopted familial, genealogical terms that Max would use when referring to most adult villagers. Consequently I called Max’s grandfather “Grandfather” (poyai), and so forth. In turn, some villagers called me “Son” (luuk) or “Grandson” (laan), while others that had become acquainted addressed me by my nickname. Strangers tended to refer to me as taw; a polite, semi-formal form of address.
The subject positions I inhabited in relation to these adult villagers posed some fundamental methodological limitations to my research. For example, the fact that I never interacted with teenagers in Ban Non Daeng, except for those related to Max, meant that my account of everyday life in the village would categorically exclude young villagers, even if my best efforts were to be devoted to discussing the contestation and conflict within the village. My subject position to those excluded from my everydayness, therefore, would be one of distance and suspicion. To illustrate, I heard from a couple of my key informants that many of the teenagers suspected that I was a spy trying to sniff drug-related activities in the village.

Setting the scene

In the sky, not a drop; In the soil, only sand:
Dripping teardrops disappear, Swallowed by the land.
The heat strikes hearts, The earth cracks in its quake;
Groaning tectonic chests, All year round, burst and break.
Nong-han, the oceanic pond; Mun, the specter-like strait;
Chi, the resurrector river: Running deep, lying in wait.
To see, and to freeze O Isan! it’s like this,
To ponder, and to feel Dejected: this is it?

—Assanee Phollachan (Nai Phi), “Isan!”

Sisaket has long been known as one of the poorest, if not the poorest, province of Thailand. Early studies of development implementation in Isan, especially in Sisaket Province, emphasize its precariousness and underdevelopment (e.g. Suparb 1963; Amyot 1964). Representations of Isan in popular culture, especially from the tradition of radical leftist Thai literature, one of whose pioneers is excerpted in the epigraph, emphasize that Northeast Thailand is full of parched fields and cracked earth, a misfortune that is supposed to evoke sympathy and revolutionary consciousness. Meanwhile, high-school textbooks teach that the Northeast is a salt-
earthed plateau, therefore generally unfit for agriculture, and that the mountain ranges block
monsoon rains from the southwest from coming to Isan, thus the relative dryness of the region
compared to other regions of Thailand.

Yet, Ban Non Daeng, Sisaket, is a place of abundance: it is not far from two major rivers
of Northeast Thailand, River Mun and River Chi. The proximity to the rivers means that there is
and will always be water underground to use for watering agricultural fields. Virtually everyone
of my interlocutors in the village told me that in this village, if one works hard enough, one can
never be poor, as there are riches to be enjoyed by anyone with hard work.

The contradictory frames of scarcity and abundance are present in the opening poem
itself: while the first four lines depict extreme aridity, the following two lines list major bodies of
water in the region almost as some sort of subaltern potentiality. Chusak Pattarakulvanit 2008
provides a lucid critique, arguing that the discourse of dryness works to obscure the issue of
poverty by shifting blame of Isan’s underdevelopment from the neglect of the state to the realm
of geography and meteorology. Building upon this critique while engaging with the contradictory
frames, I would like to provide a richer, more exploratory reading of scarcity and abundance in
Northeast Thailand grounded in an historical analysis of agrarian transition and today’s
ecological condition gathered from ethnographic fieldwork. Here, I sketch a modest account of
the history of Ban Non Daeng.

A recent history of Ban Non Daeng: economic growth and ecological change

The following account of a history of Ban Non Daeng dates back only several decades.
While there is in the village’s temple a trace of Khmer Empire, dominant in much of mainland
Southeast Asia from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, in the form of an inscription in carved
wood, locals’ accounts of the past are scant about any imperial, feudal, manorial or state presence in the village, except for memories of paying tax in the times of Siamese absolute monarchy in the early twentieth century. In contrast, most of what I heard from villagers dates back only a few generations. As the age of my informants (except Max) ranged from about forty to about seventy, the oral accounts of village life before the late 1940s would only come from old stories that the parents and grandparents of my informants—parents or grandparents themselves—had told them.

A striking pattern emerging from the narratives of Ban Non Daeng’s past tells of a progress from poverty and lack (uet) in generations past to the present state of well-being (bo uet in Lao, literally ‘not lacking’; sabaay in Thai/Lao, ‘convenient’ or ‘well’); simultaneously the narratives also indicate an ecological change in the contrary direction. The account I am giving here will focus on that double movement of economy and ecology.

To understand the economy, in the sense of the management of the household, requires a basic understanding of patterns of kinship and inheritance in Ban Non Daeng. The village’s early inhabitants organized themselves by clan, that is, major family lines within the village. Villagers married between clans, usually within the village or with someone from a nearby village. There were only half a dozen such clans, whose persistence manifest in a few surnames readily identifiable by bureaucrats and even my mother, as names from this particular area of several villages. Clans have since adopted family names according to Thai legal norms. While nowadays surnames are patrilineal, inheritance of land still runs through matrilineal lines, and uxorilocal marriage, that is, the groom moves in to live with the bride’s family, is customary. Parents divide their land among their children once they become adults; as long as the parents are still alive,
they hold legitimate authority over the land, but their children hold legal titles and are responsible for working, renting, or selling the parcels. The parents’ plot becomes reduced to the plot of their youngest daughter (luuk laa), who is expected to take care of her elderly parents.

Historically, each household had to struggle to meet its subsistence needs. Narratives of primordial poverty and lack were rife with descriptions of how long it took for rice-producing households to travel to exchange rice for salt; how hard it was in the time of the great-grandmothers to find adequate food, how mothers needed to go into the forest to dig up edible tubers for her children. First-hand, experiential accounts of the past also register poverty and lack, even though not in terms of absolute lack in a struggle for subsistence, but rather the lack of labor- and time-saving technologies and convenient household appliances, and the absolute necessity of back-breaking hard work in the fields. It is important to note that because these narratives of lack were told to me in the current context of relative well-being for villagers, they necessarily indexed the present moment.

As a result of post-World War II national economic development, rural villages started to become incorporated into the global capitalist market, and this incorporation came in the form of increased village and market-town relationships. Town merchants were generally of Chinese origin. Many of the Sino-Thai merchants, who had only in recent generations migrated from parts of China in poverty (suea puen moon bai, ‘one sleeping mat and one pillow’), have structurally benefited from Thailand’s economic development. Since the US-backed military field marshal Sarit Thanarat took power in 1957, he lifted the anti-Chinese laws erstwhile prevalent in the previous field marshal’s regime (Studwell 2007). As a result, his priority in planning and building the national economy allowed for Sino-Thai merchants’ oligarchic
economic and social ascendancy. Accompanying this rise, lesser merchants of Chinese origins who live in distant market-towns also absorb more surplus from direct producers in the countryside (my own family is one such example). In the decades prior to Thaksin's state-funded village microfinance and loans programs, the majority of Ban Non Daeng villagers relied on these merchants.

I call these merchants “monied capitalists,” to use historian Jairus Banaji’s definition: money-owning individuals who, by lending money as capital, exploit the labor-power of direct producers even as the latter nominally own their means of production (2010:308). These monied capitalists act simultaneously as buyers of agricultural products, sellers of agricultural supplies (seeds, fertilizers), moneylenders, and informal bankers/usurers. As villagers had few lending resources to turn to in times of need, they were in subordinate relations in their dealings with these merchants. Many stories of their varying degrees of exploitation were shared with me in various contexts. Their places of operation were firmly established in many older villagers' map of my home city.

For older generations of Ban Non Daeng inhabitants, my home city Sisaket is mapped in terms of places of operation of these monied capitalists, to the point where I realized how radically different the city was for villagers from it was for me. Indeed, a shop of agricultural produce I used to walk past regularly in my middle-school years, the shopkeeper whose son went to the same school as I did, for the villagers had always been the site of gruesome loans and tricky dealings, when the monied capitalists always gained the upper hand. Thankfully, things have changed due to agricultural technological innovation, populist policies, and diversification of livelihood strategies.
Throughout the last several decades, Ban Non Daeng has steadily expanded in terms of population growth, in accord with trends in northeast Thailand in general (Suwit 2003). This expansion is evidenced by the administrative expansion of the village—the same ban (‘village’) has grown from one small muu (an administrative unit for a small village or a section of a larger village) only fifty years ago, into currently seven muu, forming its own tambon (the administrative unit over that of muu, whose office of administration is responsible for allocating sizeable amounts of funding toward local development projects). The village is now a densely-populated village of three thousand registered inhabitants.

The expansion is also spatially evident. Walking through the old parts of the village, along narrow roads, I could see many two-storey houses, placed in irregular angles to fit the small parcels of land available. The density is such that, in case of fire, it would in no time spread throughout much of the older parts of the village, as it had actually happened before when houses were still entirely built from wood and bamboo. In contrast, the new parts of the village, which just fifty years ago were wetland forests, had straight, wide roads dividing houses into blocks. These new parts were now places of residence for more than half the village population. As space filled up in the old parts, villagers started to move out, clear new lands, and build new houses. Houses have also grown vertically. Previously, houses were composed of one-storey structure lifted above ground, shored up by wooden pillars and stairs. As households secured enough savings or loans to add more living space, they would subsequently add the concrete first-storey to their house. Still other families, moving out of their parents’ house, would build new all-concrete houses altogether, with parking space and painted fences.
The ecological consequences of population growth have been striking. The spatial expansion of the village has resulted in the elimination of natural lowlands for floods to flow into, making seasonal floods much more of a problem. New ways of building houses with ground-level first storey certainly do not help; individual households have started to elevate their lands instead of their house structures so that floods would go elsewhere (in the village!) The results are worse for the majority of the village: passing floods stay longer and higher in lower parts of the village, which constantly aspire to be higher off the ground.

Sanctuary forest areas around Ban Non Daeng have all but disappeared; what is left of them belong to conservationist temples. Vast expanses of rice fields (10,000 rai) that stretch from all directions of the village used to be wetland forests full of wood and mushroom; much of them was made into agricultural fields by villagers during the 1970s and the 1980s. This is in keeping with the statistics of deforestation in Isan, where the 102,667 sq.km. of forests in 1952 is reduced to 70,904 sq.km. in 1961, to 50,671 sq.km. in 1973, to 27,019 sq.km. in 1982, and to 21,799 sq.km. in 1991 (Suwit and Dararat 1998:201).

Ecological consequences do not always follow a simple calculus of inverse relation with economic growth, however. The decrease in ecological abundance is in many cases counterbalanced by increasing ecological knowledge and awareness. For example, when sanctuary forests around Ban Non Daeng were still there, villagers foraging for mushroom in the forests would come out with baskets full of various mushroom, only to throw most of them away and eat only two or three known kinds. Nowadays, when there are barely any mushroom places around the village, villagers drive for dozens of miles to a public eucalyptus forest to collect mushroom. Due to increasing experience and contact with other villagers, much more varieties
are now collected and consumed, or sold at a relatively high price. People are also more aware of the consequences of collecting too much, when the following year there is less to collect: this has resulted in more or less moderate consumption of rare goods, for example small frogs (ueng in Lao; ueng-aang in Thai).¹⁰

Economic activities of households have further diversified into petty trade, rotating cash crops, wage labor, and non-agricultural pursuits of the offspring. Subsistence rice agriculture has persisted, while commercialization of agriculture has expanded the cultivation of cash crops, especially shallots and chili peppers. This is not to say that before population growth or before the Green Revolution, villagers were simply subsistence-oriented rice-farming peasants, for I believe there has always been a variety of accumulation and reproduction strategies of the household.

The latest generation of households, on average, currently have about 6 rai or about 1 hectare of farmland per family. While this should mean that most villagers are still smallholding owner-operators of their own land, in reality the overwhelming majority of the younger generations in Thailand will not be entering the agricultural workforce (Fuller 2012). In a generation, Ban Non Daeng might follow a similar pattern faced by many other villages in Thailand facing land shortages: more migration into urban unskilled labor workforce. The future

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¹⁰ Whether economic/ecological causality could be directly attributed to population growth is beyond the scope of my research. I pointed to population growth as a telling indicator, in correlation with extension of farmlands and deforestation. It is worth probing, however, what were the roots of population growth? What allowed population to double in a matter of three decades in Isan (Suwit 2003:204)?
hangs uncertain as to how the village will be impacted by the ageing local agricultural workforce, the increasing concentration of land ownership in fewer hands, the looming avalanche of cheap shallots and chili peppers from China and India, and the increasing mobility of cheap labor from nearby neighboring Cambodia and Laos once the ASEAN Economic Community comes into effect in the end of 2015.

These questions around political economy serve as a backdrop of the coming chapters. Though they will be primarily concerned with political questions of cultural citizenship and the state, cultural constructions of the villager have been shaped by the economic history outlined above. Now, let us jump into the thick of what it means to be an Isan villager.
In the evening of 10 April 2015, the fifth anniversary of the beginning of violent crackdown on red shirt protesters led by the United Front for Democracy (UDD), a shirtless man walked up to the Democracy Monument to wrap red cloth around the monument, situated in Old Bangkok lined with bars where some middle-class people were drinking in quiet memorialization. Journalists rushed to the monument even before the authorities. The man, named Chaloempon Puupuak, was from Khon Kaen and Sakon Nakhon provinces in northeastern Thailand and now worked a wage laborer in Bangkok. He told the Prachatai journalist that “I saw my friends die, what the military government is doing now is not right.”

When the police arrived at the monument and ordered Chaloempon to take out the cloth, he complied. The police asked him if he had drunk 40-degree
alcohol or not. Chaloempon replied that whether or not he had drunk 40-degree alcohol, he would still stand by his action.

This news story, which circulated mainly among progressive circles on social media like Facebook and Twitter, probably did not reach the television channels that rural villagers would watch. Despite the return of some “red shirt” news channels some time after my fieldwork that ended in August 2014, the programming is still closely scrutinized by the military regime. Still, this story poignantly illustrates the workings of cultural citizenship in Thailand. Chaloempon’s lone direct action is questioned by the police authorities on the basis of his alcohol consumption. Not just any kind of alcohol, but a particular “40-degree alcohol” (lao siisip diikrii) typically associated with poor, rural villagers. His call for the recognition of the deaths of his friends as well as his political judgment of the military regime was discredited beforehand by the police’s interpellation into politically deficient villager-subjects. Chaloempon’s response, however, suggested that alcohol consumption did not determine his political action. In other words, drunken or sober, the man’s demand for democracy remains legitimate.

In this chapter, I will explore the question of health and hygiene and how they define cultural citizenship in Thailand. Focusing on Poyai, Max’s grandfather, I will discuss two particular health issues: drinking and the consumption of raw freshwater fish and shrimp. I will argue that the villager-citizen condition involves a lived contradiction between pride in being an authentic villager and shame in harming one’s health and hygiene. Both pride and shame, produced in negotiation with the state, become reproduced by villagers themselves. This contradiction, notably, is resolved by drinking.
Drinking shame and pride

The issue of alcohol consumption has been much associated with the image of the poor villager. As part of endless anti-alcohol campaigns organized by the Public Health Promotion NGO-cum-government entity, myriad images and narratives of the drunk, lower-class man have circulated in television and radio channels. The campaigns have emphasized alcohol consumption as not only lethal but also sinful, especially in the annual three-month season of Buddhist lent where people are encouraged to abstain from drinking. The trope of “poor, stressed, drunk” vicious cycle embodied by a dirty man sitting on substandard floorboards codes “the villager problem” in health terms. Max’s parents, themselves residents of Ban Non Daeng but now somewhat removed from its day-to-day social life, saw alcoholism as a major problem of the village. They repeatedly told me that the majority of Poyai’s village subsection, including the headman, were alcoholics. For them, consumption of alcohol was part and parcel of the so-called “broken people” (*khon haang*) and *lism* (alcoholics) who sat around drinking all day without working. Max’s mother also pointed out that in recent years many women from Ban Non Daeng had become “addicted” to alcohol which, when coupled with gambling, was a sure recipe for family disintegration, as the women were usually managers of the household economy.

The 40-degree rice whisky is the top-selling commodity in my main research site, Maeyai’s grocery store. Also known as “white booze” (*lao khaaw*), 40-degree rice whisky is the
cheapest kind of alcohol available next to cheap beer. Each shot costs 10 baht (less than 1/3 U.S. dollar); several bottles, each bottle about a dozen shots, are emptied each day. Poyai, Max’s grandfather and Maeyai’s husband, who is 72 years old, drinks multiple shots each day. Generally praised by other villagers as an exemplary hardworking man, Poyai does not quote fit his daughter’s “broken people” stereotype; perhaps he is the exception that proves the rule.

Poyai’s close family members were worried about his alcohol consumption. Max’s mother asked me multiple times that I stop her father from drinking if I saw it. This certainly had something to do with my position as a son of the well-known doctor, who would try to prohibit her patients from drinking by various means: show them x-ray evidence of their livers, appeal to their family members’ care for their longevity, and even remind them that it was sinful to drink.

Well aware of the pressures from Maeyai, his children and grandchildren, Poyai told me that he would not drink in my view. Sometimes when I was distracted looking away or talking to other villagers on the bamboo bench, Poyai would quickly walk to the rice-whisky booth and pour himself a quick shot without me even noticing. Once, my sight caught him with an empty shot glass in his hand, and I asked him, “Did you just drink?” He said yes, and I remarked how quick he was, “You’re such a pro.” He agreed and burst out laughing.

Consumption of alcohol for Poyai involved at least two feelings: shame and pride. Analogous to Kru Tuen’s fear of the military junta and pride of being a village schoolteacher,

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11 Home-brewed alcohol was illegal and trying to brew one’s own alcohol risked police persecution. Maeyai told me that when she was young people would brew their own alcohol, and it would be consumed in large quantity at festivals and also during group rice harvest, but it would still be less than the amount one could buy and consume nowadays.
Poyai’s self-narrative was split between bashfulness and pride, depending on whether he was drunk or not. When he was sober, he would be ashamed not only about drinking and but also bashful about himself. He did not want recognition as an informant; he told me that he should be referred to as “just a villager” for fear of identification and persecution. When he was drunk, on the contrary, he would be proud about drinking as well as proud of himself as an informant. He told me to describe him in my thesis with his real name—“my name is this, my age seventy-two, I drink [grins].” He ordered me to take photos of the grocery store and write down what he said. He claimed that there was no one else more fitting as an informant than himself, because he had been a regular customer of my grandmother’s fish retail business, and because he knew my mother’s clinic since it opened about twenty years ago.

The feelings of shame were not merely personal but intimately involved with state power. This shame was not only induced by his wife and children; it was endlessly called up by the Thai state’s biopolitics which encouraged citizens to manage their health for morally sound and economically productive lives (Foucault 1979). The shame arose when Poyai recognized himself to be the embodiment of the image of the deficient villager endlessly reproduced by state-funded campaigns on television. This recognition produced feelings of shame.

Drunken pride, on the other hand, suspended such shame with claims to being a villager. The sense of not properly belonging to the state was replaced by the sense of proper belonging as a villager. Poyai claimed that drinking was an authentic social activity of villagers. One evening when he was drunk, Poyai told me that drunken conversations on the bamboo bench were the “true reality of villagers” through which people could fully speak their minds. I believe that there is more to this claim than simply an excuse to drink, which was the way Max’s mother saw it.
The village headman Tong, whose patronizing discourse toward villagers like Poyai is analyzed in Chapter 4, related to me that he could get along with the current local bureaucrat in the subdistrict administration office through alcohol: “it was easy to ask him to come drink and talk, not like the previous person who was a woman and so I did not know how to have a casual talk with her.” The villagerly casualness was achieved by consumption of alcohol among men. Crucially, disinhibition through alcohol consumption promoted democratizing communication simultaneously as it marginalized women.

But drunken sociality on the bamboo bench was not merely an act of evasion of the state’s disciplinary power. Poyai’s affirmations of drinking as authentic villagerness in reality worked towards fostering another mode of belonging to the state. The conversations on the bamboo bench, and the concomitant television watching before the coup, formed a subaltern counterpublic (Fraser 1990) that recognized its oppositional mode of political recognition as villager-citizens. According to Maeyai, the television watching group would take turns buying rice whisky from the store and share it with Poyai. One late afternoon, she complained to me in his (more-or-less sober) presence,

Maeyai: Here, now that there is no one around, I’m gonna tell you all about it! I hate it so much! Are you listening? The drinking group, they came to watch, watch until late at night, and they bought rice whisky to share with one another (paeng), and gave some to the house owner [that is, Poyai]. 8 shares per day, wouldn’t that get to one full [750ml] bottle? I hate it so much that they shared it with Poyai who’d drink too much.

Peera: You mean those who came to watch the TV?
Maeyai: Yes, TV, the red shirt television channel, that is.

The rice whisky sharing practice created a social bond between people who gathered to watch political television programmes together. Crucially, this village public fused a drunken sociality with a political exercise of voice; thus villager-citizens. While every
participant of the drinking group had a television set at home, they chose to gather there to watch political programmes, discuss and voice their opinions together. While Maeyai did participate in voicing grievances, her role was less an immersed participant and more a store operator who served alcohol and swept the floor. Maeyai continued to complain about the drinking group until Poyai interrupted, quietly:

Poyai: Stop talking, darn it (sao wao sao wao, huai)  
Maeyai: [raising her voice] I’m telling it to the grandchild! Is it wrong to talk about this? [she got up and walked into the house behind the store, came back after a little while]  
Peera: So, in conclusion, the shutdown of TV stations made people consume less?  
Poyai: [laughed] Yeah.  
Maeyai: [laughed]

There was a reversal in the usual dynamic in bamboo bench conversations; here Maeyai talked more loudly and dominantly than Poyai. Maeyai only decided to vent about this when there was “no one around,” so that her charged complaint not be publicly heard. The fluidity of the grocery store’s bamboo bench on the front yard between public and private space signals that village publics occur in spaces which are constantly shifting. Furthermore, this scene might not have happened, either, if it had been later in the evening when Poyai was more drunk and would have loudly talked back to her. His quiet interjection only made her complaint more pointed and his shame more apparent. But after all it was a temporary event, diverted by my joking statement and diffused by the grandparents’ laughter.

Why was Poyai so diffident about something so central to his day-to-day life? My interpretation is that, as this complaint Maeyai exposed his “excessive” drinking and “unruly” sociality, Poyai’s sobriety did not allow him to disregard his subjection under disciplinary state power. In this instance, state power worked through the biopolitics that compelled Poyai to
discipline his own bodily conduct (thus the silent shame and the quiet interjection) and shaped his conception of the healthy life (thus the knowledge that alcohol was bad).

Poyai’s drunken state not only allowed him pride, but it also lifted fear from his chest, allowing him to fully air grievances against the aristocratic ammarr and the military junta alongside other villager-citizens. One time, he expressed his vindictive desire to dare some dictatorial general to duel at the cost of his life, before qualifying that he would not be able to reach them. A neighbor then jokingly asked him if he wanted to fight them in a boxing ring, and he replied that he was too old, going to box would only bring death. Simultaneously as it placed him into the category of hygienically deficient villagers, alcohol consumption enabled Poyai to exercise his voice as a villager-citizen.

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**Eating raw fish and shrimp as an authentic way of living (and dying)**

To illustrate how questions of health and hygiene are directly involved with the state, I would like now to incorporate the issue of consuming raw food to the discussions so far. To do so, I would like to open with an anecdote.

One evening, carrying a plate of fried fish and smashed fish salad (pon plaa), I went to the grandparents’ grocery store. Poyai was there on the front porch with a neighbor, the two of them were inspecting the fish trap that Poyai has been crafting for a few days. Seeing the plate of fish, he told me that the wild mushroom soup I had given him at noon was still not finished, nor was a bowl of fish soup that he and the grandmother had eaten from it for three meals already. Maeyai was bathing, Poyai told me. Then, apparently out of the blue, he told me that his house was not clean because only the two of them lived there, without hiring someone to clean the house for them. The gas stove was also black, he continued, it hadn’t been wiped clean since it was bought. “Actually I didn’t want you to see it, we talked about what to do, but then decided that we’d let you see it, grudging it was, see it so as to really know how it is.”
Confused as to why he felt compelled to apologetically explain to me the condition of his house, I interjected: “Well I don’t mind it at all (ka boo dai waa).”

Poyai quickly replied: “You don’t mind but I’ll say it in case (boo dai waa ka wao wai koon, puut wai koon).” He then mentioned, his voice sounded more tired and resigned than usual, that people these days no longer ate raw things, that he himself did not dare make koi (a way to prepare food raw, in some cases live, by half-cooking it with lime, chilli, shallots and heat the mixture for a minute or two), that when he made laab he made it cooked.

Poyai’s confession of his discomfort of me seeing his unclean house together with his insistence that “people these days” no longer ate raw fish expressed the tension in the hyphenated villager-citizen condition. I was surprised to hear him say all these things, because just a day before he had told me something very different.

The evening before, I had just come back from going fishing with one of Poyai’s sons-in-law, and I went to the grocery store to find his wife. She was not there, and I was on the motorcycle ready to leave, but once I told Poyai that I had in fact tried casting the net a few times, with little success, I became trapped in a conversation. Gleefully, his face flushed with alcohol, Poyai told me that fishing (tuek hae, ‘casting the net’) was the way of life (Thai/Lao withii chiwit). He told me, half-jokingly, to bring the fish so he could koi and eat together with me. “Tell your mom that you eat fish koi, that she give you a vaccine against leaf-shaped microbes in the liver! (pai book mae der waa kin plaa-koi, siit yaa pa-yaat bai-mai nai tap hai nae)” I laughed. Maeyai, frowning at Poyai as she usually did when he was drunk and loud, started to reprimand him that it would be unsafe. But Poyai continued, saying that eating it would not be lethal, that we could eat together, “father and son we eat, both of us, let’s see if someone dies (poo ka kin, huk ka kin, man si taay boo). Tell your mom that you’ve eaten everything, maeng-ngao-maeng-ngot too.”

Not knowing what the word meant, I asked what maeng-ngao-maeng-ngot was. “Scorpions,” he replied. When I told him that I hadn’t eaten scorpions, he said “You’ll get to eat them.”

Embedded in the joking order to “tell my mom” is Poyai’s knowledge that eating fish koi could lead to having “leaf-shaped microbes in the liver.” When I did end up eating koi two weeks later and told my mother about it (it was a delicious tart salad with crunchy not-quite-dead little
shrimps leaping in my mouth), she was taken aback, a little appalled. For her, a physician in the province’s main hospital, eating raw shrimp and fish meant increasing microbes she had seen so much from laboratory results, in the same way that eating wild mushroom soup meant risking lives of “mushroom experts” she saw lost in the hospital every year.

Building from this anecdote, I will now describe how it relates to the campaigns initiated by the Public Health Ministry to discourage people from eating raw fish. This issue, unlike anti-alcohol campaigns, was specifically directed at people born in northeastern Thailand.

Throughout the year 2012, the campaign against consumption of raw fish and other freshwater creatures was “the Isan agenda” (Ministry of Public Health, 18 August 2012). Northeastern Thailand was marked by Public Health Deputy Minister Surawit Khonsomboon as the region with the highest number of deaths from especially liver cancer and cholangiocarcinoma (cancer of the bile ducts) in the world: 40 deaths per 100,000 people, compared to 10-15 of the national average, and 1-2 of the global average (Thairath online, 19 February 2012). The prevalence of cancers was attributed to Isan-born people’s consumption of raw fermented fish (Thai plaa-raa; Lao pa-daek) and raw freshwater fish which caused leaf-shaped microbes in the liver. The state’s policy, then, was targeted at changing the eating practices of Isan-born people, in regional and local hospitals, in school curricula, in billboards, in Isan food stands. Special emphasis, however, was not only directed at the northeast but also at villagers. The Thairath article concludes: “In terms of the people, there will be an intensive training of village public health volunteers in the issue of recommending and canvassing villagers not to eat half-cooked food or raw fermented fish.” The more generic term “people” betrays its actual emphasis on “villagers.”
Some of the policies and events that followed were fairly sensational. *Thairath* ran one of its headlines in 6 October 2012: “Mayor Bans Civil Servants from Gobbling (*poep*, ‘to eat in unrefined ways’) Raw Fermented Fish: Urgent Measure! Noncompliance Means Violation of Discipline.” The news story told of a province mayor in Nongbua Lamphu, a province in the northern part of Isan, who ordered all civil servants in the province’s bureaucracy to sign a pledge against eating raw fish. If they violated the pledge, they would face disciplinary measures as they acted not in accordance of their duty to “be good examples/models for the people” (Thai _KeyPressText1_185_185_181_185_k_m_119_185_penta_yaang/baep_yaang_tii_dii_kae_prachaachon). Village headmen and local administrative officials were also included, even though they were not officially civil servants. The next day, another *Thairath* news article related that the mayor “in hopes to decrease the statistics of average one death per day in the area” intended to implement other measures including cautionary ones such as sticker messages on alcohol bottles and repressive ones such as random inspections of food stands with a threat of police arrest, leading to official reprimand and educational session on the dangers of raw fish.

While this was a rather extreme case, and I am not aware of such repressive policies in most Isan provinces, the same logic of training and tutelage permeated more lenient policies of persuasion. A famous Isan-born folk singer, Mike Piromporn, became a presenter for a public health tour “Eliminating Leaf-Shaped Microbes in the Liver and Reducing Bile Ducts Cancer 2013: Everybody is Happy, Eating Cooked Fish” that went to a province in northern Thailand (Naan) and two provinces in Isan. The singer said that the motivation for joining the campaign was because his father had died from it. The poster behind him was Headlined “True Isan
People... Only Eat Cooked Fish” under which the red boldfaced font “Danger!!” was clearly visible.

In these instances, the medicalization of everyday eating practices encouraged people in northeastern Thailand to become hygienic citizens not only through claims of health but also claims of identity and authenticity. To eat *koi* appeared now to be a disregard of one’s own health and life, which was linked to one’s own proper identity as a villager-citizen. Poyai’s insistence on telling me that he had the medical knowledge to fear eating raw food began to make sense. But his drunken remarks, “Tell your mom that you eat fish *koi*, that she give you a vaccine against leaf-shaped microbes in the liver!” remained unassimilated into this brand of hygienic citizenship based on a logic of tutelage and training of the villager-citizen.

A similar contradiction was present in ex-Prime Minister of Thailand Yingluck Shinawatra, in office from 2011-2013. Reported on *kapook.com* on 7 June 2011, During her campaign visit to Isan province Nakhon Panom before the 2011 general election, Yingluck spoke of her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, in self-imposed exile since the 2006 coup, reporting: “Thaksin misses *nam prik plara* (fermented fish chili paste) very much, if I can send it to Dubai, I will do it right away.” While Yingluck did not specify whether this fermented fish was raw, it is safe to assume that the distinction was not meaningful. What was clear was her attempt to recognize those who came and listen to her as villager-citizens not so removed from Thaksin. In 2012 and 2013, however, as Prime Minister her images appeared on billboards and posters discouraging the consumption of raw fermented fish, and she herself announced the “Isan agenda” to eliminate liver microbes and bile duct cancer (Ministry of Public Health, 18 August 2012).
To link the discourses of hygienic citizenship, saturated with numbers and discourses of death, back to a broader theme of aspirations to belong as villager-citizens, I would like to return to the evening of the anecdote that opened this section. Some time after Poyai’s talk about eating scorpions, the scene continued:

Poyai took a look at me, perched on the motorcycle, and said that even as my build was small and slim, I was brave in trying everything. Adding that he was not saying that I was queer (kathoey; ‘transsexual’), he went on to say that when he was my age, he too was small and slim like a kathoey or a woman, but in his military service he was braver than all the well-built, muscled men who deserted or ran away when bombs landed. It was he, the small one, who had dared everyone to duel and fist-fight. After another good while of talk, Poyai told me that once I “finish the curriculum of the basic human way of life,” he would be so happy.

In Poyai’s view, my field activities were about becoming a real man—he prohibited me from doing the dishes or sweeping the floor, for example. His hope for me to finish the “basic human way of life” curriculum was rooted in his pride in being a manly villager. The courage to duel to the death as a marker of masculinity, here reminiscent of anthropologist Oscar Lewis’s classic statement of what it means to be “macho” in Mexico, surfaced earlier in another extract from Poyai. “Without democracy, I’d shed tears as if my father died,” he said just before expressing his desire to duel a military general to death. Surely, the pride expressed by Poyai especially while drunk was as much about social recognition as a manly villager as it was about aspirations for a different mode of political belonging to a more democratic state.

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12 “In a fight I would never give up or say, ‘Enough,’ even though the other was killing me. I would try to go to my death, smiling. That is what we mean by being ‘macho’, by being manly” (quoted from Lewis 1961:38 in Crehan 2002:197).
It is for these aspirations that the drunken sociality and political venting in the grocery store cannot be reduced to and dismissed as merely cultural coping. Even though few people took the drunken Poyai seriously, his drunkenness actualized the aspirations to belong and be recognized as a villager-citizen, in addition to the alternative exercise of voice. Learning how Poyai has actualized his aspirations in moments of intoxication could enable a political economic analysis of inequalities surrounding Ban Non Daeng villager-citizens to begin to conceive of effective channels for change.
Upon hearing that I came to observe a village meeting with state officers, Poyai rode his motorcycle to the meeting place to observe; it was already the last hour of the meeting that had explained the coup, collected grievances, and elicited reform proposals from villager participants. The person sitting next to me nudged me to turn to the side, where Poyai was standing next to the wooden fence bounding the headman’s house. He listened for a bit, then retreated farther away from the panel to talk to some other villagers on a round table out back. I got up to go greet him; quickly he sent me back to continue observing the meeting.

Soon, the meeting came to the final item on the agenda: “the true desires of the community.” The meeting facilitator, a well-dressed woman doctor from outside the village, asked the villagers: “What are the true desires of the community? What do you want to have, how do you want it to be?” A villager responded along the lines of villagers’ generosity and collectivism in the past, a trait which had been lost today. The scribe wrote on the big sheet of paper stretched on a board, “- good social environment, with generosity and sharing.” The doctor repeated the comment, adding to it the fact that nowadays hired labor had replaced the earlier forms of mutual help.

The doctor then tried to elicit more examples of good things from the past. The scribe added another topic on the paper sheet: “Unity in the past.” Another official, a development officer, then spoke through the microphone in standard Thai (she was the only one who did not speak Lao), “collective, manual rice harvest” (longkhaek-damnaa). She glanced through the audience as if waiting for assent, then she nodded, turned around and wrote on the paper sheet herself; “- collective, manual rice harvest.” And then: “- developing the village, no need for hired labor,” and “- abundant nature (water full of fish, fields full of rice).” Sitting in the center of the audience, I did not hear any villager participant list those things.

Listening, Poyai was getting ready to leave, now his body on the motorcycle, which he had walked to the middle of the concrete road, several yards away to the side of the meeting place.

The doctor went on explicating the good past: “For example, in the past people helped to develop the community; helping one another grow rice. Wanting to be like before.” To this sentence Poyai immediately interjected: “If you want it, go get buffalo! (Lao yaak daay ka pai ao khuay maa)” he yelled, and then started the motorcycle and sped away from the scene, leaving peals of laughter and hurrah (hiwww) among villager participants, including myself, and a few seconds of attendant dead air from the microphone. The doctor resuscitated the panel’s voice by saying, with a reluctant calm of someone who didn’t quite know what to say: “Well there’s a comment coming from the side.”
Poyai’s remark to the state official illustrated the state’s misrecognition of villagers’ needs and desires as well as its non-recognition of a form of communal consensus-making through the hurrah. Most dramatic was the contrast between the Thai-speaking development officer advocating for a return to the pristine past—social harmony, subsistence agriculture, non-wage collective harvest, abundant nature—and the Lao-speaking elderly villager daring the officers to go get buffalo if they wanted to go back to that past. This subversive act threw open a potential space for redefining what it meant to be “villagers” and their relationships to the state, which in the format of this village meeting remained hierarchical and patronizing. I will analyze the interpersonal dynamics of interpellation and subversion in the context of village meetings more in detail in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will situate the villager–citizen concept in powerful political discourses around the villager’s relationships to economic changes.

To do so, I will explore the tension between the notion of the authentic self-sufficient peasant villager, on one hand, and the notion of the citizen entitled to civil, political, and social rights on the other. More specifically, I will focus on the analogous opposition in Thai discourses between populist policies and sufficiency economy. Both notions gained common currency in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis that spiralled out of Bangkok’s financial market. Although they have been pitted against each other, both offer a solution to growing income disparities and livelihood instabilities caused by uneven development and trickle-down economic policies since the late 1950s (see Thiwaree 2013:21). Let me now elaborate on each of the notion, which will be followed by an in-depth investigation of the villager–citizen concept through ethnographic engagement with Kru Tuen, a village schoolteacher.
Populist policies, populist democracy

*Prachaaniyom* (populism) gained its currency as a pejorative discourse around the end of Thaksin Shinawatra’s first term (2001-2005) with economist Sawai Boonma who compared Thaksin’s policies to Argentina’s before its 2001 economic crisis (Thiwaree 2013:19). This pejorative, tied to the legacy of Thaksin, sting remains to this day. In the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis which most negatively affected rural-based populations with unstable urban employment, Thaksin Shinawatra won the 2001 national elections under the slogan “New Ideas and New Actions For All Thais” (*khit mai tam mai puea thai tuk khon*). Delivering on his campaign promises of increasing economic opportunities for the poor and taking advantage of the increased executive power granted by the 1997 Constitution, Thaksin conjured up widely popular policies like universal healthcare and microfinance schemes to villages. Some of these policies, especially the universal healthcare scheme, have been more successful in providing social safety nets for the vast majority of Thai citizens. Other policies have been viewed with more suspicion, as they increased the purchasing power of lower-income people in the short term with minimal guarantee of sustainability and fiscal discipline.

An underlying assumption of the criticism is that populist policies would induce excessive desire for consumption among people of lower income, leading to debt and ultimately economic and social disintegration. This criticism, then, reiterates an assumption that villagers cannot govern themselves. In anthropologist Eli Elinoff’s description, “‘villagers’ simultaneously constitute the nation’s ‘backbone’ and that figure on the socio-political landscape in constant need of protection from the corruption of the market, the state and his or her own immoral urges and impulses” (2013:383). One can see in this description the tension between the valorization of the
villager as the nation’s backbone (Thai kraduik san-lang khoong chaat) and the stigmatization of the villager as incapable of full development.

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**Sufficiency economy, sufficiency democracy**

Sufficiency economy (*seettakit poo-piang*), bestowed by King Bhumibol as a remedy for adverse effects of globalization, was offered as a solution after the 1997 financial crisis. Since then, it has become a bureaucratic buzzword: from a response to the harmful effects of globalization in tune with Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness, to a desirable goal in national social and economic planning, to a sustainable method of agriculture, to a household practice of bookkeeping to avoid debt, to a personal ethic of non-excessive daily life. Proponents of “sufficiency economy” tend to emphasize smaller-scale grassroots, local initiatives to sustainable development focused on individual lifestyles (see, e.g. Swearer 2011). Critics, on the other hand, usually emphasize larger-scale implications or uses of “sufficiency economy” for various elite interests to preserve the status quo (Walker 2008a; Unger 2008; Bell 2008; Glassman 2008). I contend that “sufficiency economy” cannot be thought of solely as an philosophy for an authentic and good life, or solely as a tool for the royalist elite to keep the rural poor in their place. In fact, we must attend to both.

As a philosophy, sufficiency economy advocates that people develop relative economic autonomy to shield themselves from the forces of the market. In other words, it assumes that villagers are capable of developing themselves. The Isan village remains a paradigmatic example of this kind of economic autonomy (Chatthip 1997:65). As a discourse, however, it has gone far beyond just a call for ethical reconsideration or pragmatic return of migrant workers in Bangkok
to return to their homelands to build a more sustainable, autonomous living. Rather, it has frequently been mobilized by Thaksin’s opponents as well as public figures to criticize villagers for their excessive consumerist desire for mobile phones and motorcycles, televisions and pickup trucks. Since then, it has become wedded to anti-election rhetoric, what Andrew Walker has called “sufficiency democracy” (2008b). In political theorist Chairat Charoensin-o-larn’s words, the sufficiency democracy discourse

takes the Thai rural electorate as prey to the vote-buying practice of politicians, or as the victims of fugitive former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s populist politics. The logic is straightforward. The less trustworthy elected politicians, political parties and rural voters are, the greater the legitimacy and credibility of the ruling elites to rule from behind the scenes [2012:92].

The key difference between populist policies and sufficiency economy, as political discourses, therefore lies in the different modes of political belonging they engender. Thaksin’s rationale for his policies was that rural populations lacked access and opportunities to realize the potential they had, equal to that of more privileged citizens (Thiwaree 2013:18). In effect, populist policies reconfigured the villager’s mode of belonging to the state by first recognizing the villager’s entitlement to social benefits. Sufficiency economy, on the other hand, ironically reinstates the villager’s presumed political deficiency.

Poyai himself has at times adopted the term poo-piang (sufficiency) to describe his way of life as a villager, authenticated by his moderation in conspicuous consumption and capital accumulation (other than monk’s dwelling, see Chapter 5). At other times, however, Poyai chastises the poo-piang discourse as an imposition from above to keep villagers from using modern agricultural machinery as thus progress to a more comfortable, higher standard of living. Once, Poyai told me of a ‘sufficiency economy’ training session the village headman took him
to. “They taught us to grow just a little rice, just a little vegetables,” he related. Maeyai interrupted him mid-sentence: “growing just a little rice—where would you find money to live by?” Poyai continued sardonically, “to rely on oneself, to use water buffalo to plow the fields.” At this point another villager impatiently retorted: “raising kids and caring for a wife already left me with nothing—and now to raise buffalo on top of that?”

From this example, self-sufficiency is fit for a claim to villager authenticity (mediated by state training programs), yet unfit for a claim to entitlement to equal standards of living. This entitlement may be called “social citizenship,” which means, in T. H. Marshall’s words, “from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society” (1950:11). The contradictory adoption and rejection of the poo-piang discourse points to an incongruity in the villager–citizen condition, a gap between what it means to be a “villager” and what it means to be a “citizen.”

While there are those from Ban Non Daeng whose constructions of villager-citizenship do not threaten to come apart, I have chosen to focus more on the contradictions and instabilities, as these are more instructive in throwing into relief different modes of political recognition and belonging that are at play in each villager’s cultural constructions of villager-citizenship. My hope in doing so is that the following analyses will contribute to the rethinking of Apichat et al’s “new citizens” thesis (2013). The one who most strikingly straddles the hyphen between villager and citizen was Kru Tuen. It might even be seen that the example of Kru Tuen defies any easy dichotomy between the village and the state.
Kru Tuen: populist democracy is not just about social benefits

Kru Tuen was a schoolteacher who used to come join the bamboo bench conversation at Maeyai and Poyai’s grocery store every day. Since the declaration of the martial law and the ban on partisan TV and radio stations, Kru Tuen stopped coming to the grocery store. As my time in the field started one week after the declaration of the martial law, I did not see Kru Tuen visit the store, not even once. Stories of him would surface from time to time in my talk with Poyai and Maeyai. For Poyai, Kru Tuen was the most politically knowledgeable person in the village, even more than Danai. For Maeyai, Kru Tuen was the most devoted member of the several people of the “red shirt TV group” (sum tiwii suea daeng). He would come every day around noon when he finished teaching at the local school without going home first, and would only go home for dinner and then come back again to watch the television and discuss politics until 9 or 10pm. (He and other participants of the group had television sets at home; they were there not only to watch television but also talk and drink.) Kru Tuen was many times the last one to leave, and he would leave because it was a nuisance for Maeyai to still have to have the store open with loud conversations that late.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, I told Poyai that I wanted to interview Kru Tuen. Poyai responded that “he was afraid, that as a civil servant he did not dare come and talk, because it might be considered an assembly of more than five people, so he just biked past this way but did not dare come down to talk about anything. He is a civil servant too, so it’s more difficult.” When I told Poyai that I would then not interview him if he was afraid, Poyai told me that there would be no problem if we went to his house and talked, the three of us.
The emphasis on Kru Tuen's position as a civil servant was again repeated in the interview, which was the only one where I was not allowed to take an audio recording. The first words in response to my request to interview, in Poyai’s presence, was his reluctant remark about his position. He said that there were certain things about which he could not give interview, because “[in standard Thai] being a civil servant, you must respond to the state’s policy, [switches back to Lao] which at the moment the military is the state.” Whether one agreed with the state or not was another issue, but “the things that are binding me, politics, it cannot be talked about deeply.” He was unmoved when I mentioned that I had heard about his frequent visits to discuss politics in the grocery store. Indeed, when I was leaving his house after the interview, his last words were that only about two years after could I ask about politics.

However, “politics” (kaan mueang) for Kru Tuen turned out to be a more narrowly demarcated realm than I first assumed. When I asked him about democracy, he was very eager to “talk deeply” (wao luek luek) about it. Kru Tuen defined democracy as follows: “Democracy is the form of governance that gives everyone equality in a few aspects: firstly, the equality of being human; secondly, the equality of opportunity. If equal opportunities are impossible, there must be a limit to the opportunities of the already privileged, a maximum cap.” He later added that “democracy is also about the people participating in the budgeting,” and then paused to

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13 The code-switching here is significant, for to be a teacher in Thai schools means one has the duty to teach students how to enunciate and read standard Thai properly. The switch back to colloquial Lao in imparting the fact that the military is the state signals that such a statement, distinct from a statement about one’s duty as a civil servant, can be said more comfortably in the native tongue.
comment that “I cannot say as to who gets more and who gets less,” and then continued, “it’s about letting the people manage their own taxes, make uses of their own, think for their own, have their own happiness.”

His conception of democracy that involves redistribution of opportunities and income as well as an autonomous (ideally anarchic) management of taxes, is rooted in his experiences as a rural villager. Responding to my question about how the village has developed over the years, he related to me the hardships in the past before the mid-1970s. Back then, going to the city to register births and deaths or to carry the ill to the hospital, without even a bridge to cross the Mun river, had been difficult. There was no electricity, no house built with cement; there were only transistor radios to listen to broadcast news.

The change came around the mid-1970s. Prefacing that Thaksin Shinawatra was not really his favorite politician, but rather Kukrit Pramoj (Thai Prime Minister in the mid-1960s), Kru Tuen talked about his “money circulation” (ngoen pan) policy:

“Because of the money circulation policy, the people received budget from the government for the first time period . . . the first time that the government took care of the people . . . The countryside here was so vibrant (wue-waa), it received the benefits (aa-nisong) that the government gave to the people . . . it made the people feel proud, and alert (wue-waa) that politics was now close to the people.”

Kru Tuen related that the budget that funded the building of roads between villages made it convenient to go about, and the villagers who helped build them also received wages. When I asked him if he also helped build the roads, he replied with a smile: “I digged the roads like others. Back then I was a young man; when I received money I was proud. The public money (ngoen luang, ‘royal money’) was in my hands. Plus I also got the roads to go around.” Because
of this materially visible policy, Kukrit was and remained his favorite politician, who made him understand what “democracy by the people and for the people” felt like.

Kru Tuen then refuted the claim by “academics from Bangkok” that in Isan the people’s votes were bought. He said that since the turning point in Kukrit’s era, old strategies of politicians who gave things like salt, fish, and fish sauce in exchange for votes gradually shifted to ones based on policy content, up to the present era where vote buying no longer had any decisive effect. In short, it was not about favors or patronage (bun-khun), but about “which party gives to the people, or who values (hen kwam samkan, ‘sees the importance’) the people.” When I asked him to elaborate more on the difference between bun-khun and democracy, he said that for something to be “democratically sound,” it can judged by if the people could afford to live and eat well. He continued, “send some money from the city so that the countryside gets to touch it, it doesn’t have to be 50%, just 2-3% is still good.”

The distinction between patronly bun-khun and populist policies is subtle but telling. Both rely on one party giving to another, but the relationship between the state and the people is transformed in the latter. Anthropologist Akin Rabhibhadana characterizes vote buying as an example of morally corrupt Thai patronage system, and he also makes a direct link between Kukrit’s and Thaksin’s populist policies, rhetorically questioning that “we cannot be certain that in the final instance, will it be villagers or actually someone else who benefits the most?” (2009:248). Borrowing Marshall Sahlins’ terms, Akin sees patron-client relationship as hierarchical and structured by “generalized reciprocity” rather than “balanced reciprocity” (2009:245), thus requiring the socially inferior (puu-noy) to submit (and lap up) to the superior’s (puu-yai) unspecified demands in exchange for favors and protection. In Kru Tuen’s account of
“democratically sound” giving, however, there is no element of submission, the receiver exercises agency in deciding what they want, and the rhetorical question of “who benefits the most” seems irrelevant once put in the history of uneven distribution that has made a claim for “2-3%” rural redistribution seem democratic enough.

If the logic of bun-khun relies on a submission to a hierarchy, the “democratically sound” logic of giving on the contrary betrays an aspiration for political recognition. While Kru Tuen’s refutation was of course a counterdiscourse to the claim that Isan villagers did not know better than to sell their vote for some money, to read it as a merely defensive move would be insufficient. As the act of giving to the people was placed alongside the act of valuing the people, this logic of giving concurs with Jakkrit Sanghamani’s analysis that contemporary vote buying practices are less an act of material assistance in exchange of votes, and more of a symbolic gesture of recognition of each individual in the countryside (2012:62). There is much debate about whether contemporary vote buying is a reiteration of old patronage patterns or whether it is something else (see Jakkrit 2012:65-7, Akin 2009:247), but that is not my main concern here. My question remains: how is cultural citizenship constituted through the “dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the state and civil society” (Ong 1996:737)?

Kru Tuen’s account of his participation in building the inter-village roads when he was young reveals that the sense of being part of “the people” was emplaced in the experience of being a villager—thereby constituting him as a villager-citizen. The feeling of pride when he touched the ‘public money’ was one of political recognition, where the feeling of belonging as a citizen was inextricable from the practice of communal work as a villager. What makes this
special is the fact that what he received was not charity, but a fulfillment of the social contract. His pride indicated an affective connection between the state and Kru Tuen. The money, as a conduit between the state and the villager-citizen, bridged the gulf between the extractive state and the neglected villages, completing the cycle of tax extraction with tax redistribution.

More important, however, is how this experience of state-funded local development project informed Kru Tuen of what ideal democracy felt like. While his remark that “only 2-3%” of state revenue would still be enough for the countryside might be read as a capitulation to minimally beneficial governance, it turned out to be more of a pragmatic assessment. When I asked him if it would be desirable if there were no state to tax and give budgets from Bangkok, he smiled. When I added, somewhat embarrassed, “suppose it’s a possibility,” he replied that this scenario would be ideal, although some governance might be needed to even out inequalities. This answer is instructive in alerting analysts of ethnographic accounts of the state to the possibility that “the state” as a category of analysis may not capture the aspirations for full political recognition and belonging when they are imagined or achieved in terms of self-government (see also Graeber 2007).

I will now take up another important aspect of Kru Tuen: his position as a civil servant. As a schoolteacher in the public school system, he was automatically a civil servant, and as such he had to do more than just teach: he had to comply with state policies, for example propagate the military junta’s “12 values” to students. Kru Tuen was well aware that as a civil servant, he needed to “respond to the state’s policy” even in times of military dictatorship. This created an intriguing split in the person, where talking about “politics” was forbidden, but talking about “democracy” was allowed. To understand this split, I will analyze his attitudes toward being a
civil servant and a local schoolteacher. I will show, further, how the aspirations for upward social mobility and political recognition are firmly grounded on the idea of being a villager, even as they go beyond the opposition between state and village.

Born in the village, Kru Tuen received a government scholarship to study secondary school in the province capital, the market-town several miles away. There, he won another scholarship to study to become a teacher, and right after he finished his studies he went back to his own village to teach in the primary school. Alongside teaching, he remained engaged in rice agriculture on his family plot of land.

Since being a civil servant had long been considered desirable as it offered economic stability and social status, I asked Kru Tuen what he thought of this creed in the aspiration to be "master of people" or "boss" (Thai chao-khon-nai-khon). The following was his long reply:

"Chao-khon-nai-khon is a value of my parents’ generation, of Kukrit’s era, but for me, becoming a civil servant meant facing hardship and pride. I don’t have a feeling of being people’s master. I don’t think that way at all. [switches to standard Thai] I don’t have any thought of being people’s master. [switches back to Lao] Being a civil servant is actually being an employee of others, having to be in their disciplinary control.”

He then shifted to talking about being a schoolteacher:

“I want to speak from the heart that, being a teacher who has taught for almost thirty years, now I am fifty-four, I started teaching since the age of eighteen, I have pride, I have students everywhere . . . In terms of personal life, my family is good, one of my children is studying for a Master’s Degree, and the other is finishing their last year in a teacher’s college . . . I have met 80% success with the spirit of being a teacher, the teacher who knows the hearts of villagers (khruu-huaai-khong-taiban), many of my students met success, there are students who’ve become police officers, who’ve become nurses.”

Kru Tuen’s choice of talking about being a teacher after rejecting the idea of chao-khon-nai-khon, including a clear disavowal in standard Thai, indicates that what was meaningful in his
work as a civil servant lies not in his superior socioeconomic status but rather in his service to young students from the village. The status of “the teacher who knows the hearts of villagers” is imbued with local intimacy; his social recognition for being a well-regarded teacher and ethical standing as an upright, debt-free family man is embedded in his affirmation of being an authentic village.

It is important to note that the marker of success for Kru Tuen’s students and children consists of pursuing higher education and in most cases becoming civil servants: police officers, nurses, teachers. While this does not mean that to become agents of the state is the goal Kru Tuen sets up for young students from the village, it does suggest that securing a civil service position is highly regarded. Kru Tuen later elaborated that being a civil servant offered some economic stability: “If one is not ambitious or wasteful one can have enough to live (por yuu). Being a civil servant does not make you rich, but at least there is social welfare for the family’s stability, you can get reimbursed for going to the doctor, which is good, I feel that the royal government (huang, ‘royal’/’public’) does a good job as a caretaker.”

To juxtapose Kru Tuen’s expression of pride as a villager-teacher with his fearful silence, his accounts can be read further to understand different modes of political belonging.

It is not simply that “the state” allows Kru Tuen certain statements and not others. It is important to note that this suppressive power of “the state” is to an extent self-imposed. There was no military presence in the village, neither was there a potential informer (apart from myself) which could entail a threat of force. Why did he still remain silent on politics two months after the coup? A running joke from the grocery store about Kru Tuen was that students
would come look for him at the store when he did not show up to class. Why did Kru Tuen feel the need to suppress this very significant portion of his day-to-day life before the coup?

There is more to this self-imposed silence, I believe, than fear of persecution or strict observance of professional duty. An incommensurability between modes of political belonging lies beneath this silence. When the military-cum-government shut down the television channels, effectively shutting down a major channel of developing political subjectivity among the watchers in the grocery store, the bridge between the state and the villager-citizen was destroyed and the gulf widened once more. It was no longer tenable for Kru Tuen to express himself both as a loyal civil servant and a vocal citizen. Kru Tuen could narrate himself as an authentic villager-teacher, he could even proudly recite a discourse on redistributionist democracy and reject political corruption, but he could not refer to his own political activities that were critical of the coup. In short, the gap between the village schoolteacher’s duty to the state and the citizen’s political voice had widened so much that they became unbridgeable under the military junta’s martial law.

I have explored at length the self-making and being-made of Kru Tuen through his accounts on populist policies and villager authenticity. In the same vein as Aihwa Ong’s work on cultural citizenship (1996), the complexity of Kru Tuen’s subjectivity goes far beyond a simple opposition between “the state” that imposes and “the villager,” even as the claims to being a villager remain clear and indispensable.

What happens when villager–citizens come together to discuss matters of common interest? *Village publics*. Let me now turn to sketch what that feels like.
CHAPTER 3: VIEWS FROM THE BAMBOO BENCH: RECOGNIZING VILLAGE (COUNTER)PUBLICS

Among the reasons the military had to seize power in May 2014, according to the list provided to state officials who hosted village meetings, was that the media incited people to hatred and unrest. Elaborating on this reason, Secretary of the District Administration Office told Ban Non Daeng villagers in a meeting,

There is incitement in every media channel, fuelling your hatred, brothers and sisters. If you try listen to it once, nothing happens. But if you listen to it every day you come to believe them, whatever they are inciting. These media sometimes tell truth, other times they lie. Listening to only one channel wouldn’t make you know what the truth is. Brothers and sisters, you all should use your judgment when you listen, consider it well . . . The media play a part in this; the blame can’t just solely be placed on brothers and sisters. The media are the ones who lead the way to conflict. This is why there is a need for control.

The official’s discourse on the media, in particular overtly partisan media (for details of red shirt media channels, see Aranya 2013), reiterates some widespread assumptions regarding villagers’ consumption of information from the media. First, it assumes that villagers do not sufficiently exercise their reasoned judgment but rather rely on their feelings when they listen to mediatized political speeches. Second, it assumes that villagers consuming partisan media only listen to one channel, thereby being misinformed or narrowly informed about politics. Third, based on these “problems” it assumes that a solution would be to curtail partisan media outlets as well as enjoin villagers to exercise their judgment. The telling comment that “the blame can’t just solely be placed on brothers and sisters” reveals that the blame does partially lie on villagers’ shoulder.

Against these unfounded assumptions, I will provide an empirical account of how villagers consume and circulate political ideas and information. As my research occurred right after the military takeover, I unfortunately did not directly witness political television watching.
However, despite the media blackout, political discussion remained lively whenever some of the “regulars” paid a visit. Focusing on the bamboo bench on the front yard of Maeyai’s grocery store, I will show how this space crystallized into a village public. Village publics describe public or semi-public spaces where villagers come together to discuss matters of common interest, be they the price of cash crops, the wayward behavior of village monks, or the legitimacy of military regime. The activity of watching television happens in such a public.

In Habermas’s terms, village publics like the conversation on the bamboo bench would belong to the historically suppressed category of “plebeian public sphere” as opposed to the “liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere” which is Habermas’s subject matter (1989:xviii). Unlike the ancient Greek public sphere premised upon the male citizens’ freedom from productive labor (Habermas 1989:3), village publics consist of villagers who have spent their days in various forms of subsistence, wage, and non-wage labor. Unlike Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere epitomized by British coffee houses, French salons, and German table societies in the early capitalist town (1989:30), village publics occur on bamboo benches in the village. Rather than stimulants like coffee, chocolate, and tea (Habermas 1989:32), depressant alcohol is the chief substance consumed. Instead of the fundamental principle of “people’s public use of their reason” (Habermas 1989:27), emotionally charged political analyses naturally flow into musings about the weather. In place of print culture, television and spoken words connect villagers with information and with one another. At times, village publics go directly against dominant publics, and thereby assume the character of what Fraser calls subaltern counterpublics: “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent
and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional
interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1990:67).

Despite all the differences, village publics remain authentic publics in that they are the
medium for everyday sociable conversations and political discussions that give rise to political
subjectivity. As such, village publics “put the state in touch with the needs of society,” to use
Habermas’s phrasing (1989:31). However, the position of the villager in society is generally
subjugated; therefore, the project of recognizing village publics will seek to address how the
state has failed to come in touch with villagers’ real needs and desires. In this vein, I will also
learn from village publics’ democratic, consensus-based habits in order to imagine a more
inclusive communicative society. In particular, there is much to learn about democracy from
consensus-based, collaborative conversations on the bamboo bench in Maeyai’s grocery store.

The first section will examine Poyai and neighbors’ conversations on the bamboo bench in
preparation for the imminent “explaining the coup” village meetings, the details of which will
be explored at length in Chapter 4. The second section, using Arjun Appadurai’s notion of
“ideoscapes” (1990), will thematically examine the adoption and circulation of various ideas
about democracy. I hope to show that the process of receiving and believing in what the media
say is far from the assumptions that villagers consume media narrowly and uncritically.

Consensus-based conversations on the bamboo bench

I first heard about the public meetings (Thai prachaakhom, Lao pasaakhom) from Poyai
on June 17, a week ahead of the meeting for that subsection. Neighbor Boonma, swinging by the
bamboo bench to have a leisurely late-afternoon conversation, let Poyai know about the
upcoming “reconciliation” (Thai proongdoong-samaannachan) events where villagers would be able to voice their criticisms (Thai wipaak-wichaan) of the NCPO for the first time. They did not quite know whether it would be a “reconciliation” activity (that is, an orchestrated ceremony of the coming together of political antagonists) or an activity where villagers interested in national politics could actually exchange ideas. Boonma brainstormed with Poyai (as well as myself) what questions or comments they would, could, or should raise to the officials present. Boonma was the one mostly coming up with questions, and when they were good, Poyai would respond with enthusiasm: ‘good’ questions like “Will there be an election? Or will there only be selections among themselves to the Parliament and the Senate?” If this meeting were to be a “reconciliation” activity, proposed Poyai, laughing, that he could give away his red shirts to be burned—reenacting the by-then-familiar scene of “reconciliation” ceremony, reprinted on the front page of newspapers and reported on available TV stations where in many provinces, representatives from opposite political camps “annihilate the colors of their shirts” (Thai salaay-sii-suea) by taking their respective shirts off and throw them to a fire, after which the parties participate in joyous sports and recreational games as a symbol of reconciliation and unity. To Poyai’s evocative comment we chuckled, and he responded in an impassioned voice, saying: “annihilating the shirt color for what, when the feeling is in this chest?”

Poyai seemed hesitant at the idea of actually saying something in the meeting, while Boonma insisted to him that it was okay to speak. Maeyai, more absorbed in the work of peeling a breed of dry shallot bulbs, was worried that if Poyai criticized the military he would be arrested for sure. In response, Poyai said that only if he drank two or three shots of 80-proof rice whisky would he be able to speak his mind, but since nowadays he no longer drank, that would be hard
to do. He grinned; both Maeyai and I laughed at the joke. I guess he was a little tipsy at that moment.

They talked politics for about an hour, punctuated by comings and goings of different villagers, one of whom found the conversation “serious” (loanword *siiriat*), while others had their take on the military takeover. The sun had set, and the fluorescent light under the porch lit the scene; the television was silent.

The next day, June 18, was the first day that village meetings started to be held in other village subsections. On television in the grocery store, on the government-directed NBT channel, there was a running-text announcement of a “reconciliation panel for the country’s reform” in another northeastern Thai province, as well as a live broadcast of a “sustainable/long-term democracy panel” in a subdistrict of Phuket, a southern island with a clear anti-Thaksin majority. One of the panelists, the election commission officer of the subdistrict, was talking about sustainable “Thai-style” democracy as well as the upcoming election for the Senate (for which the NCPO banned all political parties from participation) when Poyai came back to the store on his motorcycle. As Poyai heard the officer say that in “this election everyone must take seriously the choosing of the truly good person (Thai *khon dii ching-ching*) to be our representative,” he retorted in standard Thai rather than his usual Lao “the truly good person—what is that like, to be truly good?” Here, he rehearsed his own critique of the hegemonic Thai notion of the good person (*khon-dii*); he said elsewhere that only “their good people,” not “our good people,” would be selected to official posts in response to another villager’s questioning whether the return of bureaucratic selections of local governance would yield good people or not.
Later in the afternoon, as a middle-aged man was riding a bicycle by the grocery store, Poyai hailed him in, calling, “come, come, be interviewed.” So he came to sit on the bamboo bench, joining Poyai, Boonma, Maeyai, and myself in the conversation. His name was Danai, and one of Poyai’s neighbors referred to him as “the academic” (nak-wichaakaan). Poyai called him in for me to “interview” because he was “packed with information/data,” and indeed during the next hour and a half I wrote down twenty pages of verbatim notes. That day, it turned out, Danai had just gone to one of the public meetings, even though he did not live in those subsections, to see how it went and to voice his ideas. He told me that for some questions he did not “let it all out” but gradually asked them in each separate meeting. Poyai, considerably curious about the meetings, asked Danai if “they” allowed one’s true opinion to be expressed, if they gave lectures on anything, so as to prepare himself for asking good questions to state officials. As he was earnestly interested, another villager around the bench asked him why did he not go listen directly, since he would also get a free meal out for it. He resolutely responded: “Even if it’s a free meal I won’t eat it, money will go into their pockets.” I assume he thought that the outside officials would receive a stipend based on the number of participants.

14 Danai finished high school in the market-town, and went on to become a military officer for a while, but resigned from his post to return home to do farmwork like everyone else. According to Maeyai, he resigned because he did not like hierarchy that he witnessed as a low-rank military officer in the palace, at risk for imprisonment if one did something wrong to royal children. The fact that he was called “the academic” and deemed fit to “be interviewed” was due more to his abundant references to international democratic standards than his level of education, although the two were of course related.
Danai, in responding to Poyai, also addressed me as I was frantically taking notes, supposedly bringing overseas the “souvenir” of words which were “distilled from the heart of the people.” Poyai also told me to “translate it to English to let foreigners know” about the culpability of the aristocratic elite (ammaat). Danai openly voiced his opposition to the coup to me, with statements like: “there would be no reconciliation, if the institutions the people depend on (that is, the justice system) have a double standard.”

The hour-long ‘interview’ covered far more topics and in greater details than those touched upon by the three public meetings I observed, while Poyai, Boonma, and Maeyai actively participated in stacking up the charges against the ammaat, the military, and the anti-Thaksin Democrat Party. On the notion of reform, for example, the conversation ran like this:

Danai: How will reform be done? Since 1932 we changed from absolute monarchy to the democratic system
Peera: But they wanted a complete democratic system, no?
Danai: Right now it was already complete—
Poyai: —Take out the ammaat
Boonma: Reform the justice system to being accountable (yuet-yoong) to the people.

On the notion of villagers consuming one-sided media:

Danai: There is only one-sided news on TV now
Poyai: Killing doesn’t make them guilty . . . we don’t really insult (daa) them; only they insult us
Danai: Before, there was no television in the village; no one knew what they talked about in the parliament; we accepted whatever they said.
Danai: Their only quality TV channel is BlueSky [that is, Democrat Party’s main channel], but the common peasant watches 200-300 channels [from cable or satellite TV]
Boonma: The PDRC [People’s Democratic Reform Committee, headed by former Democrat Party politician Suthep Thaugsuban] hired celebrities to its stage to say (switches to vulgar Thai) ‘You rat! You slut! You bitch, Puu!’ Every word is against her.
Poyai: (turning to me to explain) They were insulting PM Yingluck

15 former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra’s nickname
Peera: *(addressing Boonma)* Where did you see that?
Danai: I watched directly from BlueSky
Poyai: If I can't stand listening to it, I change the channel.
Danai: We are accused of listening only to one side.
Poyai: We say according to what is true . . . any scholar who speaks the truth is all persecuted.
Peera: You mean Worajet?
Poyai: Weerapat, the one who fled to England.
Danai: They set the rules like dogs . . . pressured for parliament dissolution, said say would stop but didn’t stop. They already dissolved it, why didn’t they stop? why didn’t they end it? The amnesty bill was already all revoked.

On elections:

Danai: Government from selections probably don’t know the people’s hardships.
Poyai: They only know to coerce the people.
Danai: Trying to find competent people—
Poyai: —‘their’ competent people. To find good people means ‘their’ good people . . .
Danai: If they have a half-elected, half-selected parliament, I will go mark ‘not wishing to vote.’
*(Poyai and Boonma grunted in agreement)*
Poyai: I won’t get involved with them/it at all.
Danai: *(implicitly clarifying his stance)* I will use my right to vote, for a hundred elections I will vote a hundred times. But I will mark the ‘not wishing to vote’ slot.

The flow of the conversation was more circular than directed toward an ultimate goal: topic after topic, day after day conversation participants repeated themselves, with gradual variations and cross-influences. Furthermore, many times participants added on to one another’s comments, blending their ideas to the point where at times it was difficult for me to identify who said which phrase on the basis of my verbatim notes, despite their differing modes of thinking and manners of speaking. “Opinion” flowed across individual differences; for example, Danai’s stance of voting for no-one was strongly taken up by Boonma afterward.

The bamboo bench on the front porch of the grocery store works as a space for intimate yet public conversations and venting which, despite seeming to be structureless, have a rhythmic
ebb and flow, according to levels of alcohol imbibed and participants involved. The later it got, say 7pm or 8pm, the more drunk Poyai became, until his drunkenness plateaued at the point where he kept venting with passion, annoying Maeyai. In the times before the coup, according to Maeyai’s complaints, Poyai and his red shirt supporters friends would each drink rice whisky, watch UDDTV (the main red-shirt television channel), and discussed politics in loud voices until 9, 10, or 11pm, requiring her to stay up and tend the merchandise as the only non-drinker.\textsuperscript{16} Now, without the television channel and some of his regulars, Poyai usually went to bed around 8pm.

Watching television in the time of military rule, Poyai contrasted his own sincere and honest way of communicating with the fake and duplicitous ways of pretending which television stars and the \textit{ammaat} elite are experts. When the two of us watched a live broadcast of TV-series awards ceremony, as an award recipient was giving his grateful speech, Poyai said “these performers only act lies.” Incidentally, many of the award recipients were actually anti-Thaksin

\textsuperscript{16} To dispel a possible assumption on the reader’s part that only men drink, Maeyai told me of a formerly nightly routine where four to five of her female friends gathered on the bamboo bench to drink, talk, sing, and be loud together. Maeyai told me that back then they would socialize until 10 or 11pm; the district’s police night patrol would be suspicious of the noise and light but they did not do anything to her and her friends. Each night, one of them would buy rice whisky for everybody, and although Maeyai did not drink she also pitched in for the state-licensed alcohol. Maeyai was a non-drinker because of the dizziness her first and only drinking experience (home-brewed sweet liquor in the bygone time of collective rice harvest in another villager’s field) impressed in her mind (\textit{jue}) that it was not good. At the time of my fieldwork, all but one of her friends had passed away.
movement participants, most notably the award-winning director and actor Aof Pongpat Wachirabanjong who, upon receiving his best directing award, said: “I am happy every time I got up to receive this award. I’d like to give thanks for the happiness presented to all of us. I hope that it won’t be a temporary happiness but an eternal one. Let me do a three-finger salute this way,” while showing an ‘I love you’ hand sign with the thumb, the index finger, and the little finger raised, subverting the code for the persecuted anti-military three-finger salute inspired by the novel-cum-movie the Hunger Games trilogy. When the screen showed a row of smiling award recipients amid cries of joy, Poyai said “Happy with them for what?” and he walked up to the screen to change the channel. In another instance, on the bamboo bench with Poyai, Maeyai, Boonma, and myself, when we were discussing the lies of the military regime that affirmed its popularity and legitimacy, Poyai vented: “They say white for black, black for white, wrong for right, right for wrong . . . They pretend! It’s the noblemen (puu-dii, also ‘good ones’) who are the envious kind (itsa-itsoe) in soap operas.” Here, Poyai equates melodramatic performance with insincere and inauthentic thirst for power and status, a performance opposed to his own villager authenticity.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that, at times, this bamboo bench sociality operates as a counterpublic against the bourgeois public sphere that defines villagers negatively. Conversations foster mutual recognition among participants, in the presence of an outsider like myself, that they are authentic villagers as well as “the people” (Thai prachaachon; Lao pasaason). Their identification as villagers confers them moral standing and authenticity, even as it paradoxically lodges them in the subordinate position subjected to the mass-mediated stereotypes of the “poor-stressed-alcoholic” villager. These stereotypes were reproduced by my
host parents themselves: Max’s mother frequently referred to Maeyai’s customers as “broken people” (Lao khon-haang), while Max’s father characterized most villagers to be “lishm” (loanword from alcoholism; similar to suem, ‘depressed’) who were lazy and good-for-nothing. By considering this social phenomenon as a village public, I resist the association of regular alcohol consumption with personal and political deficiency. Rather, alcohol is understood as a conduit for social communication, one could say “habits of democratic behavior” (Spivak 2004), that leads in turn to a development of political subjectivity.

To illustrate how the bamboo bench conversation as a village public incorporates personal experiences as well as transnational discourses, rather than narrowly accepting whatever is shown, I would like to turn to discourses around democracy expressed by Poyai, Boonma, and Danai.

The imagined world of democracy and its others

In Ban Non Daeng, there was a great variety of views on local and national politics. In the village level, despite the claims by local politicians and some villagers to the absence of conflict, there were strong tensions along generational lines. In the national level, to insist on the fact of an overwhelming “pro-Thaksin” electoral majority in the village would only obscure matters, for there were those “pro-Thaksin” who supported the coup, there were those against Thaksin who were not so happy with the military government, there were those who did not care much about the military takeover other than that it shut down most radio stations, and many other permutations.
I will attempt to understand the variety of political views through the lens of the notion of “imagined worlds.” According to anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, imagined worlds are “the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe” (1990:7). The related notion of landscapes emphasizes that such imagined worlds would be contingent on how they are situated: “they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors” (Appadurai 1990:7). One of these situated landscapes that Appadurai outlines is “ideoscapes,” landscapes of terms and images from the Enlightenment that circulate around the globe in various political struggles, for which democracy is “the master-term” (1990:10).

Understanding the imagined worlds of democracy can illuminate how the aspirations for political recognition and belonging are shaped. To attend to these imagined worlds means to explore how the bricolage of incongruous materials has come to have an effective coherence: from the history of the Cold War anti-communist discourses and strategies in northeastern Thailand, to the transnational movements of people, commodities and images, and personal histories that inform how each individual understands democracy differently. The imagined worlds not only shape how each villager imagines and understands the current political situation, they also constitute the horizon of reasonable aspirations for a better world. I would like to begin probing these imagined worlds of democracy from one of its others: communism.

The Cold War was a period that set Thailand, especially northeastern Thailand, apart from its neighboring regions of Laos and Cambodia. The material development of the region, like CIA-funded construction of highways, was there to combat “the Isan problem” deemed vulnerable to communist infiltration. The many military bases in Isan, including a rudimentary
airport once in my home city, were conduits for the air bombs in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, propelling diasporic flows of refugees into camps in Thailand and eventually the United States. Most of the elderly who I came to know in Ban Non Daeng spent their formative years during the height of anti-communist strategies.

The legacy of anti-communist strategies in Thailand was ideological as well as material. It set Thailand apart from neighboring countries as sovereign entities. One villager told me, when I talked to him about diasporic communities from the Vietnam-American War in Philadelphia, that “one is fortunate for being Thai, not having to be colonized by others, or to flee from the Indochina war.” Such an awareness of difference cuts across common ethnic origins, especially among the Lao-speaking ethnic majorities on each side of the Mekong River: northeastern Thailand and Laos.

To illustrate, an account of Poyai and Maeyai’s travel in the Democratic Republic of Laos shows how a sense of belonging to the Thai state as villager-citizens was constructed by the opposition to communist Laos.

One time Maeyai told me that when she was a new mother, she did not dare leave her house for the doctor at night, for fear of being kidnapped by communists. Poyai retorted, “Communists? They’re just students who fled to the jungle, so they accused them of being communists, just like this time that they do it with those who want democracy.” Poyai then lamented on the hopeless condition of Thai democracy today. Asserting that Thailand is now under a rule of fear, Poyai asked Maeyai to relate their travelling experiences in Laos. But he took over most of the telling:

Soon Thailand will come to be like Laos, where people don’t even dare say where they are from. Even though we understood each other in Lao, but when I asked
“where are you from?” no one would answer . . . It is because they are afraid, because the government ordered that people not reveal their own livelihoods, that the outside world not learn of the hardships and oppression in their society. Otherwise they will be punished. So they did not tell anyone where they were from, even though asking about this in Thailand is totally normal between strangers. When you go somewhere and see someone new you would ask “What village are you from?” (maa tae baan dai). I knew that they were from Laos for their beautiful traditional long skirts (sin), all beautiful women who were selected to give touristic services around tourist attractions, like those who sell flowers for offering to buddha statues.

This story was told as a foreshadowing of how the Thai state could become. The basis for comparison between Thailand and Laos was the extent to which strangers were open to talking about where they were from. The freedom to move without fear, underscored by the grandparents’ travel to Laos itself, marked mobility as a criteria for cultural citizenship (see also Mills 2012). Note that the question “What village are you from?” is premised on the village as a social unit, even though the term “village” can be used more flexibly for a range of scales and locales. The silence of women flowers-sellers and other tourist industry workers in Laos to this basic villagerly question informed Poyai’s imagined world of democracy. The dissonance between intelligible language and evasive behavior led to the conclusion that there must be something different about Laotian people’s relationship to the state they belonged to. The boundary between two Lao-speaking peoples, authenticated by different clothing styles, hardened with the imagination that livelihoods in Laos were marked by fear of the communist state. To live under fear of nondemocratic state meant to not allow oneself to be recognized as specific villagers the way people were normally supposed to be.

In the case of late 1970s Thailand, on the other hand, Poyai perceived the students who fled to the jungle as democracy seekers, even as they did in fact join the Communist Party of Thailand in an armed struggle against the Thai state. Poyai reproduced the assimilation of these
students as martyrs of democracy and blamed the Thai ruling elite for accusing them of being communists, the by-now common characterization of the period (see Thongchai 2001).

The significance of the repetition of this trope, however, lay in its contribution to Poyai’s critique of the current Thai state under military rule. Through the knowledge that a few key leaders of the United Front for Democracy (Poyai mentioned Adisorn Piangket, Thida Thawornset, and Weng Tojirakarn) fled to the jungle as students in the late 1970s, Poyai established a genealogy of the struggle between democracy seekers and their adversaries in Thailand. This genealogy further solidified through parallels between then and now, for example the parallel between the regime’s claim that students hoarded weapons in Thammasat University that led to the October 6, 1976 massacre and the claim and televised shows of weapon hoards in Khon Kaen, northeastern Thailand, one day after the latest military takeover.

Boonma similarly reworked the opposition between democracy and communism to critique the current Thai ruling elite. A former soldier trained to fight communism in 1968-9 but not eventually called, Boonma condemned the trope “what is the matter if 20 million people die” that the Thai military had been invoking since the late 1960s to fight communists and jungle rebels. In recent years, Boonma claimed, this trope was invoked again in rallies against electoral democracy headed by retired general Sae Aay. Boonma concluded: “Who actually are the communists? It is them, right? Because they do not want democracy. (pai kan nae tii pen kommiwnit, puak man maen bo, pro man mai ao prachaattippatai)”

Ideas inherited from the Cold War era could shift as well. Even though the United States, for Poyai, Boonma, and Danai, remained an exemplar of democracy (Danai said that “Republicans and Democrats take turns to help develop the country”), the opposition between
“democracy” and “socialism” did at one point become challenged. Talking about Thai political exiles, I mentioned socialist Tiang Sirikhan. Poyai reacted that he was socialist, and therefore not democratic. Boonma, however, explained to Poyai that socialism in that period was also a fight for emancipation (plot-ploy). Hearing this, Poyai assented to the word plot-ploy.

In this chapter, I have provided a definition of village publics, set against Habermas’s notion of the bourgeois public sphere (1989), and argued that their practices of communication and reception of information do not follow negative assumptions about brainwashed, narrowly informed villagers consuming one-sided media. The cyclical, consensus-based style of communication allows for multiple voices and ideas to simmer and cross-fertilize, which I consider to be favorable to the development of habits of democratic behavior. In the next chapter, I will turn to the interpersonal dynamics of the village meetings, supposedly the paradigmatic democratic public sphere, yet in practice much less so.
A few weeks after the military takeover of the Thai government and the shutdown of all politicized TV and radio stations, each district administrative authority was tasked through the Ministry of Interior to assign a team of local officials to hold public meetings in every subsection of every village under the district jurisdiction. In each meeting, the team of officials would, first, state the rationale of the military takeover, based on a list of eleven reasons; second, learn about villagers’ demands for improvement of local governmental services in four aspects: economic, social, environmental, and infrastructural; third, elicit feedback from villagers for proposals of nation-wide reform in several aspects including education, the media, the judicial system, and politics; fourth, ask for “true desires of the community” and the villagers’ future plans. Each meeting session lasted about two to three hours. By June 30, 2014, all village meetings in the Kingdom of Thailand were supposed to be concluded and summary reports sent up the levels of bureaucracy finally to the military junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO).

In Ban Non Daeng, a village which consisted of seven subsections of between 100 and 200 households each, the meetings were held either on the front yard of the house of the subsection headman (puayai baan), or—if that space is not sufficient—in other public spaces like a local school or temple. Of the seven village meetings, I went to three, all of which were held in respective headmen’s houses. These houses are their formal offices, with varying degrees of size and bureaucratic paraphernalia depending on the headman’s economic and social standing. Each

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17 ‘amphoe’ - the administrative level below that of province ‘changwat’ and above that of subdistrict ‘tambon.’
headman (along with his wife and assistants) was responsible for asking villagers under his jurisdiction to send their household representative to the meeting, as well as receiving the team of outsider officials, and preparing refreshments and food for all participants.

In this chapter, I will analyze how various villagers become subjected under the state. I will analyze the micropolitics of the village meetings as a state project that seeks to establish a common discursive framework. Here, I rely on Roseberry’s alternative interpretation of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as an ongoing process of negotiation, wherein hegemony operates not necessarily by consent, but by the extent to which the ruling order establishes “a common discursive framework” through which “prescribed forms for expressing both acceptance and discontent” must be adopted (1994:364). In the case of the “explain-the-coup” village meetings organized by district civil servants, this state project involves the constant redefinitions of the category of the villager vis-à-vis the Thai state under military rule, and the proper forms of composure and speech for a villager in the state’s presence.

To accomplish my analytic goal, I will mainly draw on Louis Althusser (1976)’s notion of “interpellation” as the way that the state constitutes individuals as villager-subjects who are by definition politically deficient, in need of training and tutelage before they can be ready for democracy. Winding through my theoretical analyses is my reassessment of Arjun Appadurai’s proposal that the poor and otherwise marginalized people cultivate their voice, rather than loyalty.

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18 On “outsiders”: although none of the officials are from Ban Non Daeng, all of them with the exception of one civil servant are from the same province and speak Lao fluently, and at least one of them (the policeman) claims to be an “insider” for having worked with the community for almost twenty years.
or exit, in deliberations pertaining to their development in order to develop their “capacity to aspire” (2004:67).

I will argue that the patterns of social interaction in the village meetings interpellate participants as villager-subjects, even as some villagers attempt to appropriate and subvert those interpellations through bridging the gap between the villager and the citizen. The village meetings, ostensibly an inclusive space of public deliberation, turned out to be less welcoming to dissenting voices, in contrast to the social dynamics of the bamboo bench conversations sketched out in the previous chapter. To trace the micropolitics of subjection and subversion more finely, I will focus on Poyai, Boonma, Headman Tong, and Danai in key moments, inside and outside the meetings, that expose the workings of state ideology and the hegemonic process constituting the villager-subject.

In employing Althusser’s general concepts, I aim to account for ideologies in the particular, so as to conduct a nuanced analysis of the Thai state and its subjects that takes into account the messy ambiguities and multiplicities involved. My analysis might at times seem to disregard Althusser’s Marxist affirmation of the unity of the diverse ideological state apparatuses, whose function in the last analysis is that of the ruling ideology (1976:146): towards ensuring the reproduction of the capitalist relations of exploitation (1976:150).

What this means is that in my analysis of the officials in the panel, they are not merely agents of the ideological state apparatus but also subjects who have their own needs and desires which are not necessarily aligned with the ruling ideology. The officials were there to function for the ruling ideology: to justify the coup d’état, to pacify the population, and to threaten unruly behavior with repression. They were also subjected to the “obviousnesses” produced by ideology
(Althusser 1976: 172). But they were also individuals who undermined the very work they were tasked to do by being absent or disengaged.

In terms of the villager participants, my analysis will not only seek to understand when interpellation succeeds, but also when it does not. When Althusser says that “nine times out of ten it is the right one” who turns upon being hailed by the police (1976: 174-175), I am interested in the one time it does not work: I suspect that inefficacy might actually occur far more than one in ten. As Judith Butler insists, as a performative there is always the chance for subversion and appropriation (1993).

**Before the meeting**

8:15am

It had been raining since the night before. When I arrived at the grocery store in the morning of the day of the village meeting, conversations switched back and forth between rain (when it would stop flooding the soil so people could start planting rice seeds) and politics. Poyai was talking to another villager about the fact that TV channels were all shut down except ‘free TV channels,’ and he said: “I don’t believe them one bit” (bo suea man poo met). Then, after the neighbors left the grocery store to go back to their homes or to the meetingplace, and Maeyai went to the kitchen at the back of the house to prepare food for me, without knowing that I had already eaten, Poyai grumbled to me that today he would not get to go to the fields; he would have to listen to them talk until the afternoon: “listen to the bosses talk all day” (fang chao-naay khao wao moet mue). Poyai told me that Maeyai had warned him not to interject (soot) anything to the officials, because they would take a photograph of him and report him to the authorities
who would put him in jail. Poyai, however, did not believe this to be the case, and said: “Will they really do anything to commoners (taa sii taa saa) like us? Not for the core leaders, who have all been arrested and persecuted.”

Poyai rode his motorcycle to check the village headman (kamnan)’s house, and came back with the news that they were still arranging the chairs.

8:45am

Some other villagers came to the grocery store: almost all of them came to buy rice whisky; one also bought MSG and two other merchandise. As it was already nine, a customer asked Poyai if he was going to the meeting. Poyai replied that he would eat first, while the other customer asked, “What meeting?” It generated the following conversation:

Neighbor: A village meeting. The military, they are coming for a seminar, so we can share our opinions with them.
Poyai: Whatever they say, just listen. They’re not here to help us or anything. Don’t share your opinion with them.
Neighbor: That’s right. They come to seek their own credentials, to build their image. If we share it with them, they’ll just write it down. It’s not like we’ll get it instantly.
Maeyai: They really talk only among themselves. Folks can’t talk to them one bit.
Poyai: Don’t say that you want an election, you’ll be arrested.
Neighbor: They won’t really charge us with anything for this meeting.
Poyai: They’ll take our photos.
Neighbor: So what kinds of things should we say?
Poyai: When will they put an end to the martial law?
Neighbor: That can be asked.

While this fear exceeded the level of direct repression enforced or threatened in the village meetings, there was in fact an outsider military officer who participated in all meetings, at times taking photos of the meetings in general. The threat of persecution by the state only surfaced in the officials’ discussions of the monarchy (through the severity of the lese-majeste law enforcement) and the possession of weapons.
Poyai: If they don’t put an end to it, nothing can be talked about.

From this bamboo bench conversation, “opinion” seems to be more porous than usually indicated by polls. The neighbor shifted his way of framing the village meeting after Poyai made the critique; likewise, Poyai who doubted the threat of imprisonment only half an hour ago now expressed that same threat in this conversation. Similar to conversations with Boonma the week before, no resolution was made as to what questions or comments would be askable to the officials. The neighbor’s approval of the martial law question seemed to me to be a misreading of Poyai’s grumbling comment that if there remained the martial law, nothing could really be talked about. More remarkable than this misreading, however, was how the flow of the conversation enabled both Poyai and the neighbor to rehearse their contrary subject-positions vis-à-vis the state. This openness to multiplicity, as opposed to merely a case of people speaking past each other, was capable of articulating non-hierarchical difference in the same social space.

After the conversation, Poyai ate some porridge on the bamboo bench for several minutes, and then Maeyai brought us two umbrellas for walking to the meeting place. As we were getting ready to leave, another villager came to buy rice whisky, and someone teased Poyai asking if he wanted to drink before the meeting, to which he replied: “I don’t want to be brazen (haan), if I’m drunk I’ll be too brazen.”

When we arrived at the meeting place around 9:30am, the meeting had already started: I heard from the speakers the voice of the Headman Tong finishing his introductory speech: “Politicians, people from above, were wrangling over power, and made us protest and demand. This is where the problem comes from.” Having laid out an implicit rationale why the military
had to take over, Tong then concluded his speech and handed the microphone to the team of officials.

Poyai: the state disciplining the villager

The format of the village meeting was already mostly familiar to every villager: the gathering at the headman’s house or at the local temple or school, the signing of one’s name, the listening to officials speak, the proposing of demands for development projects, the rows of plastic chairs, the microphones and speakers. All of these were similar to annual meetings for the villagers to propose development projects and cast vote on them with their raised hands—then the officials would write up, in order of votes from each village subsection, the list of numerous proposals, from which only one or two top projects would end up being implemented by the local administration office. What made this particular meeting different —apart from it being ordered by the military junta and more “heavily advertised”—was the presence of a man in military uniform, the variety of outsider officials from different specialties (public health, agriculture, development, police bureau, and administration), and the addition of questionnaires for each participant.

The first thing a meeting participant had to do was to sign their name in two books, one was the record kept by the subsection headman, the other by the district authority that assigned the team of officials. Then, the participant would be handed a questionnaire (usually without a pen to mark it) to fill out and hand in later. The following were the questions listed:

The questionnaire

1. Basic personal information
   1. Sex: [ ] male, [ ] female
   2. Age: [ ] below 20, [ ] 21-29, [ ] 31-39, [ ] 40 and above
3. Level of education: [ ] primary school, [ ] middle school-high school, [ ] college and above
4. Occupation: [ ] civil service, [ ] commerce, [ ] hired labor, [ ] others...
2. Satisfaction in the current political situation (1 for least – 5 for most)
   1. You agree with the governmental takeover
   2. You have been affected in your daily life by the declaration of the martial law
   3. You understand the reason and necessity to declare martial law throughout the Kingdom
   4. You agree with the control of all kinds of media
   5. You think that this takeover will make the country/nation peaceful/happy
   6. You agree with the acceleration of the rice-pledging payments for peasants/rice farmers
3. Your opinion of the community (1 for least – 5 for most)
   1. You feel safe in your community
   2. You trust in one another in the community
   3. In your community there is conflict
   4. You want to participate in the community’s governance
   5. You are satisfied with the state of equality in your community
   6. You want to renovate the community’s infrastructure system
   7. You want the state to improve its services
   8. You want the local administration to improve its services
   9. You want the village headmen to improve their work
4. Suggestions and proposals for resolution
   1. How to lessen conflict within the community?
   2. What are your ways of fostering confidence and trust within the community?
   3. You want to participate in the governance in the levels of (village, subdistrict, district, province)
   4. What are the good cultures and traditions in your community that you would like to endorse?
   5. What things do you want revived and integrated?

Looking more closely at the questions, especially ones about the local community in the latter half, I discern an attempt to measure the pulse of the rural population that so often escapes the gaze of the state.

Many ambiguous questions in the questionnaire compelled most meeting participants — most of whom were at least middle-aged and many of whom had received no more than rudimentary schooling — to collectively figure out how to answer the questions. In one of the
meetings, few people brought a pen with them, so my notetaking pen was lent to half a dozen people for half an hour.

The spatial organization of the village meetings, despite variations in different sites, always put the team of officials in a row behind a long table, facing several rows of villagers on plastic chairs. Speakers were variously placed on the sides. In this particular meeting that Poyai and Boonma went to, the space was organized in the following way:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>houseyard, kitchen, toilet</th>
<th>subsection headman’s concrete house</th>
<th>row of officials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>big wooden bench + more chairs put haphazardly</td>
<td>several rows of chairs, aisle in the middle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I sat next to Poyai on one of the back rows facing the officials. We were close enough to the front for Poyai to be heard without a microphone, but not close enough for the officials to clearly grasp his words. As we settled in the seats, I put my audio recorder on the wooden bench, right by the speaker. When the first official, a district doctor, started articulating the eleven reasons why the NCPO took power, Poyai was slowly reading the questionnaire out loud, to himself as well as in conversation with nearby participants in order to answer the questionnaire. About four

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20 This position of the recorder allowed me, upon relistening and transcribing, to attend to how the dominant voice out of the speaker was interjected by peripheral voices of people around the wooden bench, inaudible and only sometimes visible from the front row.
minutes into her discourse, the official paused for several seconds and stared in our direction. At that moment, one of Poyai’s daughters was reassuring him that “they wouldn’t know that it’s you who filled the form, hahaha, they wouldn’t know what you put down.” During the quiet that followed, another official, a district agronomist, took the microphone and said: “Mmm are you talking over the doctor? It would be good if you pay attention up here.” This remark did not stop the conversation about the questionnaire: another person told Poyai that the questionnaire was anonymous. The attempt to discipline was not efficacious.

In the following minutes, this scene repeated twice but with a difference: the last time it successfully silenced the conversation. Poyai was asking nearby participants including myself about the meaning of the community questions. The doctor, having spoken at some length about the necessity of the imposition of curfew, paused for two seconds before uttering: “I can’t compete with the talking in the back.” Then, during the twenty seconds of uncomfortable silence, it became apparent to us that she was sternly staring down Poyai. The official’s silence underlined our conversation; even participants in the front rows started to turn their heads back toward us. It was then that we fell silent; Poyai stopped talking, his face suddenly stoic and his eyes significantly lowered.

Headman Tong then took the microphone and said, under the sound of raindrops on the tin roof: “Um, the storm hasn’t quieted down?”21 In the subsequent pause, Tong was informed by

21 Headman Tong’s allusion to the storm works very differently from the way villagers talk about the rain on the bamboo bench. The former reference points only to the villagers’ unruly noise, while the latter points to a number of things: the time of harvest, the prospect for income, the village infrastructure, agricultural subsidy policies, etc.
someone among the audience that we were talking about the questionnaire. He then replied:

"Point with your hand, point with your hand. Don’t get loud, because it’s, the doctor has talked
in many subsections and it hasn’t gotten this loud. Er, listen, listen to get the content, so as to
follow the issues and the question and answer well. Many apologies. (2s) Point with your hand,
don’t get loud. Point with your hand and write down this or that. Point with your hand.” He tried
to rescue the situation by his injunction to quietly point to the page rather than to talk
disruptively.

He then handed back the microphone to the doctor, who said: “Apologies. It’s because
I’ve talked in quite a few village subsections, and it didn’t, the voices didn’t compete this much.
I have to apologize a little bit because if we don’t listen it won’t be done, talking over one
another would make it unbearable right? It would exhaust the speaker, ah, okay?” She then
resumed her discourse legitimating the coup. The doctor’s discourse

This scene reminded me very much of a commonplace situation in the conventional
classroom, where the teacher would reprimand the students “in the back” for talking over the
teacher and disrupting the class. Here, Poyai was interpellated as an unruly subject thrown under
the silent stare of state ideology. In that critical moment, Poyai recognized that he was being
“hailed,” to refer to the paradigmatic example of interpellation offered by Althusser. This
recognition arrested the flows of other interactions; from the rows of docile collectivity Poyai
was isolated and reconstituted²² as a villager-subject under the state.

²² While Althusser argues that individuals are “always already constituted as subjects through
ideology,” I chose to use the word ‘reconstitute’ here to open up the possibility of a temporary
retreat from state power, a condition of being parts not yet reconstructed by the ruling ideology.
It is interesting to note, also, the mode of address of the doctor-official and of the village headman. Both of them apologized, although I was not quite sure to whom. It was as if they felt bad to be disciplining the meeting participants, therefore they apologized to tone down their imposition. The doctor-official's patronizing elements (to apologize “a little bit,” for example) served to further sugarcoat her repressive silencing in the idiom of ideological state apparatuses.

Poyai was not silenced for long; he continued interjecting and commenting, although never in an official capacity. Throughout the meeting, there were several moments when Poyai’s unofficial proposals or interventions were heard from the front row. When a villager-official, responsible for eliciting other villagers’ participation and handing the microphone, tried to put the microphone to his mouth, however, he would resolutely refuse to use it, even frantically moving his face away from it, even as he was proposing an idea. His refusal was widely recognized, and attempts of various officials to include him only worked without the microphone. Immediately after the meeting concluded, Poyai was ready to go back to his house, with no a desire to eat the food that the headman’s house was going to provide.

In my interpretation, Poyai’s insistent rejection of the microphone is an almost parodic act of inhabiting the villager-subject’s incapability to speak properly. Judith Butler’s revision of the interpellation concept is illuminating here: “Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command” (1993:122). Poyai’s refusal to speak in the microphone exposed the double-ness of the expectations of the state: it exposed how the state tried to give voice to villagers even as it routinely misrecognized or ignored their actual voice.
Near the end of the meeting, the district agronomist, who was personally acquainted with Poyai, said to him as she was walking past him to hang out with villagers in the houseyard area:

“Why didn’t you say anything? You were so outside (jang bo wao la, yuu nook tae).” He replied:

“I don’t say anything, I’m here outside. (bo wao, yuu nook ni la).” Despite Poyai’s insistence in not saying anything officially, he was all the while engaged in an unofficial conversation among marginal participants—most of the time lighthearted spin-offs of the official flow, sometimes conflictual interjections into it. The agronomist walked past us when everyone had just cracked up from a joke. Her remark interrupted the flow of that unofficial conversation and inverted the unofficially inside position to the officially outside position.

Unlike Poyai, Danai was the one actually cultivating the “voice” in the village meetings. He went to at least three of the meetings in different subsections, hoping to propose ideas for reform to the officials. I will illustrate his exercise of voice in the village meetings, and show how it was not recognized or even registered by the state.

The meeting had proceeded to the last topic on the reform of the country [Thai patiruuppratheet] 23 when Danai came by. Despite belonging to a different subsection of the village, he paid a visit to the meeting where I was sitting next to Poyai. When he saw me he came to sit on the wooden bench to my left. He asked me how the meeting had been going, if people had been talking. Not too much, I replied, people were afraid to speak. Perplexed, Danai said that the

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23 There were eight topics for the reform proposals: for example, reform of education, reform of politics, and reform of the economy. The reform of the country was the last topic. After eliciting proposals for the various reforms, the meeting then would move on to the last phase, which discusses the “true desires of the community.”
officials came here to listen, that there was nothing to be afraid of as everyone here was a
villager, and that when he expressed his opinion there was no one punishing him for it.

The speaking official, a subdistrict bureaucrat, asked for suggestions as to how to reform
the country. A villager from behind me said, without a microphone:

Villager: [loudly] Just let them do this for another while. Now they’ve entered into it
about 70% already—

Official: —Ah, I see. [code-switches to standard Thai to dictate writing]
So, let them stay in power, let, suggestions for the reform of—

Villager: come out for 70% already, this government.

Danai: [retorting right after the word ‘government’] This government, what kind is that,
 huh?

Villager: The coup kind that is. (patiwat ni la)

Official: Ah, so you want them to do as they—

Danai: —Don’t want none of that.

Official: do whatever right? The three-step roadmap, when they will be done is their
business

Villager: —They got in 70 already.

Poyai: [chuckles] Hee hee hee.

Danai: [loudly interrupting]—No. There must be elections, elections. Election first. Only
after elections can whatever things be done. Democracy must be like that. Don’t
prattle.

Official: Er, well, the village headman would like to add, desires, this, he will add
something of desire for us now.

Headman Tong: Yes, er, this, the facilitator (Thai wittayaakoon, literally ‘one with
knowledge’) has suggested that we only observe but not interject. They talk
among themselves. Reform and political change are a very academic (Thai
wichakaan; note its etymological affinity with the earlier word ‘wittayaakoon’) issue, so we are unable to—

Poyai: [audibly to the front] —to have a say

Headman Tong: to have a say. But we do know of our own backgrounds, right Poyai?

Poyai: [assents] Mm!

Headman Tong: Something that subsection one proposed was, people in the previous
meetings, I’ve only thought this alone but, something us folks would propose but
haven’t proposed, is to talk about access to medical care...

Headman Tong went on for a few minutes on his proposal for specialized surgeons to be placed
in the nearby market-town public hospital rather than only in larger regional centers. He would
repeat this proposal for more medical personnel in another meeting I observed, similarly taking the microphone from the front row amid unruly voices of the audience, as if to model how to properly propose a suggestion for development.

There is much to be analyzed from this series of interjections. First, I want to note that the villager who proposed an unconditional consent to the moves of the military junta was heard and registered on the paper sheet, even as he did not hold a microphone or articulated himself very clearly. My interpretation is that for the social dynamics of the village meetings, the argument for passive approval for state power is a comprehensible one, much more befitting for a “villager”’s discourse than the “academic” discourse of electoral democracy.

It was notable that Tong felt compelled to take the official’s microphone to intervene that “reform” and “political change” are too academic for the “we” who most intimately know “our own backgrounds.” I interpret this act of intervention as an attempt to diffuse the tension that threatened to erupt out of Danai’s disagreement, as this kind of tension was improper for the format of the village meeting.

Even more notable and perplexing is the resonance of his words to Poyai, who himself completed the headman’s sentence. The episode was perplexing to me at the time it happened and it remains to be so—why did Poyai do that? In a sense, Poyai affirmation that the villager is unable to have a say in national governance accurately describes the actual situation where the right to vote and the right to peaceful assembly—the major channels for rural-based citizens of Thailand to have any say at all in national matters—have been stolen. And his being on good terms with the headman might have made his agreement more easy. Still, I wonder why he did
not say anything in response to Danai’s call for electoral democracy. The only response Poyai had toward the neighbor’s “70 percent” comment was amusement: “Hee hee hee.”

While it is impossible to know the precise intentions behind the headman’s intervention or Poyai’s assent, the apparent result was that the conversation sparked by the ideological conflict between two villagers was effectively derailed. Poyai’s subsequent direct affirmation to Headman Tong—who is actually younger than Poyai—lent legitimacy to his claim of the fundamental distinction between “academic” macropolitical deliberations and “our” knowledge based on immediate experience; this claim became established as common sense, an obviousness. The principle of electoral democracy, on the other hand, became established as foreign and less relevant. By drawing a line between macro-scale statecraft and micro-scale village affairs, the headman was implicitly reproducing the antinomy between the state and the historically autonomous, authentic village, much like the way Thai intellectuals like Chatthip Natsupha inherited an apparently anarchist notion of the village, a notion paradoxically produced by the imperatives of Thai state formation (Kemp 1991). In other words, this episode valorizes the authenticity of the villager at the cost of political exclusion, thereby furthering the historically rooted discourse of the rural village, one which is, in anthropologist Eli Elinoff’s words, “a certain type of site occupied by a particular subject with limited horizons of economic possibilities and a specific set of political deficiencies” (2012:389).

**Headman Tong: patronizing villager-speak**

In my interview with Headman Tong a month later at his house, his conception of the world in terms of a hierarchy of knowledge resurfaced. To my question of how his duties as village headman have changed since the change of government, he replied:
Since the change of government, we have had to make understood the policies that they assigned. We have had to explain to the people in order for them to understand, to know the reasons why the military came in like this. Whether they will acknowledge, will understand it or not is another issue. But we are a medium, the medium that must create understanding with the community.

There is a tension between the reasons of the military and the capacity to understand of the villagers. While it is unclear in this extract what he means when he talks of the issue of other villagers not understanding the military’s reasons, another part of the interview makes it clear. By this late point in the interview, Poyai (who had brought me to Headman Tong’s house and had participated to some degree in the interview) just recently left the scene and Headman Tong was talking about how hardworking Poyai had always been, how he had nurtured his economic standing and his children. Right then, unpromptedly, Tong started talking about his daughter:

Tong: My daughter, she came, came from work, came to watch news down here, to the point where she got into an argument with um. [[laughs softly]]

Peera: An argument with who?

Tong: An argument with, just this, this politics issue. It’s that she, she understands, whatever is not true she will say it (khan tii waa bo maen ka si waa), she works at Siriraj Hospital you see, the level of intelligence it’s, she is middle class so she thinks differently from us, from this patronage society (sangkhom-uppatam), so she understands that way, she understands a different politics, she, like myself, she thinks the way I (paa, ‘father’) do, but, to come watch news with the community, with the village, it’s to view from a different angle.

Peera: So she/you24 come to argue with, argue with villagers here?

Tong: [[laughs]] No, we didn’t argue. Their minds will be upset you see, upset, society is like that, looking from different angles, but I (Lao taa-haw, ‘we’) do try to slip in (soot-saek) lessons, in each issue, each thing, but by giving an example, I cannot say it directly like politicians, you see. To raise an example of harmful effects of populist policies, example of the ramifications, it’s that we have crossed and come far away in the way of life in our community.

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24 In my original question in Lao, I omitted the subject pronoun, opening up possibilities for Tong to interpret it either way. My original intent, I believe, was to ask about his daughter. I believe it was misread.
Whether this transition into talking about his daughter was arbitrary (the link being the mere mention of Poyai’s children) or not so arbitrary (that is, if in fact his daughter watched red shirts TV station and got in an argument with Poyai), Tong’s stance emerged clear. Although shrouded in terms of relativism, Tong’s characterization of the difference between his daughter and villagers rests on a hierarchy of knowledge: her “level of intelligence” has something to do with her being “middle-class” in contrast to the “villagers” who were embedded in “patronage society.” Her position as a nurse in one of the most prestigious public hospitals of the country, Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok, set her political knowledge over the villagers’ different knowledge (that is to say, selective ignorance in the issue of populist politicians’ corruption).

What is most notable here is how the headman positions himself vis-à-vis other villagers: as someone who tries to educate his misguided followers without upsetting them. The headman’s ambiguous usage of the pronoun taa-haw which either means ‘I’ or ‘we’ at times seemed to put him in solidarity with other villagers, yet he used paa (‘father’) when he set himself apart from other villagers in definitive solidarity with his daughter’s way of thinking. Ironically, this patronizing act of educating others was signified by the word soot-saek (‘insert’), a similar word to soot (‘intervene’) he used earlier to advise villagers that they “peek but not intervene” in the affairs of political regime change.

The fact that the headman told me all this—in Poyai’s fresh absence—signaled that he considered me to be one of those who has “the level of intelligence” to “understand” a perspective that many villagers cannot. The deficient other, in all the headman’s evasions, probably was Poyai. There was an assumption on his part about my superior knowledge that enabled him intimating to me how he had to keep true knowledge about national politics from
other villagers so as to not upset them. For Tong, the unenlightened villager remains in need of
tutelage, although it has become increasingly difficult to maintain that patronizing gesture for the
persuasive power of politicians. There is, I believe, an aspiration to be a patron in that very
denigration of ways of knowing under patron-client relations. To be knowledgeable is to adopt
the “middle class” way of thinking, free from patron-client relations, yet to be a village headman
involves a competition with politicians for political and moral purchase.

**Danai: the cultivation of voice that goes unrecognized**

Though silenced, Danai was unfazed by the fact that his point was ignored; he simply
walked away without complaint after listening for a while. In the last meeting I observed, in the
village subsection to which Danai belonged, he was very much an active voice. Still, his words
on democracy were similarly glossed over as too academic and not written down.

Danai was already there when I arrived, an hour early, to the house of that subsection
headman. Even before the headman announced the imminent meeting on the village speaker,
Danai took up the microphone and invited other villagers to come to the meeting through his
own bricolage of persuasive discourse:

> Today is a very important day . . . They are coming to know our information, to
know what we need. We don’t have to conceal anything that we want . . . this is
for our own material survival [Thai/Lao paak-toong, literally ‘mouth and
belly’ . . . Because this is the best opportunity! Well, today is important in another
way too, what importance? The importance lies in the fact that the day of June 24
is the day of the political/regime change from [code-switches to standard Thai]

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25 As hardly any villager was there, I was his most intent listener. He started his discourse by
referring to my presence as an observer. Following that introduction were what I have
transcribed at length.
Absolute Monarchy [code-switches back to Lao] to Democracy.²⁶ You can say June 24 is the birthday of democracy.

This reference to the anniversary of the 1932 Revolution is striking; the date is actually not an official holiday nor marked by state ceremonies or celebrations. I believe that no one else within the hearing range of Danai was aware of the fact; I myself did not realize the coincidence until I heard it. Largely discredited as an immature movement by misguided students who received ideas of democracy from abroad without thinking deeply about how the population was “not yet ready,” the 1932 Revolution stands as an anomalous forerunner of Thai democracy celebrated by countercultural organizers. Its mention by Danai, as a consequence, turned the script of the villager as a “not-yet-ready” subject on its head. Rather than treating democracy as a set of abstract principles, Danai associates democracy directly to the material survival of people like himself. Danai continues:

Therefore, mm, please, if brothers and sisters who want to see reconciliation, how are we going to do it so that reconciliation happens? It depends on what? Your own mouth and belly that is. . .

“Reconciliation” (proongdoong-samaannachan) is an oft-used term by the Thai political class when there were attempts at easing interelite conflicts. Danai’s supposition of reconciliation as an object of desire from the popular recasts material well-being of the people to be the real basis

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²⁶ The code-switching to standard Thai pronunciation of tones in the Sanskrit-derived word “Absolute Monarchy” (sombuuranaayaasitthiraat) —and not “Democracy” (prachaatippatai) (although the term prachathippatai was coined in Thai and similarly derived from Sanskrit, it was almost always pronounced in local Lao tonal system in my fieldwork)— produces a distancing effect, where the Thai pronunciation resembles what one was taught to read and recite in public schools rather than what one said in other contexts in everyday life.
of national reconciliation. The artificially dialogic style in Danai’s discourse, apparent from the rhetorical question he poses before answering it himself, implies that Danai might in this moment see himself as a kind of an organic intellectual who served as an interlocutor for his fellow villagers not yet come to political consciousness. That might have been why he chose to make explicit links between national politics and individual well-being. Danai continues:

Tell your desire to the officials who will write it down and then they will, um, present it to their superior in the next level. And then they will, it’s not really certain whether we will get it or not, it doesn’t matter, sometimes our hopes are fulfilled other times not, it’s normal for humans, sad or happy they coexist, whether we get or don’t get we still live together, therefore we must, ah, both sides are at fault for polarizing into two sides. Democracy, different ideas, different ideologies, but we must not splinter (taek-yaek), that is the true democracy. Therefore today we have an opportunity, we shouldn’t lose it: turn a crisis into opportunity, don’t turn an opportunity into crisis. . .

Danai’s injunction to other villagers to “tell your desire to the officials” precisely matches Appadurai’s proposal for the poor to develop their ‘capacity to aspire’ by cultivating voice in democratic deliberations. However, whether these aspirations and desires are satisfied or not, as Danai himself notes, does not matter; what matters is that the villagers take this opportunity to voice their concerns in a democratic fashion. In this latter part of his discourse, Danai borrowed many platitudinous phrases about democracy that abound in Thai society; for example, the idea of healthy democracy as “being different but not splintered” (Thai taek-taang-tae-mai-taek-yaek). Rather than seeing this as an uncritical adoption of hegemonic discourse or his attempt to show me his knowledge of democracy, I see these platitudes to be Danai’s effort to convince other villagers of the potential value of the village meetings. Underlying all this is his hope, however tempered, for what this opportunity promised.
Danai seemed to be one of the few people genuinely enthusiastic and hopeful about the village meeting. Of the team of seven responsible for organizing the meetings, only three officials showed up to speak in this last meeting of the village! And only the first few rows of the participants were thoroughly engaged with airing ideas for local development. In this meeting, they were the ones who constantly dictated their words in standard Thai for the scribe to copy onto the paper sheet, at the expense of other villagers in the back rows or on the side who could not even see what was on the paper sheet. The majority of the participants were there out of obligation. 27

Danai spoke at length again at a mid-point in the meeting, after the facilitator—the same man who earlier ignored his interjection of democracy—asked for suggestions for reform of the political system. The following is his discourse:

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27 It is difficult to know whether people were there for mere obligation or actual fear, as Maeyai suggested after the meeting that people were there only because they were afraid there would be consequences if one did not go. I do not think there were any direct consequences for not going, but I believe that more attendants would be beneficial for the officials involved. In one of the meetings, when I went up to the registration table to sign up and wrote down my name, an official asked if I was from the village, as “my last name did not sound like I was from there.” I was told by the other official present that this meeting was only for that particular village subsection. I told them then that I was there to observe the meeting, and asked them if I should still sign up. After a moment of hesitation, the former said that yes, as this would increase the number of participants. Not knowing what to fill in the slot for house number, I wrote down a random one.
Reform, well, if one wants Thailand to reform one must follow the rules. Whatever procedure/rule must pass through the Parliament because then the power would be with the people, let the people decide to choose representatives, whatever change must be from the Parliament like before, well, because the character nowadays, character nowadays does not pass through the Parliament. As can be obviously seen [The official responded with an affirmative: kap] there isn’t yet a Prime Minister, there’s already an appointed cabinet. I feel that this is too much of a squeeze [Thai/Lao biip-kan] of the power of the people, I’m saying it frankly, you see. Therefore, since you [Thai than] declared the martial law, now it can be considered pretty quiet already, why not return power to the people? have an election.

It is important to note here that eloquent pro-election remarks like Danai’s have been appropriated by anti-electoral democracy advocates to reinscribe the notion of the uninformed villager, whose deficiency is now exacerbated by the notion that they are brainwashed by one-sided news outlets (see Chapter 3). The more articulate (and therefore insistent) this kind of pro-election discourse is, the more convenient it has become to cast it as brainwashing by Thaksin and his cronies. Danai continues, occasionally punctuated by affirmatives from the official:

Therefore politics must move forward, don’t let the world, don’t make Thai politics regress to the bottom of the world. Why do I say that? Because, the Minister of Defense of Japan, he said that Thai politics is pathetic, that’s the bottom, why does he say that? Because, he doesn’t want the military to meddle with politics at all, [“yes”] when they have meddled in politics, problems occurred. This declaration of martial law I am in no agreement with, because we’ve tried the democratic governance that was already right [“yes”]. When there is no Prime Minister, there needs to be an interim in place. Therefore, in acting as interim one does not have the power to decide on various governmental funding, there is a time period, within 60 days, no more than 60 days, within 45 days an election must be held, therefore it must follow that path, this is democracy, this is the point I want to see happen. Now the EU is also putting on pressure [“yes”], did you watch the news? You know EU squeezed the military, there must be an election, they want to see that all the world is democratic, everything must end in the Parliament, since democratic procedures need a Parliament you know, they must pass through the Parliament, this is the ‘roadmap’ of democracy, with popular participation in drafting the Constitution, only with these two things will there be democracy that the world practices. Therefore I want others here to have some thoughts to propose for what we are going to do in our future reform.
Therefore what I want most of all! is an election, then everything will be peaceful. In fact there was no need to declare the martial law in the first place: one was demanding and protecting democracy in symbolic ways in Nakhon Pathom, while the other was creating unrest in Bangkok. But the reason that the general declared martial law, the reason was that there was violent conflict among the people, so martial law was declared. In fact I want martial law be declared on drugs you know?

By this point of the discourse, one of the officials (the same official who had in the earlier meeting given the microphone to the headman) had already got up and walked past the audience to the street outside. He took out his telephone and talked (or pretended to talk) for a few minutes. Then, hanging around in solitude, he smoked. Only a few minutes after Danai’s discourse ended did he walk back into the meeting space. His temporary absence left only two or three officials in front listening to Danai. I was tempted to interpret the bureaucrat’s apparent boredom as one of the cracks in the hard, molar state power where an agent of the state did not act as he was supposed to do. But upon rethinking, I consider his disengagement with Danai’s critical analysis of national politics and state institutions to be furthering the gap between the interpellated villager in need of tutelage and the citizen who could deliberate on public matters. In other words, Danai’s mode of citizenship required political citizenship (“democracy that the world practices”), one that the ruling ideology, only allowing some social benefits without civil and political rights, did not accommodate. We will see that the subsequent responses to Danai superficially affirmed his call for elections while fundamentally ignored his critical mode of address.

The rest of Danai’s discourse elaborated a direct critique of the military:

Danai: Being the military, the military is the last refuge of the people, when the courts we depended on are unjust, the military needs to be depended on to be the last refuge of the people. You may have heard news about a general, he wrote that, inscribed on his monument, it was written that
written words] the military is the last refuge of the people. [switches back to Lao] This is no longer not the case. Therefore, I want you to tell the bosses: don’t create unrest for the country. The people in need, whatever you lead them to do they’ll follow. When there are rights belonging to them, let them use their rights to the fullest. That’s all I wanted to propose.

Official (policeman): Propose what?
Danai: What I proposed is to hurry and have an election.
Someone28: [in standard Thai] To have an election?
Danai: Yes, [in standard Thai, syllable by syllable, as if to dictate the writing on the board] to have an election.

Danai’s was speaking according to a different set of conventions than expected by the official. The prescribed form of expression in this meeting reduced Danai’s complicated invocation of militaristic virtue to a simple call of elections. After Danai’s concluding remarks, an official started “clarifying” (tam kwaam-kaw-chai):

Please allow me, allow me to clarify to brothers and sisters here, all right . . .
Well, they asked for opinion about the power takeover this time, or to call it another way, it’s their coming to keep the order of the country. I fully believe that this year, brothers and sisters, for the past five-to-six months, there were a lot of politics, even getting to the point of having too many shirt colors, I don’t know whatever colors, so they, they’ve watched for a long time so then they came in. I tell you that if questionnaires’ results were posted, 90 percent of brothers and sisters agree with it, and the other 10 percent are those in Bangkok.

This claim that Bangkokians, as opposed to “brothers and sisters” villagers, are the ones who are not happy with the military takeover is not only counterfactual demographically, but also reproduces the false separation between “those in Bangkok” and “brothers and sisters” in the provinces. The only resonance this claim might have lies in its mobilization of “brothers and sisters” as a peace-loving people, a trait which is then set against an unruly other, in this case

28 I believe that one of the villagers in the front row said it to the scribe who appeared uncertain as to what to put down on the sheet. This standard Thai phrase was either directed to the scribe so he write on the paper sheet on the side wall, or directed at Danai to clarify it.
“those in Bangkok,” probably referring to anti-election mobs led by former Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban.²⁹ He continued:

Because they came in, the various protests dispersed. Secondly, it was very quick that money [from the rice pledging scheme] came to brothers and sisters, just 15 days after they came in, isn’t that true brothers and sisters? I think it’s good. So if it had a good effect, brothers and sisters, you don’t have to think too much. Now they’re going to set up in terms of an election or whatever. They’re doing it all, they declare it all around every day, right brothers and sisters?., they say that they will do as they’ve promised, so we just listen to them, for the deep stuff, better climb up from it, going down to probe it too much hurts the brain.

The characterization of Danai’s discourse as too cerebral works to delegitimate and derail his pro-democracy, anti-martial law argument. Similar to the headman’s earlier interruption, this official’s remark opposes Danai’s discourse to a properly villagerly way of thinking and speaking. Danai’s discourse necessitates an insistence on the authentically local precisely because his “cosmopolitan” discourse fundamentally subverts the merely local boundaries of “villagerly” things by appropriating and claiming an authentic voice of the villager even as he speaks of events in the national and global scales. Danai’s redeployment of the villager voice against the state’s subjugating logic is, in Butler’s words, “a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it” (1993:122).

For the official, to passively accept military rule for its ability to restore order and transfer money owed to villagers is more proper than to “think too much.” Interestingly,

²⁹ Interestingly, this othering gesture was reiterated later by another official in the meeting. But instead of othering “those in Bangkok,” it was “the southerners.” The official said that mob leaders of all stripes, both red shirts and yellow shirts, were all southerners—agents of unruliness opposed to the peace-loving northeastern “villagers.”
however, in this instance, elections were actually characterized as properly local, as the official continued:

Just focus on our own stuff, stuff like, to have an election, yeah, brothers and sisters, elections at whatever level, local administration, subsection headman, village headman, congressperson, senator, to have all of them elected. This, I'd like brothers and sisters to propose it like this (Lao kue hai pi-nong sa-noe kuen jang-sii), like to not have the headman selected among the subsection headmen, but elected by brothers and sisters yourselves, or even you can even elect headmen’s assistants . . . So, brothers and sisters, that’s all I want to clarify with brothers and sisters.

By framing elections as part of “our own stuff” opposed to “deeper” issues, the official isolated Danai’s call for a general election from its inherent critique of the military takeover. Even as he mentions and seems to endorse “elections at whatever level,” the purpose of doing so is to model a proper way of proposing an idea. Through a performance of modeling and tutelage, the official interpellated the meeting participants as villager-subjects to whom things need to be taught and clarified. As an agent of the state, the official tried to establish a “common discursive framework” (Roseberry 1994:364) for articulating political desires and aspirations to belong. But that discursive framework, even as it expanded to include concerns about elections, still did not register the voice of protest.

After the official’s comment, Headman Tong added his comment for another three minutes: he explained what “reform” was, elaborated more on the different structures of elections, and listed different proposals that could be put forth. In the middle of his discourse, Tong addressed the question of the military takeover:

The problem was, people came to wreak havoc on brothers and sisters, it was really not manageable so it got to be this way. Sons-in-law have a dispute and the old man doesn’t say anything. Then they really go at it, so the old man goes to stop it. This, it’s the same manner.
The family metaphor, in which the patriarch comes to intervene in the dispute between his sons-in-law, reveals much about how the state subjects its citizens as children not yet ready for full autonomy. His usage of the family metaphor reproduces the family ideological state apparatus that in this case equates the military to the benevolent patriarch.\(^{30}\)

**Conclusion: learning from Boonma's exit**

In these apparently participatory and egalitarian meetings where the officials constantly elicit villagers’ suggestions and feedback, the proper form of address turns out to produce a paradoxical subjection: it includes villager-citizens as participants only in so far as they fit the prescribed mold of the villager-subjects who should behave well, who should propose and object to things in a certain way, who should not think too much, and ultimately who should let state elites run the country.

In contrast to Arjun Appadurai’s proposal for the poor and otherwise marginalized people to cultivate their voice in order to develop their capacity to aspire (2004), the examples I have described and analyzed indicate that the cultivation of voice only works if this voice is heard and recognized as such. When the cultivation of voice went unrecognized or misrecognized, exit became a reasonable option; this is why it made sense for Boonma to decide to leave the meeting

\(^{30}\) A speculation can be made similarly as to how the commonplace way of calling the Thai King a belevolent father, especially for his role of a mediator during times of political crises, absolves him of blame for his actions and removes him from public scrutiny of various institutions and projects under his patronage.
in the first hour. The capacity to aspire, I believe, could be better cultivated on the basis of a different public like that on the bamboo bench.

The desires for political belonging of people like Poyai and Danai were thwarted on multiple levels in these village meetings. On the surface, the instances of ignoring of explicitly pro-democracy comments as too academic forecloses the possibility for villagers to belong to the state and to the public sphere as full citizens. More fundamentally, it is the very social dynamic of the village meetings itself, distinct as it is from the bamboo bench social dynamic in terms of spatial, aural, and affective organizations, that does not include certain political subjectivities and modes of address while privileges others.

In the end, Poyai made an exit. In retrospect, it was not a lost opportunity that Boonma said nothing, and exited the village meeting within the first hour, smirking as he walked past me. Poyai and Boonma assessed the realism of their desire to overthrow the military regime, and thereby resigned themselves to political venting and committing themselves to an uncompromising rejection of the regime. This gesture paradoxically lodges them as villager-subjects even as their practices such as the bamboo bench conversations certainly affirm entitlement to political rights beyond the mold of villager-subjects.
CHAPTER 5: MONKS, DRUGS, AND POLICEMEN: THE STATE IN THE VILLAGE

Thus far, I have analyzed the relationships between villagers in Ban Non Daeng and the Thai state in the realm of discourse, that is to say, primarily through villagers’ accounts of themselves and the world and their individual interaction with others. The cultural citizenship framework informing the “villager-citizen” concept has juxtaposed state-imposed views of the politically deficient villager in need of training reproduced by state officials and villagers, as well as claims to authenticity that villagers produce in their claims to being citizens. The double aspect of constructs of the villager-citizen as both self-making and being-made, simultaneously interpellation and political recognition, has been teased out from moments where the unstable, hyphenated condition comes apart.

Building from insights around cultural citizenship and interpellation of villager-subjects thus far, this chapter seeks to deepen an understanding of the villager-citizen construct in the concrete. As relationships between the state and rural villagers have been constituted and transformed by historically situated political economy, the study of concrete events that bring together the state and the village can help connect the subjective meaning makings (the cultural framework) to the objective class relations (the political economy framework) that underlie the villager-citizen concept. Phenomena that lie beyond discourse, even though they need to be routed and interpreted through many layers of discourse, are the focus of this chapter.

In addition, close attention to intimately local events will also, I hope, tease out modes of belonging to the village as a moral community centered on the village temple. The attention to how moral authority and prestige is locally distributed and how material resources are locally
managed will help much in an attempt to understand the complex of the “villager-citizen” constructs which have sprouted and matured from these local grounds.

In this chapter, drugs will serve as the paradigmatic example. A pivotal issue that can inform many aspects of how the state relates to the village, the presence of drugs in the village shapes local conceptions of well-being, democracy, political corruption, and different modes of political belonging. When I began my fieldwork, drugs were not on the list of my topics, but one event forced me to pay more attention: the arrest of two village monks for use of amphetamine. Now, the issue has emerged as the most illuminating in my efforts to capture the full complexity of the (actual and imagined) relationships between the village and the state.

**The presence and absence of repressive state apparatuses in villagers’ lives**

While drugs were not on my radar during most of my fieldwork in Ban Non Daeng, in some people’s radar drugs were very much central in observing me. For the presence of someone alien like me was linked to the presence of the state. I learned from Max’s parents, in the last days of my fieldwork, that some teenagers in the village suspected that I was a spy/informer on drugs for police authorities. My presence as an outsider researcher in the village sparked mistrust among teenagers I never talked to but who I saw in the trips I made through various village roads, on foot, motorcycle or car. A few times, I met stares and looks from young people on ubiquitous motorcycles.

The mistrust was also timely: the May 2014 military takeover shook up local police authorities, reasserting the dominance of military over police jurisdiction. This reordering meant that, in terms of drugs, the previous non-aggressive police vigilance gave way to drug raids.
Before the coup, Max related, “there were no drug raids in the village, because police here had big connections (sen yai); now that the military is ruling, the village has been affected by the change from one system of connections to another.” Drug raids during the time of this military government took the form of collaborated police-military force which targeted specific sites based on intelligence information.

Apart from drug raids, many other instances of the actual presence of state authorities in the villagers’ lives involve drugs. In the dinner circle the evening after the monks’ arrest, Max mentioned substance tests on inter-village roads, where the police set up a stop for urine tests:

That policeman was probably new, so he thought of arresting me. I was reluctant to do the urine test, but when I was like that the policeman was all persistent. So I told him to just hand me the tube, and I pissed in it to the brim. He ran the test and found nothing so I got back to the pickup. When I met policemen that already knew me they wouldn’t ask me to do it and tell me that it was “just a test” (Lao truat sue-sue dok)

The phrase “just a test” was employed to soften the state’s threat of force. The words sue-sue (‘merely’; sue indicates inaction) and dok (used here to emphasize the mereness) stood juxtaposed to the word truat which was heavy with the threat of state action. The Thai word for police, tam-ruat, and the Thai word for testing or scrutiny, truat, derived from the same Khmer word. If the police’s job is to scrutinize and thereby interpellate people into subjects, why do they not do that in some cases?

Note that the car Max was driving was an old pickup truck, a type of vehicle that virtually every household in the village now had. I asked him to clarify the kind of car he was driving because in my experience of driving dozens of times on the same inter-village roads, I was never stopped. The SUV car that I drove, however, was not common in Ban Non Daeng and surrounding villages. From this difference in experience, it can be concluded that the police
specifically targeted some people over others—and I would suggest that the selective target, in addition to the spatial specificity of the inter-village roads, had something to do with the age and class positions of Max, a young man driving a pickup truck. The new policeman in the anecdote aggressively scrutinized him as a potential subject for arrest or, as the case may be, extortion.

In both extracts from Max, personal connections to state authorities dissolved the repressive exercise of state power. While this may all be just another case of police corruption, the past absence of drug raids and the selective drug test may indicate something more. It suggests a possibility of a desire to be left alone by the state and the acknowledgement of that desire by state authorities—drawing again from David Graeber’s essay on the “ghost state” in a Madagascan village (2007). I will discuss this later in the case of Poyai and Maeyai’s reaction to the arrests of the young monks they had held in high respect and hopes.

**What everyone knows about drugs: police intelligence and village reticence**

It is no secret that there is a high prevalence of drug use especially among young people (allegedly 80-90%) in Ban Non Daeng. Amphetamine in the form of pills, called *yaa maa* (literally ‘horse drug’) or *yaa baa* (literally ‘crazy drug’), has replaced marijuana and glue as the major form of drugs in the village. Milder forms of substance include cigarette smoking for men and betel nut chewing for women. The expression “smoking horse” (*suup maa*) indicates that apart from being taken as pills, the drug is also inhaled through the smoke. Drug addiction is seen by all my adult informants as a major social problem connected to a host of others: for Max’s mother, drugs are related to alcoholism, laziness, gambling, family disintegration, and deviant sexualities (queer and trans youth and sex workers); for Kru Tuen, young students’ excessive use of social media on mobile phones leads to addiction to video games and
pornography and eventually to drugs; for Danai, monks who drink and do drugs make Buddhist temples and religion no longer a dependable institution; for many others, drug addiction is associated with the increase of petty theft in and around the village. According to Max, “there used to be no thieves [in the village], marijuana was the only drug. Marijuana is not expensive [unlike amphetamines], and those who smoke pot can still work. A stronger substance was huffing glue, but only very few people were addicted to it then.”

It is also no secret that some police officers are in reality the ones who distribute drugs to youth dealers in the village. But to disclose what one “knows about drugs” can be a risky thing to do. The operations of police intelligence, trying to gain knowledge about drug activity in the village, come up against fear among villagers. To illustrate, I would like to analyze interactions between one police officer and various villagers in the public meetings I have analyzed more generally in Chapter 4.

Among the team of officials organizing the “explaining the coup” village meetings was an investigative police officer (sai truat, literally ‘informer who investigates’). In his discourses, he positioned himself as someone who had worked closely in the area for twenty years, in an effort to claim a social proximity to the villagers. In every meeting, he would find time to talk about drugs. What he said was for the most part the same thing. “Drug addiction is actually easy to purge,” said the officer in every meeting, “that it is difficult to purge nowadays is because there are people who know but don’t tell, that is why it’s difficult.” In one of the meetings he continued:

The people caught nowadays are the small ones, from the piss test, up to the dealers and sellers. Sometimes it gets close to big sellers, right? So then it’s a problem of protecting one’s kin (luup naa pa cha-mluk), those who know, all of you sitting here know all about who uses and who sells. Sometimes you say with
worry that “Ay, they sell it like candies.” Isn’t that right? People say things, but when they are asked they don’t tell. The reason why they don’t tell I understand, it’s understandable, maybe it’s their children or grandchildren, they’re afraid that it would be hard for them, so they tried to cover up for them. Those that are caught nowadays are because good-willed people tell.

This particular extract was from the second meeting I observed. In his monologue, I heard an indirect response to the first meeting I observed.

In that previous meeting (after the part explaining the coup) when villagers were asked to voice their livelihood problems and proposals for their resolution, the problem of drugs was raised multiple times. The first time, the police officer responded by asking if people wanted a purge on drugs, and a row of women villagers responded with an enthusiastic yes. The second time the problem was raised, he responded with the remark that the problem is made difficult by “people who know but don’t tell,” and this sparked objections from a few people. A woman villager who demanded to speak said: “If I tell on them, they will come steal my things. I am scared.” Peals of resonant laughter rang through the audience. The officer then replied that arrested users were considered by the authorities to be sick people, not born criminals, that therefore there should be no fear in reporting because there would be no harm done to users. The next person who received the microphone was a man whose command of speech was widely persuasive and entertaining. He said:

In fixing a problem, it needs to be fixed at the root cause. Now you come and fix just a little like dog shit and pig shit, it’s only at the level of effects . . . Rumor has it that, don’t arrest me if I say it, okay? [peals of laughter] There is a rumor that drugs come from inside there. If it’s not from the district police authorities, maybe it comes from other channels. [laughter and hurray]

This discourse, widely resonant with other villagers among the audience, suggested that the police officer’s discourse so far had not paid attention to the root cause of the drugs problem.
Ironically, this root cause lay in the supposed suppliers: the police themselves. After the hurray died down, the officer responded: "I heard about that too, and there may be our police who do that too." Replying to the officer's admission, the man uttered another joke, "just wanted to know, I'm not going to talk much about it," inviting another round of laughter.

From these extracts, I would like to posit that even though everyone agrees that drug addiction is a major problem for Ban Non Daeng, it does not mean that everyone will agree to strategies like drug raids. It does not mean, either, that everyone who agrees to one drug raid will agree to another. The story I am going to narrate now is the event of the arrest of two monks in a village temple.

**Monks on drugs**

The latter part of my fieldwork, well into the rainy season, fell under the three-month Buddhist Lent (*khao pan-saa*), when monks were supposed to stay in a monastery without making a pilgrimage which could damage the freshly tilled and sprouted fields.\(^{31}\) In these three months, the women villagers who support the monks would take turns making food and serving it to the monks daily. Each day, a group of households (usually around ten households) would be responsible for preparing food. The day that the police raid occurred happened to be the day that I went to help serve the food and participate in the prayers.

In the village temple, there were four monks, three of whom were under thirty, significantly younger than the abbot who was older than seventy and had been a village monk for several years.

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\(^{31}\) These three months are also the period where national public health campaigns discourage alcohol consumption. See the discussion of alcohol in Chapter 1.
The preparing of food at home, and its plating in the temple’s main hall (salaa kaan pari an), was almost entirely done by women (my presence was a nuisance); my task was to serve it to the monks who sat at a level above laypersons. Everything was going well until the blessings. Having finished eating the monks turned to the laypersons to pray for their well-being. But I noticed that two of the monks were strangely fidgety, their eyes darting left and right. During the prayer, the young monk who led the chanting turned to one of his fellow monks and hit his drooping lotus-cupped hands so that they return to their upright position. The other monk seemed to not mind it. Immediately after the prayer ended, the leading monk turned to his friend and reprimanded him jokingly for the ungraceful shape of his cupped hands. The other monk replied with something I could not quite catch, and then they both laughed. I watched all this with astonishment because never had I ever seen monks in moments of solemn praying so manic.

About an hour after I left the temple, I learned that the police had arrested two of the monks for drug use, while the other managed to escape the arrest. I was hanging out on the bamboo bench of the grandparents’ grocery store. Poyai was there, his hair being cut by a neighbor. They told me that the monk who led the chant used to do drugs, but said that he had stopped, and that he wanted to be ordained as a monk to study for an undergraduate degree. “How can a monk be doing drugs? (pen kuu-baa chang-dai pai len yaa)?” Poyai expressed disbelief. When I told him that I saw the monks being manic and fidgety, he told me that that was not normal. “They were ordained to cover up for their drug use,” he lamented.

Before the arrest, no one could freely criticize the monks in the presence of Poyai and Maeyai. A few years back, they spent 200,000 baht ($6000) to build a monk’s dwelling. One of their grandchildren in a dinner circle related that if anyone suggested that the monks were doing
drugs, Poyai would retort: “Were you there with them to know that they did it?” The social and spatial separation between monks and laypeople in village life allowed for this statement. Negative talk about monks on drugs violated “concepts of formality, respect and distance” required of laypeople irrespective of the monks’ age (Tambiah 1970:141). Any negative comments were interpreted as slander by loyally pious villagers like Poyai.

**The ideology of merit-making: the role of the village temple**

Despite his piety and hopes for the young monks, Poyai insisted on different occasions that he was a man of science and that there was no life after death. If that is so, which means the ostensible rewards of merit in the next lives were not registered by Poyai, then how should we understand his reverence and costly contributions to build for the monk a two-room concrete dwelling with neatly carved wooden window frames and a marble plaque with Poyai and Maeyai’s names on one of the walls?

This section seeks to chart out Poyai’s underlying ideology of merit-making, in an attempt to chart out the local structure of moral authority and belonging. S. J. Tambiah’s ethnographic studies *The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai Village* (1968) and *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand* (1970), seeking to understand structural mechanisms underlying the practices of merit-making, put into question the proposition that merit-making was primarily for rewards in the next life: “It seems implausible that millions of villagers wholeheartedly make merit (often at a taxing economic cost) in search of a postponed effect in the next life—a highly uncertain orientation by any human conception” (1968:42). In its place, Tambiah theorized the symbiotic relationship between young monks and elderly laypeople as one of reciprocity and complementarity between generations:
The requirements of the monks and the local wat, including daily food, are supplied entirely by the laity. The monks in return perform certain ritual roles of great concern to the laity. . . It is this set of double transactions that is central to merit-making and merit-taking, in which monk and layman, the elders phu thaw, and the junior generation luang laan stand in opposed and complementary relationships [1970:143].

The notion of double transactions is helpful in thinking through how Poyai conceived of his relationship to the young monk who had been disrobed.

After the incident, I remarked to Poyai: “Now will there be anyone to live in the kutti that you built?” Upset, Poyai responded, “if there’s no one there, then there’s no one there (bo mii ka bo mii).” I did not know that their kutti was built specifically to house one of the young monks. This same monk had been disrobed for drug use a few years back, and he promised the laity that he had quit prior to his return to monkhood. According to Max, the young monk commanded the respect of elderly villagers like his grandparents because he was one among few monks who took the initiative to lead ritual ceremonies for the laity.

Later that evening, when he was drunk, Poyai raised to Maeyai his intent to accumulate more money to build yet another kutti. She frowned and responded that there was no money left, and that Poyai should think about making daily life more convenient for everyone before spending all the money in yet another temple donation. In turn, Poyai said, “Don’t be stern, we can divide up the money and I will give my part for building it.” When she did not respond, he pleaded, “Here I’m talking to my wife, not to my grandchild (laan, referring to me). Don’t you understand? You’ve got to understand.”

Turning to include me in his address, Poyai continued, “Imprints of my hands and my feet in the fields are plenty already, but I don’t know if after I die they will sell the land away just like that. But the temple is not sellable, there is not anybody who will invest in it, it endures
longer... Money, it can’t be taken after one dies!” Addressing me directly now, Poyai said, “none of my descendants listens, any time I say it they run away. So I’m grumbling to you, grandchild.”

Poyai then taught me that I be frugal, going over a lesson he feels disregarded by his offspring. Maeyai, all the while trying to quiet down his passionate lecture, said, “they don’t take it to heart.” He retorted suddenly and angrily, “They don’t, so be they! I’m still gonna talk! So my grandchild can write a report, a thesis, about how villagers’ family problems are.”

Absent claims to life after death, a desire for permanence remained in Poyai’s understanding of the temple as inalienable village territory as opposed to the sellable agricultural fields. Although all the arable land he left his mark on had been cleared and bought during his lifetime, Poyai resisted its further commodification. Parallel to the perpetual inalienability of the temple, the emotional investment in the young monks suggested an analogous desire for continuity of village life through younger generations. Likewise, Poyai’s teachings to me, in place of his direct descendants, projected a desire for permanence in my recognition of him as an elderly villager, whose legacy in the fields may soon be erased.

Through an ideology of worldly permanence, the ideology of merit remained intact in the local structure of material and ritual transactions, even without depending on the Buddhist concept of rebirth. This unmistakably local structure based on generational complementarity was relatively autonomous from the state’s operations. In addition to structural complementarity, the supportive role assumed by Poyai allowed him a sense of local belonging and permanence, while the ritual role entrusted to the young monk allowed him to study free of costs for an
undergraduate degree. From this basis of structural complementarity, I now turn to
disentangle the complexity of belonging to the local moral community and to the state.

“Losing the rhythm”: desirable and undesirable forms of state action

For Poyai and Maeyai, the police raid in the temple was an affront to their sense of local
belonging. While accepting that the monks did drugs, they nevertheless complained that the raid
was untimely, that it made the village temple “lose the rhythm.” That rhythm referred to the Lent
season, during which monks were supposed to reside in the temple and give blessings to the
laypeople regularly. Poyai described, “It’s not a trouble for us, no matter what they were doing
they were still studying in the monastery, but they were disrobed instead.” It was not a trouble
for him because even if the monks did do drugs, they did no harm to the village. He explained
that the raids made things difficult for the temple, not for the ex-monks, who could be bailed out
for 10,000 baht ($300) but could no longer return to monkhood: “It’s a trouble for the temple,
monks are gone, who is going to give us blessings?” Poyai’s lament suggested that for him the
monks’ role was primarily ritual, the medium through which the flow of village life was
sustained.

Two days after the raid was a Buddhist holy day (wan pra) where almost a hundred
people came to the temple in the morning to make merit. Every other week during Lent, monks
from a few village monasteries would gather in one of the temples to hold a large merit-making
ceremony. This morning ceremony was its prelude before many villagers took off to a nearby
village for a lunchtime merit-making ceremony.

The monk who presided over the morning ceremony, to my surprise, was the one who
managed to escape the police raid. Near the end of the solemn merit-making ceremony, he
remarked with lightheartedness that there were few monks left, inviting chuckles from some people, before he gave the blessings. As I sat next to Poyai, pouring water from a bottle to a cup in an uninterrupted flow, symbolizing the ritual flow of merit to ancestors and spirits, I could not help but marvel at the remarkable uninterrupted flow of the monk’s nonchalant discourse along with his uninterrupted monkhood. No one publicly condemned the incident two days earlier, although everyone knew and acknowledged it. The man sitting next to us had not known about the arrest until Poyai told him—he rightly guessed what had happened and felt like Poyai that it was untimely.

Even when there was finally a consensus among villagers that these three monks did do drugs, disagreements remained in explaining how one of them was not caught. Poyai and Maeyai believed that he was simply asleep when the raid happened, thus evading the test and arrest, while younger people speculated that he learned about the raid in advance, or, worse yet, that there was a collusion between him and the police. The first possibility, rejected by most as incredulous, allowed for a benign depiction of the monk. These two explanations came to a clash a week later in the grocery store, when Chandra, one of their daughters, was sweeping the floor:

Chandra: Is it really true that the monk was sleeping in his room?
Maeyai: Yes, he was sleeping and the police who called for him couldn’t find him.
Chandra: That can’t be true. They had a deal beforehand so that he not be arrested. How could the police not see it? The room was really small.
Poyai: No, he went to sleep in another monk’s room.

This version of the story derived from Poyai’s visit to the temple the afternoon after the arrest.

The conversation continued:

Chandra: I also don’t believe that the urine test the day after couldn’t find any substance. This is all bribery. Drugs can be detected in your body even months after use.
Maeyai: No, you don’t know that. You don’t sell drugs/medicine. I heard from the local pharmacist that there is an herb or a medicine that you can dissolve in water and drink so you can vomit a lot to cleanse your body of the substance.
Chandra: Is that true?
Maeyai: She knows that for real. But I don’t know it really.

Poyai and Maeyai’s willingness to defend the young monks against the charges of police collusion and bribery demonstrated the ideal significance of monks as local figures of moral authority. Even if Maeyai accepted that the monk did do drugs, she was unwilling to accept that he might have paid his way out of arrest.

This willingness to defend the monks on drugs sat uneasily with their frustrations with drug addiction among village youth. A day before the raid, Poyai and Maeyai told me that it was difficult to tell other families that their youngsters may be doing drugs, judged by their absent-minded behavior. Telling the parents about the truth would face hostile reactions. How can we understand the contradiction between their tolerance of the monks’ drug activities, going to great lengths to trivialize or deny the truth, and their frustration with drug addiction problems, especially of parents not accepting the truth? I suggest that, beyond hypocrisy or tenacious hope, this contradiction showed how a sense of belonging to the local moral community retained its autonomy from the state.

For there were desirable and undesirable forms of state action. Police raids that would disturb the flow of the village’s moral world—structured by a symbiotic relationship between monks and laypeople (Tambiah 1970:141)—were undesirable. Other forms of state intervention that recognize the unofficial jurisdiction of the village’s moral world, on the other hand, might be hoped for. During his “war on drugs,” Ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had a notorious record of extra-judicial executions of more than two thousand people, many of these people ethnic minorities in the uplands, suspected of drug trade activities. Maeyai remembered Thaksin’s first term (2001-2005) not only as the time when political and social citizenship was
meaningful to villagers, but also the time when drug addiction was effectively mitigated through
the elimination of translocal traders. She told me of a drug-trading godfather in a nearby village
who was assassinated during Thaksin’s time. Draconian state action could be desirable, when it
is not at odds with claims to belonging to a moral community, in this case centered around the
village monastery during Lent.

I am not suggesting that Poyai and Maeyai defended the young monks because they were
the ones for whom the local moral community mattered most. The grandfathers were one of the
few villagers whose reaction to the episode could be accurately described as “disbelief.” While
most people were disappointed, they were not surprised. Precisely because the sense of local
belonging has different valences for different villagers, the unsurprised indignation of younger
people at the fact that monks did drugs suggested that they belonged to the village in a less loyal
and more cynical way. In other words, their sense of the village rhythm is not one of interrupted
order but rather predictable chaos. Now, I turn to oppositional voices toward village authorities,
both in the monastery and in the local administration.

**Women’s counterpublic: moral commands of monks versus the state**

After lunch on the day of the monks’ arrest, I was invited to observe the making of
sweets. Six women of various age were sitting around a bamboo bench in front of a house not far
from Maeyai’s, mixing ingredients in the bowl while they had a casual conversation, at times
verging on the bawdy. The talk of the town, of course, was about the police raid in the temple.
Like myself, most of the women were in the temple hall shortly before the arrest. I took verbatim
notes of the conversation, part of which I recreate here:

Woman #1: They were caught when you offered lunch to them?
Peera: I wasn’t there when it happened, but yes. I attracted fortune.
Woman #2: If they’d come when I was there, I would’ve been so satisfied (choep)!
   Giving blessings, then running away and tipping and breaking the plates!
Woman #3: What would they have done with their facial expressions, in the middle of giving blessings?
Woman #4: This time they would have to renounce monkhood.
Peera: They were very fidgety, I saw.
Woman #4: It was an omen. They were enjoying themselves, they were going to compete in sports. Run! [laughs]

It turned out that one of the three young monks allegedly ran away into the nearby woods. “He wasn’t there; he knew,” claimed a person. If he did not return by sundown, another remarked, he would break the rule of only staying in the temple during Buddhist Lent. Woman #4, the most expressive one, continued her restaging of the arrest:

I find the monks so laughable. The police asked for piss, but you got water for them instead. Weren’t you gonna get kicked by combat boots? Thought yourselves smarter than they were? They were the police!

The state, here represented by the police with military boots, was imagined as more intelligent than the monks who had become the butt of jokes. This superiority in intelligence easily translated into moral superiority, especially considering that monks were supposed to be moral examples of villagers. The state here was constructed as an agent that restored rightness: the one who held moral command.

The media emerged in this event as a way to articulate scandal in the village. Among the women making sweets, their talk about the ex-monks was framed as a kind of media channel. Midway through the making of the flour mix for the sweets, one of the women received a call on her mobile phone about the incident. When she finished talking and returned to the bamboo bench, another person called her “CNN.”
Villagers had no illusions, however, about the state’s control of the media. By dinnertime the news of the drug raid had been televised nationally. It turned out that the news reported the seizure of 2,000 methamphetamine pills. Everyone in the dinner circle agreed that the number was hyperbolic: it was not realistic that they seized more than 100 or even 50 pills. They did not have total trust in the police or the military, but the case was that they had even less trust on the young village monks.

The ex-monks, both from the village, brought shame and dishonor to their families, and one of them was initially barred from returning home. Both of them have now returned to their families and remained unemployed, with little possibility of returning to monkhood and continuing their studies. Only the abbot remained as someone morally trustworthy, but being old he did not interact much with the laypeople or solve the temple’s drug problems. Neither the monks nor the state, in the last analysis, held true moral command over these villagers. In the next section, I analyze in more detail an oppositional mode of local belonging.

"Shame of the village": corruption and the imagined state

While Poyai and Maeyai lamented the untimeliness of the raid, Kittipol, a son-in-law of theirs and Chandra’s husband, blamed it on the untimeliness of the local lay authorities.

“Because the village headmen had been unwilling to drive out the delinquent monks in the first place, for fear of offending elderly villagers who did not believe that they did drugs, now that the monks were caught red-handed, there was nothing to do but be ashamed (khai naa).” What transpired was a shame of—and on—the village.

Kittipol and Chandra’s general perception toward the local authorities—both lay and religious—was one of rampant corruption. Kittipol’s account indicated that the local structure of
decisionmaking deferred to some opinion over others. The day of the raid, Chandra went to give food to the monks as part of her rotation, and her disappointed indignation afterward was palpable. When the communal space of the sacred became the space for illicit drug use (which could be a form of avoiding state power in the monastic sphere), and the structure of communal deliberation became one of lax complicity, some villagers developed a deep cynicism of local authorities.

This cynicism led to a hope for the military regime to be tough on its purge of corruption. Kittipol, a mechanic and entrepreneur who installed and maintained air conditioners in subdistrict (tambon) administrative buildings, had first-hand experiences dealing with untransparent practices of public spending. “The system is transparent, but the practices are not transparent,” he said. In his experiences, local authorities would buy the worst and cheapest kind of air conditioner available, pay with cash so that there was no paper trail, and then wrote in their accounts that they bought the best and most expensive kind. The difference between the actual amount paid and the recorded amount was then divided among officials for private use. Since the military takeover, a sense of fear pervaded the authorities that all their projects would be inspected. As a result, a subdistrict administrative official approached Kittipol to make an additional maintenance contract to cover up for the price difference, but he declined because it was not part of the original arrangement.

But that cynicism did not make Kittipol and Chandra turn to single-handedly trust in the military regime’s promise to purge corruption, nor did it make them oppose electoral democracy as such. Instead, through pessimistic discourses of corruption, they conceived of an imagined state that would redress local and national corruption through various means (see also Gupta
This state became imagined as people like Kittipol and Chandra did not subscribe to the image of communal consensus propounded by other villagers and therefore did not fully belong to the village as a public. Partly shunning the village monastery, they went to a temple outside the village to make merit in important holidays. Rejecting the village’s moral community as well as its publics, Chandra sought a better moral community elsewhere.

Oppositional claims to belonging, for Chandra, consisted of a claim to difference in desires and aspirations. In contradistinction to other villagers who they saw as primarily wanting alcohol, Chandra positioned herself as someone who “did not want anything.” Kittipol, similarly, mourned the loss of resources through corrupt governmental policies. Faulting populist policies for enabling excessive desire, Chandra and Kittipol opted for measures that would check and balance corrupting tendencies of democracy.

But Chandra and Kittipol did not reject local elections in and of themselves, as much as they disliked the current arrangement of elected local authorities. As evident from their knowledge of the police’s exaggeration of the count of methamphetamine pills in the broadcast news, as well as their knowledge that the drugs came from the police themselves, their welcome of the military takeover was not unreflective. On the local level, they expressed satisfaction at the prospect that the local politician would no longer stay in office after this term ended. “Now they will no longer get to drink with the local politician!” said Chandra, referring to the way that candidates bought their way into office. But once Chandra learned that the military government would curtail the right to vote not only for local political posts, which she saw as irredeemably corrupt, but also the administrative team, which she saw as an important body to represent local interests, she reversed her opinion on the coup:
Chandra: The administrative team will still be elected, right?
Peera: No, all positions will be selected.
Chandra: Woah, then that’s not good. If the whole team is selected then they won’t know the area.
Peera: How?
Chandra: If the team comes from elections, they will visit the area more, know the villagers more, know more about the village’s problems.

Further discussions resulted in Chandra’s formulation that the best way to structure local governance is through the mix between selection of the political posts and election of the administrative, policymaking posts, so that both sides could check and balance each other, preventing the collusion of all authorities in political corruption. (She admitted that selection could nonetheless still involve bought positions.) Kittipol, for his part, came to formulate a 5-year single-term proposal for local political posts. “If they stay for long, they’ll know people and ways to embezzle (koong-kin),” he said, “Those elected for the first time aren’t really corrupt (koong), but once they continue on the post they learn the channels and the methods, so they collude to corrupt.”

The complexity of Chandra and Kittipol’s thinking is instructive to observers and participants in Thailand’s partisan politics that so often put the championing of electoral democracy and the advocacy against political corruption in mutually exclusive terms, that is, insistence that one must be won first for the other to follow. Significantly, their oppositional political opinions informed their sensibility as villager-citizens, one that was distinct from, sometimes opposed to, but never totally mutually exclusive from another brand of villager-citizenship constructed through the bamboo bench political conversations among red shirt participants at the grocery store. As a daughter of Maeyai and Poryai, Chandra still made food and went to clean their house from time to time, and still went to the village temple with her
neighbor friends. And it will be people her age who are the next generation of the village community. Possibilities for the reconfiguration of belonging are open.
CONCLUSION: LEARNING TO LEARN FROM RURAL VILLAGERS

—When do you think you will stop writing about villagers (*chao baan)*?

—I don’t know when I will stop; everyone is a villager.

In an interview with the magazine *WRITER*, themed issue “Isan Blood,” university professor and activist Thee Anmai asserts that “everyone is a villager” (Kanokwan 2014:106). Since the 2006 coup d’état, he has written several short stories exclusively centered on Isan villager characters that regularly break stereotypes of what a villager is like. I find his claim that everyone is a villager provocative. Of course, I am not a villager. But what does it mean to proclaim one’s difference? In cultural anthropology, the claim that one has “gone native” now produces suspicion at best, for even “halfies,” those ethnographers who come from where they study but are trained in the West, necessarily contribute to a Western discourse and develop a degree of distance and estrangement toward what we write about (Abu-Lughod 1991). But in contemporary Thailand, the claim that one shares the condition of being a villager could produce feelings of linked fate, for in this reality of disenfranchisement under military rule’s new constitution, we are all second-class citizens, for those of us that are formally citizens. Analogously, to claim that one is *not* a red shirt supporter, for the sake of establishing oneself as a more-or-less neutral political observer and analyst, has become so commonplace in Thai political discourse that it necessarily contributes to the othering of already marginalized political subjects. I do not mean to conflate “villagers” and “red shirt supporters,” although the slippage is itself telling of how the two terms can be collapsed under the umbrella of second-class citizens. The project of writing about villagers thus becomes not only about the subaltern Other but also about reflexivity toward the Self that is also subaltern under the militaristic state. As Gayatri
Spivak points out, the subaltern, unlike the popular, is a purely relational concept (2004). Through a commitment in “learning to learn from below,” I have tried to understand the ways my villager informants perceive and process things from their opinion-fluid, consensus-based discussions as clues to develop what Spivak calls “habits of democratic behavior” (2004).

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the constitution of cultural citizenship in contemporary northeastern Thailand through forms of political subjectivity I call villager–citizen and communicative spaces I call village publics. The descriptors “village” and “villager” underscore the enduring social categories through which cultural citizenship have been shaped in particular forms, even as the everyday realities have blurred the boundaries between village and town, rural and urban, Lao and Thai. Villagers’ negotiation with cultural citizenship in Thailand in search for more inclusive and democratic practices is therefore necessarily inflected by these social categories. Despite the concepts’ surface attachment to the local, my deployment of the terms goes against such an understanding. In the time of military dictatorship that considers most Thai citizens to not be ready for civilian, democratic rule, we are all interpellated as politically deficient subjects. In responding or refusing to respond to this hail, there is much to learn from rural villagers.
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