One Failure Triggers More

The abundance of our lives = The abundance of nature

Sutthirat Supaparinya

In the age before colonialism, before the formation of nation states that was inevitably followed by capitalistic transformations, life in the Southeast of Asia was predicated on a reverence of nature as provider of life's necessities (sustenance, shelter, medicine, garments). A belief in animism (or nature itself) has long been the foundation of culture in this region, operating in respect of the fickleness of nature, which rebels against any human attempts to control, societies geared to respond to the change in seasons and its relationship to geography. Such patterns of the Earth forced humans to learn and adapt, or otherwise move on in search of tamer pastures, while those who settled on the land developed behaviors conducive to long-term habitation, necessitating the organization of land and resources, as well as the invention of new materials. As such, the overseeing of natural resource distribution has become paramount for a modernizing society of shared interests, be it those who utilize, cultivate, and/or sustain the abundance of these resources, so that the bounties of nature can be enjoyed in perpetuity. Before industrialization, the adaptation of human behavior was continuously adjusted, passed down from those who lived in civilizations past.



An Aneyoshi tsunami warning tablet in December 2013. Archive image during production of the work Do Not Build Your Homes Below This Point, in Honshu, Iwate Prefecture, Miyako, Omoe Aneyoshi area, Northern Japan. December 2013. Photo by Sutthirat Supaparinya.

With the rise of capitalist interests across the globe as the ultimate goal, these understandings of how our ancestors lived with respect of the cycles of Nature have been forgotten. It is in times of great natural upheaval that those who remain intimate, and live-in symbiosis with nature, who can ultimately survive, for they can rely on that 'forgotten' knowledge to keep themselves protected, as was most recently evoked during the great Australian bushfires in 2019. With the government unable to remedy the situation, indigenous communities spoke up about how to set things right[1]. During the tragic tsunami that devastated Thailand in 2004, the Moken people (inhabitants of a tiny island in the Surin Province) were able to survive unscathed because of their knowing of how to read the sea[2]. In 2011, the 100-year-old carved stone markers (see fig. 1) found in Japan's coastal areas were found to still be accurate indicators of safe distances for housing construction following the devastating tsunami of that year [3 4].

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Asmelash, Leah (2020). "Australia's indigenous people have a solution for the country's bushfires. And it's been around for 50,000 years". CNN World. Retrieved 12 February 2020. Online source: https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/12/world/aboriginal-australia-fire-trnd/index.html

2
ลิมป์, สุชาดา *(2019). "Special Scene : บ้านใหม่ของ "มอแกน" เจ้าสมุทรอันดามัน-จอมปาเกาะสุรินทร์". Sarakadee. Retrieved 24 May 2019. Online source: https://www.sarakadee.com/2019/05/24/special-scene-mogan/*

3
Solomon, Ben (2011). "Warnings Written in Stone". TimesCast. 1.42 minutes in. The New York Times.

4
Fackler, Martin (2011). "Tsunami warnings carved in ancient stone". The New York Times. Retrieved 22 April 2011. Online source: https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/21/world/asia/21stones.html.

Community Water Management System

Successful ancient city settlements often relied on knowledge of geography and land management as important governing factors, as seen in the historical evidence surrounding the establishment of various cities in Northern Thailand. After King Mungrai's successful conquering of the Haripunchai kingdom (1281 A.D.) under the rule of King Yeeba, two major cities were erected - Wiang Chawae and Wiang Kum Kam - both of which faced regular severe flooding. This led to the realization that the Haripunchai Kingdom (the kingdom of today Lamphun Province located in the south of Chiang Mai), which had the shape of a sea conch, had never previously faced such floods. When the time came to erect the third city of Wiang Chiang Mai (1296 A.D.), ancient knowledge from Haripunchai was adapted and applied, sparing Chiang Mai from flooding, while also establishing a system of land management and irrigation. Water from the surrounding rivers was able to be efficiently funneled to farmers in remote areas for use, while the expansion of the Kingdom allowed the practice to spread to every corner of the Northern region between the Mekong and Salween rivers to this day[5].

King Mungrai facilitated equitable management of water through the use of irrigation systems via a set of laws referred to as 'Mungrai's Law' (quoted here to show the importance of irrigation systems which constitute capital offenses):

> *"Section 1. For farmers with adjacent lands: If one were to request help in irrigating their fields, while the other refuses to help, but instead takes water from the first, the first may take the neighbor's life without consequence; if the neighbor is spared, a fine of 1 million chips will be imposed… Any individual who damages or impedes the irrigation channels shall be killed, for the crimes of destroying the kingdom's pantry"*[6]

The laws that governed the creation and use of these irrigation systems facilitated regulations and prevented conflict between common water use, which was implemented through sacred[7] "Channels and Dikes Agreements" amongst farmers living in the same river basin as a general rule. One received a portion of water depending on one's contribution/ volunteering to build the necessary channels and dikes (a system locals refer as "Muang - Fai").



Wang Tan Dike, an ancient stone dike in January 2012. Archive image during production of the work, My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked, synchronized 2 channel videos, 2012. Photo by Sutthirat Supaparinya.

5
สุขคตะ ใจอินทร์, เพ็ญสุภา *(2011). "*ฟื้นเหมืองฝาย"ปัดฝุ่น"กฎหมายมังรายศาสตร์". มติชนสุดสัปดาห์ ฉบับวันศุกร์ที่ *26* สิงหาคม พ.ศ. *2554* ปีที่ *31* ฉบับที่ *1619* หน้า *76*

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ณ นคร, ประเสริฐ (๒๕๑๔). มังรายศาสตร์. *Bangkok, Thailand:* โรงพยาบาลเลียงเซียงจงเจริญ.
นอกจากนั้นยังมีกฎหมายข้ออื่นที่เกี่ยวข้องกับเหมืองฝายอีก กล่าวคือ "มาตรา ๑ ผู้ใดขุดเหมืองผ่านที่นาของท่านโดยไม่บอกให้เจ้าของทราบ ให้ไหม ๓๓,๐๐๐ เบี้ย อีกนัยหนึ่งให้ไหม ๑๑,๐๐๐ เบี้ย", "มาตรา ๑ ผู้ใดอุกอาจยาดฝาย (ซิง? ฝาย) ท่านเสียหาย ฟันหลักฝายมองฝาย? (มอง -โดยปรกติหมายถึงกระเดื่องตำข้าวชนิดที่อาศัยกำลังตำน้ำตำข้าว เรียกว่า มองน้ำ) ของท่านเสีย ให้ไหม ๓๓,๐๐๐ เบี้ย", "มาตรา 1 ควรจัดให้ไพร่มีเวลาผลัดเปลี่ยนกันมาทำงานหลวง 10 วัน กลับไปสร้างเหมืองฝาย ไร่นาสวนเรือกที่ดิน 10 วัน จัดเช่นนี้ถูกตามทำนองคลองธรรมแต่โบราณแล"

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In the old days, people referred to this agreement as a kind of sacred commitment that everyone should respect – ceremonies offering the god of water flowers, pork and traditional dance took place, asking the spirit of the river for their favor in the rebuilding of the dikes each year

Towards the end of 2011/beginning of 2012, during my survey of the sites of various embankments, dikes, and dams on Ping River as part of my work *My grandpa's route has been forever blocked*[8], Thailand was facing a massive flood, which had even reached the capital, Bangkok. At the time, several groups of Chiang Mai locals gathered to protest the government's planned demolishment of ancient dikes (made of rocks and bamboo), which they believed were the cause of flooding. The government thus proposed to replace with a water gate in the south of Chiang Mai. Coincidentally, they also planned to allow sightseeing boats to travel between Chiang Mai and Wiang Kum Kam in the south.

At that time, I could only acknowledge the news without understanding its implications. But my determination to capture any obstacle to the flow of the Ping river, aware of how much it had changed since my grandfather's era, was impossible. It goes without saying that the last barrier shown in the work *My grandpa's route has been forever blocked* is the largest obstacle – the enormous hydroelectric dam. My conviction saw my team and I then witness the survival of the last three stone dikes on this river; the Phaya Kham, Nong Pueng, and Wang Tan dikes. Today however, the Wang Tan Dike has been demolished, replaced with a modern, government-built water gate (see fig.2). The repair of the Nong Pueng Dike has been forbidden, with only the Phaya Kham Dike still functioning as originally intended - a monument to be observed and studied by future generations[9]. Despite desired government intervention, the Northern region of Thailand still houses the highest number of citizen-built dikes and irrigation systems in Thailand.



Water that almost overflows Bhumibol Dam in December 2011. Still from My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked, synchronized 2 channel videos, 2012. Photo by Sutthirat Supaparinya.

In many areas in Northern Thailand, the Royal Irrigation Department replaced the ancient dikes with concrete water gates, building dams for the purpose of water management, flood prevention, and electricity generation. In speaking of dams as mechanisms of flood prevention and irrigation, it is true that in the days of my parents and grandparents (residents of the Ping River), flooding was a common occurrence. Out of necessity, their houses had to be elevated above the ground, and a boat was needed for traveling. But the Bhumibol Dam, that was built to prevent flooding, has not only caused the water levels in the river to drop

8
Supaparinya, Sutthirat (2012). "My Grandpa's Route has been Forever Blocked". Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Tak, Thailand 2012. Online reference: http://atelieror-ange.info/portfolio/my-grandpa

9
ผู้เขียนได้สัมภาษณ์คุณยัง 14 มกราคม ๒๕๖๔ /2021 คนหาปลาผู้เกิดและโตบริเวณฝายหนองผึง มีอายุได้ 60 ปี เล่าว่า ในอดีตฝายทั้งสามถูกสร้างจากไม้ แต่การสร้างด้วยหินเกิดขึ้นเมื่อไม่เกิน 30 ปีมานี ฝายท่าวังตาลมีที่มาจากที่ตรงนั้นเป็นโรงงานผลิตน้ำตาล ส่วนฝั่งในเมืองของฝายหนองผึงเคยเป็นโรงกลั่นสุราของรัฐบาล

dramatically, but has also created inequality in water distribution to the farmers. While some areas received an abundance of water for farming, others were forced to abandon their livelihood, or relocate to better sites. When the great flood occurred in Thailand at the end of 2011/beginning of 2012, I visited the Bhumibol Dam and filmed its waters held to its brim (see fig.3). The waters of the rainy season were overflowing, which gave rise to concerns among tourists and their operators, who regularly used this waterway, of the repercussions if such water pressure would cause this dam to break.

A few weeks after my expedition, the dam was unable to hold the water any longer, causing the already severe-flooded Central region to worsen, ultimately leading to the flooding of Bangkok. The Nam Tha river, which cuts through my parents neighborhood in Lamphun, consequently submerged surrounding villages. Similarly, in January 2022, China's Jinghong dam (on Lancang river in Yunnan) had to reduce its water release in order to undertake repair, changing the lives of people, plant and animal previously practiced at living with seasonal changes in river levels[10]. While in the Southern region of Thailand in the midst of its monsoon season, the hydroelectric Bang Lang Dam in Yala Province had *released* water in order to protect its structure, causing large floods in Yala and Pattani provinces[11]. It became evident that when the management of water is controlled by those who aren't truly affected by it, disaster ensues. Regardless of these dams causing the destruction of the rivers' ecosystems, the government will always maintain these dams are required, and so the lives of the people are held hostage, not to mention how nature becomes the ultimate victim.

Large-scale electricity plants, and the manufacturing, storing, and sourcing of resources from remote areas



Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT): Mae Moh Power Plant and Mae Moh Lignite Mine in December 2012. Still from When Need Moves the Earth, synchronized 3 channel videos, 2014. Photo by Sutthirat Supaparinya.

When the creation and preservation of resources is no longer sufficient for the future, new lands are thought must be sought. In 2012, I had the opportunity to interview a particular engineer, who was in charge

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สยามรัฐออนไลน์ (2021). "ชาวบ้านเดือดร้อนหนัก ลำน้ำสาขาแห้งหลังแม่น้ำโขงลดฮวบเหตุเขื่อนจีนลดการระบายน้ำ "ครูตี๋" จี้เร่งหาทางแก้ไขก่อนคน-แม่น้ำตาย". สยามรัฐออนไลน์. *Retrieved 9 January 2021. Online source: https://siamrath.co.th/n/210636*

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ฮาแว, ไพศาล (2021). "น้ำเข้าท่วมเขตตัวเมืองปัตตานี หลังเขื่อนบางลาง ยะลา ระบายน้ำฉุกเฉินเนื่องจากฝนตกหนัก". *The Standard. Retrieved 10 January 2021. Online source: https://thestandard.co/water-flooded-downtown-pattani/*

of electricity generation in the Mae Moh Electricity Plant in Lampang province. He told me that the lignite (coal) mines in the area will be depleted within the next 15 years. His company had already begun the process of building a new power plant elsewhere, which was soon to become operational in Laos. The interview was conducted as part of the research I did for the work *When Need Moves the Earth* (2014) (see fig.4 and 5), which revealed the generation of electricity in two large power plants built on active geological fault lines, which were hydro and coal based. Originally, I named the work *When Greed Moves the Earth?*, in hindsight I think this original name was far more in keeping with what I wanted to convey to my audience, but at the time I had thought perhaps a little too blunt. The reason I originally wanted to use that title was to emphasise the side-effects suffered by Nature, as a by-product of human greed. As a consequence of my interviews, this dilemma was particularly apparent as the engineers from both power plants admitted that most of the energy created by these plants were not being used in domestic homes, but instead used by large industries like factories and shopping malls[12]. Society today manufactures as many products and appliances as possible. This, coupled with the hoarding of resource and energy, has led to a disastrous assumption of control over Nature, whose previous adaptability to the changing seasons and various geographical shifts is increasingly nullified. Human desire to maintain such massive infrastructure, such as hydro and electric dams, possess consequences. For example, the flooding of the three Southern provinces at the end of 2020, to save the structural integrity of a dam, is given economic and social justification, but at a cost of local ways of life and their living with the cycles of Nature.



Engineer works in a controller room at Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT): Srinagarind Dam in December 2012. Still from When Need Moves the Earth, synchronized 3 channel videos, 2014. Photo by Sutthirat Supaparinya.

Another example of a work where I rushed to record the lives of fishermen, was before the Don Sahong Dam (see fig.6) was completed at Si Phan Don on the Mekong River, in Champasak Province, in the Southern region of Laos. The work was called *A Separation of Sand and Islands* (2018)[13]. This dam has prohibited local fisherman from repairing their 'Li' (a traditional kind of fish trap) for this method of fishing enables the measurement of quantity of fish that they have caught, thus a means

12
Supaparinya, Sutthirat (2014). "When Need Moves the Earth". Lampang, Kanchanaburi, Thailand 2014. Online reference: http://atelierorange.info/portfolio/wnme/[/footnote

13
Supaparinya, Sutthirat (2018). "A Separation of Sand and Islands". Chiang Rai, Thailand and Champasak, Lao PDR 2018.

of ascertaining the health of the river (see fig.7). The location where this dam was built was where fish spawned between the Mekong and the Tonlé Sap river in Cambodia – thus the Don Sahong Dam had significant impact, bringing a great decline in fish numbers.[14] [15] Regrettably, the power produced from this dam has not been significant, and thus this precious spawning ground has been lost with no reward. As new cities are desired, more Chinese people are bringing business to southern Laos and electricity is essential to develop - a social phenomenon found with many dams along the Mekong and its tributary rivers, such as the Mun. The lives of people affected have asked if the energy generated from damming rivers is worth it, when the fertility of the surrounding environments suffers so irrevocably?



Don Sahong Dam in 2017. Still from A Separation of Sand and Islands, synchronized 2 channel videos, 2018. Photo by Sutthirat Supaparinya.

War for Water

When the demand for water rises beyond that which is necessary for daily life, the over-manufacturing of products and the endless hoarding of resources by those who can, as well as the continuous acquiring of more land for industrial purpose, will only become more rapid and severe. This is doubly true if the land acquired is not by locals. The effects that occur with such purchase are not experienced by the owner, thus the warning signs of nature is no longer a language nurtured. Where will our collective ignorance lead us in the end?



A structure of fish trap or 'Li' in 2017. Still from A Separation of Sand and Islands, synchronized 2 channel video, 2018. Photo by Sutthirat Supaparinya.

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นิมปานพยุงวงศ์, เสาวนีย์ (๒๕๕๙/ 2016)."เขื่อนดอนสะโฮง จุดชนวนความขัดแย้งในลุ่มแม่น้ำโขงตอนล่าง". *Thai PBS News. Retrieved 7 March 2016. Online source: https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/250717*

15
คันทาร์, แซลลี (๒๕๖๒/ 2019). "ฉากสุดท้ายของ "หลี" กลางมหานที สีพันดอน". *Sarakadee. Retrieved 2 October 2019. Online source: https://www.sarakadee.com/2019/10/02/last-scene-li/*

Many bodies of water will have once been rich sources of nourishment, but the invasion and destruction of that water for the purposes of the few will only lead to more devastating conflicts, culminating in a war over water. This conflict will be fought not only for water, but will create a social and environmental domino effect. Once bodies of water can no longer act as sources of sustenance, and the fertile soil around these water sources become dry and desolate, it will lead to complications in agriculture, which directly affects the production of food and medicine. The air will carry less moisture, causing the surrounding trees to wither, leading to forest fires and pollution. This unbalanced ecological state will have far reaching effects, and will only spread further until it is no longer sufficient to solve any one issue independently. It will be a war brought about by all of humanity, by our arrogance that we will always triumph over nature, a victory that will push us over the edge towards our inevitable extinction.

Is it not possible for us to come together to preserve our sources of water in ways that include all involved, be they rich or poor, or of varying degrees of influence, all for the purpose of the 'greater good'? The preservation of the environment, as well as the sustainability of our sustenance, should take heed of the ancient spiritual bonds which held mutual respect between those who ruled and those who maintained and shared the systems of living with Nature.

Sutthirat Supaparinya
20 January 2021

Author's Bio

Working across media, Sutthirat Supaparinya (Som)'s artistic practice questions and interprets public information with a focus on the impact of human activities on other humans and the landscape. Through her works, she questions and interprets public information and reveals or questions what's structure affects her/us as a national/ global citizen. Sutthirat seeks to cultivate freedom of expression through her art practice.

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