Collaboration or Appropriation? Development Monks and State Localism in Northeast Thailand

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the changing roles of monks in alternative development in northeast Thailand. Specifically, it is an attempt to understand the relationship among development monks, NGOs, and the state in the context of localist development ideology and practice. When the phrase 'development monk' first entered the Thai lexicon, it was primarily used to refer to monks who engaged in social activism aimed at combatting state-led development policies. Support for these projects often came from localist NGOs, many of whom were anti-government. However, with the creation of the "People's Constitution" and the passage of the National Decentralization Act in the late 1990s, the Thai government began adopting the language and symbols of localism in its own development strategies. I argue that this has worked to crowd out localist NGOs critical of government policy and has created a practical and symbolic 'infrastructure' that serves as the basis for future development activism. This has resulted in the 'channeling' of monastic development practice into state-initiated projects at the exclusion of others. This research is based on fieldwork conducted in Northeast Thailand from 2013 to 2015, consisting of participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews with development monks and their lay collaborators.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to understand the shifting role of the state in the Thai localist development movement, as well as its implications, specifically with regard to the practices of so-called 'development monks' (*phrasong nak phattana* or *phra nak phattana*). I am primarily concerned with answering the following questions: (1) What are the effects of increased government involvement in the creation and implementation of localist development policies - both practical (regarding concrete localist practices) and ideological (regarding localist discourse)? And (2) How have these effects been manifest in the work of development monks? This research is based primarily on field research conducted in northeast Thailand in 2013 and 2014, consisting of participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews with development monks and their lay contributors.

In recent years, the concept of the 'development monk' has become a relatively common term in the Thai lexicon, referring to monks who engage in a wide range of activist practices such as environmental conservation, the promotion of economic growth and sustainability, and drug rehabilitation. I follow Lapthananon in defining this term as monks who "regularly engage in development activity with villagers or the community in a way that affects their living conditions or way of life" (2012a, p. 7, translation mine). For the most part, the practices and ideologies of development monks are rooted in the larger trend of localism in Thai alternative development. Localism is an ideological and practical framework that attempts to protect or reclaim the local power, autonomy, relevance, and identity in the context of globalization. Localist activists, thus, advocate for development that is tailored to local circumstances and the perceived "identity" of the community (Hewison, 1999; Connors, 2001). Most academic accounts of localism focus on what Parnwell (2005, 2007) calls "neolocalism," a development ideology characterized by the attempt to 'undo' modernist development practices in favor of reinstating a way of life that its practitioners believe to have existed in the past. Practitioners of neolocalism have, thus, often found themselves in conflict with the state. However, recent years have seen the rise of trends such as government localism and "networked localism" (Southard, 2014), which attempt to promote localist goals by fostering collaboration between state entities and local activists.

Since the late 1990s, the Thai government has been actively promoting localized development strategies and monastic development projects have frequently come to involve collaboration among monks and government institutions. This, among other factors, has led to large-scale withdrawal of NGO support from localist activist practices, resulting in development monks have relying on government institutions for cooperation in and support for their activities. I argue that this is representative of the Thai government's largely successful attempt to appropriate the practices and symbols of localism, resulting in the reaffirmation of state hegemony and nationalist narratives in Thai alternative development discourse. This is best understood by thinking of state practices and rhetoric in this arena as practical and symbolic "infrastructure" that guides localist practice into specific channels while excluding others, the active role of which in shaping how people think about and practice localism remains largely invisible.

FROM CONTESTATION TO COLLABORATION

Until the late 1990s, monastic development activism in Thailand was primarily focused on the refutation of both specific state-led development policies and the general centralization and marketization of development. The movement emerged in response to the institution of Thailand's First National Economic and Social Development Plan (NESD)[1] in 1961, which was the Thai

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[1]   Website for the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board: http://www.nesdb.go.th

government's attempt to consolidate and standardize development practices across the country (Nishikawa & Noda, 2001). These 'development monks' saw that with the implementation of these policies, rural villages were increasingly faced with social, economic and environmental problems such as the destruction of community forests, villagers' growing financial debt, and the loss of community identity. They viewed these troubles as resulting from neoliberal development strategies that valorized qualities, such as greed, materialism, and secularization, which they considered to be contrary to Buddhist teachings and traditions. (Swearer, 1997).

Development monks have, thus, often found themselves in conflict with the state and the subjects of criticism. These monks, especially those working in the realm of economic environmental activism, were often viewed as engaging in political activity unbefitting of their positions. Although the monks mostly refrained from making explicit political statements (Darlington, 1998), activism aimed at contesting (or promoting) state economic or environmental policy unavoidably takes on a political dimension. Thus, as Darlington writes, much of the criticism leveled at development monks stemmed from the belief that "the Sanga's role should be strictly in the spiritual realm, keeping clear of political and economic issues" (1998, p. 5). In some cases, development monks were subject to retaliation by individuals and state and corporate entities, who felt the monks had overstepped their boundaries. Taylor (1993) gives the example of Phra Prajak, who came up against fierce resistance to his forest conservation efforts (consisting of public campaigns, sit-ins, tree ordinations[2], etc.), including arrest, military intervention, and death threats, ending with him disrobing and leaving the monastic order amid political scandal (Jackson, 1997). The 1980s and 90s saw a rise in interest among activists and NGOs in alternative development (Rigg, 1997) practices rooted in neolocalist ideology. This cumulated in the "Community Culture" [*wattanatham chumchom*] movement, which attempted to promote development rooted in local identity (Nartsupha, 2001; Thongyou, 2004). It then became necessary to ascertain and codify exactly what constituted 'identity' and 'locality.' In this latter endeavor, development monks served as primary referents, due to their sharing similar goals with these extralocal NGOs, while simultaneously being embedded in the local community (Southard, 2011). Thus, there grew widespread collaboration among development monks and localist NGOs, many of who were associated with political opposition to the state and its policies (Darlington, 1998). All of these factors served to create a public perception of development monks as political actors in conflict with the Thai government.

Following the political and economic turmoil of the late 1990s and subsequent government restructuring, however, the relationships among many development monks and state entities shifted.[3]The Tambon (subdistrict) Administration Organizations (TAO) were created in 1996, with the intention of decentralizing state control over rural development (Parnwell, 2005). Following this, the 1997 "People's Constitution" and the 1999 National Decentralization Act further embraced the localist perspective and attempted to incorporate alternative development NGOs and local actors into state development practices (Kelly et al., 2012). During this time, King Bhumipol also publicly advocated for locally oriented sustainable development practice rooted in a Buddhist worldview, further mainstreaming and legitimizing the practices of development monks (Royal Project Development Board, 1997; Renard, 2010). Many development monks began collaborating with government entities directly in their projects and, as a result, NGOs began to withdraw and play

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[2]   This is common practice of Thai development monks working in forest conservation, in which a tree is wrapped in orange robes and the forest given symbolic monastic status in order to prevent deforestation. This practice is described in detail below. For more information see Delcore (2004) and Darlington (2012).

[3]   As Kelly, Yutthaphonphinit, Seubsman and Sleigh (2012) note, the NESD had been moving toward localized, participatory development over the previous decade, but it was at this time that the most far-reaching changes were implemented.

lesser roles in monastic development (Prakhru Phothiwirakhun, personal communication, April 28, 2014). Development monks, for the most part, moved from an arena of conflict with the state to one of collaboration, acting as go-betweens among government entities and villagers. This has had far-reaching implications for the movement, both in terms of the kinds of projects that are implemented and the ideological framework that underlies them.[4]

THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF DEVELOPMENT

I will describe the impact of the government's involvement in development localism using the notion of *infrastructure*. This is a term rarely used to directly describe development attitudes/policies and their repercussions. However, framing them as such represents many of the ways in which these systems function and underscores the mechanisms by which government involvement shapes localist activism, in terms of both discourse and practice. We tend to think of infrastructure as material - roads, sewage systems, and electrical grids. It takes the form of things that exist in the world, which always exist as infrastructure and as passive, near-invisible facilitators of activity. However, as Star and Ruhleder (1996) point out, infrastructure is not so much a 'what' as it is a 'when.' Things are not infrastructure in and of themselves. They only become infrastructure when used as such. Infrastructure, they contend,

> is a fundamentally relational concept. It becomes infrastructure in relation to organized practices. Within a given cultural context, the cook considers the water system a piece of working infrastructure integral to making dinner; for the city planner, it becomes a variable in a complex equation (p. 113).

In other words, the characteristic of 'being infrastructure' is temporal and defined in relation to practice. Things that are commonly perceived as infrastructure cease to be so when not functioning as such. The city planner in the example above treats the water system as the object of engagement and within the context of that interaction, it cannot be considered infrastructure (that is, until she turns on the faucet to get a glass of water). Similarly, that which is not typically thought of as infrastructure can be infrastructure when it acts as such. The Thai state's localist practice and rhetoric falls into this category. It can be described as a kind of "infrastructure" when it is used as a vehicle by which activists (in this case, development monks) talk about and practice localist development and when its active role in this process as is largely invisible or deemed inconsequential. This is easily understood by using the analogy of a road (a typical example of infrastructure) built from point A to point B. It is rarely acted upon directly, and its role as an active force is typically overlooked. However, it plays an active part in channeling movement between the two points. Prior to the construction of the road, people may have taken various different paths to complete the route. Once a road is built, however, it becomes the 'obvious choice,' essentially codifying the path. The Thai government's involvement in localist development acts in a similar way, as described below.

It is important to note that I do not claim that the government localism is equivocal to material infrastructure or infrastructure in the form of information systems and archives in all respects or that it should be considered as infrastructure first and foremost. However, there are times when these policies act as infrastructure and when understanding them as such helps to shed light both on the way such policies work and on their implications. In using this construct to describe the localist

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[4] For a detailed account of the de-politicization of monastic community development see (Southard, 2014, June)

turn in Thai state-led development, I am attempting to emphasize several key elements of the phenomenon that are often overlooked but, nonetheless, significantly influence both ideological and practical aspects of monastic development activism. First of all, it is, generally speaking, constructive. That is, it negates through addition rather than subtraction. Although the Thai government's localist push has the effect of driving out development practices that do not support a nationalist model, it does not do so by contesting those practices outright. Instead, it does so through the creation of new models of localist development to which considerable resources are devoted, thus channeling localist development activism into selected areas that fit the nationalist paradigm. This leads to the second element, which is that it creates a kind of path of least resistance in determining what kinds of projects are implemented by development activists. This is easily understood by referring to the road example described above. Like the road's active role in creating an 'obvious choice' for a path of locomotion, the Thai government's considerable investment in localist projects leads to the creation of 'obvious choices' in localist development practices, which result in the neglect of other configurations. By creating a context where certain types of development activism are heavily supported, those kinds of projects are often implemented by local developers without consideration of the possibility of others. Finally, as I mentioned above, the active role this channeling effect plays in both what types of projects are undertaken/implemented and how localist development is conceived of and talked about is largely invisible.

I divide this infrastructure into two types - practical and symbolic (as opposed to material, e.g., sewage systems and highways). The project of state localism acts as practical infrastructure for development monks when it provides them with convenient, ready-to-use tools for implementing specific kinds of development practices. These tools take the form of resources, funding, networks, and so on, which make choosing some kinds of projects (the kind the government chooses to support) over others more practically and materially feasible. I use the term symbolic infrastructure, on the other hand, in reference to the effect of state-sponsored localism on development ideology and discourse. As I have pointed out, localist ideology is heavily concerned with concepts such as "culture" and "identity," and is an endeavor to define these notions just as much as it is an attempt to defend them. The symbolic infrastructure of state localism, then, is the production of ready-made referents by which local culture and identity can be reified in a way that is consistent with a nationalist narrative.

STATE LOCALISM AS PRACTICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

I will begin by discussing some of the ways in which state localism manifests itself as practical infrastructure and what that means for development monks in Thailand. Since the late 1990s, the government has devoted considerable resources to localist endeavors. In keeping with localist rhetoric, this investment has been largely directed at collaborative projects, with the state actively seeking local actors to promote them and carry them out. They are particularly concerned with enlisting the help of development monks in rural communities. Representatives from government organizations, thus, often work closely with development monks, regularly participating in meetings and advocating for monastic involvement in specific projects. By way of example, one meeting I attended for the development monk network, *Phaendin Tham Phaendin Thong* (November 15, 2014 in Amnat Charoen Province), began with a 90-minute presentation by a representative from the ministry of energy, in which he explained the costs of energy consumption and urged the monks in attendance to engage in projects directed at conserving power in their temples and villages.

This collaborative approach to state-led local development creates a practical infrastructure for localist development. Ostensibly, it is a resource that can be accessed by development practitioners on the ground, rather than an example of top-down policy implementation. However, like material infrastructure, there is the risk of its proclivities (by this I mean its tendency to favor one configuration over another) becoming invisible to those who use it. In this case, it is important to understand that there are specific localist goals to which the state's institutional and material resources are directed, and that this is significant in determining what kinds of projects localist activists choose to pursue. Thus, it is primarily the aspects of localism that align with government interests that end up being realized and translated into action. In other words, government involvement in localist development projects leads to development monks working primarily on those projects that conform to the goals of and narratives presented by the state. This happens in two ways: 1. It crowds out other sources of support (in this case, primarily NGOs) that conflict with this narrative and 2. It makes working in compliance with this narrative the most readily accessible option - the 'obvious choice.'

THE CROWDING OUT OF DEVELOPMENT NGOS

Shigetomi's (2004) "Space Model" of NGO involvement in development is useful in making sense of the general withdrawal of NGOs critical of or unaffiliated with government projects from development monks' activities. He imagines NGOs as working within economic and political "spaces," - the gaps within these spheres that are unmanaged or managed only loosely by the government, the community, or the market. Of these, Shigetomi pays particular attention to the state as a defining agent in the possible range of NGO activity and details three major factors - two in the economic sphere and one in the political - that can hamper NGO activity.

The economic "spaces" in which NGOs operate are the areas concerning the distribution of resources that are not tightly controlled by the state. From the economic perspective, he argues that two major factors currently determine the space in which NGOs work. The first is declining foreign investment as Thailand begins to be perceived as a developed country and the other is an increase in government distribution of resources. While the former serves to shrink the economic space of NGOs, the latter has the effect of both expanding opportunities for NGO collaboration and hampering NGO autonomy. It allows, he writes, for NGOs to "have more space to act as [the government's] agent rather than as critical resource distributers. The group seeking participation in governance may find that it has a wide space as long as it is not critical of the government" (p. 57). In addition to the economic factors, control over the distribution of resources has vast political implications. Thus, as Shigetomi points out, even in a situation in which there is plenty of space in the economic realm, state domination of the political realm can just as effectively restrict the economic activities of NGOs. In the case of Thailand, he argues that the Thaksin regime's relatively aggressive stance regarding political dissidents had the effect of limiting the 'political space' in which the NGOs were able to function.

From the monastic perspective, my informants also speculated that political opposition and increased government involvement (also, to a lesser extent, NGOs moving their activities abroad) as responsible for the decline of NGO support for monks' development projects. Phrakhru Phaisal Visalo (a prominent development monk in Chayaphum Province), for example, cited - in addition to a lack of funding – government resistance as a reason for the reduced role of NGOs in his development work: "During the Thaksin administration there were policies put into place that restricted the freedom of NGOs that did not agree with the government, especially those that work with rural communities" (personal communication, December 18, 2014). The reason the majority of my development monk informants cited, however, was the presence of government support.

Phrakhru Sangkhrakchatwuti of Ubon Ratchathani province, who has worked primarily on projects promoting economic self-sufficiency and environmental conservation, talks about NGO involvement in his work this way:

> Presently NGOs have a much lesser role [in monastic development]. It is not like it was in the past…we would collaborate with NGOs, for example, in ordaining forests, growing trees, and reviving forests…now it is the role of the government to take care of the forests and try to restore them (personal communication, July 29, 2013).

Phrakhru Phothiwirakhun attributes this decline in NGO support as being due to the creation of the TAO (Tambon Administration Organization) and its involvement in local development activities. "When the state is close by," he says, "they come in and have a role and this results in NGOs having less of a role in working with monks. However, there are still some left [that do]" (personal communication, April 25, 2014). As examples, he gave the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (*Samnakngan khong Thun Sanap Sanun Kan Sangsoem Sukhaphap*) and the Stop Drink Network (*Samnakngaan Khrueakhai Onggon Ngod Lao*), both of which are actually government organizations (although they are structured like NGOs) that campaign against drinking, smoking, and drugs. The NGOs and civil activist organizations I did encounter during my fieldwork were all supported to a large extent by these GOs, which seemed to be involved in every dimension of contemporary monastic development work. According to my informants, it was primarily after 2006-2007 that these organizations became especially important in defining the development landscape. Ungpakorn (2009) argues that ill-will on the part of localist NGOs garnered by Thaksin's combative rural development policies had led many of these organizations to side with the conservative royalists (yellow shirts) in the 2006 protests and subsequently support the military during and following the ensuing coup. Thus, many of the NGOs that had not been crowded out of localist development work entirely found themselves working with the military government on projects largely funded by organizations such as the THPF. The result was a blurring of the lines between GNGOs and civil society, making it nearly impossible at times to distinguish between the two.

Government involvement in and the allocation of state resources to localist development projects have effectively shrunk the "economic space" within which NGOs work, both crowding them out (especially during the Thaksin administration) and 'absorbing' them (particularly post-2006). In one sense, this can be interpreted as a victory for the localist movement, and the development monks with whom I have spoken have often characterized it as such. The state is devoting more resources to projects that are - at least ostensibly – in line with localist ideology. However, consistent with the idea of infrastructure, we must understand this provision of resources as channeling development activism into specific kinds of projects, while necessarily excluding others. It is, thus, crucial that we turn a critical eye to the kinds of practices being implemented (or not implemented) and the implications of that, both symbolic and concrete.

PRACTICAL INFRASTRUCTURE AS MANIFEST IN THE PRACTICES OF DEVELOPMENT MONKS

The channeling of localist development practice into state-sanctioned activities is evident in the amount of focus spent on government-sponsored projects since this shift took place. As Lapthananon (2012b) notes, after 1997, the government became increasingly involved in community development and GOs began urging development monks in the northeast to participate in state-led endeavors, such as the OTOP (One Tambon, One Product) project. In 2003, after Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra announced the Thai government's widely criticized [5] "war on drugs,"

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[5]   For example, see Phongpaichit & Baker, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2008

development monks were "strongly encouraged to contribute their efforts to the rehabilitation campaign" (2012b, p. 178). This is the current focus of one of the largest development monk networks in Northeast Thailand (also called the Isaan area), *Phaendin Tham Phaendin Thong* [Land of Dhamma, Land of Gold], which used to be involved in a much wider range of social and economic development activities. In the late 1990s, however the project narrowed its scope to focus on campaigns to convince villagers to refrain from *abayamuk* - or vices (according to Buddhist principles) such as drinking, drugs and gambling, leading it to become much like the government program of the same name (briefly discussed below). This is not to say that the monks are reluctantly complying with state programs. The development monks with whom I spoke were enthusiastic about and expressed passion for the projects, although many also voiced disappointment at the reduction in scope. However, without the help of NGOs and other activists, the monks must rely on state support, which means engaging in projects that the government is willing to fund. As Phrakhru Phothiwirakhun phrases it:

> Currently, I feel like there is a lot of cooperation between development monks and politics [the government]. This is because if politicians come in and support us it allows us to do development work longer…there need to be organizations that come in and help. But if no politicians help us, the temples have to fund themselves, which we can do, but not continuously (personal communication, February 15, 2014).

The OTOP program is another example of how state-led localist policies serve as practical infrastructure, channeling future development projects through the preferred narrative of the national government. The project began in 2001 under the Thaksin administration as a way for villagers to earn money selling local artisanal products through national and international markets. Local products selected to be part of the project are emblazoned with the OTOP logo and are sold in OTOP shops and at fairs across the country. The project was adapted from the Japanese OVOP (One Village One Product), with a key difference being that the Thai government plays a much larger role in the selection and development of products than does its Japanese counterpart (Kurokawa, 2009). A national committee selects OTOP "Product Champions" [*kaan khad saan soodyod* - OPC] and gives products a 1-5 star rating based on export potential, product quality and consistency, production standards, and the product's "history" (Prayukvong 2007).

The amount of money and resources the government has devoted to promoting and implementing this program make it an attractive option for development monks looking to improve economic circumstances in their villages. Thus, many monks in the Isaan area have begun working directly with OTOP as part of their community development strategies. Phrakhru Phothithamkhosit of Udon Thani province, for example, works closely with the local municipal government in order to produce goods such as *plaraa* (fermented fish paste) and decorative tissue box covers to sell through the program. One reason he has chosen to participate in OTOP is that it offers villagers access to national and international markets to sell their handicrafts.

> Recently our community has become quite famous. We produce *plaraa* that gets 4-5 stars. [Representatives from] Korea and Japan come and inspect the sanitation [of the production process] every three months. We send it to other provinces and other countries as well. We also ship it to Bangkok, where it is sold at *Muang Thong*[6] (Personal Communication, December 6, 2014)

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[6]   *Muang Thong* is the place in which the largest OTOP events are held, gathering products from around the country for sale.

The OTOP program has created an easily accessible sales and promotion network and a ready-made model for economic development projects in rural communities. For development monks attempting to raise standards of living in their villages, OTOP is useful, convenient, and precludes the necessity to devise other methods, even if other methods may be less problematic or more compatible with the goals of localism. It functions as a kind of infrastructure for the practice of localism, which - as discussed above - becomes the 'obvious choice' for future economic development projects and representative of localist development. What is not readily apparent is that it necessarily excludes other projects and other products that may not fit with the narrative the state is attempting to produce. As Michael Herzfeld noted in a lecture given at Chiang Mai University, rather than representing the local communities, themselves, the goods sold at OTOP shops and fairs represent "the products that people are willing to sell under the government niches; and the risk, of course, is that these products will eventually become dominant because of the huge amount of government money being put behind the project" (personal communication, August 19, 2014).

Lack of funding, stricter constraints on expression of political dissension, and increased government resources being allocated to local development have crowded out or absorbed the localist NGOs and activists who had provided development monks support in the past. This served to bolster monastic involvement in state-initiated development work, such as OTOP and campaigns for "moral" reform. It has created a practical infrastructure - consisting of funding, networks (both lay and monastic) for project planning and implementation, and knowledge and promotional resources - that serves as the basis for future development practices. It has the effect of directing the practical expression of localist development ideology through specific channels, at the exclusion of others, the symbolic implications of which I will discuss below.

SYMBOLIC INFRASTRUCTURE AND STATE CONTROL OF LOCALIST IDEOLOGY

Although Shigetomi's account of economic and political spaces that help define the limits of NGO development activism is useful, it is incomplete. There is also a third realm that greatly influences the power of NGOs to exercise power, that of meaning or symbolism. Thai Development NGOs in the 1980s and 1990s did not merely advocate for the implementation specific kinds of development activities, but also for a reimagined development ideology. This is most evident in the creation of "community culture" in the early 1990s, which, at the time, served to define the NGO-led alternative development movement in Thailand.

The government's increased attention to localism in their statements and policies gives the state greater control over the meaning and expression of localist ideology. This not to say that the state's embrace of certain aspects of localism is not genuine or does not represent the traditional goals of localist NGOs and other activists. What it does, however, is give the state considerable influence in the struggle to define what the movement means and does not mean, how certain key elements of the movement - such as local "identity" and "culture" - are articulated. The starting point in localist discourse has been relocated from the strategies and collective practices of (often anti-government) NGOs and activists to government documents and royal proclamations, creating what I have called above a "symbolic infrastructure" for localist development. It is a discursive framework through which the central referents of localist development ideology - namely local identity and culture - are defined and situated in relation to the nation-state in future discourse.

With the re-appropriation of localist development practice and ideology comes the power to help define the local community itself, as well as its symbolic relationship to the state. This was most evident in the state-led development policies before the late 1990s that were contested by development monks and alternative development activists (such as the replacement of rural forests

with monoculture Eucalyptus plantations), in which rural development often meant the production of the raw materials necessary for urban growth. These practices clearly placed rural communities in a position ancillary to the central mechanisms of the state. However, as Hirsch (2002) points out, even the seemingly uncontroversial government-led rural development projects of the 1980s and 90s served as "an attempt to impose a rural identity that at once incorporates Thainess and positions the village within the larger entity" (p. 269). He gives several examples of government projects that he claims serve this purpose. One is the *Phaendin Tham Phaendin Thong* project mentioned above, which he says urged villagers to comport themselves in a way that reflects an idealized (and unified) sense of 'Thai' morality. Hirsch also points to the imposition of physical representations of village identity, such as the "bounding" of the village through fencing and centralized infrastructure and to events such as village competitions, which - alluding to Foucault - he refers to as "disciplinary instruments" (p. 267). Even after the turn toward alternative development strategies and localization on which the late 1990s reforms and the 8th National Economic and Social Development Plan focused, imposition of a nationalist local identity and reaffirmation of state hegemony over the village remain defining features of state-led development initiatives. In fact, it is precisely the projects mentioned above and those like them that characterize the recent "localist" policies of the Thai state, and which have subsequently become the core of many development monks' practices.

One of the driving ideological forces in both state and monastic development activism today is the philosophy of *setthakhit pho phiang*, or 'sufficiency economy.' This is an idea that began gaining traction in localist development practice when, in response to the 1997 financial crisis, King Bhumipol called for the adoption economic policy that emphasized moderation and sustainability over rapid growth and overconsumption. Hoping that such an approach could shield the Thai economy from market fluctuations and buffer against another economic bust, the philosophy was included as a guiding principle in the 8th through 11th national economic and social development plans. Due in large part to relentless promotional campaigns sufficiency economy has subsequently entered the mainstream Thai development lexicon and is one of the ideological terms I encountered most frequently in my interviews with practicing development monks. Phra S, a monk working to protest a goldmine in Loei province, for example, employed this notion as a way of criticizing the kind of corporate ideology he sees as leading to the mine's deleterious effects on local well-being.

> Corporations do not have words like *phaen din tham phaen din thong* or *setthakhit pho phiang* in their hearts at all. Companies have a lot of capital in order to get more profit. This is because they only exist for profit, to make as much of it as possible. This is not compatible with *setthakhit pho phiang* (personal communication, September 12, 2013).

The development monk network, *Phaen Din Tham Phaen Din Thong* also cites sufficiency economy as being one of the core tenets of their development ideology. The group states as one of their primary goals "to introduce the philosophy of sufficiency economy as a driving force toward concrete results in all areas around the country."[7] Part of what has made this such an attractive referent for various actors is its malleability. The ideology of sufficiency economy as originally proposed by King Bhumibol was merely a call for change in Thai citizens' economic attitudes and did not contain any specific policy recommendations. The vagueness of the language and the wide range of interpretations as to how sufficiency economy philosophy is implemented led Kevin Hewison to comment, "SE is so broadly defined that it really is whatever one wants it to be" (2008, p. 214). It

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[7] From a 2007 PowerPoint presentation on Phaen Din Tham Phaen Din Thong ideology given to me by Phrakhru Phothiwirakhun (the group's secretary).

was, thus, the academics, policy makers, and activists who championed the cause in the following years who were eventually responsible for for something like codification of the philosophy (Ivarsson & Isager, 2010). Still, it serves as less of a guide for economic policy decisions and more of a metric by which one's positions can be legitimized, one's ideological opponents' positions can be de-legitimized, and responsibility for economic problems are placed on the shoulders of individual citizens.

It should come as no surprise, then, that while the Thaksin administration had paid little attention to the philosophy of sufficiency economy in terms of the creation and execution of rural development policies, the 2006 coup saw a renewed push for large-scale implementation of this ideology. The military government promoted it as the backbone of their economic philosophy, going as far as to include it in the 2007 constitution. This had the effect of creating a kind of symbolic shorthand through which the military government could assert their legitimacy by tying their efforts to religion and the monarchy. It also gave them a vehicle of criticism through which they could delegitimize the policies of the democratically elected government they had replaced. Krittian (2010) argues that the post-coup government's focus on advancing the ideology of sufficiency economy was primarily an attempt to refute 'Thaksinomics' in favor of a royalist ideology. Thaksin's localist development policies were, as Walker puts it, "repainted" (2010, p. 242) as endeavors aimed at sufficiency economy, with emphasis on their moral and religious connotations. As walker writes, "The primary objective of the sufficiency economy campaign was to publicly construct a moral connection between royal virtue, the sufficiency economy philosophy and the new political regime in which electoral power was to be constrained" (2010, p. 261).

The aftermath of the 2014 coup saw a similar emphasis on village-level moral reform, most notably with the *moo ban raksa sin ha* (Villages that Adhere to the Five Moral Precepts) campaign. Headed by the NCPO[8], The program encourages villagers to make vows to adhere to the five Buddhist moral precepts to be obeyed by the Buddhist laity[9]. The ideology driving the program attributes many of society's woes, including political unrest, to the lack of adherence to these precepts[10] at the village/community level.[11] Similar to the push for sufficiency economy, this campaign has had the effect of associating the military government with unquestionable moral legitimacy and shaping the localist discourse in a way that is in their favor.

This is not to say that there have been no other attempts by outside entities to define local identity. It has been argued, for example, that this was an essential aspect to the "Community Culture" school of thought so popular among NGOs and other actors in the alternative development movement in the 1990s (Southard, 2011). The crux of this movement was the idea that each "community has its own culture" (Nartsupha 1991, p. 119), separate from that of the state. Thus, it favored the implementation of development strategies congruous with local culture, as opposed to centralized "one size fits all" development practices and policies (Thongyou, 2004). However, developing and advocating for these kinds of strategies required the creation of what Wilk (1995) refers to as a "structure of common difference" (p. 118) - guidelines that determine what constitutes legitimate

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[8]   The National Council for Peace and Order - the junta that has been ruling Thailand since the 2014 coup.

[9]   These consist of prohibitions against killing, stealing, adultery, lying, and taking intoxicating substances.

[10] See "*Khumu Gandamnoen Gnan Khrongkan Sang Khwambrongdong Samanchon Laktham Thang Phra Phuttasasana'Moo Ban Raksa Sil Ha*" (Manual for Implementing a Structure for Harmony Through the Buddhist Morals of "Villages that Adhere to the Five Moral Principles"), distributed by the National Office of Buddhism. Available at https://www.sila5.com.

[11] It is important to note that it is primarily rural villagers who have been the most vociferous opponents of the military coup.

cultural expression by which local culture can be objectified as a bounded entity (see Cohn, 1987). In other words, it was within the purview of these NGOs and academics to decide exactly what counted as 'local culture' or 'local identity.' In this case, because Community Culture was a movement contesting state development policies, local culture and identity were to be defined in contrast to national culture and identity. It can be argued that, in many ways, the success of the movement led to its ultimate downfall.   As Shigetomi (2004) points out, the aftermath of the 1990s' political upheaval saw a greater amount of participation from these NGOs, academics and other sectors civil society in government development strategies and policy-making. The result was a convergence of Community Culture and state local development ideology - one that resembled the latter more than the former, at least with regard to how local culture was to be understood and articulated.

Local culture was once again to be identified with the state. State-brand localism has come to take the place of that of the anti-government NGOs and activists of the Community Culture movement. This kind of localism seeks to define local identity as both part and representative of a larger national culture. In the case of the practices of development monks, this can be seen in both the adoption of state-initiated local development projects, such as OTOP, and the re-appropriation by the state of the symbolic meaning of traditional monastic development activities, such as tree ordinations. The former represents the local primarily as part of a hierarchy and as one part of a national whole, whereas the latter attempts to portray the local as synecdoche - a small-scale representation of nation identity.

LOCALIST DISCOURSE EXPRESSED THROUGH OTOP

The government's OTOP program is one such example of the symbolic infrastructure of state-led localism. Above, I described how OTOP forms a practical infrastructure that serves as a convenient vehicle for the implementation of localist development projects. More important than that, however, is the way in which it serves as a referent by which concepts central to localist ideology, such as local culture and identity, can be expressed and legitimated. As I argue below, this representation is controlled at all levels by state entities and serves to ratify a nationalist narrative of local authenticity - treating local communities as "pieces" that fit together to form the nation as a whole.

In order to understand this, it is important to recognize that the OTOP label, itself, is a meaningful symbol that increases a product's value. As Phra Phothitamkosit told me, "If the product is just the tissue box [without the OTOP label], there are many of those at the market and many shops that sell them. But if we make them OTOP products, the [sales] price will go up" (Personal Communication, December 6, 2014). This is not merely because the OTOP label is seen as a mark of *quality*. If that were the case, the OTOP brand would be no different from that of any well-known corporation producing similar products - the very thing from which OTOP attempts to distinguish itself. Instead, these products command a higher premium primarily because the OTOP brand and its star rating represent *authenticity.* They are vehicles through which the products being sold are deemed authentically local - that is, consistent with village culture and identity. However we must examine how that authenticity is produced. Who is it that decides what is an authentic representation of village culture, what kinds/aspects of village culture are presented, and what real-world implications do such representations have?

Ritruechai, Ritruechai, Nuchprayoon, and Peralta (2008) have described the management as being simultaneously top-down and bottom-up. Goals and strategies of the program are handed down from the National or Central Committee, chaired by the deputy prime minister, and passed down through Provincial and District Committees to the Tambon (subdistrict) Committee, where they are implemented.   Moving in the other direction, products are selected for consideration at the level of

the Tambon Committees and passed up through the District and Provincial Committees, where the selections are narrowed down, and then to the National Committee, where they are ultimately rated and judged as acceptable or unacceptable.

Upon reading this description, three things become apparent. The first is that every level of the selection and "authentication" process is controlled by the state. It is exclusively government entities who decide which products best represent local communities' cultural identities. Secondly, the process reaffirms a hierarchical model of power in which villagers are managed by a local group, which, in turn, is managed by a higher-level group and so on, until it reaches the level of the state. Even what Ritruechai et al call the "bottom up" aspect of the selection process can be described as such only in terms of chronology. The power to select products and craft policy – the power to "authenticate" - is greater at successively higher, less local, levels of the chain. The third thing that is clear is that this hierarchical structure mirrors the administrative structure the government, itself. Village and Tambon authority is subservient to provincial authority, which, in turn is under that of the national government. Each of the local branches of administration contributes their product, and these products are managed, selected, grouped together at the national level, where they will be packaged and presented as a representation of the national identity as a whole.

Herzfeld has called this process a symbolic "mapping" of the country that is physically portrayed in OTOP shops in Bangkok and elsewhere. Each part of the country is represented an object, each of which represents a part of a unified exhibit, depicting "a kind of factory in which each segment will produce its own specific product" (personal communication, August 19, 2014). The aspects of local identity being promoted by the OTOP program are those that present the local village as a functioning part of (and subsumed under) a larger national identity. Local authenticity is represented through objects as that which contributes to *Thai* authenticity. The village is the *Thai* village and the products they produce through OTOP are carefully cultivated in order to present a "map" of Thailand to be presented both domestically and internationally. It is a bureaucratic framework and mode of representation that also serves as system of classification - classifying communities as villages as forming the base of a pyramid, at the apex of which is the nation-state. The consequences of this are not merely academic. As Bower and Star write, "even when people take classifications to be purely mental, or purely formal, they *also* mold their behavior to fit those conceptions" (1999, p. 53). The power relationships inherent in OTOP's representations of locality form a symbolic infrastructure for the project of localism and become the referents that help shape localist development practices (as well as being translated into other arenas).

THE CO-OPTING OF THE TREE ORDINATION

The widespread adoption and royal sanctioning of the 'tree ordination' ritual (*buad paa*) is illustrative of the Thai state's usurpation of the symbolic practices of localism. The tree ordination ritual was reportedly first conducted by Phrakhru Manas Nathipithak in Phayao Province in an attempt to put an end to logging activity near his village. According to Isager and Ivarsson (2002), after years of droughts, which the villagers associated with the heavy logging, and several failed attempts to halt the practice through petitions and road blockades, he decided to take a religious approach to the problem. He held a ceremony, wrapping a tree in saffron robes, symbolically 'ordaining' the forest. Any subsequent attempt to harm the forest, through logging or other means would then be thought to confer religious demerit (*brap*) onto the practitioners. This practice was picked up by other monks in the area, and spread throughout the region, becoming a popular symbolic tool for resisting the encroachment of nonlocal forces into local forests and for asserting local peoples' rights to land management.

However, the meaning of the ritual has changed over time and it has - at least in part - become a powerful tool for reinforcing local forest-dwelling communities' hierarchal relationship to the state. In her book, *The Ordination of a Tree*, Susan Darlington (2012) traces the shift in the symbolic meaning of tree ordination in the Thai mainstream from a small-scale act of protest against encroachment into local forests to state-sponsored events that serve to reaffirm nationalist ideology and the nation as primary warden of local natural resources. She writes that

> [rather] than pushing people to question modern consumerist values as causes of environmental destruction and human suffering, such rituals are increasingly used to support national agendas and to undermine the power of the rural people for whom environmental monks aim to help (p. 12).

This shift from protest to politicking began in the late 1990's, when the Thai government instigated a series of reforms emphasizing the decentralization of state control over rural development (Parnwell, 2005). King Bhumipol publicly advocated for locally oriented sustainable development practice rooted in a Buddhist worldview (Royal Project Development Board, 1997; Renard, 2010) and in 1997, asked that fifty million trees to be ordained in honor of the 50th anniversary of his accession to the throne. This marked a critical moment, in which the tree ordination ritual transformed form of resistance against state policies and practices to what Tannenbaum refers to as "part of the national political ritual" (2000, p. 122). Tannenbaum, writing about one such ordination in a community of ethnic minorities in northwestern Thailand, argues for a critical interpretation of this state/royal involvement and support. He contends that while the invocation of the monarchy and the presence of state officials lent legitimacy to the community's cause and gave them direct access to high-level officials, it also served to reinforce the hierarchical relationship between the state and the local community.

Isager and Iversson (2002) make a similar argument with regard to a tree ordination in the Northern village of Ban Yang Mae Malo, a primarily Christian Baptist community made of ethnic Karen. Amid the Royal Forestry Department (RFD)'s tightening of restrictions on activities within protected areas, people in the community, located within the Doi Ithanon National Park, were afraid that they would be forced out of the area. In addition, the lowland villages in the area had recently been experiencing frequent droughts, for which many blamed the 'forest eating' minority groups who dwelled on the mountain. In response, the villagers collaborated with the Northern Farmer's Network (NFN), an NGO concerned with conflicts between farmers and the RFD over land rights, to hold a tree ordination ceremony in the name of the king in collaboration with the Department for Environmental Quality Promotion. Isager and Iversson draw upon Vandergeest and Peluso's (1995) concept of 'territorialization' - in which the state uses systems of classification of the environment in order to control natural resources[12] - and label this ritual an attempt at 'counter-territorialization.' However, it is one that, in fact, affirms the act of territorialization, itself. By demarcating swaths of forest for ordination, they were in effect, engaging and legitimizing the process. They write,

> "Counter-territorialization" becomes in fact part of the overall process of territorialization, but with the important difference that the tree ordination ceremony forms part of a strategy to contest the classifications of the territory built into the Thai state's mode of territorialization (2002, p. 414).

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[12] See (Laungaramsri, 2002) for a detailed account of how government-led forest conservation in Thailand, specifically the national park system, has served to assert state hegemony over local minority populations through classification.

Furthermore, they argue that the inclusion of representatives of the state, the use of a Buddhist ritual, and the invocation of the monarchy[13] was an assertion of the villagers' identities as essentially "Thai." Despite this, and in contrast to Tannenbaum, Isager and Iversson ascribe primary agency to the villagers who chose to conduct the ritual, describing it as a strategic adoption of nationalist symbols and declarations in order to maintain their power and relevance amidst centralization and nonlocal intervention.

The meaning of the tree ordination has, thus, shifted considerably. It has gone from being a symbolic ritual intended to stem encroachment into forests from non-local sources to an attempt to legitimize the local use of land and resources in the face of state regulations through appeal to nationalist values and symbols. According to this model, it is the local people who must defend themselves against accusations of encroachment (upon *national* resources) and the tree ordination is an affirmation of that relationship. While still an invocation of local peoples' rights to land use, the tree ordination has become, in many cases, a way in which power over the local landscape is symbolically handed to the state. It is less an assertion of local autonomy with regard to resource allocation than it is a plea for permission for access to the resources of the nation-state.

The OTOP program and the reimagined tree ordination ceremony both reflect and constitute the state-oriented symbolic infrastructure of localist ideology. OTOP is a representation through which local communities are 'mapped' onto of the whole, placed in a national hierarchy, and represented as a single piece of a larger national identity. Whereas the state's re-appropriation of the tree ordination portrays local identity as representative of a more fundamental national identity and the local community as a representation of the nation, itself. These are not merely practices reflecting a specific kind of ideology, but a symbolic infrastructure - conduits through which future "common-sense" conceptions of local culture and identity are constructed and articulated.

CONCLUSION

Since the implementation of the First National Social and Economic Development Plan and other attempts to centralize and homogenize development practices in Thailand, the Thai government has long been in conflict with localist development activists, who advocate for a bottom-up approach that takes community culture and identity into consideration. However, the state's ostensive focus on "bottom-up" development policies since the late 1990s has greatly altered this dynamic. Rather than directly opposing dissident forms of localist activism, the government reasserts hegemony over the local and crowds out dissenting views by coopting the symbols and practices of the localist movement. In doing so, it gains direct control over how those symbols and practices that are at the heart of that ideology are understood and articulated. As Roseberry (1996) writes, "What hegemony constructs … is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about and acting upon social orders characterized by domination" (P. 80). The localist development policies produced and implemented by the Thai government serve as a future-oriented framework, - that is, an infrastructure - for shaping understanding of the local and its relationship to the nation-state. In reframing the state's mobilization of resources toward localist development endeavors as the creation of practical and symbolic infrastructure, we are able to render as visible the active role it plays in guiding both the practical and discursive expressions of localism into channels that conform to a nationalist narrative. This is evident in the practices of development monks, which have shifted from those that contest centralized power and stress local

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[13]   Throughout the ritual, they described themselves as guardians of the forest in the name of the King.

autonomy to those that reflect and reproduce the "structures of common difference" consistent with state hegemony.

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