

## CHAPTER 5

### Participation and Leadership

This chapter will examine Mae Kampong in terms of participation and leadership. The reality and problems Mae Kampong is currently facing in terms of participation and leadership will be main points here. This chapter also examines the Thai people's individual mentality, especially in terms of individual relationship with family, community, society, and authority such as the government. In addition, this chapter discusses Thailand's local administrative system and the role of village headman as a leader under the system. After discussing these points, it will mention the culture of Mieng production as a possible tool to enhance the villagers' spontaneity in decision-making process of the village.

#### 5.1 Social Milieu in Thai Rural Communities

Thai rural peasant communities are often illustrated as extremely passive entities that are not active in playing a part in decision-making in the community administration and also national politics. In fact, the data was collected nearly half a century ago though, a survey of Phillips (1966) carried out Bang Chan village shows that 86 per cent of the common villagers think that when "a big man" with authority (*phuu jinjaj*) tells them to do something, they feel they have to do it no matter what while no more than 12 per cent of the people feel it is conditional, depending on the case (Phillips 1966: 144). By the same token, when it comes to politics, Thai peasants tend to regard the government as a benevolent, strong, and wise but indulgent father and themselves as children (Phillips and Wilson 1966, cited in Rubin 1976: 293). This phenomenon has been approached by a number of sociologists and anthropologists to explain the mechanism behind it. Here, it is worth considering the prevalent notion the Thai rural peasants generally have toward the authority, both in the realms of local communities and nationwide politics. This narrative entails a broad range of social dimensions including a religion, history, education, and economy.

The relationship between Thai rural communities and the state can be explained by an inferior-superior relation. In the inferior-superior relation, superior, or a big person (*phuujaaj*) has to show kindness (*metta*) and passion to help the subordinate in difficulty (*karuna*) towards inferior, or a small person (*phuunooj*) (Rubin 1976: 296-297); and in return, *phuunooj* has to show *kreng*, translated as to feel awe, humbleness or self-effacement, which leads to the situation in which *phuunooj* cannot dare to talk back to *phuujaaj* or disagree with him (Rubin 1976: 300). For this, Thai villagers often have feelings of smallness about themselves and inability to initiate any community development projects. It also leads to villagers' dependence upon officials for leadership and innovation for community development.

In Thailand, Buddhism is an indispensable part of the nation state and essentially associated with the King and the royal family. The long-lasting situation of the royal patronage between Buddhism and kingship has made the tendency of the Thai people looking at the royal family, the government, Buddhism temples, and any other forms of authority as absolutely righteous bodies which take good care of them in any situations. Because King is the creator of the nation, the savior in the wartime for independence, and the exemplary religious leader; without King, Thai people cannot maintain their identity as a national subject, the nation will lose stability and cannot exist, and also religion will be abandoned (Mulder 1997: 43). For this, most Thai people believe that as long as the King exists for the nation, they are protected by him and nothing can go wrong with his presence (Mulder 1997: 315). Thus, with the virtue of people's tractability with authority, it is natural for one to think that this absolute reliance on the King extends to the prevalent acceptance of the wisdom of the monks, government officials, sub-district chiefs (*kamnan*), and village headmen (*phu yai ban*). This situates people in the long-lasting dependent relationship of deference and obligation, putting them in need of moral guidance of authority such as the King, officials, monks, teachers, and elders.

The notion of hierarchy among the inferior and the superior is ingrained in Thai society so deeply that one can see it even in the experience in an individual family. Children in Thailand must experience this fact in the course of their pathways to maturity. In fact, in the second grade in Thai schools, it is taught that family members are unequal, mainly because of their ages, and that each family member is supposed to act towards another

according to their mutually unequal positions (Mulder 1997: 33). For this, children in Thailand are expected to reciprocate their parents who take care of and love them by helping in the tasks around house or family business. This understanding of hierarchy, unequal position, and reciprocation among individual family can be the very basis of the Thai community and society in which people look up to authority and show their passive deference to it.

Also, since it is taught at schools that all individuals must act without defiance towards other family members, and family is a minimum unit of a group of people, comprising a bigger system, society, it is important for them to stick to moral principles. Moral principles in Thailand the most importantly refer to the individual's docility and tractability be it towards family members, teachers, community leaders, monks, or government officials. Thus, the hierarchical and obliging system within individual family is enlarged to encompass the three basic institutions, namely Nation, Religion, and King, leading to the public world to become personalized and subjected to the same moral principles as children in families who must follow in a hierarchically structured familial world (Mulder 1997: 36). In this way, Thai people come to think highly of obedience to their families, their schools, their communities, and the nation-state.

Therefore, it can be said that since all Thai people were born as subjects under the King, they are bound with the obligation and gratefulness with the King and any form of authority that stems from him. Here, inequality and social hierarchy become not only natural but also moral, without the ring of any negative connotations such as coercive or paternal. In this set of thoughts, as long as people act tractably in the hierarchy, society can be in harmony, and if there is someone who breaks it, it will become a danger to the society. Lest that situation happens, the morality as a Thai subject is taught and it has to get drilled in to children in a family, and later at a school. Indeed, the schools in Thailand, by equating the nation with a family, function as a state apparatus to train the student for subjectship, rather than for citizenship (Mulder 1997: 313). In this way, there is an understanding among the Thais that the country is one family, one nation, and one social unit that is functionally integrated, and differences are nothing more than complementary; and therefore, principles of democracy that is to deal with the fact that

people have conflicting ideas and interests with each other cannot be truly appreciated (Mulder 1997: 312).

Individual self-awareness is also considered as one of the causes as to why Thai peasants are passive in community decision-making and politics. Many researchers agreed on that Thais are psychologically quite self-sufficient. For example, Bunnag (1976) ascribes this set of minds of the Thais to the fact that they were traditionally not in need of working hard and depending much on others because of the country's natural abundance, which can be exemplified by the Thai phrase, *nai nam mi pla nai na mi khao* (there's fish in the water, there's rice in the fields) (Bunnag 1976: 152-153). In this way, Thai villagers do not need to prove their personal value as a human towards others or to validate their sense of self-esteem, which can lead to acts of unabashed self-seeking and ultimately dependence on no one (Phillips 1966: 167). This point overlaps the notion of so called "loosely structured social system", which is often mentioned by scholars who particularly study about Thai social system. The core concept of loose structure is, according to the forerunner of the concept, Embree (1939) that in the loosely structured social system such as that of Thailand, "considerable variation in individual behaviors is sanctioned" whereas this is not the case in tightly structured society such as Japan (Embree 1939, cited in Piker 1969: 61).

Although it is perhaps oversimplifying to think that all the Thai peasants act based on the religious principles and individual philosophy mentioned above, those ideas play a large part in constructing the self-awareness of the social roles the Thai peasants acknowledge themselves to have. The individual psychology shared among Thai villagers, coupled with the certain principles of normative Buddhism thoughts, makes a social milieu in which they are inactive in playing a part in government and community decision-making and the selection of the members in authority. The psychological self-positioning of the people in social settings, in addition to the Buddhist thoughts such as awe (*kreng*) mentioned above, makes the villagers keep away from authority in their peasant life and see the government a distant and awesome entity, which is the source of paternal order rather than a hated exploiter (Hindley 1976: 183).

Since the tendency of passive attitudes towards politics among Thai peasants is undeniable, there is a need of coming up with a way to get them involved in politics and

local governance by making use of the various thoughts they hold, like the ones mentioned above. For example, Young (1976) found in his field research in a Northeastern village that the villagers believe that if they help building infrastructure and public buildings such as a road, wells, bridges or schools, they will gain merit and that individual actions benefitting another person can be rewarded in the form of merit acquisition (Young 1976: 285). Therefore, in order to encourage people's participation into politics and community development, it should be advised that any community development programs, which are predominantly established by the authority in Bangkok though, should be supplemented by opportunities for the local community members to make merit or advance one's self interest because these are the most useful devices to gain participation from community members in Thai culture, which is not keen in seeking involvement in politics (Young 1976: 288).

Bearing in mind the points discussed above, allowing the people in Mae Kampong to have a chance to make merit or advance one's self interest will make them aware of the individual roles in the decision-making process and tourism planning process of the community. It should be noted that self-interests in the Mae kampong villagers' minds can be most clearly seen in their Mieng production activity. The main concern of the villagers' everyday life is whether tea leaves grow well in their lands and how much Mieng they expect to yield. This is obvious by the fact that while there are only 27 households that operate homestay service out of 134 households and other tourism-related services are concentrated in the tourist area, as many as 97 percent of the villagers are engaged in Mieng production. Therefore, in order for all the villagers in the whole village to pursue their self-interests, in Mae Kampong's case, one has to pay attention to the tradition of Mieng production.

## **5.2 Mae Kampong's Village Management**

Because of the village's system characterized by various kinds of meeting in which the villagers can participate and the presence of the committee as a decision-making authority, it seems, on the surface, that the village achieved a great sense of equity in the decision-making for their development. However, in reality, one might have to say that the process of decision-making of the village is quite top-down based on the great leadership of the former village headman and is hugely influenced by the state power. In fact, the first paved road connecting Mae Kampong with Chiang Mai city started to be

constructed in 1970s, led by the US-aligned government that was concerned about the threat of alleged communists who sought refuge in nearby mountains (Mattijs 2014: 152). In addition, the micro hydro-electric system and the cooperative system was initiated by the government authority.

Although it was a sheer village program to begin with, the village tourism also came to be incorporated into the government's "One Tambon One Product" program (OTOP) (Yaowapa and Chuangchote 2009: 7). Moreover, for Mae Kampong to be widely recognized by potential tourists, the government and other authority that gives credentials to tourist destination community through various awards play a significant role. In fact, Mae Kampong has received many awards from both domestic and international organizations. The awards include the Thailand Tourism Award 2009, Princess Sirindhorn's good community development award, OTOP village Champion 2006, best learning center, community volunteer award, best leader award, and Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Gold Award in the cultural category, which was presented to the village leader in Macau in 2010 (Mattijs 2014: 234).

Also, some individuals' attitude towards development is not necessarily the same as that of the committee's. As Mattijs mentions, some villagers think that they have already reached sufficient level of development and being too modern could bring adverse effects to the village (Mattijs 2014: 163). Therefore, all the villagers need to think and to give their voices in deciding their own path in development in order for them to become the protagonists of their development trajectory, not spectators, or not victims of it. A number of scholars who studied Thai community culture (*watthanatham chumchon*) states that community and the common people (*chao ban*) should be the decision-makers in development, not bureaucrats, professors, or doctors, for the recovery of the self-reliance of the community (Kitahara 1996: 92). This point signifies that there is a need for the common people in the community to think about their development direction and to negotiate with the authority.

### **5.3 Development Trajectory and Decision-making: Participation and Leadership**

As noted earlier, the modern development was first introduced to Mae Kampong in 1970s by the state-led rural development schemes. The construction of the paved road

was initiated by the US-aligned government's political intention to expel the communism activists who were thought to be hiding in mountains near Mae Kampong. Similarly, seeds of coffee were first brought to the villages as a part of a crop substitution plan by the Thai royal project; micro hydro power generators and the idea of the cooperative system was also brought by the government; and although it is the villagers (especially the former village headman) who decided to get themselves involved in tourism in 2000, later on, the village tourism became a part of the government-led OTOP program. Thus, it can be said that the development programs in Mae Kampong were always initiated by or taken into a part of the government-led development programs or a royal project. Thus, it is highly dubious if the true voices of the village members were reflected in the village's development.

In discussing Thai rural community administration, it is essential to touch upon the government's regional administrative system. For Thailand's regional administration, village (*muban*) and sub-districts (*tambon*) play a significant role. In each village, village headman (*phu yai ban*) is elected by the villagers while sub-district chiefs (*kamnan*) are appointed by the government. At the sub-district and village levels, sub-district councils and village development committees are now integrated into the rural development framework and play a part in administration of rural development programs; and these bodies are dominated by the sub-district chiefs and village heads as agents of the state (Hirsch 1990: 16).

Because of this administrative system, in Mae Kampong, there seems to be a strong leadership of the former village headman. Although he passed down the official role as the chief of the village to the current village headman, who serves the official duty as a village head, the former village headman is still playing a significant role in the village's development. In fact, according to Kontogeorgopoulos et al (2014), Mae Kampong has a very strong leader, who took the bulk of responsibility for the initiation, development, and management of CBT; and nearly every single one of his interviewees states that the presence of the former village headman's leadership is a primary reason for the success of Mae Kampong's CBT (Kontogeorgopoulos et al 2014: 117).

Despite the fact that the strong leadership contributed to the success of Mae Kampong's CBT, participation of the common villagers (*chao ban*) is required in the decision-

making for their better development. As mainstream Development actors such as Asian Development Bank (ADB) and The World Bank often states, effective development requires the early and substantive involvement of all stakeholders in the design of activities that will affect them (Ondrik n.d.).

The concept of participatory development has been internationally hailed as a possible countermeasure to the paternal and top-down development discourse; however, Thailand's situation with regard to participation in administration of rural development programs is far from achieving community participation. In Thailand's case, the decentralized system of tambon administration is nothing more than a top-down program by the government within each bound of sub-district and village. Since all the village heads (*phu yai ban*) are summoned by the government for attending tambon meetings that aim to disseminate the government policies throughout the villagers via the village heads. After the tambon meeting, the village heads set up village meetings (usually compulsory) in their own villages to pass down the same story made by the sub-district chiefs in the previous meeting to the common villagers, and in the village meetings, opportunity for the villagers to express their opinions and to give feedback about the government projects to the village heads is often limited.

Thus, it can be said that, at best, the village heads are caught between the role of the lowest rank of government officials and that of the village's representative who is responsible for the village's interests (Preecha 2002: 8). In addition, generally speaking, the trend is that village heads are getting far from each village member and becoming more and more dependent on the external resources of the government, and consequently the common villagers see the village heads as the representatives of State and capital within the village (Hirsch 1990: 204). In Mae Kampong's case, at least, it cannot be denied that the (former) village headman has a strong influence over the village's decision-making and for the common villagers. Therefore, it is not easy to openly oppose him in formal occasions like the village meetings. As my questionnaire results clarifies (see Table 5.1), many people in Mae kampong think that there is no need of further development and they want to lead a quiet life like they had in the past. For this, there may be a discrepancy between the village headman and a common villager in terms of the outlook of future development. Thus, considering the power relations between the leadership of the former village headman and the common



villagers is essential in the examination of the future development trajectory in Mae Kampong.

#### **5.4 Leadership and Participation: The Villagers' Voice**

In order to examine the villager's opinions about the attitude of the common villagers towards the village leaders, some answers out of the questionnaire are indicative. Here, one of the questions in the questionnaire, *Do the village leaders listen to your opinions?* will be discussed. The survey reveals that 14 out of 19 respondents showed positive opinions about the village leaders' attitudes while 2 showed negative opinions and 3 showed neither positive nor negative ones. This result shows that the majority of the villagers think that the village leaders listen well to the common villagers. However, the opinions of the 2 respondents who showed negative answers are not ignorable and give a very important viewpoint to this research. Table 5.1 shows the opinions in details from the questionnaire respondents. Considering the fact that the negative comments came from those who live in Pang Nok, the area which is the farthest from the tourist area (and the former village headman lives in the tourist area too), one might be able to say that there is a tendency that the farther he/she lives from the tourist area, the more negatively he/she thinks about the village's authority or at least the less he/she feels resistance to expressing negative opinions about them to outsiders.

**Table 5.1: The common villagers' answers to a question, "Do the village leaders listen to your opinions?"**

Respondent	Cluster	Comment
A 48-year-old woman	Pang Nai 1	The former village headman and the village committee members always listen to us so that we can share any ideas about the village development
A 20-year-old woman	Pang Nok	We have equal rights because the village headman and committee members were chosen by a referendum
A 43-year-old man	Pang Khon	Everyone respects the village leaders because they have been working very hard to develop the village
A 36-year-old woman	Pang Nok	All the voices from the common members of the village are to be heard by the village leaders and are discussed in meetings in a democratic way. Everyone in this village is like in one family
A 28-year-old woman	Pang Nai 1	They listen to us sometimes
A 38-year-old woman	Pang Nok	They don't listen to us at all
A 60-year-old woman	Pang Nok	They just do what they want to do. Common villagers cannot play a role in development. For example, we wanted to buy a water reservoir to keep water for dry season. But the leaders turned us down. Similarly, one day, we made a small dam in the village to keep water in it, but the leader destroyed it, saying "it's against the law". But actually, it wasn't.

### 5.5 Problems of Mae Kampong's Administrative Management

Although Mae Kampong is known as a very successful case of a CBT village where the decision-making is based on community participation and the wealth made from the village tourism is redistributed to all the villagers through the village cooperative system, whether one can say that Mae Kampong has a democratic administrative structure is open to question, considering the fact that there are obviously problems in terms of the village's administrative management. One of the problems in the village's administration is a lack of fluidity of the village committee members. According to the villagers, the members of the village committee have not been changed for many years. The reason of this lack of fluidity in the village committee is that they are the only people who can spare time in thinking about the whole village and discussing the

village's management. Most others are those who either have not enough time to do it or who do not want to be burdened with responsibility to determine the future of the village. This phenomenon can lead to the lack of the dynamic discussion among the village committee about the decision-making of the village's future path.

Although they introduced CBT, it has to be said that the villagers in Mae Kampong lack the sheer sense of participation. In fact, in monthly village meeting, most villagers sit back and just listen to what the village headman says. In the meetings, there is little interaction between the village headman and the common villagers. As is the case in most villages throughout Thailand, the village meetings in Mae Kampong are also an occasion for the government to disseminate its view to the common people in the village through the village headman as a government spokesman. In spite of this, most respondents of my interviews did not show any sign of dissatisfaction or disapproval with the village headman or any other village committee members. The majority of the people in Mae Kampong seem to be satisfied with the current administrative system and the members in it.

Interviews with the villagers revealed that most of the common villagers do not have ambition to play a part in the village committee or to become a future village headman. They tend to think that working as a village headman is beyond their capacity because a village headman is expected to deal with various problems in the village and also has to function as a spokesman of the village with relation to the outside world. Most people, including the current and the former village headman in Mae Kampong, seem not to be concerned about the common villager's lack in ambition in the village administrative system because they think that having all the same people in the village committee enhances the stability of the community and educating some new people is difficult and takes a long time (Personal Interview: April 2016).

In addition to the problem of the fixed members of the village committee, redistribution system of the village tourism proceedings has to be examined again. According to the explanation by the former village headman, while there is only 15 per cent of the proceedings go to village welfare service, which is destined to the individual villager through financial support for education and medical care, 25 per cent of it goes to the former village headman as a financial support to cover various expense such as travel

fees to attend conferences outside the village and advertisement fees (Personal Interview: April 2016). These expenses incurred to the former village headman, the village's most prominent representative to the outside world, might be much more than we tend to think, and therefore the high portion of the dividend to him may be reasonable. Nevertheless, considering the fact that as many as 25 per cent of the village's tourism income goes to the former village headman alone while only 15 per cent goes to 360 villagers, the system of the tourism wealth distribution might need more transparency.

### **5.6 Employing Mieng as Cultural Capital**

Mieng has an aspect of cultural capital, which has an important negotiation power in the community development discourse. Although the high-powered government programs and strong leadership in the village have a significant role in the village's development trajectory, bottom-up from ordinary village members can be possible by the tradition of Mieng production. In fact, Bourdieu maintains that in modern societies, the confrontation between the distribution of economic capital (wealth, income, and property), which is so called the dominant form of hierarchy, and the distribution of cultural capital (knowledge, culture, and educational credentials), second principle of hierarchy, delineates the field of power (Swartz 1997: 136-137). In addition, Bourdieu (1993) regards the field of culture as the most important battleground in the field of power because culture plays a very important role in capital accumulation and legitimatization in socio-cultural consumption (Bourdieu 1993: 37). Thus, cultural capital, which is the most significantly embodied by the tradition of mutual cooperation among the villagers fostered by Mieng production, can be a significant factor as the bargaining power for the ordinary villagers to negotiate with the development discourse.

Similarly, in the arguments of cultures and power, Hall et al (2005) says, while the dominant culture represents itself as the culture, trying to define and contain all other cultures within its inclusive range, other cultural configurations will not only be subordinate to this dominant order: they will enter into struggle with it, seek to modify, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its reign (Hall et al 2005: 5-6). For example, ethnic Karen people, who were formerly seen as the forest destroyers by the government and the general public, in Northern Thailand altered their cultural capital, which is the most

notably exemplified as the traditional swidden agriculture and other ways of forest management, into political action to promote their identification as “children of the forest” in order to be recognized as the eligible forest dwellers (Yos 2008: 110).

Today, there is a growing awareness of increasing indigenous people’s legal status and their cultural role so that they can exercise power in politics. For example, in 1992, the Australian High Court passed a law to entitle the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders to indigenous land title, or native land title, under the common law (Hall 2010: 201-202). The same phenomenon can be seen in a tourist site. One of the most well-known examples is a case of Aboriginal in Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Australia. Uluru is one of the most famous (eco) tourism attractions in the world, and it is the sacred place for the indigenous Aboriginal Australians. Out of the concern that the tourists do not care about the Aboriginal culture and the symbolic meaning of Uluru to them, the Aboriginal community decided to become involved in CBT in order to well manage the tourists site, making most of their cultural capital. Since then, they started to play an important role in the management board that administers the park and how tourism is presented, so as to get the message across to the tourists that the Aboriginal people attach the cultural and religious significance to the park (Wells 1996, cited in Boyd and Singh 2003: 27).

In Mae Kampong, the former village headman remains strong in the village’s decision-making process. Most villagers are not as active as the conventional CBT narratives expect them to be. In my field research interview, testimony that shows objection or resent to the leader was rare. Most villagers said that there was no problem in the village’s administrative system because they have some regular meetings in which they can speak to the former village headman and other village committee members, and they are satisfied with the current situation. However, what I found the most common answer through interviews as to a question about the village management is the following statement, which illustrates a common attitude of the normal villagers, “*I attend the monthly village meeting, but I just listen and don’t say anything*” (Personal Interview: April 2016). From this statement, it would be able to be posited that in Mae Kampong, although they have a system of the bottom-up role of the common villagers in the framework of CBT, which gestures its egalitarian way of the management to outsiders, the true sense of participation of the villagers is lacking, just like other normal

villages in Thailand, and the leader has very strong power and a high status in the village.

Mieng as cultural capital can be a good tool to raise consciousness of the common villagers in the decision-making process and planning process of the village tourism programs. Moreover, if it is utilized, it might enhance the negotiation power of the villagers with authority. This would be made possible, again, by integrating Mieng more into the village tourism programs. Mieng is the symbol of Mae Kampong and what the villagers are the most proud of. As Amnaj (2014) mentions, 95 per cent of his respondents in the village said that they would like to open their forest tea lands to tourists to show how they cultivate tea leaves to the tourists. In addition, I found that some villagers have had tourists, both domestic and foreign, to come to their tea lands and showed how they cultivate tea leaves. One of my interviewees who has that experience said that she enjoyed teaching how to pick up tea leaves and felt proud of herself as a Mieng farmer.

### **Summary**

This chapter examined problems of Mae Kampong in terms of participation and leadership. In the contemporary narrative of rural development, the notion of grass-roots participation is quite important in order to enhance empowerment of the common people. Also, in today's leadership theories, an emphasis is no longer made on some sorts of inborn charismatic aspects of leaders. Instead, a number of contemporary scholars pay attention to a bigger picture of an organization, making an emphasis on how leaders should act and how the power should be exerted with relation to the common members. However, through my research, it was found that in Mae Kampong, the role of the village leader, which is the former village headman, is quite strong, and participation from the common villagers remains in a low level. A Village headman in Thailand is to function like a government spokesman in each village under the local administrative system. This system resonates with the individual set of mind in a Thai village, which is quite passive to authority based on a sense of respect and submission to something powerful. This makes Thai villages passive entities that are subject to the government's paternal development schemes and sometimes end up in victims of their negative results. Mae kampong is also one of the common Thai villages in that the

village leader has a strong power and the common villagers' participation does not play a major role in the village's decision-making process. For this fact, my argument is that Mieng as cultural capital can provide common villagers with space of discussion with the village leader and the village committee members, and thus might be able to help in raising awareness of individual's sense of participation.



ลิขสิทธิ์มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่  
Copyright© by Chiang Mai University  
All rights reserved