

## CHAPTER I

### DEVELOPMENT BAROMETERS: ASSESSING CONTEMPORARY THAI DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS THROUGH SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

#### 1.1 Introduction and Background

As national governments throughout the world propose their own variations of state-managed development projects aimed at everything from national security and energy production to tourism and natural resource export, distinctive political ecologies shape the means and methods of the state's development planning. Whether authoritarian, democratic or socialist, nation-states generally claim that their development paths are for the benefit of “the people” or “the nation”, but the input and influence of “the people” or “the nation” in the form of civil society participation is wildly variable and sometimes negligible at best (Beng, 2005; Weller, 2005).

Thailand is officially a constitutional monarchy, which offers a much greater democratic potential for civil society action, but Thailand's young democracy has a history of complications, experiments and setbacks (Haberkorn, 2007; Missingham, 2003, Wyatt 1984). Environmental, cultural and political social movements in Thailand have evolved out of relatively recent changes in the economic and socio-political climate. Using a variety of cultural, ideological and physical means a diversity of social groups and political levels have reacted to each other with an assortment of coercion, protest, dissent and policy. Naturally, the positions of social actors and stakeholders involved in the debates surrounding these social movements encompass a wide range of principles including local resource dependencies, national conservation ideals, religious interests, political strategies and socio-cultural history. Connecting social, political and cultural histories to contemporary debates about environmental and cultural preservation and their ties to modern development, helps to reveal how and why ideologies and movements have formed and how differing camps gain legitimacy in such a diverse field of social actors.

Many of the development projects and policies put forth by Thailand's recently deposed Thaksin Shinawatra government (*Thai Rak Thai*<sup>1</sup> Party), created heated public debates and protests. From the "War on Drugs" and "poverty alleviation" schemes, to state infrastructure development and investments, in the end it was arguably a general lack of government transparency that led to the Thai Rak Thai government's dissolution after sweeping elections just two years prior.

In recent years in Thailand's Chiang Mai Province, two major state-sponsored tourism development packages were proposed. The first of these two projects was issued for Doi Luang Chiang Dao. In early 2003 rumors surfaced of a government-initiated plan to build a cable car up the slopes of Doi Luang Chiang Dao, a biologically and culturally prominent limestone massif about 70 kilometers north of the city of Chiang Mai. This plan pushed Doi Luang Chiang Dao to a new "poster child" status in the debate over natural resource management in Northern Thailand and evoked a large social protest movement.

In 2003, Deputy Chiang Mai Governor Parinya Panthong, noted for pushing a plan to develop Doi Luang Chiang Dao into a major tourist attraction, commented: "We are hoping to propose it as a world heritage site because the place is host to rare species of flora in a perfect ecological system" (The Nation, 26 DEC 2003). This plan of tourism development included the cable car, which opponents found little sense in as far as conserving what Mr. Panthong identified as "rare species of flora in a perfect ecological system". Numerous visible examples of the conflict between conservation and the cable car became obvious. For instance the orchid *Sirindhornia pulchella*, one of over 20 species of threatened and rare orchids found on this mountain, was documented at 35 spots directly on the proposed cable car site (The Nation, 19 NOV 2004).

The cable car situation is a familiar one in Northern Thailand where from the early 1970's through the 1990's a similar plan was proposed and re-proposed for the religiously sacred and park-protected slopes of Doi Suthep, the broad mountain that looms to the west of the city of Chiang Mai. In the Doi Suthep case there was a distinct evolution of how the project was framed with regard to changing popular

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<sup>1</sup> "Thai love Thai"

development goals and forms of protest (Forsyth, 2003; also see Chapter V). Once again, through the proposed project at Doi Luang Chiang Dao there were similar conflicts of interest, access and legitimacy and Suthep-comparable social unions against a repeated, dichotomous standard represented by the state's simultaneous interests in conservation law (managing the Doi Chiang Dao wildlife sanctuary) and economic development (cable car and tourism infrastructure within the sanctuary). However, in March 2005 Plodprasop Suraswadi, then-Director of the Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration announced the cancellation of the cable car project saying he was fed up with defending the project from endless protests by extreme conservationists and local groups (Bangkok Post, 20 MAR 2005). Mr. Nikhom Puttha, head of the Chiang Dao conservation group responded to this message: "Announcing that the project has been axed because of his personal boredom is an insult to the public. We need a reasonable explanation of the project's adverse impact from Mr. Plodprasop" (21 MAR 2005, The Nation).

So have civil society protests at Doi Chiang Dao been successful? At the present this seems to be the case, but there is a lingering concern that the real reasons behind the project cancellation were funding-related and not due to the protests at all, suggesting that if money becomes available the project will be revived (Chiang Mai Citylife, 22 APR 2005). Importantly, the networks established through the social movements at Doi Luang Chiang Dao were ready to mobilize when the next big project surfaced only a few months later.

In 2003 the Thai government under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra created the public administration Designated Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA) "to develop and derive revenue from the country's natural resources and culture". Accordingly, DASTA's initial aim was to "develop the landscape and develop tourist attractions and improve transportation links in order to attract not just tourists but foreign investment as well" (Voices from the Field, Issue 2, January 2007) and establish tourism development in many regions of Thailand (predominantly national park areas).

Early in 2005 DASTA began promoting a plan in Chiang Mai to create a tourism / urban infrastructure mega-project package comprising a series of large-scale

development and tourist attractions on and around Doi Suthep. The project was dubbed “Chiang Mai World” (CMW) and consisted of development sub-projects with a total budget of nearly 12 billion baht. Overall, the initial plan’s fourteen projects were estimated to cover 23,000 *rai*<sup>2</sup> of land in Hang Dong, Muang and Mae Rim Districts of Chiang Mai and were to reach almost halfway up the slopes of Doi Suthep. (Chiang Mai Citylife, OCT 2005).

Two notable Chiang Mai World sub-projects that have reached completion, the Royal Flora Ratchaphreuk Exposition (RFRE) and the Chiang Mai Night Safari (CMNS), will serve as significant points of analysis for this thesis. These two projects were hotly contested, and although direct geographic neighbors, they sometimes offered up very different ideological spaces for debate. The Chiang Mai Night Safari and Royal Flora Expo both highlighted land, water, and community rights conflicts within a local context, but the Royal Flora Ratchaphreuk Expo introduced notions of Thailand’s national development capabilities alongside the sensitive public sentiments of royal patronage and a devotion towards honoring the 60th anniversary of H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s accession to the throne<sup>3</sup>.

A third project that strongly channels the cultural contestations of Chiang Mai World is the Khruba Sriwichai monument development sub-project. Its initial plans included a shopping complex and a trolley station for the planned cable car connecting the Chiang Mai Zoo region with the newly established Chiang Mai Night Safari near Doi Kham. The epicenter of this project, as the name suggests, was the Khruba Sriwichai Monument at the base of Doi Suthep. In November of 2005 local Chiang Mai community members gathered for a meeting at Wat Sri Soda at the base of Doi Suthep to discuss the new development plan.

Interestingly, despite the fact that many of the 14 projects, such as four-lane highways and a city monorail, were slated to be established in areas of Grade A watershed and planned to run through Doi Pui-Suthep National Park, the meeting’s overall tone was not one of environmental science, forestry or hydrologic threats (although these issues were mentioned). Instead the overarching theme of the meeting

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<sup>2</sup> A *rai* is equal to 1600 square meters.

<sup>3</sup> 2006 marked King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s 60th year on the throne and events to honor this anniversary were organized throughout Thailand.

was acknowledging and protecting the cultural and religious heritage of Chiang Mai, how this heritage is linked to environmental concerns and how this tradition can serve as a voice to non-local decision makers about Chiang Mai's local projects. The sacred history of Doi Suthep and Chiang Mai was perceived as directly threatened and thus the meeting directly highlighted the consideration of local beliefs and ideologies when making local development decisions. The community took this opportunity to honor Khruba Sriwichai, an independent-minded, Northern Thai monk who had dedicated his life to enhancing and rehabilitating northern religious life and tradition with the efforts of local northern people at his side. The invocation of Khruba Sriwichai's spirit speaks of more than admiring a dignified history associated with a revered landscape such as Doi Suthep, but ties pre-modern ideals tightly to current social struggles and movements.

Another interesting variable in the movement against the CMW sub-projects was the early, although brief, appearance of an unlikely protest actor, the Thai army. One of the originally planned sub-projects of the mega-project package was a new road connecting the Mae Hia region of Chiang Mai with Mae Rim District. This road was to travel through the training land forest of the 5th Special Forces Regiment in Mae Rim District; an area already heavily encroached upon by wealthy developers (Chiang Mai Citylife, 02 JUN 2006). One of the most outspoken Chiang Mai civil society networks, Paki Khon Hak Chiang Mai (see Chapter V), made efforts early on to team up with the 5th Special Forces Regiment to protest the construction of this road for fears of further land intrusions, and environmental degradation.

## **1.2 Statement of the Research Problem**

Chiang Mai has long been considered Thailand's northern cultural reservoir and the desire to establish it as a tourist center will most likely increase. However, the current trend is for developers from other regions of Thailand along with Bangkok government elites, to propose and execute their Chiang Mai development dreams without a consideration of local Chiang Mai input and opinions. Mega-projects such as Chiang Mai World have been hastily implemented with little government transparency and almost no public access to information. The methods in which these

recent Thai Rak Thai-sponsored national projects have been conceived and managed, and some of their troubling outcomes, should serve as a red flag and draw future government planners to analyze the shortcomings of recent state-sponsored, development practices in Thailand.

As a result of these state shortcomings, a network of Chiang Mai citizens, NGOs and community organizations are now lashing out at state-sponsored development in a fight to retain their regional autonomy, preserve their cultural and environmental wealth and perhaps, most importantly, become an acknowledged part of the state's development process. But who are these people and groups and how do they interact, share information and recruit others for their cause? In short, in what ways is civil society represented and defined in Chiang Mai? Newspapers often refer to "NGO's" or "community members", but who are the people, communities and groups involved in Chiang Mai's civil society?

Importantly, does Northern Thailand offer a unique example of these types of social movements or does the region at least offer locally unique incarnations of national trends? The past protests surrounding the proposed Doi Luang Chiang Dao cable car and the current movement against development of the newly dubbed "Chiang Mai World" on Doi Suthep seem to represent a distinctive evolution in Thai social movements in that much of its protest comes from actors who have many more ideologies at stake than Thailand's more livelihood-based movements of the 1980's and 1990's (Buergin and Kessler, 2001). The contingent of Chiang Mai stakeholders is comprised of social actors from a wide variety of groups including academia, suburban villagers, government officials, Buddhist clergy, and media. Although some of these actors are not necessarily Chiang Mai natives, many of the "local" passionate activists have spent decades in the city and have rightly gained a deep devotion to its conservation, administration and future development goals.

Social movements have rich underlying networks that when successful, come to the surface as solidarity. Untangling these network foundations of protest in a situation such as Doi Suthep development could shed light on the transitions in Thai notions of conserving environment, place and culture. Conservation and development objectives have not remained static in recent Thai history. Thus, linking community,

political and social histories to current disputes about ecological and cultural protection and their links to proposed development, helps to reveal how and why social movement ideologies and arrangements have formed and how these factions strategically legitimize their goals in such a varied arena of actors.

The basic premises for the Chiang Mai movement's momentum are fragmented within the population and the actors perhaps come from too many backgrounds and interests to form naturally melded purpose and intentions. The objective for efficiently achieving change may be a solidified front, but the actors come to the debate table with different resource needs and notions of environment, culture or the issue at hand. Understanding the various ideological and physical bases of the actors presents a framework that highlights the external as well as internal debates, improving the likelihood of the fruitful outcome of better understanding where solidarity exists, when policy succeeds, where marginalization is least and equity is maximized.

However, in a region with such a diversity of meaning for a broad segment of the concerned population, untangling and understanding civil society presents a formidable task. Specifically, one aspect of my research interests includes exploring how Northern Thai cultural identity and religious heritage are used as a tool of negotiation and authority in the recent debates over Northern Thailand's tourist expansion and its impacts on eco-cultural space of the prominent mountain landscapes such as Doi Luang Chiang Dao and Doi Suthep. These mountain spaces enter strongly into the environmental debate, but they also hold value beyond their physical and geographic prominence and are distinctive features of the historical and cultural sense of Chiang Mai's heritage.

As symbolic features, Doi Suthep, Doi Kham and Doi Ang Salung Chiang Dao are prominent in the Northern Thai cultural imagination and sense of identity, but have these mountains, once so rich with meaning, lost their power and significance, becoming mere tourist landscapes and spaces to be exploited commercially?...In the face of a perceived threat to traditional ways of life by modern economic culture, some seek a return to the fundamental verities of a simpler era believed to be embodied in an earlier historical age or represented by an idealized, mythic time of primal beginnings (Swearer, et al. 2004).

Localized social movements and reactions to state-sponsored development are certainly not rooted solely in the “local”. The past few years have been some of the most tumultuous of recent Thai political history and the rapidly changing national political ecology has dynamically affected how civil society has responded to state projects and how the state has responded to civil society concerns.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

1. In what ways does the “Chiang Mai World” development package represent a new mega-project focus for Thailand’s tourism infrastructure and what parts of Thai society are represented in the planning and implementation of this kind of project development?
2. How do Northern Thailand’s recent social movements that have organized surrounding these mega-projects, represent a shift in Thai protest and social movement ideology?
3. What are some of the prominent, contemporary representations and debates surrounding the “Chiang Mai World” project and how are these linked to Northern Thailand’s social, cultural, political and geographical history.
4. What are the unique qualities or distinctive characteristics of “Chiang Mai-based” and Northern Thai social movements and in what ways are these differences expressed?

### **1.4 Research Objectives**

1. To investigate Thailand’s methods and abilities in the planning and execution of large-scale tourism development goals.
2. To determine what kind of equity exists among social actors when establishing new nationally sponsored mega-projects such as “Chiang Mai World”.
3. To explore the division of social actors and subgroups involved in Chiang Mai’s social movements and investigate some of the representations and ideologies involved in local development debates.

4. To use the “Chiang Mai World” case study as a way to investigate social networks and paths of information flow among Chiang Mai’s social actors.

## 1.5 Methodology

### 1.5.1 Research Site

Although my research was not geographically bounded in a strict sense, the project sites pertaining to my research were physically defined. The Chiang Mai World projects I have focused on are all loosely sited within the “Doi-Suthep region” of Chiang Mai within *Amphoe*<sup>4</sup> Hang Dong and *Amphoe* Muang. Doi Suthep is the prominent sloping “peak” of the limestone ridge to the west of Chiang Mai. Although the two CMW sub-projects that serve as the thematic center-point of my analysis (RFRE and CMNS) are not situated directly on the slopes of Doi Suthep they are in the geographic, historic and mythical shadows of this mountain and are in many ways ecologically synonymous with Doi Suthep.

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<sup>4</sup> *Amphoe* is the district-level administrative subdivision of Thailand.

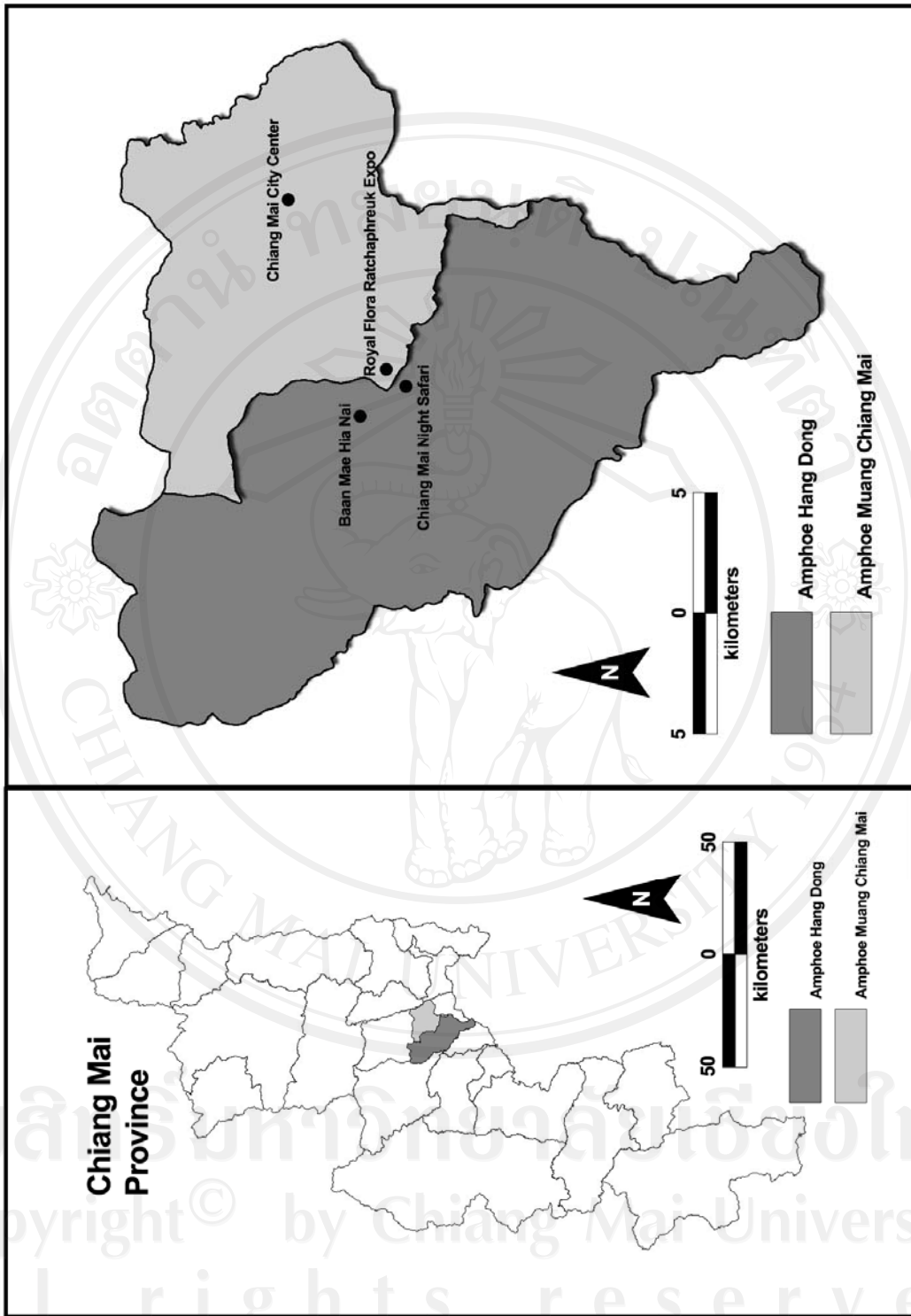


Figure 1.1 Research Site – Amphoe Hang Dong and Amphoe Muang (Chiang Mai City) within Chiang Mai Province



Figure 1.2 Aerial photo of research site.

### 1.5.2 Levels of Analysis

A range of root factors influences the political ecologies that sway the outcomes of development projects such as Chiang Mai World. This study aims to consider the socio-cultural, historical, physical and political realms that underpin the current actions and interactions of the state and civil society. This case study is manifested as a dynamic realm of policy formation, ideological experimentation and negotiation that all interact to form project products. By addressing these levels I have attempted to analyze how the Chiang Mai World mega-project has evolved, been portrayed, negotiated and constructed with the hope of unraveling and better understanding the project's and related social movements' successes and shortcomings.

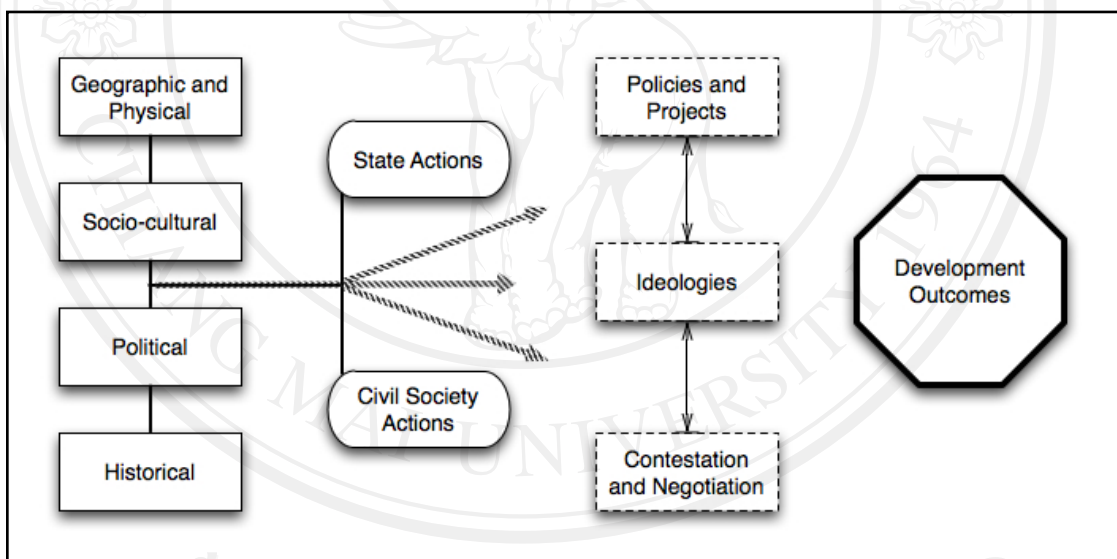


Figure 1.3 Diagram of Levels of Analysis

### 1.5.3 Data Collection and Field Research

For this study I used qualitative research methods of analysis. Qualitative methods enabled me to understand and link people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live and act, one of my primary concerns of the situation surrounding the case study's social movements. I chose a case study framework which allowed for a situated and more holistically rounded view which holds a distinct advantage when 'how' or 'why' questions are being asked about a

contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin 1984). Many aspects of development conflict are highly contextual and dynamic. Case study analysis allowed me to look beyond homogenization and appreciate the complex details that occurred in these creative, reactive and innovative social settings.

Of perhaps three distinct forms of the case study: the intrinsic, the instrumental and the collective (Stake 1994), I chose to fit into the collective category because it extended my research beyond the central or instrumental case of the Doi Suthep mega-project to include applications and extrapolative commentary for other regional cases. This extension of case analysis gave me an opportunity to broaden beyond the general Chiang Mai phenomenon, population and local conditions.

Although my research was essentially a single case study, the various sub-projects of Chiang Mai World do offer multiple layers of sub-case studies, each with distinctive actors. However, while addressing multiple case studies could have introduced pitfalls such as extending research resource and time needs, the two sub-cases were intimately linked and there was an overlap of stakeholders, actors, ideologies, government agencies and national budgets. The inherent flexibility of case study analysis allowed me to periodically adjust my research scope and methods to examine new situations using a variety of modes of data collection including documentation, interview, participant observation, and direct observation

Documentation became perhaps the most consistent aspect of my research for a number of reasons. First, my research dealt with large-scale, nationally funded tourism development projects that were in the process of being debated, implemented and constructed directly prior to and during my fieldwork period. At some points during my research, news stories regarding CMW were an almost daily occurrence and these stories served as important resources, not only for specific figures, dates or project plans, but also for identifying important stakeholders and their concerns with, or involvement in, the mega-project.

Second, as I will address in later chapters, the nature of some of the sub-projects' planning and implementation was far from transparent, therefore attempting to obtain solid information often led me down paths of local hearsay and to more questions than answers. Access to even moderately high-ranking Thai government

officials or Thai development planners was generally not possible. Thus, I relied heavily on media outlets for documentary sources of high-ranking sound bites, interviews and mega-project updates. The Chiang Mai Night Safari, for instance, had wide-reaching international implications regarding animal acquisitions, thus international media also became a key asset in uncovering information related to this project. Because the Royal Flora Ratchaphreuk Expo was constructed to honor the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of H.M King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne, many international news sources picked up the story to highlight the life of “the world’s longest living monarch”. These international media outlets became invaluable.

Third, as I sought relevant project information from members of local civil society and community groups it was not uncommon for our interaction to lead to them asking if *I* had more information. Initially, this struck me as funny as I had thought my position as a relative outsider with moderate Thai language skills was causing me to miss some important Thai events and information. Quickly and importantly I realized that many local citizens also had few resources for this information. Consequently, piecing together documentation became one of the more important aspects of my research.

Because my case studies were also about human affairs, opinions, networking and human relationships to environment and culture, interviews were obviously an essential way to get interpretations and reports on the research topic. Initially I thought that I would use a mix of interview styles, but I ended up mostly conducting open-ended, discussion-style interviews because it allowed me to not only ask the interviewee about key facts, but left additional room for the respondent to elaborate on their own insights, which led me to new questions and a more rounded and thorough investigation of the topic later. Of course many times language was a barrier, but various translators aided me throughout my research.

Participant observation helped me avoid being a by-standing data collector and allowed me to become a contributor to the activities within the case study. In the formal sense, participant observation requires the researcher to enter into some sort of routine of the research subjects in order to understand a view of the research subject's reality (Jones, 1996) and find out the meanings underlying their actions (Lofland and

Lofland, 1984). As my research period progressed, this research method and the notion of crossing the line to become a “participant observer” was usually not a premeditated effort. Attending community gatherings, meetings or get-togethers, although initially about research, later became much more about being an informed community member and about socializing with other community members. As a researcher, I attempted to remain an unbiased observer, but as a Chiang Mai resident (albeit only for a few years), the issues surrounding the development of Doi Suthep became strongly personal at times.

As I just implied, one of the pitfalls of participant observation is that strong favoritism can be introduced as the researcher becomes involved with the study issues beyond the view of an external observer. Initially I thought it might be important to avoid being caught up in any opinionated advocacy campaigns and detracting too much from my attempts at impartiality. In reality, being a *farang*<sup>5</sup>, while affording me some unique research opportunities and access, also inherently posed me as an outsider, which slightly limited my ability to be “too much” of a participant. Thus at large meetings and more formal events, the direct observation methodology almost came naturally whereas workshops and field trips became great opportunities for both observation and participation. Overall, I strongly disliked being seen as an “observer” and I deliberately avoided it in the strict sense.

### 1.6 Structure of the Thesis

Five chapters follow this introductory section of the thesis. Chapter II presents the theoretical concepts and a review of literature relevant to the case study. A brief background of social movement theory leads into a review of applied social movement concepts and debates. The chapter closes with a concise conceptualization of the thesis research. Chapter III broadens the historical background of Thailand’s development process, and briefly addresses early state formation and subsequent natural resource territorialization. The chapter continues chronologically by highlighting Thailand’s social movement construction in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Buddhist principles of conservation and the evolution of Thai notions of

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<sup>5</sup> *Farang* is the Thai word for a Western foreigner.

rural/urban interactions are presented and segue into the recent history of development in Thailand and the shifting political ecology, especially focusing on the recently deposed Thaksin Shinawatra government. Chapter IV is a detailed overview of two Chiang Mai World sub-projects that comprised the core of the thesis research – the Chiang Mai Night Safari and the Ratchaphreuk Royal Flora Expo. The planning, construction, contestation, impacts and current state of these projects are all presented. Chapter V looks at the levels of stakeholders involved in the project and contextualizes the concepts and ideologies that civil society grounds its CMW development debates in. As will be presented in Chapter II, these views on the Chiang Mai World project are referred to as the movement’s social “frames”. Chapter VI concludes the thesis with an analysis of the Chiang Mai World project as it stands today and how this connects to the practical implications of future large-scale development projects in Thailand and potential for further research on the topic.