

Constructing a Governing Rationale: Developing Lao Hmong Refugees at Wat Tham Krabok

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that Thai discourses of modernization and development have been taken up by the leaders and other prominent monks at Wat Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple (WTK) in central Thailand's Saraburi Province and directed at governing a settlement of mostly Lao Hmong refugees that made their home on temple controlled land from the 1990s to 2000s. Though decoding the motivations on the part of WTK's leaders and other senior monks for allowing thousands of Hmong to settle on WTK controlled land is a complex process, viewing the story through the lens of development teaches new things about their overarching motivations for such an intervention. Furthermore, it allows several aspects of their governing rationale—including attention to legibility, territoriality, infrastructural development—to stand out and reveals that WTK's leaders enacted specific projects that appear to be directed at governing, reforming, and possibly modernizing the Hmong population at WTK. The styles of this intervention varied between the temples second and third abbots, Chamroon and Charoen, in their respective use of discursive versus material means of intervention. Considering these goals in concert with the history of material construction at the temple highlights how the material and discursive aspects of life at WTK are recursively connected to reinforce regimes of Hmong development toward an ideal of modernity that pays homage to symbols of Thai modernity and legitimizes WTK as a worthy Buddhist institution.

Keywords: Hmong, Wat Tham Krabok, Thai Buddhism, Thailand

It could be argued that the way WTK leaders dealt with issues of WTK Hmong development in WTK space is simply a subset of broader governmentalities that occurred in Thai state space, and to some degree this is true; however, because WTK authorities held an uncharacteristically high degree of freedom from Thai government intervention, their programs for development were more autonomous and followed motivations somewhat distinct from broader discourses though they were informed by them. The leaders of WTK along with many of the lower level monks seemed to view the Hmong at the temple, as subjects to be reformed and developed. As hinted, this relationship is a rough microcosm to nation scale discourses and their resulting interventions that have surrounded Thailand's hill tribe "problem" since at least the 1950s (Gilligly 2004: 119). This sense of reformist necessity can be seen in several aspects of the relationship between temple

authorities and their Hmong guests, both WTK ideas about Hmong people and how those ideas influenced practice. Chief among them is WTK leaders' material construction projects and manipulation of politico-spatial relationships—including the maintenance of legible landscapes with somewhat strict territorial control, as well as the construction of physical symbols of Thai modernity for the Hmong to frequently see and become habituated to.

1. Research Methods and Background

This paper is based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork done in Thailand in May-July 2012. My primary means of information gathering was interview and participant observation. A little over a month of my field work was spent living at WTK where I interviewed monks and lay residents of temple controlled land—both Thai and Hmong. This included interviewing WTK's most prominent monks, including the fourth (and current) Abbot of the temple, Bounsong, and the four other most prominent monks at the temple—Chian, Wichian (Tong), Wanchai, and Sayan.¹ Most helpful to the project was Phra Santi who has been a monk at WTK since 1985 and has gained fluency in the Hmong language and an intimate knowledge of Hmong life and livelihood at WTK. Not only were his interviews invaluable, Santi spent the better part of a month leading me down the now abandoned trails of what was once WTK's Hmong village to help me reconstruct WTK's geographic history and its Hmong experience.² Aside from residency at WTK I spent nearly a month in northern Thailand (Tak, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Phetchabun) and northeastern Thailand (Nakorn Ratchasima) to interview former Hmong residents of WTK and other Lao Hmong living in Thailand.

2. WTK's Commitment to Developing the Hmong

A combination of broader discourses that centered on negative images of the Hmong in Thailand and their unorthodox Buddhist hosts has encouraged WTK leaders to reform their Hmong guests and make them a modern and orderly model to the nation. Several authors have argued that the Thai mainstream viewed upland ethnicities, 'hill tribes' or 'hill people'³ as they are often called, as problematic, disorderly, childish (Gillooly 2004, McKinnon 2008), un-modern (Jonsson 2004), disloyal (Bowie 1997) and unpredictable (Pinkaw 1999). This derision has fallen especially on the Hmong (Forsyth and Walker 2008:60). Furthermore, the vast majority of the Hmong that made their way to WTK in the 1990-2003 period were Lao Hmong that had lived at refugee camps in northern and northeastern Thailand. They had no claim to Thai citizenship and were often viewed by outsiders categorically as insurgents and otherwise dangerous elements.

Speaking of WTK's monks, although they are not upland minorities and are Thai in most senses, they perceived themselves to be overlooked, looked down upon, or misunderstood by the Thai majority (Chambers 2013: 90). There are several reasons for

¹¹ This group of monks were, except Wanchai, were included in the body that selected Bounsong as the Fourth Abbott of WTK.

² As opposed to the Hmong's WTK experience

³ The category 'hill people' usually includes Thailand's six major minority ethnic groups: Karen, Hmong, Lisu, Akha, Mien, Lahu

this, including the temple's relationship to women, their differences in ritual with the mainstream, their isolation from surrounding communities, and general difference in doctrine and practice (Chambers 2013). This sense of marginalization has encouraged WTK monks toward a sense of isolation and indignation that has led and continues to lead them to compare themselves with monks from the outside and search for legitimation. There is a strong sense among WTK monks that although they are a truer reflection of purer Buddhist ideals than outsiders, they are often misunderstood and misrepresented by a respectively misguided mainstream.

Seen in this light, WTK's development discourse directed at WTK Hmong is a possible channel for reaffirmation of WTK legitimacy. In other words, it is implied that the WTK Hmong were good because they had come to WTK just like the thousands of drug addicts that have come to be reformed at WTK. They were reformed and developed at WTK, as others have been—e.g. drug addicts that have come to be rehabilitated. And thus WTK is legitimized as an institution that can solve several of the country's major problems—opium and 'hill tribes.' And so reminiscent of Ferguson's 'anti-politics machine' framing, WTK's housing and possible development of this large Hmong population was a deeply political act and legitimation maneuver, though it could be portrayed as apolitical altruism (1994).

The consistently positive portrayal of WTK Hmong given by WTK monks flags both the broad hierarchy between the ethnic Thai majority vis-a-vis upland minorities and WTK's uneasy relationship—as an unorthodox and somewhat unpopular Buddhist institution—with the more mainstream Buddhist majority. Although there is certainly evidence to suggest that the Hmong village had its fair share of crime, the public transcript regarding WTK Hmong read by WTK monks seems decidedly positive. I was often told in a somewhat perfunctory fashion that the Hmong at WTK were 'very orderly' or 'very good' or in implied comparison with non-WTK Hmong that 'the Hmong *here* are very good.' Though such public portrayals may come in the same breath as an acknowledgement of some Hmong crime (most often drug use or trafficking), self-conscious evaluations of WTK Hmong given by WTK monks asserted that these crimes were unrepresentative of the group. Interestingly enough, the same monks (among the temples most senior) were quicker to connect drug trafficking on the part of Thai and western inhabitants of WTK with those group's moral characters. This suggests that monks were giving the Hmong the benefit of the doubt and holding others to a different standard. Aspects of this double standard can be seen in the way that WTK Hmong were expected not to clear land in the hills while Thais did so freely (a topic I will cover later in the paper). I have no reason to doubt that WTK Hmong are any less deserving of such praise than others; but such laudatory statements were often used to defend WTK Hmong against accusations of criminal activity or otherwise disorderly behavior that came from outsiders (especially media sources).⁴ This discourse of orderly Hmong people indicates that because WTK had

⁴ According to Tong, before the Hmong exodus from WTK in 2004, several news outlets (including *The Nation*) produced reports on WTK that portrayed the temple as a dangerous place. WTK Hmong were shown to be insurgents and drug dealers. Furthermore, temple leaders were called 'mafia'.

taken the Hmong in, this 'problem population' (as so many Thais in the mainstream viewed them) was WTK's responsibility.

It may be that there was something about Hmong demeanor and action that struck these monks, but it could also be that WTK's monks *wanted* WTK Hmong to be orderly regardless of how they actually were. There were certainly immediate reasons for pushing such a discourse. With so many Hmong people—at least 12,000 by 2003 (Lao 2009:4) and possibly many more in the mid-1990s—living at WTK, there would have been an immediate concern for order and safety in WTK space. Some senior WTK monks perceived that in the eyes of the Thai nation, the responsibility for this order and safety fell squarely on their shoulders. In maintaining a discourse of 'Hmong orderliness' and creating a structure of order, WTK leaders would have encouraged an equally orderly performativity on the part of their Hmong subjects that would recursively create a more orderly reality.

WTK Hmong development can be seen as part and parcel of a Thai-style modernization teleology that sought to mold Hmong senses of performativity to align with proper Thai modernity and make Hmong much more Thai-like. A few WTK monks shared with me their evaluation of the transition of Hmong refugees after coming to WTK. One senior Monk recalled to me that Hmong, after coming to WTK, "developed far along" (or "phatthana pai klai" in Thai). More likely owing lack of access to water at the temple than a lack of habits of personal hygiene maintenance, some monks claim the Hmong, upon arrival at WTK, were dirty and disheveled in appearance, they progressed little by little to adopt Thai norms until they were showering more often, wearing western style slacks (rather than traditional Hmong clothes), and combing their hair in styles similar Thai people. Furthermore, one of WTK's public relations monks attributed Hmong economic development to their separation from their traditional upland livelihoods since coming to live at WTK, asserting (in teleological fashion) that due to insufficient supplies of upland agricultural space at WTK, Hmong could no longer make a livelihood in farming and were forced to begin producing knives and other wares, and engaging in trading. He seemed unaware that blacksmithing is a long held practice among the Hmong and that these Hmong have long been trading in markets. Although these 'changes' were not actually new, he wanted to view them that way and possibly attribute some reason for such a 'positive development' to Hmong residency at WTK.

3. WTK Leader's commitment to Developing the Hmong

There is strong evidence to suggest that leaders of WTK were invested in this narrative and influenced discourses, and materiality of Hmong development and orderliness at WTK. After meeting with Chamroon at WTK in the 1980s, the eminent anthropologist of the Hmong, Nicholas Tapp, recounted that Chamroon interpreted one of Tapp's dreams. Tapp shares that in his dream he saw a doctor approach a tiny naked man inside a jar. The doctor opened the jar and turned a dial thereby draining the tiny man of his blood. Tapp recounts Chamroon's telling interpretation:

"That dream was about this place, and I am the doctor you saw in your dream. The little man represents the hill people, because they are smaller than we are. And the

blood signifies their whole way of thinking which must be radically changed if the opium problem is to be solved. For the hill people are the key to the opium problem.” (Tapp 1986)

This example, shows clearly that Chamroon, as abbot and key decision maker at WTK from 1970-1999, was committed both to opium eradication and radically changing uplanders way of thinking, presumably to bring them into Thai modernity. During Chamroon’s involvement, as a young man, with Thailand’s secret police, the *Santiban*, he was involved in opium suppression and developed a strong dislike for opium and those involved in its trade (Thanakon no date: 8). At mid-century in Thailand, upland minorities were known by the Thai mainstream for producing Thailand’s opium. Aside from, a patronizing concern for the Hmong, Chamroon may have harbored distrust or suspicion toward these assumed opium producers.

However, WTK’s founder, Chamroon’s beloved aunt Mian Parnchand (more commonly known as Luang Por Yai) and leader of WTK from 1957 to 1970, had a deep relationship with Hmong people from the early days of the temple (see Baird 2013; Chambers 2013). As someone who could recall all of her former incarnations, Hmong informants believe she admitted to making promises to the Hmong, possibly in a past life,⁵ that she would help the Hmong. Furthermore around 1967, she foretold the large gathering and settlement of Hmong to the temple that eventually took place during the 1990s into the early 2000s (Baird 2013: 133). And so, despite his personal tendency to dislike opium producing people (as many would assume the Hmong were), it would have likely been beyond Chamroon to ignore the goals of a beloved aunt. Instead, he took them on as his own, running a drug rehabilitation program that served Thais and ‘hill tribes’ from the late 1950s—after the Sarit led Thai Government banned opium in 1959 (Baird 2013: 127, Thanakon no date).

Furthermore, as his life became devoted to the cause of WTK, a movement profoundly shaped by his aunt’s unorthodox inspiration, Chamroon—as WTK’s second leader after Auntie Mian—was increasingly concerned with proving the legitimacy of his involvement in the movement, his ordination to the monkhood, and the legitimacy of the WTK movement as a whole. Chamroon stated, in an interview, that even before joining the monkhood, he was concerned that his joining would be of benefit to his religion and society (Thanakon no date: 9). He reports asking for a miraculous sign that his joining the monkhood would “give benefit to the religion and its followers” (Thanakon no date: 5). That, in 1975, Chamroon was presented the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for his opium rehabilitation efforts is evidence of this legitimacy. Furthermore, in 1979 Galyani Vadhana (Phra Phi Nang) of the Royal family visited Chamroon and asked him to help stop the minority opium problem through his drug rehabilitation program (Baird 2013: 136).

4. Methods of Development: Discursive and Material Interventions

⁵ Luang Por Yai professed to be an early manifestation of the universal being “Lokkutara.” She was an extraordinary spiritual figure that from an early age had innate ability to see spirits, access deep knowledge, recall prior incarnations, and prophesy the future. For fuller explanations see Baird 2013 and Chambers 2013.

Assuming the tendency of WTK Monks to view their Hmong guests as subjects of reform and development, we now ask the question of how this translated into action. I argue that the push toward orderliness and development was a deeply spatial process that involved firstly forms of discursive governmentalities and later material interventions in the form of infrastructure (for a brief history of the entire period see footnote below).⁶ The planning, use of, and attention to space were all used as tools for the eventual development of Hmong subjects. The process of development seems roughly divided into two periods of development style that reflected a shift in regimes of WTK leadership from Chamroon to Charoen. The first of these two overlapping periods lasted from 1990-1999 and was headed by Chamroon. This period was based on a hands-off ideal that, although it shaped spatial arrangement of the Hmong village, did little to develop infrastructure and services in the Hmong Village. The second period from 1997-2003 (headed by his younger brother Charoen) took a more materially involved approach that used infrastructural development to assist in the physical and material aspects of Hmong life in the Hmong village. It should be noted that these periods overlapped because Charoen had taken on the development of infrastructure before becoming abbot. Still, during this second period, infrastructure projects were aimed at creating a sense of proper, orderly WTK Hmong modernity that followed some lines of Thai modernity—nation, king, religion (Jonsson 2005: 59, Bowie 1997: 183).

4.1 Chamroon's Project: Constructing Appropriate Hmong Territoriality

To argue thus, I first illustrate the virtual sovereignty of WTK space and the Abbot's control of that space. A retired General of the Thai Royal Army in charge of military intelligence in the Saraburi area pithily attested that WTK was, in times past, a city of its own, (or "pen muang khong khao eng" in Thai). This could also be translated as, 'a state unto itself', which I argue elsewhere was very much the case (Chambers 2013). Chamroon's military and political connections allowed him to take control of an expanding landscape consecrated to the cause of WTK. The temple sits on land that is geographically isolated from surrounding communities by a horseshoe shaped ridge of cliffs and mountains that surround temple land and is accessed via a single road. Furthermore,

⁶ After WTK's establishment in 1957 by the three Parnchands, the temple opened an opium rehabilitation facility around 1959 that served Thai's and minorities. This effort initiated a relationship between WTK and upland minorities that came for drug rehabilitation in the following years. By the 1970s, Lao Nationals, including Hmong, were being treated at the temple (Baird 2013:144). Chamroon allowed leading members of the *Chao Fa* (a Hmong insurgency group active in Laos) to take residence at WTK. He also made WTK a gathering place for insurgents heading into battle. It was not until the late 1980s when Hmong refugee camps in Thailand were closed that a large number of Hmong came to WTK. This group lived first in WTK's unused hospital, but as numbers soared Chamroon allowed them to settle on open land controlled by WTK. The Hmong built their own homes in 4 groups determined by Chamroon. Planned physical infrastructure was built under the supervision of Charoen beginning in the mid to late 1990s. This included a water system, clinic, school, and several monuments. This largely undocumented Hmong population had a period of relative freedom and prosperity at WTK until after Chamroon's death in 1999 Thai military and government put pressure on Charoen to deal with the Hmong 'problem' at WTK. In 2003, Charoen eventually allowed the military enter WTK and begin processing Hmong people for immigration to third countries. From a population of more than 12,000 in 2003 only a handful of Hmong families remain at WTK at present.

according to the current village headman of WTK's lay Thai village, Ban Song Thai, state auxiliaries have only recently after the Parnchand reign made an ostensible entrance into WTK space in the form of forestry agents, water services, garbage collection, centralized plumbing or electricity (some services commonly provided by *Thesaban*). During the period (1957-2008) of the first three abbots of the temple Mian Parnchand, Chamroon Parnchand, and Charoen Parnchand there was a decidedly consolidated vision of Parnchand power and authority. Upon the death of Mian, there apparently was little question that a member of the founding three abbots would succeed Luang Por Yai to the abbotship. It was only after the third of these founders passed that abbots went up for election. Under this constellation of power, Chamroon's decisions about land use were rarely seriously challenged, and as far as he had the resources to put them to practice it seems these goals were accomplished.

WTK leaders' tendency to use space as a tool of reform has long been evident there. Because WTK has housed a drug rehabilitation program since the late 1950-60s, WTK practices regarding Hmong refugees reflect a style of policy reminiscent of rehabilitation that uses territorial control to reform behavior. This sense of reform is further evidenced by the orderly settlement of Hmong on temple grounds, and their territorial representation along legible sections of population (Scott 1998). This is very likely a product of the temple's opium addiction recovery program, within which patients are cloistered in a rehabilitation center (known colloquially as the 'Hei', a shortening of 'heroin') and are only allowed exit during strictly supervised trips to sauna facilities elsewhere in the temple. This form of supervision is the product of historical evolution from earlier practices. Stories are circulated around the temple that during an earlier period patients that slept on an open air pavilion were kept inside at night (to prevent them from fleeing or leaving to buy or use opium) by a simple string which demarcated the boundary of spiritual protection from excruciating stomach pain that awaited on the other side.

This sense of territoriality as a controlled and bounded space (Sack 1985) seems to have been keenly understood by Chamroon as a tool of reform and control. One important story illustrates this conclusion. During the late 1960s and early 1970s a pair of monks claiming special knowledge at the temple known as Taa lang and Taa Phaeng were in competition with the Parnchand clan for leadership at WTK. This pair of monks garnered a large following that established a large settlement of monks at the base of the cliffs roughly where the large pond has since been dug. Here, they planted crops and lived a very disciplined and hardworking life. When Chamroon was finally able to remove these interlopers from temple space he promptly bought the land that their settlement previously occupied and had it immediately dismantled. One now senior monk at WTK recalled that he was commissioned by Chamroon to raze the buildings quickly after their abandonment. He confirmed that Chamroon did so because he did not want another group to come and fill this space and present a new challenge to his authority. This clearly shows that Chamroon made a connection between territorial control, development, and political power.

This sense of territoriality very likely influenced Chamroon's method of settling Hmong in WTK space. In the late 1980s and early 1990s when large waves of Hmong

refugees left refugee camps that were closing in several locations of northern and northeastern Thailand, many of those migrants came to WTK. Chamroon who was abbot at the time allowed Hmong to occupy a three storied abandoned hospital just off the main temple complex, known in Thai as *teuk sam chan*. When the people that filled this building crowded in by the thousands, Chamroon allowed them to settle elsewhere on WTK land. However, this did not mean they could settle haphazardly anywhere they liked. Chamroon allowed for settlement in bounded territories that eventually became known as groups 1-4. Beginning with what is now called group 2, Hmong settled along the edge of the mountains. When that group was full, Chamroon allowed settlement in group 3 on the lowland plain adjacent to group 2. Group 1 otherwise known as the Mango Grove, the group closest to main temple grounds, was third to be settled. And finally after Chamroon secured another piece of land at the outer edges of WTK controlled land, group 4 was established (see Chambers 2013:128 for a fuller explanation).

These groups facilitated a legible means of management. As families filled the space they were put in a registry prepared by Chamroon's relative Manop Parnchand (nicknamed 'Piak'). Each family's picture was taken and their names were listed in the registry. Each family under the supervision of its head (in this case usually a father) was put under the supervision of a subgroup leader. These subgroup leaders reported the leader of their respective groups, 1-4. Group leaders had frequent meetings, often daily, with Chamroon, during which Chamroon gave news, issued orders and warnings, and took reports. In this way, the WTK Hmong population was made into a more legible and moldable group (Scott 1998). Contra, the hopeful claims of WTK monks, WTK Hmong were more ordered than they were orderly.

Chamroon's WTK Hmong forestry policy was of key import to this sense of territoriality. According to one longtime WTK monk with intimate knowledge of Hmong life and livelihood at WTK, Chamroon strictly forbid the Hmong from clearing new land in the uplands surrounding WTK, but later allowed them to use land previously cleared by Thai cultivators. In the early 1990s, this policy restricted WTK Hmong from viable access to agricultural land, as most of the lowland areas were taken by Thai agriculture. WTK Hmong later gained access to agricultural space in a few upland areas of the mountains surrounding WTK after those spots were abandoned by the Thai cultivators that cleared them. Interestingly, Chamroon's restrictions had a partial legal basis (1964 Reserved Forest Act, 1989 Logging Ban), but Chamroon would not have been particularly concerned with legal reprisal considering his political connections, WTK's virtual legal sovereignty⁷, and the absence of forestry workers in the mountain areas surrounding WTK.⁸ Chamroon allowed that Thai farmers could clear mountain land nominally controlled by the Thai Government, but drew the line at his Hmong subjects. This policy says a lot about

⁷ As I argue in my Master's thesis, WTK was something of a city unto itself where Chamroon commanded political as well as ecclesiastical power. This situation was due to a complex of factors—including Chamroon's political connections, the legal status of the "temple", the particular type of tenure of lands under WTK's control, WTK's unorthodox beliefs, and the temple's isolated geography (for a fuller explanation see chapters three and four of Chambers 2013).

⁸ One forestry worker explained to me that Royal Forestry workers did not go into the mountains near WTK during the period high Hmong population at WTK. He bluntly attributed this to their fear of Hmong people.

Chamroon's attention to mainstream Thai discourses. In the 1980s proximate to the early 1990s period of heavy Lao Hmong migration into WTK there was a national debate that increasingly pointed to 'hill tribes' as creating deforestation (Gillogly 2004:127). Although much of the deforestation was due to commercial logging, many Thai's blamed upland minority groups like the Hmong for clearing too much land for swidden and other forms of shifting agriculture (Pinkaw 1999; Gillogly 2004:128) Though the claim does not seem to hold up to serious scrutiny (Delang 2002). In creating such a policy for the WTK Hmong population, Chamroon seems to be reforming WTK Hmong toward proper images of Thai modernity in the space that he controlled.

During this initial period of Hmong settlement, Chamroon's tendencies for developing the Hmong were exhibited in his use of less-than-material technologies of power and governmentality (Foucault 1995, McKinnon 2008: 282), in the sense that his projects did not begin in material form (though they certainly had material effects and results) but came first in the form of words—rules and regulations—that articulated themselves on the WTK landscape through human mediums. Chamroon's pseudo-legal measures—restrictions on settlement, agriculture, and sometimes animal slaughter—shaped ideas of territoriality and reformation of Hmong subjects. Rules were given in the hope that Hmong would manage themselves based on the rules, but streets were not paved, pipes were not laid, and statues were not built. It was not until the late 1990s that these projects were undertaken.

4.2 Charoen's Materially Oriented Hmong Development

It remains somewhat unclear when and why a shift toward building more material aspects of WTK development in Hmong areas occurred, but it is very likely that Charoen's leadership was key to the change. After Chamroon's passing in 1999, his younger brother Charoen succeeded to the abbotship. Charoen had previously overseen building projects in WTK's inner campus. Also, the temple's public relations monk recalls that around the year 1999, WTK leaders met with government representatives to address the issue of providing services and facilities for the Hmong population at WTK. He recalls that prior to the meeting the government had criticized WTK for not taking care of basic human needs for the Hmong at the temple. Quoting his recollection of a statement made by a government official toward WTK the monk states, "you [WTK] say you are merciful, but you are destroying human rights." The meeting in 1999 was an answer to this criticism and a call from the government to provide what WTK could not, most notably health facilities, adequate education, and other facilities. In the period that followed, WTK saw the completion of a school, clinic, water system, roads, and several monuments—including the Rama 9 and Buddha image projects I will discuss later.

Though Tong's story presents the change (from a hands-off approach to a more hands-on type of agency in WTK Hmong development) on the part of monk leaders as a clean segmented transition, it appears that Charoen was engaged in infrastructural projects just prior to the meeting, possibly at the behest of government criticisms or reactions to the broader discursive structurings regarding WTK heterodoxy and uplander development that I have already discussed. Most notably among these were, the construction of water

towers—to provide Hmong with easier access to water—and the extension of power lines to some parts of the Hmong village. The water system project was one of Charoen's crowning achievements that solved the major problem of access to adequate water for a large population in an area with no naturally occurring bodies of water.

Although there was a change in method it seems the broader goal of developing WTK Hmong through manipulation of spatial relationships seemed to stay relatively constant. However, in this latter period a new level of symbolism was added to the proposal of WTK Hmong development discourses. Temple authorities were now able to present a more complete set of the symbols of Thai nationality and proper modernity—nation, king, religion—for the consumption of their Hmong guests.

The Rama IX construction project is an example of modernization toward an ideal of respect for the Thai monarchy. Along a road that passes by group 1 of the Hmong village there is now constructed an enormous statue of Thailand's current and intensely revered King Bhumibhol Adulyadej otherwise known as Rama the Ninth. This enormous statue was constructed in the late 1990s and stands at approximately 50 feet tall and is surrounded by a wall with decorative embellishments. The statue is a multi-vocal symbol, both a 'civilizing tool'⁹ for Hmong and a signal of WTK's monarchical relationship to outside communities. Its positionality vis-à-vis a main Hmong thoroughfare is key to its meaning and indicative of the intentionality and goals of its construction. According to one monk resident of WTK since 1985, the road that the statue was built along was a Hmong creation. The road did not exist before Hmong families came to inhabit the Hmong village. After their settlement, a trail formed that provided the quickest access to the main road out of the temple. Overtime this road presumably became the primary means of entrance and exit for Hmong moving in and out of the temple, it was eventually paved in the early 2000s. Furthermore, the public relations monk, without prompting, informed me that the Rama IX statue was, in fact, built "for the Hmong." In the Thai national context it is obvious what this positioning meant for Hmong school children that passed it daily enroute to Than Thong Daeng School. They were made to show respect and obeisance to the revered monarch. In becoming habituated to this activity Hmong school children would have been taking part in an act common to most Thai school children, an act that may have been new to many of them. The discourse of 'orderly Hmong' seems magnified considering that these Hmong school children were encouraged by their Thai school teachers to walk to school in a single-file line and pay respects to the King in an orderly fashion. Furthermore, the public relations monk showed me several photographs of Hmong men in full Hmong apparel kneeling in respect before the statue. This is striking considering that these Lao Hmong men were usually not Thai citizens.

Regarding religion as an ideal of Thai modernity, WTK monks did not make strong efforts to proselytize Hmong to Buddhism, but they used building projects to expose

⁹ Here 'civilizing tool' is used to denote an instrument used by a governing subject (in this case Charoen) over objects of reformation (the Hmong at WTK). Although the Hmong at WTK were certainly civilized in their own way, Charoen would have used this 'civilizing tool' to bring them toward his ideal of civilization (which involved a respect for the Thai King).

Hmong to Buddhism. When asked directly if the temple intended to convert Hmong to Buddhism, many WTK monks were confident that this was not their primary concern, though a significant number of WTK Hmong claim to have converted to Buddhism at WTK. However, in contrast with the 'older' and more 'primitive' Animistic beliefs of Hmong (as many 'modern' Thais might attest), Buddhism is another, rather obvious yet important, aspect of Thai identity/modernity that temple authorities made sure to emplace in the lives of Hmong at WTK. Hmong at WTK were in a more habituated¹⁰ praxis surrounded by Buddhist images in their daily lives after a series of large Buddha images (approximately 10 feet high) were built in several of the groups within the Hmong village. Furthermore, as mentioned on page 9, by around 1997 Charoen was put in charge of building a water system for the Hmong village that eventually supplied Hmong inhabitants with potable drinking water that was pumped from wells into large towers and made available in large basins. This more general provision of water to the Hmong village was a signal to the Hmong and outsiders that WTK cared about and took care of its Hmong population. This fact was made quickly apparent when one looked at the top of each cylindrical water tower to see Luang Por Yai's name "Ong Khetamaracha" in Pali (Thai Theravada Buddhism's canonical language) neatly painted thereon reminding WTK Hmong that Luang Por Yai's followers provided them with water. Similar markings can be found on a number of other buildings, including the three storied building where the Hmong first made their home at WTK.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the story of Hmong development at Wat Tham Krabok in Saraburi is indicative of broad Thai discourses of modernizing and reforming backward unruly subjects. Furthermore, this WTK example shows how the understanding of particular individuals translated into a very direct form of development intervention. Though WTK Hmong have varied opinions of the time spent at the temple—ranging from love to hate—a large contingent is thankful to the abbots of the temple for giving them help in a time of need and a place to stay. In return, Hmong have adopted some temple leaders into their pantheon of revered ancestors. It could also be argued that WTK Hmong have taken on an identity unique from other groups in the Lao Hmong diaspora. A significant portion of Hmong of WTK call themselves Buddhist, though many continue traditional Hmong practices. Similarly, there seems to be more of them that identify with the Thai nation even after coming to the United States, even preferring to speak Thai rather than Hmong when given the chance. It would appear that Chamroon and Charoen saw some success in reforming some of their Hmong guests closer to an ideal of Thai modernity and development.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, that people are habituated to behaviors through common practices that occupy frequented spaces, speaks to my usage of this example. Charoen, as many others, seems to have understood this principle in deciding to construct the statue along a main Hmong thoroughfare.

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