(Re)defining Community Concerns in the Northern Thailand:

Gender, Ethnicity, and the Fight for Citizenship

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Introduction

Within the vast, interconnected networks that dictate the resources one can access and the paths they can walk, things are hardly distributed fairly. Various identities and positions within come to affect one's access to what they need to survive and thrive. However, these relationships are hardly fixed, and changes in social hierarchies at local, national, and even international scales can result in radical shifts in people's abilities to provide for their families and pursue their interests. Through the 20th and 21st centuries have been clear examples of this fluidity, with its citizens around the world experiencing significant changes to their day-to-day lives as globalization and shifting geopolitics have increasingly far-reaching effects. As both geographically and socially marginalized social groups of the country, upland peoples saw their position in comparison to the lowland government rapidly change from the time of Siam in the late 19th century to present day. During a time where focus on the economic, political, and social changes of Southeast Asian countries has been of particular note and focus, the evolving challenges faced by upland communities has generally failed to capture the same attention as, for example, the increasingly conservative politics of the Philippines or the shifting economic and political alliances between Southeast Asian nations and large countries such as China and the US.. Describing and assisting in upland peoples' transition to a more formal, *tangible* relationship with the Thai state has been a focus of some scholars and various aid and advocacy groups for some time, but there remains tremendous room for progress. Thailand's relationship with these populations has been of particular focus, given the particular complexities of the Thai nation-building project and historic interactions with many upland communities. As questions of Thai citizenship and the ethics of the Thai government's handling of upland DNA have captured some attention over the past decade, the need for increased attention is becoming clearer.

My own introduction to academia came through research into these very issues. Over a month and a half in the Summer of 2017, I conducted interviews with villagers of Huay Mak Liam, a small Dara'ang community near the town of Fang, to research how community members understand their relationship with the Thai government and lowland people. Dara'ang communities are relatively new to the region, with many in that town coming to Thailand from neighboring Shan State in Myanmar within the past 60-70 years, and many noted the difficulties in settling in. From being unable to own land to difficulties accessing basic public goods like schooling and medical care, present in all conversations with the specter of pending citizenship processes. Those with up-to-date and high-level identification cards were always quick to show them off, often with a complicated story of how they obtained it and a quick list of what access to local resources they gained access to as a result. The mayor of the town, an energetic young man named Ta, was excited to show us the water system and elementary school he had been able to secure for the town by petitioning foreigners in Chiang Mai for donations. His personal pride was a small corn field he had rented to save money for his son's future education, although he did note with concern that their identity as upland peoples could have negative consequences both for his son's admission odds as well as the legal stability of his property contract. The town was filled with families trying to find stability and permanence in their lives while not entirely being sure how that would be accomplished.

To a large extent, these responses were quite similar to those reported in the extant literature. Many papers have been written on the Thai government's obligation to help provide education.[1] Studies of microfinance programs and nonprofit grants abound in research on the political economy of development, proposing and critiquing ways in which non-state entities can

[1] Maitrarat, Openshaw, and Walshaw 2021; Tapingkae and Setti 1973; United Nations 2000; Arunsutalangkarn 2016.

fill the gaps.[2] Theorists like James Scott have described the "non-state" spaces of the Southeast Asian uplands quite famously. However, our interviews also included quite a few important elements that were not as clearly described. Dara'ang women described feeling their part of the community diminish over time, with childcare moving to schools, cultural education being deemphasized, and expectations from their husbands shifting. Men in these communities described the difficult and dangerous labor they undertook, often on farms or in factories, for minimal pay, as their lack of citizenship or another high-status ID card level barred them from other work. A group of elders who had been in the community for some time described it as somewhat unstable, as they noted the lack of ownership, historical and legal, over the land they occupied. For all of these people, the push for citizenship was a ticket for options, stability, and the potential for growth. But for all of these benefits, the path was simply too complicated to travel legitimately, and working with local government officials often meant operating largely under the table. Many were wary of Thai state efforts to emphasize Thai cultural traditions in the realms of healthcare and education, and almost every interviewed subject pushed back considerably on any notion of citizenship or birthright lending one of their own the status of *Thai*. While the original project was largely focused on describing the community's desire for additional state resources and connections with lowland populations, these interviews demonstrated a depth and specificity to the issues that, at the time, my fellow researchers and I were not aware of.

While research on broader consequences and relationships between upland people and the Thai state in regard to citizenship has been conducted, there continues to be a need for more work to be done that helps examine and document nuances such as these. Not only are these

[2] Asian Development Bank 2000; Roy 2010; Warnecke 2014; Jose and Chacko 2017.

understandings important for researchers, but for nonprofit organizations in the region focused on providing assistance to these communities with limited resources, this information is vital to ensure that efforts are well-targeted. Being able to refine definitions of key terms such as *women's empowerment* and *citizenship* that encapsulate local interpretations is crucial to ensure their desires and needs are being understood. To this end, various research groups and local organizations have pursued interview projects and surveys throughout the region to help build a more robust bank of data to be used as a resource for future work in the region. It is with one of these projects that I conducted my MIRS capstone project internship.

My particular project sought to help elaborate the particular relationship between gender and citizenship as experienced by a collection of upland populations throughout the Northern Thailand region. Through a large set of interviews spread from multiple communities, the goal was to help build more nuanced and specific understandings of this relationship as it was experienced by different upland groups. My own task within this project was to compile the initial database of survey results as they arrived from the field, engaging in basic quality checks and building preliminary connections and themes that could be furthered by others at the conclusion of my time with the group. The project was the collaboration of numerous agencies from both Thailand and the United States. My local points of contact were Amanda Flaim of Michigan State University and Cheryl Moyer of the University of Michigan, while other partners included the Indigenous Women's Network, the Indigenous Mountain People's Education and Cultural Association of Thailand, the Asia Indigenous People's Pact, and representatives from Chiang Mai University and Mae Fa Luang University. The cooperation between these groups was the result of a long history of collaboration regarding building literature and implementing public health interventions in pursuit of women's health objectives in the region, particularly

those of upland women. The collaboration between actors from a variety of backgrounds and institutional styles served as a critical element to the association's function and plans for achieving their goals.

My experiences with the collaborative project presented a clear depiction of some of the benefits and persistent challenges of such a pairing. While the project that I was initially brought on to work with became mired in bureaucratic delays, I was able to work with the group and learn much more about how upland communities and non-profit groups in the area operate and work around the shifting definitions for citizenship in the evolving Thai state. Ultimately, my main takeaways centered around the idea of citizenship as a symbol that differs in perception in different countries, and the particular benefits that working with local communities and advocate organizations can have regarding access and trust with local community members. While much of the day-to-day description of my work is discussed in my capstone journal, this paper will examine these ideas after first providing some background on immigration and upland-lowland relations in the region. This background helps us understand the perception of citizenship by upland people and how it has been shaped by and differs from Western notions. Finally, I will explore how collaborative projects such as these help demonstrate the shared goals and similarities between nonprofit and academic groups while simultaneously reproducing persistent inequalities that ultimately frame, limit, and contextualize international partnerships between Western academic institutions, like UM and even the most elite institutions in the Global South. Academic work focusing on the Thai uplands has been my entry point into academia at a graduate level, and this capstone project has demonstrated to me numerous pathways and directions with which I can continue my involvement after my academic career comes to an end.

Citizenship and Gender within Thailand

Studies on immigrant populations, their assimilation, acceptance, cultural shifts, and more, are plentiful across academic literature. A cursory search of academic literature yields a body of work numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and that number merely captures writing on the specific phenomenon of American immigration. The role of immigrants within society is a topic that has captured public opinion and discourse across the world for the history of the contemporary state, but the social and subsequent academic focus on a handful of key, often large, flows of people from a specific region to another often leads to populations being passed over. The stories and histories of these communities contain specific and nuanced experiences of peoples seeking to work through and escape from the restrictive category of *noncitizen*. Within their narratives can be found sources on localized cultural tradition, such as the impact on Canadian comedy by Ukrainian immigrants or the cultural impacts and urban development sourced from Slavic peoples settling in Michigan.[3] Alternatively, lessons and hard realities of the environments some communities entered into can help us better understand the difficulties inherent to immigration, as can be seen through the experiences and subsequent political contributions of radical-left Italian Immigrants to the US through the 1890s-1910s and the horrible social and political exclusion faced by Belgian immigrants into Britain during WWI.[4] Central to all understandings and lessons from the experiences of localized immigrant populations are conversations and framings in their own words. Without them, the unstoppable tide of the academic and nonprofit industrial complexes' drive for consumption renders the nuances of their lived experiences moot. The framing of *upland peoples* in Northern Thailand encapsulates a multitude of specific ethnic identities, community histories, and relations with the

[3] Cheladyn, 2018; Cetinich 2003.
[4] Jenkinson 2016; Bencivenni 2011.

state that offer unique viewpoints to the development of the modern Thai state. The working group I had my internship alongside sought to further uplift and amplify these voices, and build on the preexisting understanding of this region built by activists, advocates, and academics.

The preexisting context surrounding the national status and shifting cultural norms of upland communities in Thailand, in fact throughout the Southeast Asian region, is complex and in many ways unique to the area. Much of Northern Thailand resides within a large, often unrecognized space of remote, mountainous regions throughout mainland South and Southeast Asia labeled by James Scott as "Zomia."[5] The peoples of the region share some general features and qualities, but their coalescence into a tangible collection of cultures stems from their shared distancing from the formation of state authority. Having generally moved further upland to avoid the often violent incursions from growing political entities in neighboring lowland regions, the peoples of Zomia developed a shared status outside traditional government structures.[6] The mountainous locale made exerting governing control and social influence over these communities challenging, a concept defined as *friction of distance*, and the region of Zomia was largely considered a sort of "non-state space" for some time, until the development of technology and state power, particularly after WWII, came to overcome these challenges.[7]

Implicit within upland communities' move away from state structures, as noted within the works of Scott and others, is a rejection of the idea of a "state" in both a historic and Western sense.[8] Thus, the introduction and rapid adoption of the Western definition and structure of a modern nation state by the newly established Thai government left many individuals suddenly within the bounds and jurisdiction of governing entities that they did not contribute to, serve

[5] Scott, 2009
[6] Scott, 2009; Johnson 2006; McCaw et. al 2021
[7] Scott 2009.
[8] Scott 2009.

within, or stand with. Technological advances limited the utility of the *friction of distance*, and the new powers and concepts wrapped around the notion of the modern state has led lowland governments to renew their claims of authority over these upland regions and the people within.[9] As the last half of the twentieth century brought to completion the rise and global dominance of the nation state as an international—Western driven—project, communities throughout the Zomia region found themselves having to prove their dedication, devotion, and loyalty in order to receive the benefits of state membership. The feasibility of a non-state space has largely been lost.

Within Thailand, questions surrounding upland community members' status as citizens, legal residents, refugees, or other situational labels have persisted and changed throughout the contemporary era. While many upland people now actively seek citizenship status , collection of public goods has proven complicated. The development of Thai citizenship has seen it become intertwined with membership of or proximity to lowland peoples of the Tai ethnic group, particularly those around Bangkok, and this relationship has complicated attempts by Thailand to implement a familiar birthright citizenship process.[10] To magnify this problem, many communities have lived in their region for many generations, meaning they lack the status as refugees or recent migrants and the different documentation, or category of lack thereof, that comes with it .[11] This lack of documentation creates a myriad of legal and functional problems for upland communities, as this lack of tangible documentation creates significant hurdles for communities seeking public goods from the Thai state.

Accessible and affordable healthcare is one of the most important resources that upland peoples mentioned, both through the interviews noted in my internship as well as during my

[9] Aung 2014.
[10] Morton and Baird 2019.
[11] Morton and Baird 2019.

personal research. Given the international acclaim of the Thai universal healthcare system, international observers are often surprised by the upland community's lack of access to healthcare.[12] Prior to the transition to a universal healthcare plan by the Thai state, upland populations saw some access to coverage through the patchwork of healthcare options offered by public and private sources.[13] The introduction of universal healthcare came with a renewed effort by the state to "properly identify" and categorize affected populations, continuing and accelerating a revision of ID cards and immigration documents that became the primary means by which formerly stateless, upland populations could access healthcare.[14] As a result, many families face a situation with no feasible options. While general interest in some medical services, particularly preventative care, is high, parents must face the challenges of distance to clinics–often in the lowland regions–, potential arrests or legal troubles that could arise during their travels, and the necessitated time of work.[15] As a result, upland communities, particularly recent upland refugee populations from Myanmar, have had significantly decreased levels of overall health.[16] Clearly, the unclear and fluid nature of citizenship for upland peoples renders an oft-touted Thai public good functionally distant and inaccessible.

Even regarding the primary path paths presented by the Thai government to gain citizenship through the ideal of birthright citizenship, upland peoples have a murky path to follow. The idea is–ideally–simple: a child born in Thailand will be Thai, as is the case in many countries around the world. In actuality, the connection introduces a myriad of complicating factors to the process of obtaining rights and recognition by the state. The interlinkage of one's birth location with their citizenship status and thus the resources they are entitled to under the

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[12] McCaw et al. 2021.
[13] Harris 2013, 116.
[14] Harris 2013, 117-118; Reddy 2015.
[15] Canavati, S. et. al. 2011, 529.
[16] Suwanvanichkij, Voravit, 2008.

law is a complicated and fraught exercise. Legally, the process has undergone many permutations over the years, with key court cases and amendments resulting in "different standards for acquisition of Thai nationality" for different ethnic groups within the country.[17] Prior relationships between certain ethnic populations and Thai state authorities play a crucial role in predicting outcomes of citizenship application on a communal level, and these relations also run parallel with differences in literacy and education levels which also are tremendously important for navigating the process.[18] Considering the ideal outcome of birthright citizenship as a national policy is to increase the ease by which residents of a state can access its resources, these compounding factors imply a significant disconnect between the parties involved.

These issues of access are not to suggest that birthright citizenship as a process is not being sought or engaged with. The policy is well-known, and a basic route for achieving it exists, as demonstrated by the strong, consistent utilization of the public health system's antenatal care by Shan migrants in the Chiang Mai urban region.[19] However, this utilization introduces other problems in implementation. The needed consistent engagement with the necessary medical and legal resources relies on such things as clear and available instructions for upland families and nearby health clinics, the absence of which makes certified hospital births complicated for many upland families to achieve. The recent alternative of DNA testing has its own set of ethical, logistical, and bureaucratic hurdles and is in many ways even less accessible.[20] On a larger level, birthright citizenship results in a legal objectification of the bodies of upland women, with their capacity to give birth and thus bestow nationality on their children rendering them generators of community inclusion in a broader struggle for public goods.[21] As the absence of key resources,

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[17] Kampan and Tanielian 2017.
[18] Flaim 2017, 154.
[19] Seo, Bo Kyeong 2016: 485-486.
[20] Flaim 2017.
[21] Abji and Larios 2019.

such as consistent education, healthcare, and stable employment, continue, these policies will continue to have a particularly heavy impact on women through the critical importance placed on their childbearing capacity.

These healthcare inequities facing upland communities have come to rest a significantly disproportionate burden on the shoulders of upland women. Broader studies on immigration note the interactions between the position of an immigrant, or other non-citizen statuses, and pre-existing gender hierarchies, suggesting that instabilities resulting from the lack of citizenship deepen gendered distributions of power within the home.[22] Given the predominant role that upland women play in family life and childcare, they face the brunt of policies and environments that limit their ability to secure care for themselves and their families. While the aforementioned barriers to care apply here as well, women face additional pressures surrounding the time required to pursue medical care, particularly preventative care. Upland women note that pursuing checkups, antenatal care, or vaccination appointments often requires not only taking a day off of work, but also finding alternative sources of family and household care.[23] For families already operating on the financial margins, that time expenditure is difficult to justify, even when routes are available. Upland women also have considerably greater pressures to maintain their health given common gender-based power imbalances in many families. Some Shan migrant women with HIV choose to not disclose their status to their partners, fearing the consequences of being seen as unable to continue to provide that crucial family role and perhaps left by their partners.[24] Upland women exist at the nexus of a complicated web of intersecting identities that result in a significantly challenging environment to simply exist within. While many researchers have engaged in teasing out relations between pairs or trios of said factors, the desires and

[22] Castaneda, H., et. al, 2015.
[23] Thummapol, Barton, and Park, 2018.
[24] Ayuttacorn A., et. al, 2019.

culturally-specific experiences of women across various upland ethnic groups are often overlooked.

Capstone Project in Context

The projects I worked on during my capstone internship project sought to help bring greater clarity to important and oft-overlooked subpopulations of these upland communities. Through interviews and surveys from different ethnic groups and refugee villages throughout the uplands of Northern Thailand, including both men and women, conducted by members of our collaborative working group, we were working to pull together more nuanced understandings of their approach to the key ideological issues driving the nonprofit and research spaces. The actual practical value of vague ideals of *women's empowerment* or *citizenship* would ideally be seen with greater detail through the interviews. Due to a set of hurdles that arose during the project regarding payment flows and leadership changes, these data were not provided My own brief, introductory overview of their content demonstrated a much greater concern around structural hurdles in the pursuit of proper legal documentation and equitable access to public goods in the family structure, as opposed to internal drives towards more symbolic or nationalist interpretations. Ideally, the eventual outcomes of these projects will help both non-profit organizations operating in the area as well as future researchers tackling the topics at hand.

Building a more detailed and comprehensive dataset from which local insights on key topics can be gleaned and built upon will help generate more useful projects. Nonprofit groups, academics, and, perhaps more importantly, the Thai government would be able to engage in projects and studies with more care and precision if the voices of their citizens and research subjects were properly heard and incorporated. In many ways, the work from my internship to

further examine and explore these perceptions helps represent a larger tension in the core of Western international studies, political science, and other social sciences: that of different ways of seeing the world through different eyes. Taking the time to understand the goals of these communities in their own words helps us understand the context of their experiences, but they continue to operate and exist within a framework of understanding immigrant experiences grounded and fixed in ideas, frameworks, and themes founded and developed in the West. The academic and government-oriented projects through which Western notions of citizenship and identity have developed represent not only a specific viewpoint but also reflect desires to organize and understand the world in ways that reify the dominance of certain perspectives on history and the world. Thus, knowing the context surrounding upland communities is only the first step in properly and efficiently translating academic work and theory into practical benefits to their lives. The next, crucial step is to critically examine the idea of moving beyond simple cultural *transposition* in our international projects, seeking instead a goal of conceptual *translation*.

Conceptual Translation in Practice

The practice of translation writ large in academia, particularly international studies, is omnipresent in a world and community where international cooperation, such as in my own intern organization, and cross-cultural studies are becoming increasingly common. In the professional world, translation allows business transactions to go through with minimal avoidable difficulties, and the use of translators and translated documents allow corporations to interact with their employees and customers around the world. However, when we seek to bridge the gap between different cultures, the act of translation goes beyond language, extending to the

very concepts, ideologies, and philosophies that underlie our beliefs and goals. A common critique of translation rests in the inability to strip translated works of the biases and implicit author biases that guide their selection of unclear phrases or missed turns-of-phrase. On a basic level, even supposedly simple translated works, such as the fairy tale *Pinnochio*, have been shown to have significantly different meanings and messages as they're translated into different languages, even simply by different publishing houses.[25] The implications of translation's unreliability are significant, particularly in projects such as my own, where the ultimate goal of processing and recording various community standpoints on social/political concepts ultimately must be run through the filter of language and imperfect translators. Given the core role this conflict holds over the work of my capstone internship, its intricacies as they apply will be examined here.

To turn to a more tangible discussion of translation in closer proximity to the topics contained within my capstone project, it is worth examining the origins of birthright citizenship as a concept that has been implemented by many countries around the world, including Thailand. The very idea of contemporary citizenship is tied to that of the nation-state itself. As both concepts have developed through the late 14th century to present day, it has become clear that their implementation differs significantly between the Western, formerly colonial powers wherein they were born and the post-colonial environments where they were often foisted upon.[26] While it would certainly be inaccurate to suggest that cultural notions similar to a contemporary *citizen* did not exist prior to colonial encounter, the introduction of Western conceptions of citizenship has been argued to be a means of obscuring traditional discourses through the veil of 'legitimacy' and 'development'.[27] However, it is not just external colonization

[25] Valerio 2013.
[26] Berenschot, Nordholt, and Bakker 2016, 1-6.
[27] Isin 2012.k

that matters in this case. As noted above, much of the colonization experienced by upland communities has come from nearby, with lowland people's continued growth of power into the uplands has come with a pressing and long-term imposition of their culture, governance, and norms over parts of upland communities throughout Southeast Asia. Thus, while the idea of citizenship in a Western sense is certainly externally sourced, the complicated association between citizenship, ethnicity, and community elevation that has arisen from lowland communities is, in many ways, less desirable. All this is simply to say that the question of how *citizenship* is viewed by the communities whose interviews I reviewed can be traced back to this original sin of cultural transposition, the overriding of organically developed ideas of the political subject by colonizing influences.

With the implementation of contemporary citizenship fraught with these concerns of ideological intrusion, the solutions to address it hold similar concerns. Birthright citizenship as a means by which citizenship can be divested to the appropriate populations is an institution resting on many legs, from ideals of democratic self-governance to generational perpetuation and even bureaucratic convenience.[28] While the efficacy of this system is oft-debated, there are important ways in which birthright citizenship and the theory undergirding its construction shift the power dynamics within and between upland communities. Western nation-building projects have long had a focus on the biological 'construction' of citizenship and a national population through the capitalization on women's childbearing capacity. Feminist scholars have discussed at length not only the important role that childbirth plays in the construction of the myth of "common origin" of a people from which to gain their national identity, but also the implicit ties it makes between citizenship and biological or genetic elements of ones circumstances.[29] It is

[28] Shachar 2009, 134.
[29] Yuval-Davis 1997, 26-31.

also clear that the inherent linkage of family and politics "in the discourses of citizenship" is itself a remnant of Western political philosophy.[30] The entire discourse surrounding this troublesome situation befalling upland communities and entangling their reproductive practices in future generations' receiving of rights and public goods can be tied back to the implementation of governing norms rooted in Western political philosophy..

This state of affairs helps explain the necessity of understanding relationships between the state and marginalized communities in ways that represent their particular lived experiences. To refocus the discussion on questions of citizenship, there is evidence that citizenship as a symbolic thing to reach for differs in the uplands of Thailand compared to in Western nations. Despite continued limited opportunities for legal immigrants into the United States, some young people from recently immigrated families continue to see further solidification of their citizen status as a potential path towards greater social integration and access to the ephemeral "American Dream."[31] This can be contrasted with research of Dara'ang communities in the Fang region of Thailand, as well as nearby nonprofit organizations helping them parse the complicated path of ID cards and medical documentation, where members of those communities see citizenship as a direct prerequisite for the acquisition of crucial legal rights, such as land ownership and more stable employment. Oftentimes, people in these communities explicitly disconnected the notion of citizenship from an association with a broader Thai community identity or any other symbolic importance.[32] Explanations for this difference are likely varied, although the development of "Thainess," or a specific property of Thai citizens in the national tradition, is worth noting. Under King Rama IV (r. 1910-1914), the *tai* lowland peoples, those originating from historic lowland urban centers such as Ayutthaya, became *Thai* through the

[30] Joseph 2005, 149.
[31] Rumbaut and Komaie 2010.
[32] McCaw, Marcotte, and Vieille 2022.

newly developing nation-state's adoption of Western nationalism through the preexisting dominance of said ethnic group.[33] The distinct and relatively contemporary connection of ethnic identity (*tai)* with the symbolic core of Thai citizenship (*thainess*), it is more clear how the attraction towards citizenship as a symbolic status to achieve is not highly prioritized by upland communities. This view of the process was reinforced in the interviews I read through for my internship, as achieving citizenship was portrayed most often through the tangible ways it would benefit the affected party or the opaque bureaucratic system that shrouded it.

Academic and Professional Linkages

As should be clear through the entirety of this paper, the questions and troubles plaguing the upland communities in Northern Thailand are quite complicated, both in terms of their literal components as well as the difficulties inherent in grappling with them in pursuit of solutions. The literal circumstances of their legal status and shifting power dynamics within communities and households, as well as the sheer number of distinct ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds, pose difficult problems for nonprofits to address in overarching ways. From an academic standpoint, research on these communities and their interests requires precise care in order to engage in translation activities without the unnoticed imposition of the scholar's own beliefs and philosophies while also noting that the crises at play are decidedly marked by Western colonialism and neo imperialism in ways that are now fundamental to many of the conflicts they face. The situation is thorny on many levels, so many organizations that engage in work in this region with necessary care. Often, this requires collaboration between arenas, with nonprofit organizations, international government groups such as the UN, academics, and the Thai state working together to build necessary datasets, properly target aid efforts, and obtain the

[33] Renard 2006, 295.

necessary resources to reach communities in need through mountainous terrains. My own capstone worked through one such collaboration, with my partners originating from US and Thai Universities (Michigan State, University of Michigan, Chiang Mai University, and Mae Fa Luang University) and nonprofits, including the Asia Indigenous People's Pact, the Indigenous Women's Network, and others. My experiences help demonstrate some of the benefits and complications of such cross-sourced efforts.

One important distinction between local nonprofit groups and international academic initiatives is the significant difference in trust offered by interview subjects. A core principle of survey interviews has long been the stranger-interviewer norm, where subjects are supposedly more likely to speak to a passing stranger on basic research topics, and the ensuing practice of obtaining a group of highly trained interviews to be spread into the targeted communities is quite common.[34] However, interrogation of this norm in the late 20th and early 21st century have demonstrated that not only does the identity of the researcher have a significant effect on subject trust, but local and even familiar interviewers are significantly more likely in obtaining honest and detailed responses, particularly regards to Western data collection in Global South countries.[35] Through my work with these interviews during my internship, the veracity of these claims was abundantly clear, but their application in this context was a bit more complicated.

Most of our interviewers were either residents of Northern Thailand or had significant personal experience in the subject communities. Recorded conversations covered a great deal of ground and touched on sensitive topics with subjects from a variety of demographic groups within the community populations. While an assessment of the honesty of said interviews was not conducted during my time there, conversations with nonprofit workers made it clear that the

[34] Simmel 1950, 402-408.
[35] Gopal et. al. 2021; Weinreb, Sana, and Stecklov 2018; Weinreb, Sana, and Stecklov 2016.

trust was reciprocated back towards those they spoke with. This was especially notable for myself given my own experience doing research in the region for a prior article, where the lack of a relationship between myself and those I was working with sometimes made it difficult to get detailed responses on sensitive topics surrounding opinions of the state and experiences with cross-border migration. Based on the patterns and studies cited above, one may assume that the Thai-based researchers had an easier time building these relationships, but the dynamic is complicated. While many of those in our working group were Thai, their status as lowland people sometimes created barriers with upland community members given the historic tension between the groupings. Many of the American-based researchers had long-standing relationships with many, but not all, of the community members surveyed, with their international status allowing them to sidestep some of the aforementioned tension. While there were select individuals from the upland in the group, they were the minority. With these diverse and complicated relationships to the target communities, all parties brought their own networks and existing relationships, allowing a much wider array of communities to be reached. Unfortunately, this incredible resource of a group of local or familiar researchers at the disposal of our working group was only available for specific elements of my work, and that brings to note a challenge of these sorts of nonprofit-academic partnerships: bureaucracy and funding challenges.

As has been discussed in depth in my capstone journal entries, funding challenges plagued what was supposed to be the primary focus on my work. Due to a sudden leadership shift at the top of the organization and lacking clarity on where critical grant money was to be disbursed, many field researchers and interns, including myself, found that the money they relied upon was not going to be available, leading to the interviewers ceasing their work until they were paid. This itself is not entirely uncommon, as nonprofit organizations are well-known for

challenges with funding allocations, both in deliberate misallocations and in the financial realities of working with tight budgets.[36] Further complicating matters are non-profits' general pursuit of revenue streams that may alienate them in regard to their advocacy for the community.[37] In this environment, academic institutions and government grants would seem a perfect solution, offering clarity of planned funding and consistent expectations of available funds. In fact, non-profit organizations with work primarily working around issues of political advocacy and citizen engagement, such as those I worked with during my capstone, are much more likely to rely on these sorts of funds than non-profits with other aims.[38] Other challenges became clear as my internship continued.

Academic associations and government funding mechanisms, particularly those from outside the non-profit's country of operation, are often difficult to navigate once a financial problem arises. Financial processes across institutions and between entities in separate countries can take a great deal of time, and such disruptions can be devastating for groups that rely on consistency to maintain their projects' margins.[39] This can be particularly true for many Global South nonprofits that rely on non-GS governments and institutions, highlighting the continued power discrepancies between the two regions both within and outside of this particular sphere.[40] Research grants from these sources are known to have consistent problems with bias against marginalized communities, yet the nature of the processes and the scale of the institutions at play makes nailing down specific issues methodologically challenging.[41] In comparison, local revenue sources could hypothetically be consulted with relatively high speed to develop a solution if a funding break or disruption occurred, but that expediency can't always be relied upon when the

[36] Timm 2016; Archambeault, Webber, and Greenlee 2014.
[37] Sosin 2011.
[38] Moulton and Eckerd 2011.
[39] Moulton and Eckerd 2011.
[40] Abouzeid et. al. 2022.
[41] Sato, Gygax, Randall, and Mast 2021.

gaps, both physical and institutional between organizations and their funding mechanisms are significant.

This problem of securing funding was prominent throughout my capstone project. The Women's Empowerment Survey that was mostly complete when my position began ground to a halt when leadership involved with handling grant funding left the project. Attempts to address this break ran into significant hurdles, both from the processes of communicating needs and appropriate documents up and down the chain to the necessary offices and desks and from the thorny process of distributing large sums of money overseas in a hurry. Ultimately, the interviewers weren't paid for some time, during which the work on finishing conducting and, crucially, translating and preparing the interviews for my data organization role came to a grinding halt. While the multi-faceted nature of the organization's many contributing organizations meant that my time could be filled with a variety of administrative tasks, mapping opportunities, and other qualitative coding opportunities, the planned focus for my time was not able to be achieved. From conversations with many delightful coworkers from many backgrounds, it is clear that this experience is hardly uncommon. Instability within these sorts of collaborative efforts is ultimately, if unfortunately, predictable. How my internship was handled after the problems arose, however, lends itself to the benefits of these sorts of partnerships.

That capacity for engagement with a variety of qualified, fascinating, and diverse individuals within this interrupted program demonstrates many of the ways in which academic and nonprofit (or other community-oriented associations) partners can provide mutual benefit for each other. Across many of these collaborations in a general sense, one of the strongest drivers for the formation of these partnerships is the ability to utilize the other party's resources and experiences for a greater total mutual benefit.[42] Researchers get an opportunity to see their

[42] Berzin and Dearing 2019.

theories and hypotheses developed and tested in real-world environments, and community groups obtain additional financial and human resources to address pressing problems in their community. Within our own project, the potential for mutual benefit is clear, but the relationships are complicated. Many key researchers from academic posts have a distinctly activist-oriented approach to their work. As is the case with many researchers doing work with marginalized communities, a primary goal for their projects is for the assistance on problems and needs of said group. Unfortunately, as noted above, the structural hurdles within academic spaces can create logistical and bureaucratic hurdles that are more challenging to clear with this approach alone, and the line between the two types of work can be hazy at best. Given the challenges present in properly maximizing the effectiveness of aid projects and upland engagement projects with sometimes limited funding, the nonprofits working alongside our organization sought to utilize the data and interviews collected to better target their efforts for future work. For all parties of the working group, the sharing of relationships and connections held both by those in the local nonprofit organizations as well as by the academic researchers is an incredibly valuable resource to build crucial networks of trust while developing better frameworks for future research and projects to explore. The success of both of these ventures significantly benefits from the unique resources held by the other.

Another benefit of this sort of partnership is through the ability of local groups to help direct the actions of academic or non-local actors towards topics of most concern. As was discussed in the prior section on translations, every community is going to have a different relationship to power structures, both local and international, that will modify their perception of important social concepts and result in specific needs. Academics and government institutions traditionally from a very top-down perspective, with a limited proximity to these issues

sometimes hindering their ability to see these nuances and react to them with proper care and attention. Comparative politics is a common example of this phenomenon, where small, very local differences can grow and expand to create large gaps in overarching research studies that may be missed.[43] Engaging with non-profits in the area can operate quite similarly to other community associations, which are generally known to help create projects and exercises that are more relevant and thus save time and money for the organizations behind it.[44] This may be particularly relevant in parts of the world that are traditionally overlooked by academics and thus have an absence of large-scale, substantive work generated directly from community engagements, such as upland communities in Thailand and the *Zomia* region as a whole. Bibliographies of grant proposals, briefs, and articles regarding the region are filled with the same handful of key authors, creating what can feel like an echo chamber at more distant levels of academic discourse. In this context, these partnerships with local advocates and community leaders can be viewed as crucial to build and diversify the sorts of messaging and sourcing that makes its way up the academic ladder.

Of course, for these benefits to continue to exist, the role of non-profits as community-oriented and generally focused on local betterment must also continue. The 21st century has brought with it a pattern of the professionalization of nonprofit organizations. This trend can be ascribed to a variety of factors, from the continued financial challenges noted above to the continued degradation of service provisions in many communities as neoliberal economic policies continue to reign supreme, but that it is occurring is hardly in question.[45] This trend brings with it a variety of departures from community-oriented nonprofit groups or tax-funded state run public services. This has attended shifting employment priority to those with

[43] Van Deth 1998, 22-24.
[44] Ward, Mazul, Barry, and Harley 2017; King et. al. 2015.
[45] Padejski 2021; Timm 2016; Hwang and Powell 2009.

"professional expertise" and traditional "credentials of merit" as well as shifting priorities more directly towards continued growth and financial stability over community outcomes.[46] It is not hard to see how these goals can complicate the traditional utility of nonprofit groups in community oriented spaces. Moving away from the local knowledge and community focus that allows many groups to develop and thrive complicates their ability to build and maintain trust with local figures and stay close to the ideological and practical needs of the community. Social expectations for these groups that rely on this proximity and reflection of community needs would likely decrease under these circumstances.[47] Smaller groups outside the public eye can feel these pressures more acutely.

Working alongside academic groups can, ideally, help reinforce the people-focused outcomes that these small groups seek, thanks to the promises of mutual benefit and increased availability of funding, however complicated, that come with those partnerships. During my internship, the hours spent working alongside such a wide array of nonprofit initiatives, government-funded research projects, and academics from both Thailand and the US demonstrated this utility with great clarity. While my time with them was somewhat turbulent due to matters largely out of their control, the collection of dedicated, skilled individuals was able to consistently make progress on their ideological goals, diverting assets to other projects and ideas, new and old, and putting in the effort required to build networks of interconnection that will likely be the foundations for future collaborative works. My experience would not have been nearly as valuable a development experience without the unique elements and resources put forward by all the groups involved.

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[46] Hwang and Powell 2009, 272-275.
[47] Sosin 2011.

Conclusion

After concluding my capstone internship, I have gained a much more expansive and comprehensive understanding of the communities and topics that introduced me to formal academia. Reading through the interviews of individuals from a far more diverse group of communities and backgrounds than I spoke to back in 2017 demonstrated how concerns could differ so significantly in adjacent towns. Where my prior work painted a picture of these peoples' pursuit of citizenship influencing all walks of their lives, my internship filled in many of these gaps to show how and why these interactions occurred as they did. It is also undoubtedly true that my coursework and valuable conversations through my graduate program themselves prepared me to properly engage with these stories. However, as was the case at the conclusion of my initial foray into Thai upland community politics, it is abundantly clear that what is left to learn is vast. There are some who liken the work of activists, advocates, and like-minded academics to that of archivists and storytellers, preserving and magnifying the voices and experiences of the marginalized and ensuring these stories are told. These stories and narratives will naturally continue and expand as the central communities grow and change. Countless people across the globe have, and will continue to, dedicate their lives to the understanding and improvement of the problems and challenges facing these communities, and their means of doing so will vary as well. My contributions during this capstone project were a small piece of a snapshot of upland community expression, and my time doing this work has positively contributed to my ability and interest in doing so further.

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