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From Bhumibol Dam to Yuam Water Diversion: Exploring the Price of Development "That Cannot Yet Be Counted" Through the Voice of the Sor and the Work of Som Supaparinya

By Chonnicha Thapumin

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"...เปิ้นก่อว่าบ้านเกิดเมืองนอน อยู่เต้า ใดมันก่อตึงบ่ก้าย ก่อถ้าน้ำเขื่อนมันบ่ขึ้นมาไล่ ตึงบ่ขอไปตาง ใด คึดฮอดบ้านหลังบ้านเก่า เป๋นดีง่อมอกง่อม ใจ๋ บางฮ่อมน้ำต๋าปอไหล ง่อมหาสวนปู่สวนย่า..."

(They used to say the heart never tires of home. Had the dam not risen, we would never have run. Now the old house where we once lived, the garden our grandparents once tended, survive as longing and tears.)

So says an excerpt from "ซอน้ำท่วมวังลุง" (Sor Nam Thuam Wang Lung).[1]



แก้วต๋าไหล - ซอน้ำท่วมวังลุง
มนต์ นครเชียงใหม่






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I first heard this song by Thai folk musician Por Kaew Ta Lai while researching a feature-length documentary, *In That DAMMMN Old Day* (working title), which I am making with collaborator **Torfan Kanthamoon**. An environmental communicator focused on renewable energy, Torfan is also a descendant of villagers from Huai Hin Dam who were forced to flee the floodwaters caused by the construction of the Bhumibol Dam, relocating to a new village to begin their lives anew.

This encounter led us to artist Som Supaparinya's exhibition, *รู ป ระ ลึก (MO NUM EN TS)*, at the Jim Thompson Art Center in Bangkok, held between December 4, 2025 and March 29, 2026.[2] Together, Por Kaew Ta Lai's folk song about a flooded Thai village and Supaparinya's moving-image and multimedia works offered critical points of entry into our documentary research—and into the disparity between official state narratives of development's "benefits" and the impacts borne by communities uprooted and displaced by the project.



Still from the rough cut of In That DAMMMN Old Day (working title),
a feature-length documentary by Chonnicha Thaphumin and Torfan Kanthamoon

In 1953, on the heels of WWII, Thailand's Committee for Considering the Construction of Power Plants Throughout the Kingdom approved the construction of the Bhumibol Dam.[3] The dam became the country's first hydroelectric dam, as well as a multipurpose dam built to block the Ping River, serving tourism and agricultural purposes—particularly during the dry season—for people in the provinces of Tak, Kamphaeng Phet, and the Chao Phraya basin.[4]

Or so says the account I have been taught since childhood, through school and television media, where the benefits Thai people were to receive from the dam were repeatedly presented.

"Sor Nam Thuam Wang Lung" was among the first accounts I encountered from the villagers' side of the story, and it unsettled that familiar version of the events. The song recounts the displacement caused by the flooding—*a direct consequence of the Bhumibol Dam's construction*—which forced people in the districts of Hod and Doi Tao in Chiang Mai province from their homes, families torn apart across resettlement areas whose names recur throughout the song.

The lyrics convey deep hardship and longing for the old home once inhabited and the way of life once lived, only for everything to have been irrevocably changed by

what happened. Throughout the performance of the sor, that inescapable dilemma becomes impossible to overlook: *reluctance to accept, yet powerlessness to act*.

"...มันหยังมาแสนตุ๊กโขตุ๊กขัง เพราะรัฐบาล กั้นเขื่อน ละพ่องก่อบ่ไหว บ่เฟือน จะขอต๋าย ใกล้น้ำแม่ปิง พ่องว่าเป๋นอันตุ๊กอันยาก ทำ ใจ๋จะจาก ตี้อยู่ตี้กิ๋น เมื่อรัฐบาลมาแก้เงินตี้ดิน ก่ออยู่บ่ได้ เด็ดขาด..."

(Why must sorrow cut so deep? The government raised the dam, and we were left to leave. I had wished only to die beside the Ping. To abandon the place that fed and formed you, you must steel the heart. Yet once payment came for the land, staying was no longer ours to choose.)

Beyond the stories carried by the song, Torfan and I also heard from people who had lived through this history themselves. Torfan asked her grandparents about their memories of those events. They told us what it was like when they first arrived at the new house: *"When we first moved here, there was no electricity and no water. We had to carry buckets and walk up to the stream to fetch water."* Torfan then asked them: *"If you could choose, without any other factors involved, would you prefer to live in the old house or the new one you moved to?"*[5]

"We'd rather live in the old house," they both answered loudly and in unison. *"[Back at the old house] we could grow anything we liked. There used to be coconuts, mangoes, jackfruit, all sorts of things,"* her grandmother explained in a bright tone, before her grandfather added his closing remark: *"Looking at it now, we probably would have been much better off than we are today, if we had stayed in the old house."*

For over 60 years, Torfan's grandparents and many other villagers never received compensation from the dam's constructors. And yet, this history does not remain confined to memory. Worse still, its unresolved tragedy may be returning to them in another form: the Yuam Water Diversion Project, a government water management scheme that has passed the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and is scheduled to be built in the near future.[6]

In March 2025, news outlet Lanner reported on the legal proceedings against the project, which would construct a water transport tunnel through the mountains, spanning over 60 kilometers across three provinces: Mae Hong Son, Tak, and Chiang Mai. Once again, the project could lead to another round of forced displacement, repeating a tragedy from the past.

The villagers affected by this incomplete EIA therefore came together to file a case with the Chiang Mai Administrative Court on October 18, 2023, seeking an investigation into the project's procedures. Their action prompted Torfan and me to look more closely at how clearly the project's benefits and drawbacks had actually been understood. We began researching the Yuam Water Diversion Project and impacts that followed the construction of the Bhumibol Dam.



Map of the Project to Increase Water Supply for Bhumibol Dam (Yuam Water Diversion).
Image source: https://www.salween.info/

Between 1957 and 1964, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) recorded video footage of the Bhumibol Dam's construction process, later compiled into the documentary *Bhumibol Dam*.[7] The film depicts the allocation of land through the self-help land settlement, presenting the state's efforts to compensate for the damages caused by the dam's flooding of villagers' land in the provinces of Tak, Lamphun, and Chiang Mai—in addition to compulsory land acquisition at a compensation rate of THB 400 per rai (adjusted for inflation: approximately THB 4,200–4,700).[8]

The documentary also recounts how, during land allocation, the area was divided into *"Plaeng"* (plots) and distributed among the villagers. It also records how residents of Hod District were directed to relocate to the higher-elevation Doi Tao District, an area the state assessed to be beyond the reach of the dam's rising waters. Today, the village names Plaeng 1, Plaeng 2, Plaeng 4, Plaeng 5, and Plaeng 8 can still be found in the Doi Tao district — lingering remnants of this forced relocation.

Yet this compensation appeared to be an ineffective solution, as the land was of little real benefit to the villagers' agricultural livelihoods. The land had not been cleared or prepared for planting, and its soil was not fertile enough to sustain the crops they had once grown on the land that now lay submerged deep beneath the Bhumibol Dam.

"...ขออย่าไปว่า อ้ายแก้วต๋ำไหล จ้างแป๋งกำลมมาอู้มาบอก..." ผู้ขับร้องจำเป็นต้องย้ำหนักหนาว่าเรื่องเล่านี้คือความจริง ไม่ใช่แค่ลมปาก หรือเรื่องที่กุขึ้นมาจากตัวเขาเพียงลำพัง แต่มันคือเรื่องจริงที่เกิดขึ้น เขาทำเพียงแค่สะท้อนมันออกมาผ่านเสียงเพลงนี้

("Do not say Ai Kaew Ta Lai was paid to make these words." The singer insists that Sor Nam Thuam Wang Lung is no made-up lament: it bears witness to what truly happened, held and handed on in song.)

One piece of evidence that illuminates the state's mode of thinking during that era appears in *1,000,000 CUBICS*, published on July 30, 1962 by Brown & Root–Utah, the contractor responsible for the Bhumibol Dam's construction.[9] The book records the building process in considerable detail, alongside historical photographs of the monumental undertaking—an effort to conquer nature and complete the work within a tight deadline, as expressed in the text:

"...All the workers therefore had to press on, toiling hard throughout that year's summer season, so that the work would be completed in time for His Majesty's Royal Visit..."

The book also records the names and photographs of numerous foreign engineers who contributed to this great construction project. Yet nowhere do we find a record —including in this book—of the number of people who died during the dam's construction. What remains, then, is an unsettling question born of that absence: *can the photograph documenting the smashing of a champagne bottle against the one-millionth cubic meter concrete bucket, as recorded on page 1 of this book, truly serve to*

commemorate those who lost their lives to construction accidents during the project, as the text claims?

Foreign engineers, who carried out numerous development projects especially in Northern and Northeastern Thailand, regarded Thailand's valleys and forests as mysterious, remote spaces—distant from what it meant to be "urban." It was through this very discourse that development gained entry. Samchai Srisan's book, *Rurality and the Discourse of Bannok in Thai Identity,* examines the binary urban-rural opposition, pointing out how remoteness functioned as a kind of justification for legitimizing "development" in various areas—one carried out for someone else, beyond the people who actually inhabited those places.[10]

None of this is new. These histories have been raised through writing, moving image, and many other art forms. One such example is ***รู ป ระ ลึก (MO NUM EN TS)***—a two-room exhibition of works by Thai artist Som Supaparinya on the development of Thailand's public infrastructure and its transformation of landscape, society, and environment. Closely aligned with the documentary I am working on, it became a significant point of reference during my field research, foregrounding the lived aftermath of such projects while offering a clearer understanding of how infrastructure reshapes space, memory, and everyday life.



Installation view of *รูประลึก* (MO NUM EN TS),
Gallery Room 1, Jim Thompson Art Center

The exhibition's first room presents a large-screen video—not quite a typical cinema screen. Its rectangular image is interrupted at the top by an angular break that evokes the thick concrete mass of a dam. The video brings together fragments from several documentary projects, moving between scenes of everyday life and narratives unfolding along the highways and rivers of Northern and Northeastern Thailand. Pixels scatter across the screen, preventing any one image from fully settling into focus. Among these fragments is *Bhumibol Dam,* a historical record of the dam's construction that I had watched many times during my own research and that is distributed through the Thai Film Archive's YouTube channel.



Still from Bhumibol Dam, distributed by the Thai Film Archive

For me, the most distinctive aspect was the authoritative narration in the style of an earlier era—the voice of the narrator from the Bhumibol Dam documentary footage, incorporated into this video. As I sat watching, I found myself feeling dispirited at, once again, having to witness the same pattern recur—*and yet it is that repetition that also made something clearer: rarely does information presented by the state arrive without some particular agenda.*



Installation view of *รู ป ระ ลึก* (MO NUM EN TS),
Gallery Room 2, Jim Thompson Art Center

In the second room, a book displayed prominently near the entrance immediately draws the eye: *Rivers in Harness* (*Sai Nam Thuk Lam Sao*), translated by Noppol Poonsri.[11] One passage discusses the hypothesis that the beaver served as a conceptual model for dam construction, as the rodent instinctively shapes its habitat, often in ways that can benefit the surrounding ecology. Human-built dams, by contrast, are often motivated by more self-serving interests—the accumulation of state power, personal enrichment, urban expansion at the expense of rural communities. What we do not do nearly enough is imagine the consequences before we act.

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Beside this book, neatly arranged on a wooden shelf, are issues of *Sereephap* (*Freedom*) magazine—a print publication that continuously updated readers on developments across Thailand. Through this periodical, the imperative that *"the nation must develop"* reached readers across Thailand, chronicling projects nationwide, foremost among them the Bhumibol Dam.

At the center of the room are books addressing developments in Thailand and Southeast Asia—alongside other censored, banned, or controversial publications. A table, chairs, and reading lamps invite visitors to linger with them, taking in their contents rather than simply passing through. Some volumes contain paper notes inserted as bookmarks, directing visitors deeper into narratives referenced in the video in the previous room.

Also in this room are two large heaping piles of shredded paper—a work titled Paradise of the Blind, a new version of a piece the artist previously exhibited in 2016 at The Reading Room, a contemporary Thai art archive in Bangkok. The title shares its name with the banned Vietnamese novel written by Duong Thu Huong, resonating with the books the artist has assembled around the work and for the room.

รู ป ระ ลึก (MO NUM EN TS), in both its video and printed forms, speaks to Thailand's various infrastructure development projects during the Cold War, when agricultural, infrastructural, and cultural development often served as instruments of geopolitical influence and control as conflict was gradually creeping into Southeast Asia. Against this backdrop, the work brings the narratives of the state and the dam's builders into contact with the projects' consequences: *flooding, environmental transformation, and displacement.*

The voice overlaying the footage recounts what happened following the dam's construction with a gravity, grandeur, and spectacle befitting such a colossal structure, yet without registering how people felt about what occurred. *"Sor Nam Thuam Wang Lung,"* by contrast, preserves Por Kaew Ta Lai's account, giving voice to those who have had to live with those consequences.

Both *"Sor Nam Thuam Wang Lung"* and *รู ป ระ ลึก (MO NUM EN TS)* demonstrate how the effects of water-related development extend into the present. Currently, the

investigation process concerning the Yuam Water Diversion Project is at the stage of counter-submissions, with villagers calling for an examination of the project. There are also people from the lower Ping River basin (or those who live downstream of the dam) calling on the state to accelerate the project before the EIA expires this October.[12]

For Torfan and me, this means continuing to find ways to communicate about this issue—*to affirm what the narratives and feelings of those who actually live with development reveal.*

It is not a question that belongs to us alone.

How, then, are we to continue living with what keeps happening, over and over again?

End Notes

1. Por Kaew Ta Lai, "Kaew Ta Lai — Sor Nam Thuam Wang Lung," YouTube video, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVX4OzkoBr4&t=648s. A *sor* is a traditional two or three-stringed bowed fiddle associated with Northern Thailand.

2. Jim Thompson Art Center, *รู ป ระ ลึก (MO NUM EN TS)*, exhibition page, 2025, https://www.jimthompsonartcenter.org/th/exhibitions/mo-num-en-ts.

3. Thanyaporn Suraphakdi, Chonlathon Wongrasmi, Pongphop Dangsamanachanjai, and Peeraya Phunhiran, *Changing Thailand Through Energy* (2026), 20, https://jetinthailand.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/justenergythbook_26_03_69_.pdf.

4. Digital Services Division Northern Region 2, Bhumibol Dam, "History of the Bhumibol Dam," 2017, https://bbdam.egat.co.th/index.php/2014-10-10-05-07-47/history.

5. Phaibun Thongsaard and Iang Thongsaard, 13 April 2025.

6. Lanner Editorial Team, "'Yuam Water Diversion': When the River Cries, Amid a Development That Cannot See Lives," *Lanner,* 2024, https://lannernews.com/07112567-02/.

7. Thai Film Archive, “Bhumibol Dam,” YouTube video, 7 September 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gED7WAfg5Qc.

8. Thanok Bangphon, “The Fate of the Sacrifice of People Above the Bhumibol Dam,” *Transborder News*, 2025, https://transbordernews.in.th/home/?p=44378.

9. Brown & Root–Utah, *1,000,000 Cubics*, 1st ed. (Brown & Root–Utah, 1962).

10. Samchai Srisan, *Rurality and the Discourse of Bannok in Thai Identity*, 1st ed. (Sameeti Publishing House, 2020).

11. Noppol Poonsri, *Sai Nam Thuk Lam Sao,* 1st ed., (Kaona Publishing House, 1970).

12. ThaiPBS North, “Ping River Basin Network Submits Support for Yuam Water Diversion Project,” YouTube video, 15 July 2026, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRd1QqhfCt0.

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As this article is being published, the Royal Irrigation Department has submitted letters requesting permission to use forest land for construction of the Yuam Water Diversion Project to local agencies in Tak, Mae Hong Son, and Chiang Mai. This comes ahead of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)’s expiry in October.

I therefore ask everyone to continue following developments on this issue. It concerns more than THB 70 billion in Thai taxpayers’ money — *and it concerns a part of the world we all share.*

Writer Bio

Chonnicha Thapumin (b. 1999, Nan) is an art project coordinator, filmmaker, and independent writer based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She holds a bachelor's degree in Journalism and New Media from the Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University. Chonnicha's work engages with social, environmental, and cultural issues, particularly in Thailand's northern region, her home, through both writing and documentary filmmaking. Her practice concerns spaces marked by social and geopolitical ambiguity like rivers, or land overlapping with reserved forest zones that are the areas in constant flux, both geographically and politically. She is interested in the community capital: the resources, knowledge, and relationships that sustain these contested spaces.

Mentor Bio

Jirat Prasertsup is a writer, translator, and editor whose works include short stories, novels, and nonfiction. His fiction writing often engages with political satire, critiques of propaganda, and the control of social memory. Most of his works have been published in Thai by Salmon Books. In addition to his literary work, Prasertsup contributes as an interviewer and columnist for online platforms such as The Cloud, The Momentum, and
GroundControl. He also works to connect literature with contemporary art and has held two solo exhibitions: Our Daddy Always Looks Down on Us (2020) at Cartel Artspace and From Dawn Till Dust (2022) at VS Gallery—both developed from his own short stories.

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