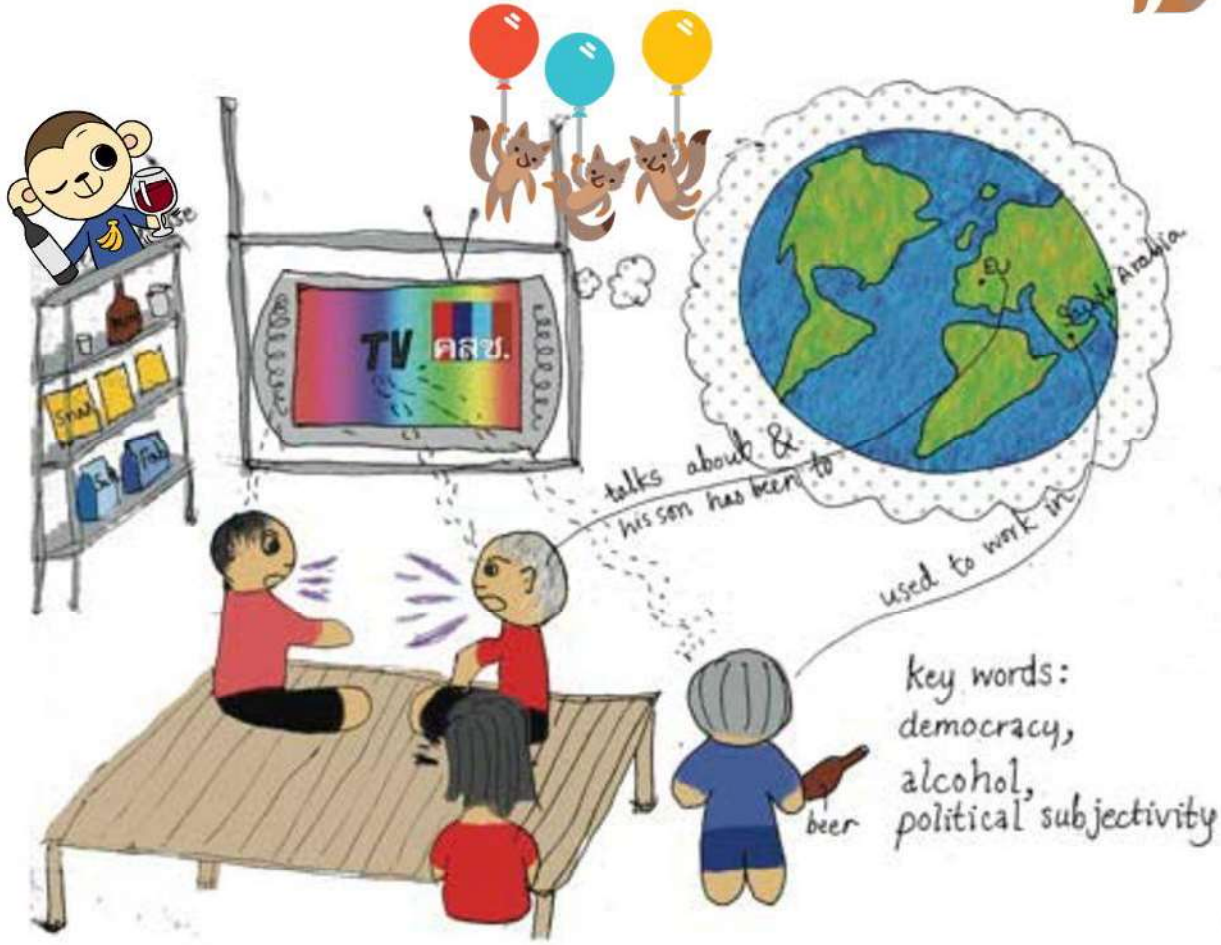


Recognizing Village Publics:
Cultural Citizenship and the State in Northeastern Thailand



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CHAPTER 1: DRUNKEN VILLAGERS AND HYGIENIC CITIZENSHIP



(A man wraps red cloth around the Democracy Monument, Photograph by *Prachatai*)

In the evening of 10 April 2015, the fifth anniversary of the beginning of violent crack down on red shirt protesters led by the United Front for Democracy (UDD), a shirtless man walked up to the Democracy Monument to wrap red cloth around the monument, situated in Old Bangkok lined with bars where some middle-class people were drinking in quiet memorialization. Journalists rushed to the monument even before the authorities. The man, named Chaloepon Puupuak, was from Khon Kaen and Sakon Nakhon provinces in northeastern Thailand and now worked a wage laborer in Bangkok. He told the *Prachatai* journalist that “I saw my friends die, what the military government is doing now is not right.”

When the police arrived at the monument and ordered Chaloepon to take out the cloth, he complied. The police asked him if he had drunk 40-degree

alcohol or not. Chaloepon replied that whether or not he had drunk 40-degree alcohol, he would still stand by his action.

This news story, which circulated mainly among progressive circles on social media like Facebook and Twitter, probably did not reach the television channels that rural villagers would watch. Despite the return of some “red shirt” news channels some time after my fieldwork that ended in August 2014, the programming is still closely scrutinized by the military regime. Still, this story poignantly illustrates the workings of cultural citizenship in Thailand. Chaloepon’s lone direct action is questioned by the police authorities on the basis of his alcohol consumption. Not just any kind of alcohol, but a particular “40-degree alcohol” (*lao siisip diikrii*) typically associated with poor, rural villagers. His call for the recognition of the deaths of his friends as well as his political judgment of the military regime was discredited beforehand by the police’s interpellation into politically deficient villager–subjects. Chaloepon’s response, however, suggested that alcohol consumption did not determine his political action. In other words, drunken or sober, the man’s demand for democracy remains legitimate.

In this chapter, I will explore the question of health and hygiene and how they define cultural citizenship in Thailand. Focusing on Poyai, Max’s grandfather, I will discuss two particular health issues: drinking and the consumption of raw freshwater fish and shrimp. I will argue that the villager–citizen condition involves a lived contradiction between pride in being an authentic villager and shame in harming one’s health and hygiene. Both pride and shame, produced in negotiation with the state, become reproduced by villagers themselves. This contradiction, notably, is resolved by drinking.

Drinking shame and pride

The issue of alcohol consumption has been much associated with the image of the poor villager. As part of endless anti-alcohol campaigns organized by the Public Health Promotion NGO-cum-government entity, myriad images and narratives of the drunk, lower-class man have circulated in television and radio channels. The campaigns have emphasized alcohol consumption as not only lethal but also sinful, especially in the annual three-month season of Buddhist lent where people are encouraged to abstain from drinking. The trope of “poor, stressed, drunk” vicious cycle embodied by a dirty man sitting on substandard floorboards codes “the villager problem” in health terms. Max’s parents, themselves residents of Ban Non Daeng but now somewhat removed from its day-to-day social life, saw alcoholism as a major problem of the village. They repeatedly told me that the majority of Poyai’s village subsection, including the headman, were alcoholics. For them, consumption of alcohol was part and parcel of the so-called “broken people” (*khon haang*) and *lism* (alcoholics) who sat around drinking all day without working. Max’s mother also pointed out that in recent years many women from Ban Non Daeng had become “addicted” to alcohol which, when coupled with gambling, was a sure recipe for family disintegration, as the women were usually managers of the household economy.

The 40-degree rice whisky is the top-selling commodity in my main research site, Maeyai’s grocery store. Also known as “white booze” (*lao khaaw*), 40-degree rice whisky is the

cheapest kind of alcohol available next to cheap beer.¹¹ Each shot costs 10 baht (less than 1/3 U.S. dollar); several bottles, each bottle about a dozen shots, are emptied each day. Poyai, Max's grandfather and Maeyai's husband, who is 72 years old, drinks multiple shots each day. Generally praised by other villagers as an exemplary hardworking man, Poyai does not quote fit his daughter's "broken people" stereotype; perhaps he is the exception that proves the rule.

Poyai's close family members were worried about his alcohol consumption. Max's mother asked me multiple times that I stop her father from drinking if I saw it. This certainly had something to do with my position as a son of the well-known doctor, who would try to prohibit her patients from drinking by various means: show them x-ray evidence of their livers, appeal to their family members' care for their longevity, and even remind them that it was sinful to drink.

Well aware of the pressures from Maeyai, his children and grandchildren, Poyai told me that he would not drink in my view. Sometimes when I was distracted looking away or talking to other villagers on the bamboo bench, Poyai would quickly walk to the rice-whisky booth and pour himself a quick shot without me even noticing. Once, my sight caught him with an empty shot glass in his hand, and I asked him, "Did you just drink?" He said yes, and I remarked how quick he was, "You're such a pro." He agreed and burst out laughing.

Consumption of alcohol for Poyai involved at least two feelings: shame and pride. Analogous to Kru Tuen's fear of the military junta and pride of being a village schoolteacher,

¹¹ Home-brewed alcohol was illegal and trying to brew one's own alcohol risked police persecution. Maeyai told me that when she was young people would brew their own alcohol, and it would be consumed in large quantity at festivals and also during group rice harvest, but it would still be less than the amount one could buy and consume nowadays.

Poyai's self-narrative was split between bashfulness and pride, depending on whether he was drunk or not. When he was sober, he would be ashamed not only about drinking and but also bashful about himself. He did not want recognition as an informant; he told me that he should be referred to as "just a villager" for fear of identification and persecution. When he was drunk, on the contrary, he would be proud about drinking as well as proud of himself as an informant. He told me to describe him in my thesis with his real name—"my name is this, my age seventy-two, I drink [*grins*]." He ordered me to take photos of the grocery store and write down what he said. He claimed that there was no one else more fitting as an informant than himself, because he had been a regular customer of my grandmother's fish retail business, and because he knew my mother's clinic since it opened about twenty years ago.

The feelings of shame were not merely personal but intimately involved with state power. This shame was not only induced by his wife and children; it was endlessly called up by the Thai state's biopolitics which encouraged citizens to manage their health for morally sound and economically productive lives (Foucault 1979). The shame arose when Poyai recognized himself to be the embodiment of the image of the deficient villager endlessly reproduced by state-funded campaigns on television. This recognition produced feelings of shame.

Drunken pride, on the other hand, suspended such shame with claims to being a villager. The sense of not properly belonging to the state was replaced by the sense of proper belonging as a villager. Poyai claimed that drinking was an authentic social activity of villagers. One evening when he was drunk, Poyai told me that drunken conversations on the bamboo bench were the "true reality of villagers" through which people could fully speak their minds. I believe that there is more to this claim than simply an excuse to drink, which was the way Max's mother saw it.

The village headman Tong, whose patronizing discourse toward villagers like Poyai is analyzed in Chapter 4, related to me that he could get along with the current local bureaucrat in the subdistrict administration office through alcohol: “it was easy to ask him to come drink and talk, not like the previous person who was a woman and so I did not know how to have a casual talk with her.” The villagerly casualness was achieved by consumption of alcohol among men. Crucially, disinhibition through alcohol consumption promoted democratizing communication simultaneously as it marginalized women.

But drunken sociality on the bamboo bench was not merely an act of evasion of the state’s disciplinary power. Poyai’s affirmations of drinking as authentic villagerhood in reality worked towards fostering another mode of belonging to the state. The conversations on the bamboo bench, and the concomitant television watching before the coup, formed a subaltern counterpublic (Fraser 1990) that recognized its oppositional mode of political recognition as villager-citizens. According to Maeyai, the television watching group would take turns buying rice whisky from the store and share it with Poyai. One late afternoon, she complained to me in his (more-or-less sober) presence,

Maeyai: Here, now that there is no one around, I’m gonna tell you all about it! I hate it so much! Are you listening? The drinking group, they came to watch, watch until late at night, and they bought rice whisky to share with one another (*paeng*), and gave some to the house owner [that is, Poyai]. 8 shares per day, wouldn’t that get to one full [750ml] bottle? I hate it so much that they shared it with Poyai who’d drink too much.

Peera: You mean those who came to watch the TV?

Maeyai: Yes, TV, the red shirt television channel, that is.

The rice whisky sharing practice created a social bond between people who gathered to watch political television programmes together. Crucially, this village public fused a drunken sociality with a political exercise of voice; thus *villager-citizens*. While every

participant of the drinking group had a television set at home, they chose to gather there to watch political programmes, discuss and voice their opinions together. While Maeyai did participate in voicing grievances, her role was less an immersed participant and more a store operator who served alcohol and swept the floor. Maeyai continued to complain about the drinking group until Poyai interrupted, quietly:

Poyai: Stop talking, darn it (*sao wao sao wao, huai*)

Maeyai: [*raising her voice*] I'm telling it to the grandchild! Is it wrong to talk about this? [*she got up and walked into the house behind the store, came back after a little while*]

Peera: So, in conclusion, the shutdown of TV stations made people consume less?

Poyai: [*laughed*] Yeah.

Maeyai: [*laughed*]

There was a reversal in the usual dynamic in bamboo bench conversations; here Maeyai talked more loudly and dominantly than Poyai. Maeyai only decided to vent about this when there was “no one around,” so that her charged complaint not be publicly heard. The fluidity of the grocery store’s bamboo bench on the front yard between public and private space signals that village publics occur in spaces which are constantly shifting. Furthermore, this scene might not have happened, either, if it had been later in the evening when Poyai was more drunk and would have loudly talked back to her. His quiet interjection only made her complaint more pointed and his shame more apparent. But after all it was a temporary event, diverted by my joking statement and diffused by the grandparents’ laughter.

Why was Poyai so diffident about something so central to his day-to-day life? My interpretation is that, as this complaint Maeyai exposed his “excessive” drinking and “unruly” sociality, Poyai’s sobriety did not allow him to disregard his subjection under disciplinary state power. In this instance, state power worked through the biopolitics that compelled Poyai to

discipline his own bodily conduct (thus the silent shame and the quiet interjection) and shaped his conception of the healthy life (thus the knowledge that alcohol was bad).

Poyai's drunken state not only allowed him pride, but it also lifted fear from his chest, allowing him to fully air grievances against the aristocratic *ammart* and the military junta alongside other villager-citizens. One time, he expressed his vindictive desire to dare some dictatorial general to duel at the cost of his life, before qualifying that he would not be able to reach them. A neighbor then jokingly asked him if he wanted to fight them in a boxing ring, and he replied that he was too old, going to box would only bring death. Simultaneously as it placed him into the category of hygienically deficient villagers, alcohol consumption enabled Poyai to exercise his voice as a villager-citizen.

Eating raw fish and shrimp as an authentic way of living (and dying)

To illustrate how questions of health and hygiene are directly involved with the state, I would like now to incorporate the issue of consuming raw food to the discussions so far. To do so, I would like to open with an anecdote.

One evening, carrying a plate of fried fish and smashed fish salad (*pon plaa*), I went to the grandparents' grocery store. Poyai was there on the front porch with a neighbor, the two of them were inspecting the fish trap that Poyai has been crafting for a few days. Seeing the plate of fish, he told me that the wild mushroom soup I had given him at noon was still not finished, nor was a bowl of fish soup that he and the grandmother had eaten from it for three meals already. Maeyai was bathing, Poyai told me. Then, apparently out of the blue, he told me that his house was not clean because only the two of them lived there, without hiring someone to clean the house for them. The gas stove was also black, he continued, it hadn't been wiped clean since it was bought. "Actually I didn't want you to see it, we talked about what to do, but then decided that we'd let you see it, grudging it was, see it so as to really know how it is."

Confused as to why he felt compelled to apologetically explain to me the condition of his house, I interjected: “Well I don’t mind it at all (*ka boo dai waa*).”

Poyai quickly replied: “You don’t mind but I’ll say it in case (*boo dai waa ka wao wai koon, puut wai koon*).” He then mentioned, his voice sounded more tired and resigned than usual, that people these days no longer ate raw things, that he himself did not dare make *koi* (a way to prepare food raw, in some cases live, by half-cooking it with lime, chilli, shallots and heat the mixture for a minute or two), that when he made *laab* he made it cooked.

Poyai’s confession of his discomfort of me seeing his unclean house together with his insistence that “people these days” no longer ate raw fish expressed the tension in the hyphenated villager-citizen condition. I was surprised to hear him say all these things, because just a day before he had told me something very different.

The evening before, I had just come back from going fishing with one of Poyai’s sons-in-law, and I went to the grocery store to find his wife. She was not there, and I was on the motorcycle ready to leave, but once I told Poyai that I had in fact tried casting the net a few times, with little success, I became trapped in a conversation. Gleefully, his face flushed with alcohol, Poyai told me that fishing (*tuek hae*, ‘casting the net’) was the way of life (Thai/Lao *withii chiiwit*). He told me, half-jokingly, to bring the fish so he could *koi* and eat together with me. “Tell your mom that you eat fish *koi*, that she give you a vaccine against leaf-shaped microbes in the liver! (*pai book mae der waa kin plaa-koi, siit yaa pa-yaat bai-mai nai tap hai nae*)” I laughed. Maeyai, frowning at Poyai as she usually did when he was drunk and loud, started to reprimand him that it would be unsafe. But Poyai continued, saying that eating it would not be lethal, that we could eat together, “father and son we eat, both of us, let’s see if someone dies (*poo ka kin, luuk ka kin, man si taay boo*). Tell your mom that you’ve eaten everything, *maeng-ngao-maeng-ngot* too.”

Not knowing what the word meant, I asked what *maeng-ngao-maeng-ngot* was. “Scorpions,” he replied. When I told him that I hadn’t eaten scorpions, he said “You’ll get to eat them.”

Embedded in the joking order to “tell my mom” is Poyai’s knowledge that eating fish *koi* could lead to having “leaf-shaped microbes in the liver.” When I did end up eating *koi* two weeks later and told my mother about it (it was a delicious tart salad with crunchy not-quite-dead little

shrimps leaping in my mouth), she was taken aback, a little appalled. For her, a physician in the province's main hospital, eating raw shrimp and fish meant increasing microbes she had seen so much from laboratory results, in the same way that eating wild mushroom soup meant risking lives of "mushroom experts" she saw lost in the hospital every year.

Building from this anecdote, I will now describe how it relates to the campaigns initiated by the Public Health Ministry to discourage people from eating raw fish. This issue, unlike anti-alcohol campaigns, was specifically directed at people born in northeastern Thailand.

Throughout the year 2012, the campaign against consumption of raw fish and other freshwater creatures was "the Isan agenda" (Ministry of Public Health, 18 August 2012). Northeastern Thailand was marked by Public Health Deputy Minister Surawit Khonsomboon as the region with the highest number of deaths from especially liver cancer and cholangiocarcinoma (cancer of the bile ducts) in the world: 40 deaths per 100,000 people, compared to 10-15 of the national average, and 1-2 of the global average (Thairath online, 19 February 2012). The prevalence of cancers was attributed to Isan-born people's consumption of raw fermented fish (Thai *plaa-raa*; Lao *pa-daek*) and raw freshwater fish which caused leaf-shaped microbes in the liver. The state's policy, then, was targeted at changing the eating practices of Isan-born people, in regional and local hospitals, in school curricula, in billboards, in Isan food stands. Special emphasis, however, was not only directed at the northeast but also at villagers. The *Thairath* article concludes: "In terms of the people, there will be an intensive training of village public health volunteers in the issue of recommending and canvassing villagers not to eat half-cooked food or raw fermented fish." The more generic term "people" betrays its actual emphasis on "villagers."

Some of the policies and events that followed were fairly sensational. *Thairath* ran one of its headlines in 6 October 2012: “Mayor Bans Civil Servants from Gobbling (*poep*, ‘to eat in unrefined ways’) Raw Fermented Fish: Urgent Measure! Noncompliance Means Violation of Discipline.” The news story told of a province mayor in Nongbua Lamphu, a province in the northern part of Isan, who ordered all civil servants in the province’s bureaucracy to sign a pledge against eating raw fish. If they violated the pledge, they would face disciplinary measures as they acted not in accordance of their duty to “be good examples/models for the people” (Thai *pen tua-yaang/baep-yaang tii dii kae prachaachon*). Village headmen and local administrative officials were also included, even though they were not officially civil servants. The next day, another *Thairath* news article related that the mayor “in hopes to decrease the statistics of average one death per day in the area” intended to implement other measures including cautionary ones such as sticker messages on alcohol bottles and repressive ones such as random inspections of food stands with a threat of police arrest, leading to official reprimand and educational session on the dangers of raw fish.

While this was a rather extreme case, and I am not aware of such repressive policies in most Isan provinces, the same logic of training and tutelage permeated more lenient policies of persuasion. A famous Isan-born folk singer, Mike Piromporn, became a presenter for a public health tour “Eliminating Leaf-Shaped Microbes in the Liver and Reducing Bile Ducts Cancer 2013: Everybody is Happy, Eating Cooked Fish” that went to a province in northern Thailand (Naan) and two provinces in Isan. The singer said that the motivation for joining the campaign was because his father had died from it. The poster behind him was headlined “True Isan

People... Only Eat Cooked Fish” under which the red boldfaced font “Danger!!” was clearly visible.

In these instances, the medicalization of everyday eating practices encouraged people in northeastern Thailand to become hygienic citizens not only through claims of health but also claims of identity and authenticity. To eat *koi* appeared now to be a disregard of one’s own health and life, which was linked to one’s own proper identity as a villager-citizen. Poyai’s insistence on telling me that he had the medical knowledge to fear eating raw food began to make sense. But his drunken remarks, “Tell your mom that you eat fish *koi*, that she give you a vaccine against leaf-shaped microbes in the liver!” remained unassimilated into this brand of hygienic citizenship based on a logic of tutelage and training of the villager-citizen.

A similar contradiction was present in ex-Prime Minister of Thailand Yingluck Shinawatra, in office from 2011-2013. Reported on *kapook.com* on 7 June 2011, During her campaign visit to Isan province Nakhon Panom before the 2011 general election, Yingluck spoke of her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, in self-imposed exile since the 2006 coup, reporting: “Thaksin misses *nam prik plara* (fermented fish chili paste) very much, if I can send it to Dubai, I will do it right away.” While Yingluck did not specify whether this fermented fish was raw, it is safe to assume that the distinction was not meaningful. What was clear was her attempt to recognize those who came and listen to her as villager-citizens not so removed from Thaksin. In 2012 and 2013, however, as Prime Minister her images appeared on billboards and posters discouraging the consumption of raw fermented fish, and she herself announced the “Isan agenda” to eliminate liver microbes and bile duct cancer (Ministry of Public Health, 18 August 2012).

To link the discourses of hygienic citizenship, saturated with numbers and discourses of death, back to a broader theme of aspirations to belong as villager-citizens, I would like to return to the evening of the anecdote that opened this section. Some time after Poyai's talk about eating scorpions, the scene continued:

Poyai took a look at me, perched on the motorcycle, and said that even as my build was small and slim, I was brave in trying everything. Adding that he was not saying that I was queer (*kathoey*, 'transsexual'), he went on to say that when he was my age, he too was small and slim like a *kathoey* or a woman, but in his military service he was braver than all the well-built, muscled men who deserted or ran away when bombs landed. It was he, the small one, who had dared everyone to duel and fist-fight. After another good while of talk, Poyai told me that once I "finish the curriculum of the basic human way of life," he would be so happy.

In Poyai's view, my field activities were about becoming a real man—he prohibited me from doing the dishes or sweeping the floor, for example. His hope for me to finish the "basic human way of life" curriculum was rooted in his pride in being a manly villager. The courage to duel *to the death* as a marker of masculinity, here reminiscent of anthropologist Oscar Lewis's classic statement of what it means to be "macho" in Mexico,¹² surfaced earlier in another extract from Poyai. "Without democracy, I'd shed tears as if my father died," he said just before expressing his desire to duel a military general to death. Surely, the pride expressed by Poyai especially while drunk was as much about social recognition as a manly villager as it was about aspirations for a different mode of political belonging to a more democratic state.

¹² "In a fight I would never give up or say, 'Enough,' even though the other was killing me. I would try to go to my death, smiling. That is what we mean by being '*macho*', by being manly" (quoted from Lewis 1961:38 in Crehan 2002:197).

It is for these aspirations that the drunken sociality and political venting in the grocery store cannot be reduced to and dismissed as merely cultural coping. Even though few people took the drunken Poyai seriously, his drunkenness actualized the aspirations to belong and be recognized as a villager-citizen, in addition to the alternative exercise of voice. Learning how Poyai has actualized his aspirations in moments of intoxication could enable a political economic analysis of inequalities surrounding Ban Non Daeng villager-citizens to begin to conceive of effective channels for change.