

## THE EFFECTS OF SYMBOLISM ON A SOCIAL MOVEMENT: THE WANG SAPUNG GOLD MINING CONFLICT IN LOEI PROVINCE, THAILAND

Chantha Thanawattanawong<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Mining industries, which are involved in the extraction of minerals, have a long history in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia. These industries bring profit to both the entrepreneurs and the state. However, the consequences that come with extractive industries are the potentially significant changes to the environment, economy, and society. Those changes often cause conflicts or controversies between local communities (especially near or in mining areas), private companies and among government officials. Often extractive industries catalyze violence due to the deterioration of natural resources, environmental conditions, and inequalities in the distribution of public benefits. This article focuses on the conflict within the mining industry, using a Thai case study as its main methodology, the gold mining conflict at Wang Sapung, Loei Province. In the conclusion, this paper shows that the varieties of symbolism that were created by the anti-gold mining movement could help to overcome the situation that the movement was concerned about and, in the meantime, they used those symbols to support their collective identity. This symbolism had an emotionally powerful effect on the followers of the movement and brought the movement to the attention of the public. Those conditions contributed to the anti-gold mining movement becoming a non-violent social movement.

**Keywords:** Extractive industries, non-violent movements, symbolic practices, mining

### Introduction

It was a year since the violence had occurred at Nanongbon village, Wangsapong District when a group of men invaded the village to clear the way for trucks to be able to transport gold from the area. The Rakbankerd movement of the villagers who opposed the industrial mining company held a remembrance day for the resources stolen from the land.

Mining industries have a long history in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia and bring profit to both the entrepreneurs and the state. However, the consequences that come with extractive industries are potentially significant changes to the environment, economy, and society. Those changes often cause conflicts or controversies between local communities (especially near or in mining areas), private

---

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Political Science, Ubon Ratchathani University Email: chanubu@gmail.com

**Received:** May 26, 2018 **Revised:** November 10, 2018 **Accepted:** Jan 29, 2019

companies and among government officials. Often extractive industries catalyze violence due to the deterioration of natural resources, environmental conditions, and inequalities in the distribution of public benefits, as can be seen at Nanongbon village.

This article focuses on the conflict within the mining industry that made the Rakbankerd movement turn their strategy from counterattack to the use the symbolism. The main objectives of this research are to examine the varieties of symbolic conditions that existed in this conflict and the conditions that contributed to the anti-gold mining movement becoming a non-violent social movement. The first part will show the nature of the gold mining that was the root of the conflict, the second part will give the background to the conflict at Nanongbong village, the third part will illustrate the symbolic strategy of the Rakbankerd movement and finally a conclusion will be drawn.

### **The nature of gold mining**

Gold is a mineral that has great value in the market. Its special characteristics are its yellow color, brightness, resistance to rust even if buried in soil or mud, cleanliness and resistance to stains. These features have made gold desirable to humans for centuries. The value of gold is important and has dominated international exchange rates.

Gold mining was supported by the Thai government in the fifth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1982-1986). The first gold mining was carried out by Cholsin Company Limited at Tum Mo Mine, Sukhirin District, Narathiwat Province. It operated during 1994-1996 and produced a total of 230 kilograms of gold. Meanwhile, the Department of Mineral Resources invested in mineral resources

development projects. By surveying air geophysics throughout the country between the years 1984-1987, it was possible to determine the potential areas for various minerals. The survey results allowed the Department of Mineral Resources to confirm the potential of gold in Thailand in many areas including Loei Province. Following the survey, the government accelerated the policy of allowing gold mining in practice by approving its policy on gold exploration and development proposed by the Ministry of Industry on 3 February, 1987 to encourage private entrepreneurs to invest in gold mining exploration (Techawan, 2003, pp. 1-2) and pay special returns to the state.

In particular, the promotion of private investment led to large private gold mining companies having the opportunity to explore the potential areas for gold ore. In the case of Loei, Thungkum Company Limited obtained the right to survey and explore for gold mining on plot 4, the Namcute - Phu Khum Thong site that covers an area of 545 square kilometers. The company ran the operation until gold ore was found and it could estimate the economic worth of extracting it before making a proposal for a special license and for paying special returns to the state.

When considering the exploration and development system for mineral resources in Thailand, it can be seen that it is a system that does not provide opportunities for local people who have minerals in their areas to get to know how to develop their own areas. This is a policy that causes conflicts that are difficult to resolve and which was prolonged for more than 9 years in the case of the mine at Wang Saphung District, Loei Province; this was a conflict partly derived from the mindset relating to the management of state resources with the government considering that it was the duty of the state to

manage the natural resources that are public property. At the same time, the use of resources for national development were allocated to private individuals, as happened in the case of the gold mineral resources. Although there are rules and regulations set on the basis of sustainable use of resources, the impact on the way of life and the health of people living in settlements in a project area are often neglected. Relying solely on technical data, revenue figures and special benefits that operators offer to the government only results in never-ending conflict.

The nature of the mining business is considered as a source of conflict between local communities in the location of gold resources and private developer companies, whether from inside or outside the country. States often have policies that benefit the drilling for and extraction of mineral resources by entrepreneurs rather than local communities; this is due to the expectation of economic benefits from local employment, revenue and mineral royalty payments from private companies. These revenues are used by states as a factor in determining the wealth of a country.

### **The mining conflict and social movement**

Data from mining conflicts around the world suggest that mining activity which is growing on different continents, whether in Latin America, Asia, Africa or Europe, is a business that requires an intensive level of investment and comes with high risks as well because minerals are exhaustible natural resources. It is clear that all mining activities have had a significant impact on the environment, so many developing countries control this business through their governments both for protection of the domestic mining business and to generate

revenue for the development of domestic economic growth.

Open pit mining, in which the ore deposits extend very deep into the ground and which is the most common form of mining for strategic minerals, has key impacts on the environment such as acid mine drainage and contaminant leaching, erosion of soils, and mine wastes deposited into surface waters. Many of these mining activities are located within local communities, and when mining activities are not properly managed the results are degraded soils, water, biodiversity, and forest resources, all of which are critical for the subsistence of local people. Moreover, when contamination is not controlled, the cost of the contamination is transferred to other economic activities, such as agriculture and fishing. Additionally, the contamination in water, soil and air increases the potential health risks to the community.

Frustration about the health issues of local communities is an important condition that leads to collective behavior among local people that is related with social movements' literature. Those movements are characterized by a collective behavior, its purpose being to raise objections to changes in the environment that affect the natural resources and livelihoods of local communities as a result of the mining activities.

Collective action is a framework for the study of the characteristics and integration of individuals in society. The shared grievances are important prerequisites and necessary conditions that create collective actions or social movements. However, resource mobilization theory notes that suffering a feeling of deprivation, dissatisfaction, etc. is common in society but is not the cause for the rise of social movements in every society. McCarthy and

Zald (as cited in Pintobtang, 2009, pp. 76-77) suggested that the social movements occurring in certain economic-political contexts were caused by collective action and needed personal motivation and a structure or mechanism that would reduce the costs of the movements. The analysis of social movements is therefore related to social movements' organization because it is through organization that there will be a collection of resources (including money, labor, reconciliation, etc.) and creation of activities to mobilize resources that are considered important to a social movement. In addition, the social movements' organization has an important mission to innovate fighting methods including mobilization strategies, supporters, tactics to draw the public's attention, and changing the elite to become sympathetic or make those who oppose to become neutral.

Although a social movement might have sympathetic supporters, it may fail. An essential tactic is to make the movement public and expose the issues of suffering or grievances that occur in various groups in society, especially when those issues are not resolved or alleviated. If a campaign is to exist in the society, it needs to keep the problem in the spotlight continuously.

Public communication has become an important political tool for any social movement that is opposed to the implementation of various government agency projects. The amount of support determines the strength or weakness of the movement. Wisler & Giugni (1999) explained that protest movements and the suppression of movements often ignored the role of the media in changing the level and direction of violence. They used information about suppression and news reporting in 4 cities of Switzerland to analysis a framework

called the media spotlight to see the role of the media in explaining protests and dealing with protests. The study concluded that when there are media to keep up with the news about a movement, the action of suppression will be sensitive if violence is used against protesters in front of the cameras and correspondents. The media's attention to protests has contributed to the suppression of violence at a certain level.

On the other hand, at the micro-level of a social movement, there are strategies to gather the emotions of the people, especially in a movement that is related to environmental issues, by using symbolic analysis. Marx & Holzner (as cited in Melucci, 1985, p.797) pointed out the relationship between a social movement and its membership via a symbolic function: "they (actors) do not fight merely for material goals, or to increase their participation in the system. They fight for symbolic and cultural stakes, for a different meaning and orientation of social action. They try to change people's lives, they believe that you can change your life today while fighting for more general changes in society."

Those concepts have been linked to an examination of the gold mining conflict at Wang Sapung and helped to prevent deadly violence. The author argues that even if there were violence at Wang Sapung surrounding the mining conflict, the movement used strategies that merged the issue and created symbolism to collect identities and represent public attention. The concepts illustrate how the gold mining conflict has maintained the movement upto the present time.

### **The crux of the dispute**

Loei province is one of the areas with potential gold mineral resources. After

the Department of Mineral Resources conducted a geological survey of gold deposits in Loei and Nong Khai provinces, the Cabinet passed a resolution on January 10, 1989, approving for the Ministry of Industry to issue a monopoly license for special mineral exploration and concessions for exploration and development of gold mining in Loei and Nong Khai provinces.

Thungkham Company Limited was the company that received a concession for the development of gold mining in the area of Namcute - Phu Khum Thong, which covers Phu Ruea District, Tha Li District, Mueang District and Wang Saphung District, Loei Province, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** The concession location (the area for gold mining development is a large project)  
Note. From "Nation - Waste from gold mining - Loei Province, By Dawan

From 1994, the company was quite involved participating in local discussions and ready to address the concerns of the people. In the mining operation process in the area of the mountain, the company would not blow up the whole mountain, although it would periodically blast part of the mountain. Moreover, during this process the company would spray water to prevent dust and smoke from disturbing people near the mine. Additionally, it cut a new road to transport the ore, so as not to use roads in the village thereby preventing accidents and dust. The company donated 50,000 baht to buy children's toys for children in the village. As a result, at a meeting of Tambon Khao Luang Council, on March 6, 1996, it was voted to allow Thungkham Company Limited to

operate at Khao Luang Subdistrict, Moo (community) 1 and Moo 3; although there was a discussion about the consequences of the destruction of natural resources, they thought that the benefits from the gold mine would be greater than the environmental impact, as the mine would provide people in the area with work, earn income for their families, and pay local tax income (Khao Luang Subdistrict Council Center, 1996). In 2003, Thungkham had a gold mining concession for 25 years covering a total of 6 areas totalling 1,308 rai, or 2.07 square kilometers located in Phu Tub Fah (5 areas covering 1,080 rai) and Phu Sompabon (1 area covering 228 rai) and began to run the operation on September 2006 (Suraphakdi, 2010, p.12).

The operation of the gold mine used the open pit process with explosions and digging ladders to bring out the rock that contained the gold ore and copper, and then the gold was extracted by using cyanide to separate the gold from the copper-bearing rock. An environmental impact assessment on the gold mining in Loei questioned the operation and made observations with a warning on the effects of the cyanide process on the environment and local people's health; for example, the effects on the environment if the soil's condition was not maintained, and the severe effects on local water sources due to high levels of arsenic and other contaminants in the soil. Moreover, when the project was fully operational, natural resources such as the soil would be disturbed and would change dramatically. In such cases, subsequent soil subsidence would occur and the amounts of arsenic and other contaminants washed into the river would be at a level that was harmful to people. Moreover, there was a warning for the company to listen to opinions and coordinate with community leaders to solve the problems which might be caused by the operation of the mine. The company needed to publicize the facts about mining and community development projects that could be done for the public. The company also should ask for the opinions of the villagers after the mine had been operating for 1 year to truly listen to their views of the mine's impact and the effect that it had had on the community (The Project for the Right of Economic Society and Culture, 2014). Since the mine became fully operational in 2006, there were many problems that arose from the mining, such as was found by the Environment Office Region 9, Udon Thani Province (2008) that there was excessive manganese and cyanide in the Huai River

which is the main water source for the community

Water quality testing was carried out by the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning, Region 9, Udon Thani Province in order to monitor the environmental quality in the area around the mine during the years 2004-2006; as well as the excessive manganese and cyanide in the Huai River, in 2007 the retaining dam for the quarry's reservoir was broken allowing cyanide-contaminated soil to flow onto the villagers' fields and leading to the demand for safety inspections.

As a result, 2 years after the mine was officially opened, 6 villages around the mine were aware of abnormalities that were occurring in the health of the villagers and in the ecosystems surrounding the mine. The villagers noticed that vegetable crops along the Huai River and Huai Phook were withering and the rice fields grown on the plains of Phu Thap Fah and Phu Sum Pa Bon gave lower yields. The health of the people in the area around the mine was unusual, with itching bodies, chronic headaches, painful eyes and dizziness; they did not realise that the cause was the toxins that had accumulated in their bodies from exposure to the contaminated natural sources.

The health abnormalities led to the villagers around the mine to demand that government officers carry out medical checkups. So, in January 2008, Wang Saphung Hospital randomly examined 279 people from the 6 villages around the gold mine and found cyanide in the blood of some of them. It was found that 54 of the villagers had cyanide in their blood, with 8 of them having excessive amounts. Most of the 54 people lived near the mine and their villages were located next to the waterways (Provincial Public Health Office Loei, 2008).

Although there was recognition of the risks that occurred around the villages, there was no resolution to the root of the problem. The result was anxiety about the toxins that had contaminated nature. In particular, the question for people who fell ill was how they could remove the toxins from their blood. The increased frustration was created from both the company's irresponsibility and the inappropriate punishment under the government's regulations. As a result conflicts arose with destruction of trust

between the villagers and Thungkham Company Ltd. and related government agencies. This situation brought the villagers together in a group called "Khon Rakbankerd" to claim their rights and resolve the impact on the villagers around the gold mine. The group has been in existence since the end of 2006 after those from the 6 villages around the mine experienced their health disorders.



**Figure 2** The project area and surrounding communities

Note from : ANCHALEE KONGRUT; A golden opportunity for change. *Bangkok Post*, 4 June, 2014 <https://www.bangkokpost.com/lifestyle/social-and-lifestyle/413444/a-golden-opportunity-for-change>; (accessed April 14, 2019)

### **From the collective action to the symbolic movement**

Khon Rakbankerd is a social movement that normally assumes a close link between the frustrations or grievances of a collection of individuals. The distinguishing feature of this movement was that it was a new form of grassroots movement that came from a determined

community that was damaged by the type of development policy that is more often imposed on the poor than on the affluent.

This movement demonstrated that the mobilization of the poor is horizontal, more spontaneous and based on the traditional kinship and territoriality or associations of class and that the characteristics of a horizontal mobilization enable it to reveal the hidden aspects of cooperation that, upon

bursting forth, displays what is implicit. In short, the space-time of the uprising reveals the internal space-time that is invisible to us (and even to the actors themselves) in the everyday reality of domination. To put it differently, popular sectors only discover their internal power when it is unleashed (Zibeche, 2010, p.11).

In the early stages of the movement, they submitted a complaint letter to various agencies associated with the project, especially the state agencies, to resolve the problem. This strategy resulted in the government approving a cabinet resolution on 8 February, 2011 (Thai Government Cabinet, 2011) that gave authority to the Ministry of Industry to halt Thungkum Company Limited's expansion of new areas until the cause of the contamination was established and a health impact assessment was carried out on the local natural resources and the way of life of the villagers. In practice, the cabinet resolution had no effect, as no one found the cause of the contamination and there was no remedy for the villagers.

When the anxiety and health problems were ignored both by Thungkum Company Limited and the government agencies that were responsible for overseeing the mining operations at the provincial and national levels, Khon Rakbankerd changed their strategy to use a local mechanism to promulgate "community regulations" which were announced on 3 August, 2013 issuing

rules for the use of roads within the village to prevent chemicals from entering the area and limiting the weight of the vehicles using the road in and out of the village to a weight of not more than 15 tons; they also built what they called a "heart wall" blocking the entry to the mine on September 7, 2013 (Khon Rakbankerd Movement, 2013.) This showed the formation of collective powers, meaning powers distributed somewhat evenly throughout the social fabric and political powers that are not separate from the society from which they are born. Commenting on a movement in Bolivia, Zibeche stated: "During the insurrection, we see how a social body (the rural and urban communities) are power structures without specialized bodies, power in movement - without power over the collective" (Zibeche, 2010, p.12).

The "heart wall" was the first symbol for the Khon Rakbankerd movement and served to promote the protesters' collective identity, conveying their political message of resistance to the mining operation of Thungkum Company Limited. They built this the wall 3 times; the first one was destroyed by a group of men clad in black on the night of 19 September, 2013; the second by the chief executive of Khao Luang Subdistrict Administrative Organization who brought more than 50 police officers and security personnel to demolish the wall on 11 October, 2013; after that, the villagers rebuilt the wall again and it was again dismantled on 27 November, 2013.





**Figure 3** The “heart wall” that was destroyed for the second time by 50 policemen on 11 October, 2013

Note from: Threatening to the murder case? the power circle at the mining town, *The Transbordernews*, 13 March, 2014, <http://transbordernews.in.th/home/?p=3646#prettyPhoto>; (accessed April 14, 2019)

The erection of the wall led the company to sue the members of Khon Rakbankerd claiming that the wall was interfering with the occupancy of the site by the company. Also it alleged that a crime had been committed by 2 or more people together who had placed obstructions on the public highway without permission and created a barrier on the surface of the road in a way that would cause harm to vehicles without permission. However, the charges against Khon Rakbankerd did not end the conflict between the two sides as the movement continued to use methods to make problems to the company and their effects in the public

arena. The movement appeared in public and there were communications between the protest movement and the public; they gave presentations sporadically in public, such as holding the *Ngan Bun Phu Thap Fa To Chata Phu Sam PaBon* ceremony in every year since 2009; and they invited the environmental media to press conferences to present their point of view against gold mining in the area and urging the government to close the mine and carry out continuous restoration of the environment and the communities. This strategy is in accordance with the work by Wisler & Giugni (1999) which studied protests and suppression and

their relationship with news presentations. In the case of the protest campaign in Zurich between 1980-1982, the study found that there is a relationship between suppression and the use of rubber bullets and the presentation of the news. In Zurich, during

the ongoing news presentation there was a decline in suppression of the movement, but when the news campaign was reduced, the level of suppression and the use of rubber bullets increased.



**Figure 4** Fundraising Parade Ceremony *Ngan Bun Phu Thap Fa To Chata Phu Sam PaBon*

Note: Published on

<https://www.facebook.com/NewEsaan/photos/pcb.1396537307055702/1396537207055712/?type=3&theater>



**Figure 5** The wording around the mines “Close mines and restoration”

Note from: Publish on <https://www.facebook.com/เหมืองแร่ เมืองเลข V2>

Furthermore, the structural context of society is an important condition that affects the suppression of various movements if the social context is based on respect for civil rights. In such cases, public protests will be seen as actions that use the path of peace. News presentation by the media will make a crackdown using force more difficult. In the case of the conflict over the gold mine in Wang Saphung District, Loei Province, it can be said that the Khon Rakbankerd group tried to show their issues in the public eye. After a broadcast about the health issues of the villagers around the mine by Thai PBS television station in January 2009, the public were alerted and became aware of the causes of the health problems faced by the villagers; that the problems were caused by exposure to heavy metals contaminating the soil, water and natural food that the villagers grow as food sources in the household. This issue created a community consciousness and awareness of the causes and catastrophes resulting from heavy metals.

### Conclusion

The gold mining conflict at Wang Sapung, Loei Province can be used to examine the varieties of symbolic conditions that existed in this conflict and the conditions that contributed to the gold mining movement and which resulted in no member of the movement being murdered even though there was physical violence.

The “heart wall”, the wording that appeared around the mines and the Fundraising Parade Ceremony are symbols that transformed the public’s perception of the conflict over the environment by creating names and that resonated with the public and made the members of the movement part of this context to which he or she was responding. All the symbolism shows the definition of the situation that the movement

is concerned about and, in the meantime, they use those symbols to hold up their collective identity.

Moreover, the strategies of Khon Rakbankerd are part of an open social structure and based on respect for civil rights. The relationship between the campaign against the gold mining and the media also had more tangible and pragmatic aspects and helped the movement to avoid being suppressed by violence.

### Reference

- Environment Office Region 9, Udon Thani Province. (2008). *Environmental Quality Situation Report 2007 Region 9. Mekong Basin*. Udon Thani: Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning, Region 9.
- Khao Luang Subdistrict Council Center. (1996). *The resolution to The Permission for Thungkham Co., Ltd. to operate gold mining at Moo 1, 2 and 3 Subdistrict, Khao Luang Subdistrict, Wang Saphung District, Loei Province*. Submitted to the province's mineral resources office on 14 March 1996.
- Khon Rakbankerd Movement. (2013) *Community regulations*. Retrieved from <http://loeiminingtown.org/2013/10/31/184>
- Melucci, A. (1985). The symbolic challenge of contemporary movements. *Social Research*, 52(4), 789-816.
- Pintobtang, P. (2009). *Political Analysis Framework for Social Movement Theory*. Chiang Mai: Heinrich Böll Foundation, Southeast Asia Office.
- Provincial Public Health Office Loei. (2008). *Summary of blood tests for cyanide compounds of people living in the area of 6 villages around the gold mine*,

- Khao Luang Subdistrict, Wang Saphung District, Loei Province conducted during January 21-25, 2008.* Submitted to Thai National Human Rights Commission, August 30 2012.
- Suraphakdi, T. (2010). *Plian pai "Loei" chatakam khong Mueang Loei pailang kan khao ma khong Mueang Thongkham*. Nonthaburi: Center for Development of Health Impact Assessment System and Mechanism. [in Thai]
- Techawan, S. (2003). *Gold mining development situation in Thailand*. Bangkok: Mineral Resources Conservation and Management Division Department of Mineral Resources.
- Thai Government Cabinet. (2011) Cabinet Resolution on February 8, 2011. Retrieved from <http://122.154.24.34/ssnet2/html/prompt/2553/100114/49.pdf>.
- The Project for the Right of Economic Society and Culture. (2014). *Voice report from marginalized people Na Nong Bong: Economic, social and cultural rights in the northeastern region of Thailand*. Peace and Human Rights Center in Isan. Retrieved from <http://www.aseanminingwatch.com>
- Wisler, D. & Giugni, M. (1999). Under the spotlight: The impact of media attention on protest policing. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 4(2), 171-187.
- Zibechi, R. (2010). *Dispersing Power: Social Movements as Anti-state Forces*. Oakland, CA, USA: AK Press, 174p.