Unpacking Pro-coal Narratives in Thailand: The Case of Mae Moh Mine Museum[1]

Yeji Yoo

Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand
Email: yejiyoo@gmail.com

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Abstract

Coal is still the king of energy sources in Southeast Asia. However, there are only a limited number of studies concerning the discursive aspect of strategic efforts by the region's coal sector to maintain its status quo amid the climate crisis. This article aims to unpack exhibition narratives (texts, images, videos, and spatial arrangements) and examine which discourses are highlighted while others are seen to be irrelevant, and are thus hidden or excluded. The study uses the case of the Mae Moh Mine Museum, which is located in the Mae Moh Lignite Mine and Power Plant in Lampang province, northern Thailand. By employing spatial discourse analysis, this article demonstrates that there are three main pro-coal narratives that have been produced in order to craft a positive image of coal, and thus gaining legitimacy for controversial coal business practices in Thailand. The first main narrative is coal being part of the King's legacy, the second concerns environmental management and clean coal technology, while the last is related to community development and prosperity. Following this, the article argues that the discursive power of the coal sector, which has been employed in making pro-coal discourses and narratives that are later displayed in the museum, has a significant impact not only on the carbon lock-in, but also on a patronage lock-in that results in the obstruction of the more fundamental social, political, and economic changes in Thai society.

Keywords: coal, discourse, discursive power, patronage, Thailand

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Introduction

The contemporary climate crisis necessitates that the world stop burning fossil fuels. Of all the fossil fuels, coal has come under the most pressure. Because of its intense impact on the climate, phasing out coal is critical in limiting global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels (UNFCCC, 2016). Despite the global call for climate action, 'coal is still king' in Southeast Asia (Wood Mackenzie, 2019). This region has become the only one in the world where coal's share of power generation increased in 2018 (IEA, 2019). Between 2010 and 2015, Southeast Asian countries' newly-built 25GW of coal capacity accounted for 42 percent of the total added capacity of electricity generation over that period (World Coal Association and ASEAN Centre for Energy, 2017). Although COVID-19 slowed this trend, Southeast Asia's appetite for coal is forecast to continue (Zein, 2020).

Concerning coal's reign in the region, existing studies have focused largely on political-economic factors, such as lack of political will, tax policies, government corruption, and increasing coal investments from developed countries (Clark et al., 2020; Gallagher et al., 2021; Manych and Jakob, 2021; Overland et al., 2021; Shi, 2016). However, there has been only limited research on the discursive aspects of the coal sector's strategic efforts to maintain its status quo in Southeast Asia. Discourse and linguistic framing are of great importance in energy politics because the distinct framings of energy policy problems and solutions have considerable influence on existing and future policy pathways (Isoaho and Karhunmaa, 2019).

In addressing this gap in the literature, the present article examines how the coal power sector secures its status as a hegemonic energy source in Southeast Asia. As a case study, it focuses on the Mae Moh Lignite Mine and Power Plant (MMLMPP), the Mekong Region's largest coal power plant, with a total installed capacity of 2,455 MW, operated by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT)[2]

[2] EGAT is a state-owned enterprise and the country's sole lignite miner under the supervision of the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Finance of Thailand. In 2021, Thailand's domestic production of lignite (also known as brown coal, the lowest grade coal) was about 14 million tons, which was solely produced from the Mae Moh Lignite Mine and totally consumed in the Mae Moh Power Plant to generate electricity (EPPO, 2022). For more information about coal use in Thailand, please see Prurapark and Asavaritikrai 2020.

in Mae Moh district, Lampang province, Thailand. MMLMPP is well-known for its serious sulfur dioxide exposure in the 1990s and its impact on public health and the environment (Boonlong et al., 2011; Greenpeace Southeast Asia, 2006). As the government continually failed to respond to the citizen's concerns, mistrust and opposition to existing and proposed coal-fired power plants increased in Thai society (The Mekong Eye, 2016). Therefore, while EGAT pursues new projects in neighboring countries, it has produced and reproduced pro-coal discourse and narratives in order to craft a positive image of coal and gain legitimacy for its controversial business.

In particular, I focus on the Mae Moh Mine Museum located in the MMLMPP as a site of (re)production of pro-coal discourse and narratives, and analyze how EGAT has exercised its discursive power to create a new image of coal. By employing spatial discourse analysis, I explore the museum's narratives, which are presented not only in texts, images, and videos but also in its spatial arrangement. Although the museum is the primary frame of analysis, other materials such as EGAT's annual reports, magazines, and interviews are also used when available. In doing so, this research aims to reveal how EGAT's discursive power has been exercised not just to maintain its controversial coal business, but also to reinforce unequal power relations embedded in Thailand's patronage system.

The paper is divided into five sections, beginning with the literature review above. The second section will present theoretical concerns regarding discursive power and the role of discourse and narratives in sustaining the fossil fuel energy system. The third will introduce spatial discourse analysis as the research methodology. The fourth section will provide the main findings, examining three key pro-coal narratives of Thailand, namely, coal as the King's legacy, environmental management and clean coal technology, and community development and prosperity. The last section will summarize the main arguments.

Theoretical Concerns

The term 'power' is one of the most basic, but contested, concepts in the social sciences. The agency-based understanding of power focuses on the ability to control others and change their behaviors and choices (Dahl, 1957; 1961). Bachrach and Baratz (1962) expanded the meaning of power by emphasizing that power is not just limited to the ability to change others' decisions, but also to control the political agenda and suspend or delay decisions on controversial issues. Beyond these two perceptions of power, Steven Lukes (1974), who started the so-called 'faces of power' debate, argues that power should be understood as multidimensional and complex. He suggests that power is exercised in three ways. The first two types of power consist of decision-making and non-decision-making power. The third dimension of power is often termed ideological power, which is the ability to prevent conflict by influencing, shaping, and determining others' desires and behaviors (Lukes, 1974).

Beyond agency-based and structuralist views on power, there emerged a post-structuralist perspective that was inspired by Michel Foucault. This approach pays more attention to discursive power and the role of discourse and narratives. The common assumption of this approach is that discourse is not simply a particular set of written or spoken statements, but "shared ways of apprehending the world" (Dryzek, 2012: 8) or "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices" (Hajer, 2006: 67). Since discourse shapes meaning, perceptions and identities, they in effect construct reality and have a crucial impact on policies and political processes. In this sense, it is crucial to understand discursive power, which is exercised through the (re)production of discourse and narratives on particular issues not just by the state, but also by various strategic actors such as companies and NGOs (Svarstad et al., 2018). As for the business sector, it invests considerably in this source of power by supporting image marketing, sponsoring events and entertainment, and promoting corporate social responsibility (CSR). It also creates interest by leading the public to accept 'truths' about desirable policies and political development for itself (Fuchs and Lederer, 2007).

Fossil fuel regime actors also play a role. Facing the challenges of coal phase-out and low carbon energy transition, the coal sector employs various defensive measures, such as "political lobbying, participation in government committees, media advocacy, information dissemination and investment in current or preferred technologies" (Trencher et al., 2019: 783). Among the strategies, an emerging body of studies has highlighted the pivotal role of discourse and narratives to defend the fossil fuel energy system, delay decarbonization, and reinforce energy injustices (Bodenhamer, 2016; Buschmann and Oels, 2019; Curran, 2021; Rosenbloom, 2018; Scrase and Ockwell, 2010; Trencher et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021). These studies have found that the coal industry has resisted climate change-related pressures by repositioning itself for low-carbon futures without any fundamental change. It is therefore crucial to understand the discursive power of the coal sector since it has an important impact on the framing of policy problems and solutions, and thus sustaining the high carbon energy system (Scrase and Ockwell, 2010).

Research Methodology

Based on the theoretical concerns, this article aims to unpack pro-coal discourse and narratives in the context of Thailand. In particular, it focuses on the Mae Moh Mine Museum as an arena for the exercise of EGAT's discursive power. Museums are significant sources for analyzing discursive power because they "present certain historical episodes and highlight certain themes, while excluding others, they reveal underlying processes of how societies choose to remember or forget past events" (Smith, 2018: 2). Studying museums helps to find which narratives are presented and highlighted, while others are seen as irrelevant and are thus excluded. In order to examine these museum

discourses, Smith and Foote (2017) suggest spatial discourse analysis by extending qualitative discourse analysis, which has been mostly interested in one- or two-dimensional texts, to three-dimensional space such as museums, historical sites, or guided tours. Spatial discourse analysis focuses not only on the texts of museum exhibits, but also on the spatial arrangement, layout, and positioning, which contribute crucially to their meaning (Smith and Foote, 2017: 132).

Thus, I apply spatial discourse analysis to examine how the pro-coal discourse is narrated in the Mae Moh Mine Museum. The focus of this study is the exhibition narratives themselves, rather than how they are designed by museum staff or how museum visitors understand them. The exhibition narratives include not only texts, images, and videos, but also the spatial arrangements of the exhibition zones of the museum. In terms of collecting data, I visited the museum five times between 2018 and 2021. Texts, images, videos, and other artifacts used in the museum exhibits were photographed and documented while the museum's official brochure depicting floor plans was used to document and diagram the three-dimensional arrangement. Moreover, although the museum is the primary unit of spatial discourse analysis, other materials such as EGAT's annual reports, magazines, and interviews with local villagers are also used as forms of data triangulation. Triangulation, using multiple data-collection methods, is a way to retain the validity and reliability of data among qualitative researchers (Bryman, 2012; Glesne, 2016).

In terms of data analysis, I have documented and transcribed all texts and visual materials such as photographs and videos displayed in the museum, made note of repeatedly mentioned expressions, and categorized them into several topics, such as 'coal,' 'the role of the king,' 'energy/electricity development,' 'environment,' 'clean coal technology,' 'cooperation,' 'with communities,' and so on. After that, I grouped them into broader categories of three pro-coal narratives, which are the main findings of this research.

Analysis and Discussion

Overview of the Mae Moh Mine Museum

The Mae Moh Mine Museum was first opened in 2006[3] as part of EGAT's restoration project that aimed to change its negative environmental image and improve community relations in Mae Moh district (Andrews et al., 2007). The museum was established with the following seven objectives: to 'honor King Rama VII,'' 'create an understanding of EGAT's mining and power operation,' 'bring tourism to Mae Moh,' 'dispel the effects of negative media attention,' 'inform visitors of the environmental improvements,' 'present reclamation plans to visitors,' and 'to be a resource for the Mae Moh community' (Andrews et al., 2007: iii). As previously mentioned, during the period between 1992 and 1998, there were two serious incidents in which dangerous levels of SO_2 were released from the Mae Moh coal-fired power plant. This resulted in the illness of thousands of people and livestock, while also damaging surrounding communities' crops throughout the region (Boonlong et al., 2011; Greenpeace Southeast Asia, 2006). In order to respond to environmental criticisms of coal power and regain trust from local people, EGAT initiated the plan to create the museum inside the MMLMPP.

The museum consists of seven zones and an outdoor exhibition, as follows (Figure 1):

A. Mae Moh Mine Museum
Zone 1: The Exhibition in Honor of the King;
Zone 2: Universe, Earth, and Coal;
Zone 3: A Gift from Sea and Land;
Zone 4: The Power that Moves Thailand;
  Zone 4.1: The Development of the Mae Moh Mine
  Zone 4.2: Mae Moh Clean Coal Technology Power Plant
Zone 5: Drive to the Future;
Zone 6: A Turning Point of the World and Basic Sciences; and
Zone 7: Mae Moh, a Sustainable Community

[3] It was temporarily closed for maintenance and renewal in 2014 and reopened on May 30, 2016.

Outdoor Exhibition: B. Mining Machinery; C. Mining Conveyor; D. Mining Operation Machinery, and E. Machinery's wheels

Visitors who join the one-hour guided tour will first be introduced to a brief five-minute film, in which two mascots of MMLMPP, *Tan Noi* (Little Coal) and *Buatong* (Mexican Sunflower) briefly explain the mine, power plant, and museum. The mascot *Tan Noi* represents coal development in the area, while *Buatong* symbolizes EGAT's efforts on environmental management in MMLMPP.[4] The two mascots are not just shown in the film but can also be easily seen throughout the museum. This demonstrates that they play a crucial role in giving a favorable impression on coal to the visitors. After watching the film, visitors are guided to the first exhibition room of Zone 1 and then to other zones in Building 2 (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 1 An official brochure (Source: Mae Moh Mine Museum)

[4] This is because *Buatong's* character is based on Mexican sunflowers that were planted in the rehabilitated park area that used to be a dumping site of the mine.

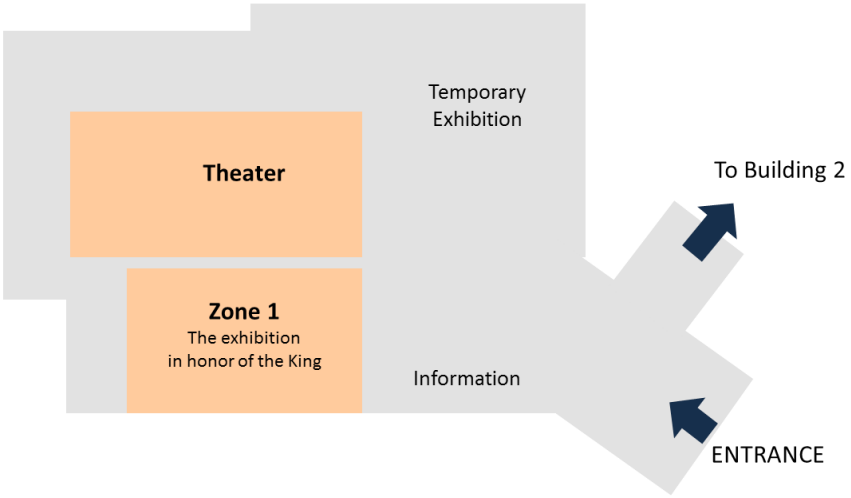

Figure 2 Floor plan of Building 1 (Cartography by the author)

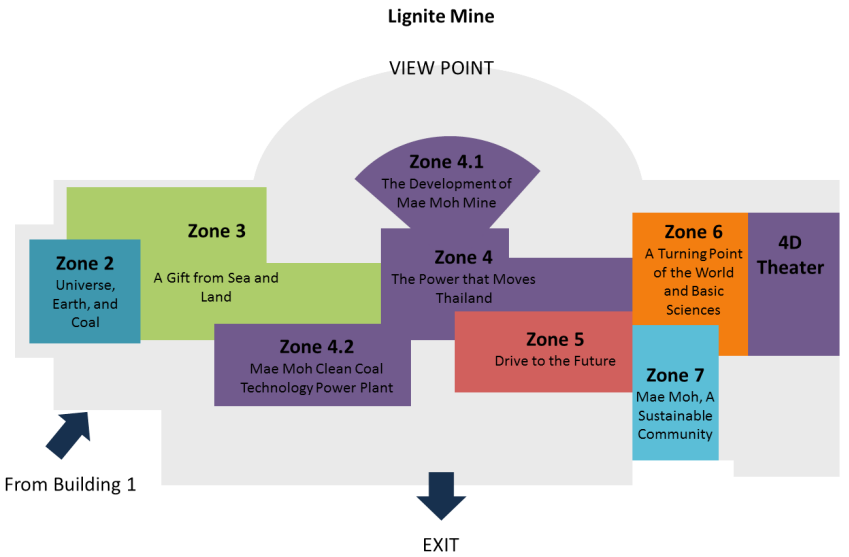

Figure 3 Floor plan of Building 2 (Cartography by the author)

Pro-coal Narratives in the Mae Moh Mine Museum

This section will provide an exploration of Thailand's pro-coal narratives. These can be separated into three categories; 1) coal as the King's legacy; 2) environmental management and clean coal technology; and 3) community development and prosperity.

1. Coal as the King's legacy

After watching the short film, visitors are guided to Zone 1 (Figure 4), 'the exhibition in honor of the King.' The King refers to King Rama VII or King Prajadhipok, who reigned from 1925 to 1935. This zone highlights the role of King Prajadhipok in coal/energy development and his contributions to national development in Thailand. The zone includes several themes such as "The Beloved King Prajadhipok of Thai People," "His Royal Grace Light[s] the Kingdom," "9 Years of Changes during the Reign of King Prajadhipok," and "World Eminent Personality."

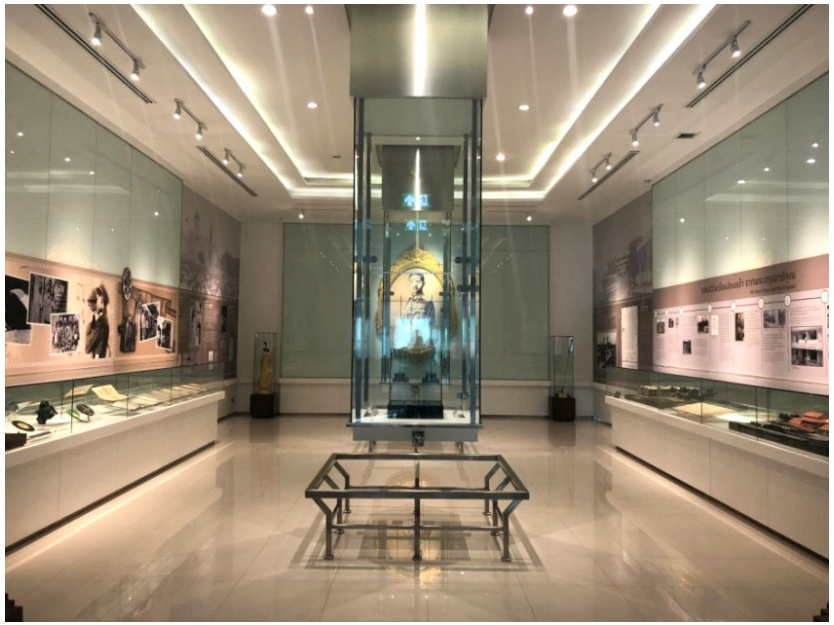

Figure 4 Zone 1. The exhibition in honor of the King

Figure 5 The section of "His Royal Grace Light[s] the Kingdom"

The exhibit, "His Royal Grace Light[s] the Kingdom" (Figure 5), introduces a brief history of coal and electricity development in Thailand. Key events include the establishment of electricity in Thailand in 1884, King Rama VII's royal command of the preservation of coal for official use in 1927, and the development of the Mae Moh coal-fired power plant. Because of his royal command, King Prajadhipok is portrayed as a key figure in coal development in Thailand. The role of the King was already stressed in the short film;

> King Prajadhipok *realized the importance of coal resources. With his wide vision*, His Majesty ordered that coal resources only be conserved in governmental institutions. The order was effective on February 16, 1927. *The long vision of King Prajadhipok* is the origin of Thailand's valuable resource conservation until today. It is regarded that King Prajadhipok is *the father of energy in Thailand.* Since then, Mae Moh Mine has been continuously developed… (From the short film, narrated by Tan Noi, the mascot of MMLMPP; emphasis added)

A photocopy of the royal command is also displayed in Zone 1 as one of the main exhibit artifacts. The translation of the royal decree is as follows:

> As the mining concession for the coal mine at Ban Don, which had been granted to Sila Siam Coal Company Limited had expired, I am of the opinion that it is an appropriate time to collect the coal sources in the Kingdom for operation of the government only *as it will be of great benefit to the country*. Therefore, from now on, coal mines at Ban Don in Krabi and at Mae Moh are reserved for government use only. Should anybody ask for concession or any right on the above-mentioned areas, please let them know that it is reserved by the government for official use (EGAT, 2019; emphasis added).

This exhibit conveys several interrelated meanings by displaying the royal decree while also introducing the King's life and devotion to the Thai people in the first zone. In one sense, it portrays coal as an important and valuable resource that is 'of great benefit to the country.' Second, this valuable resource has been used for public as opposed to private interest, which has contributed towards Thailand's national development. Third, it was specifically the King himself who made this foundational decision; who realized 'the importance of coal resources' with his 'wide' and 'long vision.' Although the following two zones–Zones 2 and 3–explain how fossilized vegetation and hence coal has been created from the perspective of geology, this introductory area gives more emphasis to the fact that coal was bestowed upon the Thai people by King Prajadhipok, whose astute vision became foundational to the development of the MMLMPP.

The role of King Prajadhipok is further stressed in additional exhibit texts;

> The biography and the royal duties of King Prajadhipok regarding energy demonstrate that he was *the pioneer of [the] energy sector in Thailand*. His contribution was *important to [the] development and stability of this country* since it was his initiative to conserve coal for the use of the kingdom, which led to the establishment of Thailand's energy." (From the Building1/ Zone1 information of Exhibition Guide; emphasis added); and The contribution of Mae Moh Power Plant was very important for Thailand's power infrastructure *owing to the long vision of King Prajadhipok back in the past*. (From the texts under the photo of Mae Moh Power Plant Units 4-13 in the Zone 1; emphasis added).

This narrative of coal as a King's legacy has a dual effect. First, it legitimizes an extractive industry–irrespective of its destructive side–by highlighting its contribution to the national economy; and second, it legitimizes the patronage system of Thailand. In the context of Thailand, a significant type of patron-client relationship has been constituted between the King and the people. In exchange for being a benevolent King to the people and giving what the people need, the people should be loyal to the King and the system.

Because of the transformation from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 1932, the symbolic power of Thailand's kings dwindled. However, under Sarit Thanarat's military regime (1958-1963), it was revived. In order to gain legitimacy, the military government initiated a 'hegemonic project' that emphasized King Rama IX's symbolic power of being the primary caretaker of the Thai people (Ferrara, 2015). The role of the monarchy and successive kings was represented as that of a caring patron who has been taking care of their clients' livelihood and welfare. In this sense, the highlighting of King Rama VII's contribution in reserving coal for official use can be understood as a strategy meant to legitimize the patronage system between the monarch and his people. Thus, in Zone 1, discursive power is exercised not exclusively to construct a favorable description of coal as a King's legacy, but also to legitimize the royal patronage system in Thailand.

After touring Building 1, visitors are guided to the next building, which contains the remaining exhibition zones. In the following two

zones (Zone 2: Universe, Earth, and Coal and Zone 3: A Gift from Sea and Land), visitors can learn how earth, fossils, and coal are created, and observe various displays of fossils and different types of coal. After that, visitors are guided to Zone 4: The Power that Moves Thailand.

2. Environmental management and clean coal technology

The next pro-coal narrative is related to EGAT's environmental improvements in MMLMPP. Inside Zone 4: The Power that Moves Thailand, there are two sub-zones, Zone 4.1: The Development of Mae Moh Mine and Zone 4.2: Mae Moh Clean Coal Technology Power Plant. Each zone introduces EGAT's responsibility to minimize environmental impacts from the lignite mine and the lignite-fired power plant.

The section, entitled "The Past, Present, and Future of Mae Moh Mine," in Zone 4 introduces the development of MMLMPP in particular. After facing the global oil crises in the 1970s, the Mae Moh coal-fired power plant underwent rapid expansion in the 1980s-1990s to enhance energy security through the use of domestic resources (Sukkumnoed, 2007). Previously, there were only three coal-fired power plant units with an installed capacity of 225MW. However, from 1983 to 1995, 10 more units – with a total installed capacity of 2,400MW – were added to this first batch (EGAT Mae Moh, 2020a).

The expansion of MMLMPP produces not only electricity but pollutants as well. It discharges about 1.6 million tons of sulfur gas each year, which has caused severe impacts on nearby communities and the environment (Boonlong et al., 2011). Serious SO_2 leakages from the power plant in the 1990s made local villagers suffer from respiratory ailments and mobilized them to protest against the MMLMPP. These tragic incidents served as an impetus for EGAT to invest more in environmental management (introduced in Zone 4.1 and 4.2) and CSR programs (displayed in Zone 7) in order to minimize environmental impacts and improve its relations with the local community.

However, throughout the museum, there is no mention of the social and environmental problems in Mae Moh during the 1990s. Rather, Zones 4.1 and 4.2 provide information on the environmental management of the lignite mine and power plant, respectively.

Concerning Zone 4.1, there is a strategic arrangement in its location, as it is located in the only sunny and bright room in the museum and includes a full view of the Mae Moh open-pit lignite mine (Figure 6). Visitors who do not have a particularly negative stance on the coal industry are likely to gain a positive impression of the mining operations. One reason for this is that they can observe the huge open-pit lignite mine from a long distance, which facilitates the portrayal of the mine as well-managed, especially when positioned alongside the many exhibits explaining the specific measures of clean environmental management in Zone 4.1.

Figure 6 A view of the Mae Moh open-pit lignite mine can be observed from Zone 4.1.

Visitors are then guided to Zone 4.2 (Figure 7). In this zone, an exhibition model of MMLMPP is displayed under the glass floor, while the processes of clean coal technology are depicted on the wall. On the other side of the wall, visitors can see a diagram of the wastewater treatment system of the power plant and the real-time online monitoring of SO_2 and NO_X emissions. The clean coal technology and air quality monitoring system are explained in the text below:

Mae Moh Power Plant also embraces *clean coal technology to minimize environmental impacts*, such as installing the flue gas treatment system which *can remove more than 95% of sulfur dioxide, dust, and nitrogen oxide,* which is better than Thai government regulations. (Emphasis added)

EGAT also has developed a real-time air quality monitoring system to ensure people around the Mae Moh Power Plant areas in 11 stations that they *have clean air quality for living.* (Emphasis added)

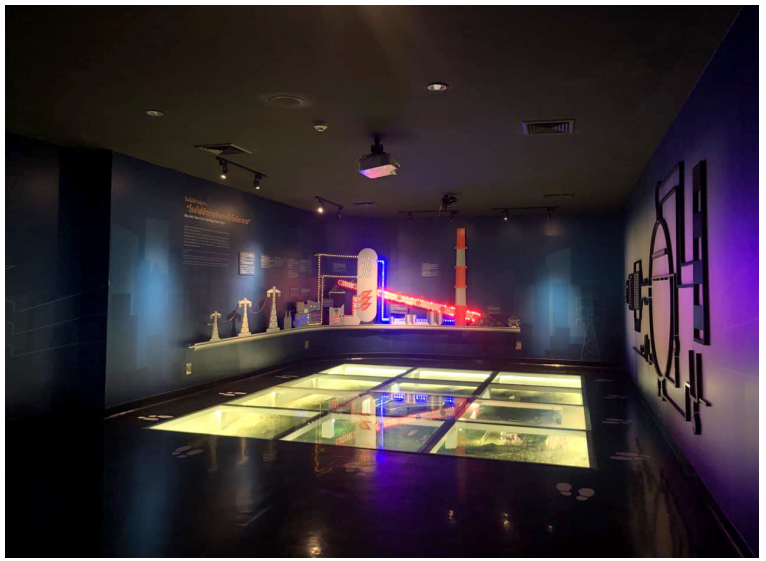

Figure 7 Zone 4.2. Mae Moh Clean Coal Technology Power Plant

The museum aims to create a 'clean' image of coal by disseminating information about EGAT's environmental management of the lignite mine and coal-fired power plant. This type of image-making of the MMLMPP can be easily found in other documents, such as EGAT's official reports and magazines. For example, in EGAT's 50th-anniversary special report in 2019, the Mae Moh coal-fired power plant is described as "the model of a clean coal technology power plant"

(EGAT, 2019: 193). Additionally, the report emphasizes that "the pollution can be reduced to be lower than the level which is dangerous to the environment" and "the power plant is equipped with the flue gas desulfurization system (FGD), electrostatic precipitator (ESP), and selective catalytic reduction (SCR) to efficiently control environmental impacts" (EGAT, 2019: 193, 207).

We can see from the museum and official reports that EGAT uses 'greenwashing' strategies to create a view of their business as green, clean, and environmentally friendly, whereas the idea of giving up coal is never considered. Greenwashing is understood here as "a type of selective disclosure" which "retain[s] the disclosure of negative information related to the company's environmental performance and expose[s] positive information regarding its environmental performance" (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020: 6).

In the case of the museum, the messaging conceals several negative environmental impacts caused by coal mining and combustion. First, it does not mention the two incidents of SO_2 leakages that occurred during the 1990s. Instead, it simply highlights in Zone 4.2 that SO_2 emissions are well managed due to having installed FGD and real-time air quality monitoring systems. Second, although it mentions the potential environmental impacts of lignite mining, such as dust, odors, tremors, and noise, they are described as manageable and controllable problems in Zone 4.1. However, these impacts continue to affect nearby communities even though they might be comparably less threatening to health than SO_2 emissions.

Last, there is no mention of the carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions originating from coal combustion in the power plant. Coal is the most carbon-intensive fossil fuel, contributing greatly to the current global warming crisis. In the context of Thailand, the use of coal and lignite in power generation accounted for 38 percent of CO_2 emissions (34.49 million tons) in 2020 (EPPO, 2021). Its global impact is not mentioned in the museum or any in other EGAT-published documents. Rather the problem of coal extraction and combustion is framed merely on a local scale. Thus, FGD, ESP, and SCR are emphasized as key clean coal technologies that reduce SO_2 and NO_X emissions.

In short, the pro-coal narrative regarding environmental management and clean coal technology demonstrates that discursive power is wielded within the process of problem-solving framing. EGAT Mae Moh narrowly defines multi-scalar problems of coal exploitation and combustion as local environmental and health issues and provides technological fixes as solutions through the installation of environmental management systems such as FGD, ESP, and SCR without considering the more fundamental low carbon energy transition and coal phase-out approaches.

3. Community development and prosperity

The third pro-coal narrative is that the MMLMPP has a beneficial effect on community development and prosperity. Passing through Zone 5 and Zone 6, visitors are guided to the 4D theater to watch a short animation film concerning energy conservation. Following this, visitors reach the museum's last zone, 'Zone 7: Mae Moh, A Sustainable Community.' Unlike the other zones, it mainly displays photographic images and explanatory text panels (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Zone 7. Mae Moh, a Sustainable Community

By displaying the photos and texts, the zone emphasizes EGAT Mae Moh's endeavors to contribute to local development through 'cooperation with communities.' Showcasing various activities initiated by EGAT that are, 'for communities' and which work, 'with communities,' EGAT Mae Moh has crafted its corporate image as a 'good neighbor,' or a 'caring patron' whose business is beneficial to and supportive of the community. This narrative is also introduced in the 2D short film:

> The Mae Moh Mine and Power Plant are located in the area of a key resource site, surrounded by local communities. *Our mission, apart from the power system stability of the nation, is taking care of the communities and the environment around our area so that we can live together sustainably.* 'I come from the mine's restored area, which used to be a dumping area on the east side. It has now become the beautiful *Chaloem Phrakiat* Park full of the blooming Buatong flowers in winter.' (From the short film, narrated by Buatong, the mascot of MMLMPP; emphasis added)

In a similar manner to highlighting the role of the King in coal development, EGAT has created its image as a benevolent agency looking after energy security and taking good care of local communities. In this sense, this narrative contributes to the (re)production of the patronage system, in this case between the coal industry represented by EGAT Mae Moh and the local communities. It also maintains the royal discourse through the naming of the park "Chaloem Phrakiat" (translated as "in honor of the monarch").

The activities displayed in Zone 7 are financially supported by EGAT Mae Moh, which has three main budget sources: CSR, local taxes from royalties, and the Power Development Fund (PDF). In 2020, the total budget for community development was 757.51 million THB (approximately 24 million USD) (EGAT Mae Moh, 2020b) (Figure 9).

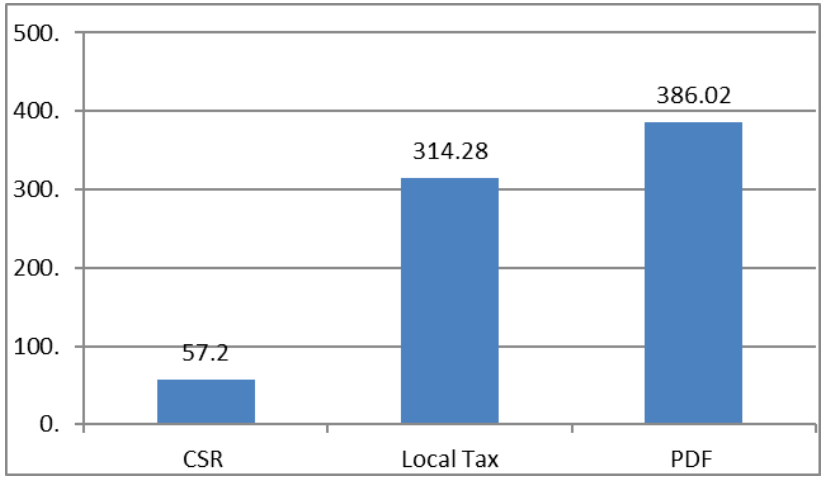

Figure 9 EGAT Mae Moh's annual budget for community development in 2020 (Unit: million THB) (Source: EGAT Mae Moh, 2020b)

During my field research in Mae Moh, some villagers mentioned that they were very proud of living in this area because Mae Moh is the richest district in northern Thailand in terms of budget (Villager #1[Pseudonym], 2021). However, one villager who had joined the protest and lawsuit against EGAT Mae Moh, pointed out the limitations of EGAT's financial support. The villager argued that those community development funds are nothing but a temporary expedient since EGAT has already destroyed the local people's livelihoods and environment, as well as caused various illnesses (Villager #2[Pseudonym], 2021). Furthermore, the villager pointed out that EGAT attempted to gain honor and claim itself as meritorious to villagers, which ended up being quite successful in that most villagers believe EGAT is well-intentioned, electricity is abundant, and that EGAT gives lots of things here and there (Villager #2[Pseudonym], 2021). EGAT's material exchanges with villagers' consent to the controversial coal business in the area have been working as a foundation to the patron-client relationship between EGAT and the villagers. This is reminiscent of the legitimacy created by reference to the monarchy at the national level, as discussed above.

In this zone, discursive power is exercised to shape local people's dependency on the MMLMPP by inducing them to understand the coal business as beneficial to, and sharing interests with, their community.

Conclusion

This article explored how the discursive power of the Thai coal industry, particularly in the case of the MMLMPP managed by EGAT, has been employed to maintain the status quo. By focusing on the Mae Moh Mine Museum as a site of (re)production of pro-coal discourse and narratives, I have identified three main narratives: first, coal as a king's legacy; second, environmental management and clean coal technology; and third, community development and prosperity. In the case of Thailand, EGAT Mae Moh has produced particular discourse and narratives to defend its controversial business practices after the tragic public health problems that resulted from its operations during the 1990s. By producing these pro-coal narratives, EGAT has endeavored to craft positive images of the controversial coal industry and reframe its practices as environmentally conscious, socially responsible, and vital to both the national and local economies.

Moreover, this article has pointed out that particular sets of information that EGAT deems problematic, such as the accidents of SO_2 leakages in the 1990s, local people's many sacrifices as a result of the mine, and coal combustion's critical impact on global warming, are seen as irrelevant and thus silenced in the museum. In this sense, the discursive power of the coal sector has been exercised by solely supporting the positive aspects of the coal industry, which can be understood as a 'greenwashing' strategy.

Finally, this article has shown that the discursive power of the coal sector has a significant impact not only on maintaining a fossil fuel-centered energy system but also on legitimizing, drawing on, and further reinforcing a patronage system that is deeply embedded in Thai society. This patronage system is problematic since it encourages uneven

power relations by making individuals or groups (usually less powerful or powerless) dependent on the more powerful. In this research, I have pointed out that the monarchy and EGAT can be described as 'a caring patron' and 'a good neighbor,' respectively, causing people to feel grateful and loyal. Hence, the production of pro-coal discourse and narratives lead not only to carbon lock-in but also to patronage lock-in, which hinders more fundamental social, political, and economic change in Thai society.

This research is significant in the way that it has revealed (re) production of pro-coal discourses as one of the crucial factors in maintaining the fossil fuel energy system and unequal social structures in Thailand and thus it would help to view them with a more critical eye. In addition to Mae Moh Mine Museum, EGAT is now operating five more learning centers across the country–e.g. headquarters in Nonthaburi, Kanchanaburi, Prachuap Khiri Khan Nakhon Ratchasima, and Songkhla provinces. Two centers in Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son are in preparation for opening (EGAT Learning Center, 2020). As we have seen from the Mae Moh Mine Museum, they would play a crucial role in producing and reproducing mainstream discourses about energy development and even future energy pathways. Thus, future research will be required to critically analyze and compare what specific narratives have been highlighted in each center to reveal EGAT's discursive power to maintain its status quo not just in the coal business, but also in the fossil fuel-powered centralized energy system in Thailand.

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