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Decoding Power in Thai Organizations: Control, Visibility and the Authority Illusions

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Abstract

Organizational power is often inferred from formal authority, hierarchical position, and visible performance. In practice, however, decision influence frequently diverges from these signals, particularly in hybrid organizational environments where multiple governance logics coexist. This misalignment creates persistent uncertainty about who actually holds influence in everyday organizational settings. This study addresses the problem by asking how power operates beneath formal structures and why visible indicators of authority often fail to reflect actual control over decisions. Adopting a conceptual research design, the paper synthesizes literature on organizational power, legitimacy, and attention to distinguish between structural control—control over resources, agendas, rules, and organizational attention—and symbolic visibility, such as titles, recognition, and positional prominence.

The study proposes that managerial tensions and misaligned decisions emerge when visibility is interpreted as evidence of authority. To explain this mechanism, the paper develops the Control–Power Decoding Framework, which models how organizational actors interpret power signals under hybrid governance conditions. The framework includes a control–visibility matrix that identifies four recurring positions: structural authority, symbolic authority, marginal actors, and hidden power. This study contributes a conceptual explanation of why power is systematically misinterpreted in organizations and offers a practical lens for distinguishing symbolic authority from structural control in managerial decision-making.

Keywords: power dynamics; symbolic authority; hybrid power systems; managerial illusions; Thai organizations

Introduction

Power in organizations is often assumed to follow formal structure. Titles, reporting lines, and performance systems are commonly treated as reliable indicators of who holds influence and who makes decisions. Yet in practice, these signals frequently mislead. It is not uncommon to observe highly visible managers who are unable to shape key decisions, alongside individuals with limited formal recognition who nonetheless exert substantial influence behind the scenes. This disconnect is not an exception but a recurring feature of organizational life. Increasingly, organizational research shows that judgments are shaped less by underlying structural conditions than by what is visible, measurable, and socially recognized. Studies on symbolic management and status processes demonstrate that observable signals—such as performance narratives, recognition, and positional prominence—shape how influence is perceived, even when they do not

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correspond to actual control (Westphal & Zajac, 1998; Ridgeway, 2001; Phillips, 2001). Similarly, research on organizational signaling suggests that formal roles and performance indicators often function as interpretive cues, particularly under conditions of uncertainty (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996).

As a result, authority is often inferred from what can be seen rather than from the structures that govern decisions. From a conceptual perspective, classical sociological accounts have long emphasized that authority is stabilized through legitimacy and formalized systems of rule (Weber, 1978). Subsequent research has shown that power extends beyond formal authority and is embedded in relationships, structures, and systems of meaning (Clegg, 2009; Lukes, 2005; Rutar, 2017; Pfeffer, 1992). Empirical and contemporary studies further demonstrate that the role of legitimacy, attention, and visibility in shaping how authority is perceived and enacted in contemporary organizations (Tyler, 2023; Ocasio, 2023; Joseph et al., 2024). Yet these perspectives have largely developed in parallel, rarely explaining how they intersect in practice—particularly when they generate conflicting signals about who actually holds influence.

This limitation becomes more pronounced in hybrid organizational environments. In many contemporary organizations, hierarchical authority, performance-based evaluation, informal networks, and political influence coexist without being integrated into a single governance logic. Institutional research has long acknowledged the coexistence of multiple logics and governance structures (Scott, 1987; 2014; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012), yet has paid comparatively less attention to how such conditions shape the everyday interpretation of power in organizations. This gap is particularly evident in the Thai context. Existing academic discussions of power in Thailand have largely focused on political structures, governance arrangements, and educational hierarchies (Dongjit, 2025; Kanjanapabu et al., 2024; Korsakul, 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights into authority and institutional design, they offer a limited explanation of how power is interpreted and enacted within everyday organizational settings. As a result, systematic analyses of power dynamics in routine organizational life remain underdeveloped. Organizational actors often operate within environments where multiple governance logics coexist, yet lack conceptual tools to interpret how power actually functions in practice.

This absence contributes to recurring misinterpretations of organizational signals. Visibility may be taken as influence, performance as authority, and proximity to leadership as structural power (Jiang et al., 2022). Such misreadings can lead to misaligned expectations, flawed decision-making, and persistent organizational tension—particularly in hybrid contexts where multiple forms of authority coexist without clear integration. When organizational signals are inconsistent, actors rely on available cues to make sense of influence. This process aligns with research on organizational sensemaking, which shows that individuals construct meaning based on partial and context-dependent information under conditions of ambiguity (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). At the same time, research on relational and structural power suggests that influence is often embedded in networks, resource dependencies, and decision processes that are not always visible to organizational members (Pfeffer, 1992; Clegg, 2009). Together, these perspectives point to a persistent gap between perceived authority and actual control—one that existing frameworks have not fully explained. Rather than treating these inconsistencies as isolated anomalies, this study argues that they reflect a systematic feature of hybrid organizational environments, in which power is not only distributed across structures but also continuously interpreted through visible signals.

This study focuses on three closely related questions: how does power operate beneath formal organizational structures in hybrid systems, why do visible indicators of authority often

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diverge from actual decision-making control, and how can such misalignments be systematically interpreted within organizational contexts? To address these questions, the paper develops the Control–Power Decoding Framework, a conceptual model that distinguishes structural control from symbolic visibility and explains how managerial illusions emerge from their misalignment. By integrating insights from power theory, legitimacy research, and attention-based perspectives, this study reframes organizational power as both an interpretive and structural phenomenon rather than a purely positional one.

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual research design grounded in theory synthesis and integrative literature analysis. The choice of this design follows directly from the nature of the research problem. As outlined in the introduction, the issue is not the absence of theories of power, but the lack of an integrative explanation for how power is interpreted—and often misinterpreted—in everyday organizational settings. While existing studies provide well-established accounts of power, legitimacy, and influence, they often remain analytically separated when applied to practice. A conceptual approach is therefore necessary, as it allows these fragmented perspectives to be brought into relation and examined as part of a broader interpretive process. Rather than testing predefined variables, this study focuses on developing an explanatory framework that accounts for the recurring gap between visible signals of authority and actual control over organizational decisions. In this respect, the study does not aim to introduce a new definition of power, but to explain how power becomes legible—and at times misread—under hybrid organizational conditions.

Data sources and selection criteria

The analysis draws on three strands of literature: organizational power theory, legitimacy and authority studies, and research on attention and visibility in organizations. These domains are selected because each captures a different dimension of how power operates—how it is structured, how it is perceived, and how it becomes visible in practice. The selection of sources is purposeful rather than exhaustive. Priority is given to theoretical works and empirical studies that directly engage with organizational dynamics such as decision-making, influence, and visibility. Foundational perspectives on power and authority (Clegg, 2009; Lukes, 2005; Singh & Asce, 2009; Christensen, 2024) are used to establish conceptual boundaries, while more recent work on attention and organizational behavior (Ocasio, 2023; Joseph et al., 2024; Dai, 2025) informs how power is interpreted and enacted in practice. Studies addressing visibility, perception, and evaluation in organizational contexts (Eberhard, 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2022; Widder et al., 2023) are incorporated to account for how observable signals shape judgments of authority. The aim is not to cover the full body of literature, but to focus on contributions that provide conceptual leverage for understanding a specific tension: the misalignment between visibility and control.

The analysis proceeds in three stages: first, foundational theories of power and authority are revisited in order to clarify how power has been conceptualized across different traditions. Particular attention is given to the distinction between formal authority and structural influence, as this distinction often becomes unstable in organizational practice (Clegg, 2009; Lukes, 2005; Rutar, 2017). Second, literature from organizational sociology, legitimacy theory, and attention-based research is examined to identify how authority becomes visible, interpreted, and socially validated. Prior work suggests that evaluative judgments in organizations are shaped by what

is observable, salient, and contextually meaningful (Tyler, 2023; Ocasio, 2023; Joseph et al., 2024). At this stage, these mechanisms are considered separately in order to preserve their original theoretical assumptions. Third, the three strands are brought into comparison. What emerges from this comparison is a recurring pattern: organizational actors frequently infer power from visible signals such as titles, recognition, or performance indicators, even when these do not correspond to actual control over decisions. At the same time, structural control often resides in less visible domains, such as agenda setting, resource allocation, or the design of rules and processes (Helfat & Maritan, 2023; Jiang et al., 2022; Herath & Joshi, 2025). This gap between visible signals and structural control becomes the central analytical problem addressed in this study.

Model construction

The framework proposed in this study is developed through an iterative process of conceptual abstraction. Rather than being derived from a single theoretical source, it emerges from comparing and aligning concepts across three domains of literature. These domains include both conceptual foundations and empirical studies, which are treated as analytically distinct throughout the framework development process. The process involved three steps. First, key constructs—particularly control, visibility, and authority—are identified and applied consistently across sources. Second, the relationships between these constructs are examined, with particular attention to how visibility and control may diverge under different organizational conditions. Third, these relationships are organized into a structured framework that conceptualizes power not as a fixed attribute, but as an interpretive outcome shaped by hybrid governance environments. Importantly, the framework is not constructed by imposing a predefined model but by identifying a recurring pattern across the literature: visible indicators of authority are often interpreted as proxies for power, whereas actual control is embedded in less observable structural conditions. The model therefore reflects a synthesis of existing theoretical insights, rather than a structure introduced independently by the author.

From conceptual model to visual representation

To clarify the analytical structure, the conceptual model is translated into two visual forms: the Organizational Power Decoding Process (Figure 1) and the Control–Visibility Matrix (Figure 2) These figures are developed as part of the analytical process rather than added at a later stage for presentation.

Figure 1 is derived from the stage of analysis concerned with how organizational actors interpret authority signals in practice. Its layered structure reflects three elements identified across the literature: visible organizational signals, interpretive processes, and underlying structural control. The figure illustrates how actors rely on observable indicators—such as titles, performance indicators, and recognition—as proxies for power, which can lead to systematic misinterpretation when visibility is taken as evidence of control.

Figure 2 is developed at a later stage, when visibility and structural control are treated as analytically distinct dimensions. By mapping these dimensions independently, the model produces four positions that reflect recurring patterns observed across the literature: actors who are both visible and powerful; actors who are visible but lack control; actors who are marginal on both dimensions; and actors whose influence remains largely hidden despite holding structural control. The matrix, therefore, serves as a simplified representation of the structural misalignment identified in the analysis.

Given the interpretive nature of the study, particular attention is paid to maintaining analytical rigor. First, conceptual consistency is maintained across sources. Core constructs such as control, visibility, and authority are applied in the same way throughout the analysis, rather than

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being redefined to support specific arguments. Second, the analysis relies on theoretical triangulation. Insights are developed by relating multiple strands of literature to one another, rather than relying on a single explanatory framework. This approach reduces the risk of selective interpretation and strengthens the coherence of the resulting framework. Although conceptual in design, the framework is intended to support future empirical work. By specifying the relationship between visibility, control, and interpretation, it provides a basis for developing testable propositions in organizational contexts—particularly in settings characterized by overlapping governance logics. In this sense, the study contributes not only to theoretical discussion but also to the development of tools for analyzing how power is perceived and enacted in practice.

Conceptual Foundations of Power in Organizations

Power has long been a central concept in organizational studies, though its meaning varies across theoretical traditions. From a conceptual perspective, early studies often define power as the capacity to influence outcomes, while later studies shift attention toward the relational and structural conditions through which influence is produced and maintained (Lukes, 2005; Rutar, 2017; Liu et al., 2023). Rather than locating power solely in individuals or formal positions, these approaches emphasize how power operates through social relations, organizational arrangements, and systems of meaning (Foucault, 2019). This shift is important because it challenges the assumption that authority can be directly inferred from formal structure.

Subsequent research in management and organizational studies extends this view by examining how power is enacted in practice. Conceptual developments in this stream highlight that authority is not simply held but continuously constructed and reinforced through organizational arrangements, particularly through legitimacy, institutional structures, and decision-making processes (Brahma & Economou, 2024; Broek et al., 2023; Eckl & Hanrieder, 2023). Legitimacy, in particular, plays a central role in stabilizing expectations and guiding behavior across organizational contexts (Tyler, 2023). While these perspectives help explain how authority becomes accepted and reproduced, they often assume a degree of alignment between visible authority and actual influence that may not hold in practice.

This assumption becomes more problematic in hybrid organizational settings, where multiple governance logics coexist. In such environments, hierarchical authority, performance metrics, informal networks, and patronage systems may operate simultaneously, producing competing signals about who holds influence. Empirical studies further suggest that these mechanisms are often examined separately, with limited attention to how they interact in everyday organizational contexts (Armstrong et al., 2022; Dai, 2025). As a result, the process through which actors interpret these signals remains underexplored. Empirical research on attention and visibility further complicates this picture. These studies show that what becomes salient in organizations is not simply a reflection of underlying structures but is shaped by communication practices, evaluation systems, and patterns of interaction (Joseph et al., 2024; Pitafi et al., 2023; Shamai-Leshem et al., 2023). While this study advances understanding of how attention is distributed, it largely focuses on outcomes rather than on how these processes contribute to the interpretation—and potential misinterpretation—of power.

Taken together, these strands of research suggest that power is both structurally embedded and socially interpreted. However, they fall short of explaining how visible signals and underlying control may diverge in practice. This gap is particularly relevant in organizational settings where authority is inferred from incomplete or ambiguous information. This study builds on these foundations but takes a different step. Instead of treating power as a stable attribute or a fixed structural position, it approaches power as an interpretive outcome shaped by organizational

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conditions. The Control–Power Decoding Framework is developed to explain how actors make sense of authority under such conditions and why visible indicators of power may lead to systematic misinterpretation when taken as direct evidence of control.

Power, Visibility, and the Limits of Formal Authority in Organizations

Research on organizational power has long been divided between perspectives that emphasize structural control and those that highlight symbolic, relational, or interpretive dimensions of influence. Classical approaches tend to treat power as embedded in formal authority, hierarchical position, and control over decision-making processes. Within this view, power is expected to follow organizational design: authority flows through formal roles, and influence aligns with institutionalized responsibilities. This assumption continues to shape much of management research, particularly in studies of executive authority, governance structures, and organizational control systems (Brahma & Economou, 2024; Herath & Joshi, 2025). However, it risks oversimplifying how power operates in practice, especially in contexts where formal structure does not fully determine decision outcomes.

Subsequent developments in social theory challenge the idea that power can be reduced to formal authority alone. Power is increasingly understood as relational and socially produced, operating through interaction, norms, and systems of meaning rather than through formal positions. Even in organizations that attempt to minimize hierarchy, informal structures of influence continue to emerge through recognition, social positioning, and patterns of interaction (Audretsch & Fiedler, 2023; Christensen, 2024; Haabisto, 2023). Empirical studies of network-based and distributed organizations further show that hierarchy does not disappear when formal authority is reduced; instead, it reappears in less visible forms—through informal influence, similarity biases, and social identification processes that shape whose ideas are accepted and whose voices remain peripheral (Eckl & Hanrieder, 2023; Jun et al., 2025; Schweisfurth et al., 2023). While these perspectives extend the understanding of power beyond formal structure, they do not fully account for how actors interpret conflicting signals of influence in everyday organizational contexts.

A parallel line of research has examined the role of visibility, legitimacy, and attention in shaping organizational outcomes. The attention-based view suggests that what matters is not only who holds authority, but what becomes salient within the organization (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2022; Joseph et al., 2024). Visibility—through performance indicators, communication platforms, or symbolic recognition—can influence outcomes by directing collective attention, even when it does not align with actual decision-making authority. Studies on enterprise social media and legitimacy processes further show how visibility can amplify perceived influence through endorsement dynamics and communicative exposure (Pitafi et al., 2023). Yet this line of work rarely distinguishes clearly between attention and control, leaving unresolved whether visibility reflects actual power or merely signals it. Taken together, these streams of research provide valuable but partial explanations. They clarify how power is structured, enacted, and made visible, but leave unresolved how these elements are interpreted when they diverge. As a result, the possibility that power may be systematically misread in organizations remains underdeveloped in the existing literature.

From the author's perspective, this gap is not only theoretical but practical. In contexts where multiple governance logics coexist, signals of authority become inherently ambiguous. Performance, proximity to leadership, or public recognition may be interpreted as indicators of influence, even when they do not translate into control over resources or decisions. This interpretive gap becomes particularly pronounced in hybrid organizational systems, where formal hierarchy, performance evaluation, and informal political arrangements operate simultaneously.

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This study, therefore, shifts the analytical focus from power as possession to power as interpretation. Rather than asking who holds power, it asks how organizational actors come to believe that power resides in particular locations, and how such beliefs shape organizational behavior. By reframing power as an interpretive problem embedded within hybrid organizational environments, this section establishes the foundation for the Control–Power Decoding Framework developed in the following section.

Hybrid Power Systems and the Emergence of Managerial Illusions

Research in organizational studies and social theory has long established that power does not operate solely through formal authority or hierarchical position. Instead, organizational outcomes emerge from the interaction of structural arrangements, institutional expectations, social relations, and symbolic processes that shape how influence is perceived and enacted (Audretsch & Fiedler, 2022; Christensen, 2024; Liu et al., 2023). While this insight is widely recognized, much of management research continues to examine these mechanisms in isolation—focusing separately on governance structures, performance systems, legitimacy processes, or attention allocation—without fully accounting for how they coexist in practice.

This study introduces the concept of hybrid power systems to address this gap. Hybrid power systems are organizational arrangements in which multiple governance logics—hierarchical authority, performance-based evaluation, patronage relations, legitimacy claims, and informal political influence—operate simultaneously without being integrated into a single, coherent decision-making structure. Existing research has acknowledged institutional plurality and competing governance arrangements (Dai, 2025; Herath & Joshi, 2025; Reardon et al., 2024), but has largely focused on structural or institutional outcomes rather than on how actors interpret authority within these conditions. As a result, the interpretive consequences of hybridity remain underdeveloped in organizational analysis.

From the author's perspective, the defining feature of hybrid systems is not only structural complexity but interpretive ambiguity. Organizational actors encounter overlapping signals of authority in which visibility, performance indicators, legitimacy cues, and relational proximity do not necessarily correspond to control over decisions and resources. Under these conditions, actors must rely on available cues to make sense of influence. This process is reinforced by how attention is structured within organizations. The attention-based view suggests that organizational behavior is shaped by what becomes salient within a given context (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2022; Joseph et al., 2024). When attention is unevenly distributed toward visible actors or symbolic signals, visibility itself becomes a proxy for influence. As a result, actors may infer power from what is seen, rather than from underlying structural control.

Legitimacy processes further complicate this dynamic. Organizational actors often rely on social validation, peer endorsement, and recognized authority cues when forming judgments about influence, particularly under conditions of uncertainty. In hybrid environments, these legitimacy signals may operate independently from decision authority, allowing symbolic indicators—such as titles, recognition, or proximity to leadership—to circulate as markers of influence even when they do not translate into control. Related research shows that visibility and communication processes can amplify perceived influence without necessarily altering underlying authority structures (Pitafi et al., 2023). It is under these conditions that managerial illusions emerge. Managerial illusions refer to situations in which symbolic indicators of authority are interpreted as evidence of power despite the absence of structural control. These illusions should not be understood as individual cognitive errors, but as patterned outcomes of hybrid governance environments (Dai, 2025). When multiple governance logics coexist, organizations generate

ambiguous and sometimes conflicting signals of authority, making it reasonable for actors to rely on visible proxies when interpreting power. Consequently, patterns such as visibility without control, performance without influence, and participation without decision authority become recurrent features of organizational life rather than isolated anomalies.

This study, therefore, argues that understanding organizational power in hybrid contexts requires moving beyond explanations centered solely on hierarchy, leadership, or informal politics. Existing research has yet to systematically explain how hybrid governance arrangements produce persistent misalignment between symbolic authority and structural control in everyday organizational settings. This gap is particularly evident in the Thai context, where analyses of power have largely emerged from political and governance perspectives, with limited attention to how power is interpreted in organizational management research. By conceptualizing hybrid power systems as environments that systematically generate interpretive ambiguity, this section provides the basis for the Control–Power Decoding Framework introduced in the next section. The framework separates structural control—defined as influence over resources, agendas, rules, and conditions of visibility—from symbolic indicators of authority. In doing so, it reframes organizational power not as a fixed attribute or positional outcome, but as an interpretive problem embedded within organizational structures.

The Control-Power Decoding Framework

The preceding sections have shown that organizational power cannot be adequately explained by formal hierarchy, leadership positions, or performance-based governance alone. In hybrid organizational environments, multiple governance logics coexist, producing overlapping and often contradictory signals of authority. Under such conditions, actors rely on visible or symbolically reinforced indicators as proxies for influence (Broek et al., 2023). This section introduces the Control–Power Decoding Framework as the central conceptual contribution of this study. The framework analytically separates structural power from symbolic representations of authority and explains how misinterpretations of power emerge under hybrid conditions.

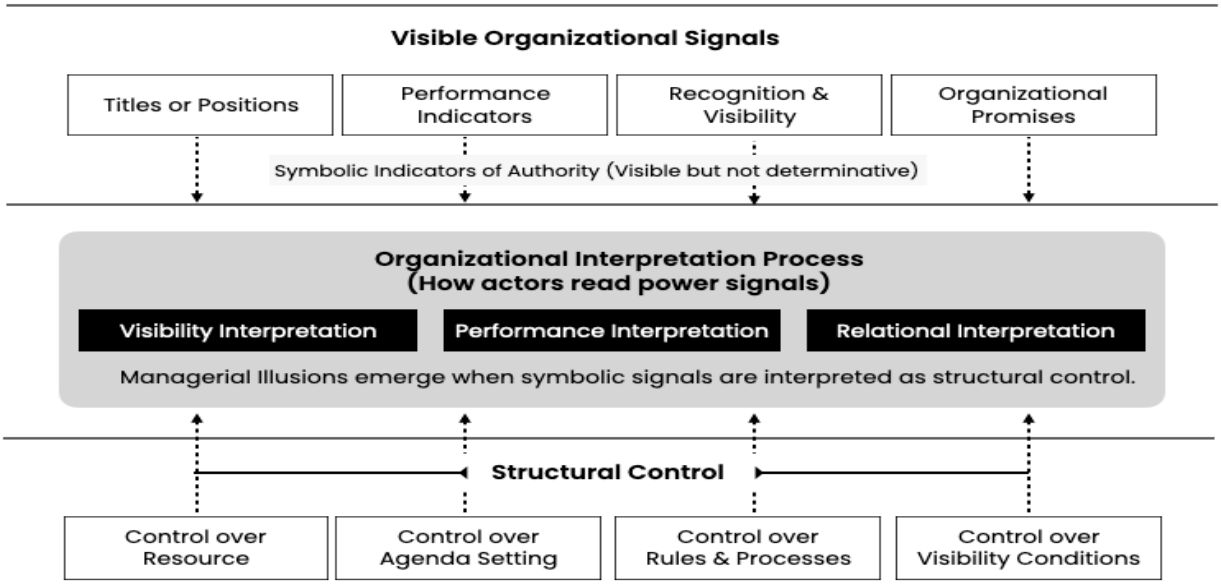

Figure 1: **Control–Power Decoding Process Model.**
Source: Author's conceptualization

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This figure illustrates how organizational actors interpret power through observable signals rather than through direct access to underlying control structures. Visible organizational cues—such as titles, performance indicators, recognition, and organizational promises—function as symbolic indicators of authority. However, these signals do not directly determine power. Instead, they are filtered through interpretive processes that shape how influence is perceived in practice. These interpretive processes can be distinguished into three dimensions. Visibility interpretation refers to how actors infer influence from observable presence, exposure, or communicative prominence. Performance interpretation captures how performance indicators are translated into assumptions about authority or decision-making capability. Relational interpretation reflects how proximity, networks, and social ties are used to infer influence within organizational contexts. Together, these processes explain how symbolic signals become cognitively linked to perceived power. At a deeper level, however, power is embedded in structural control—namely, control over resources, agenda setting, rules, and the conditions under which visibility itself is produced. Managerial illusions emerge when these symbolic signals are interpreted as evidence of structural control. The model, therefore, demonstrates that misinterpretation is not incidental but arises systematically from the way organizational signals are processed.

From Authority to Control: Reframing Organizational Power

Traditional management research often treats authority, leadership, or performance outcomes as indicators of power. However, social theories of power distinguish between visible authority and the deeper mechanisms that structure organizational outcomes. Power operates not only through direct command but through agenda-setting, rule formation, and the structuring of conditions under which certain actions become possible (Christensen, 2024; Clegg, 2009; Reardon et al., 2024). Resource dependence research similarly shows that influence often derives from control over critical resources and interdependencies rather than from formal positions (Jiang et al., 2022). Building on these perspectives, this study defines control as influence over resources, agendas, rules, and conditions of visibility within organizational systems. The confusion observed in organizational contexts stems from conflating authority signals with control itself. Titles, recognition, performance evaluations, or proximity to leadership may increase perceived influence without altering the underlying distribution of decision rights. This distinction becomes particularly salient in hybrid systems, where simplified signals are used to interpret complex structures. The framework, therefore, shifts the analytical focus from who appears powerful to who shapes organizational outcomes.

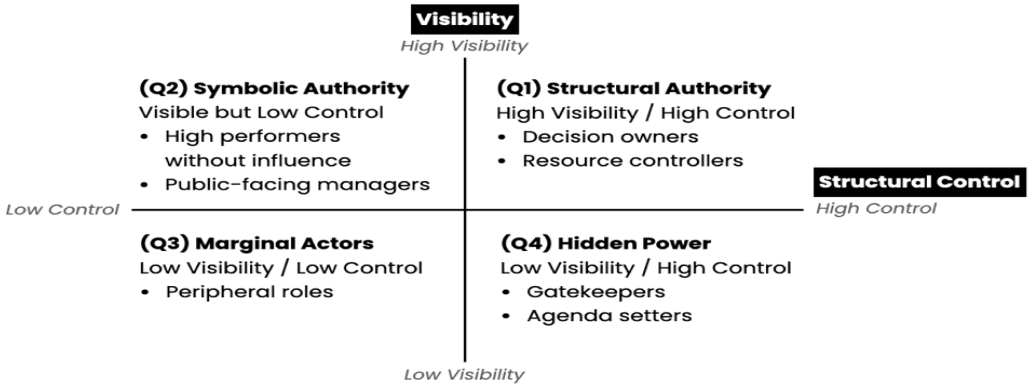

Figure 2: **The Control–Visibility Matrix in Hybrid Power Systems**
Source: Author's conceptualization

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This figure presents the structural implications of the decoding process. While Figure 1 explains how power is interpreted, Figure 2 maps the distribution of power across organizational positions. The matrix distinguishes two analytical dimensions: Structural control — influence over decisions, resources, and agendas, and Visibility — the degree of organizational recognition and attention. The interaction between these dimensions produces four recurring positions: (1) Structural Authority (high control–high visibility), (2) Symbolic Authority (high visibility–low control), (3) Marginal Actors (low visibility–low control), and (4) Hidden Power (low visibility–high control). The matrix shows that visibility and control do not necessarily align. As control shifts away from visible positions, power becomes progressively decoupled from recognition. Managerial illusions arise when actors interpret visibility as evidence of structural control across these positions.

Visibility as an Organizational Mechanism

Visibility occupies a central role in the framework because it mediates how power is interpreted in practice. Organizational research shows that visibility—through communication systems, performance metrics, and recognition structures—shapes perceptions of competence and influence (Pitafi et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023). Attention-based perspectives further suggest that organizational behavior is structured by what becomes salient rather than by formal authority alone (Brielmaier & Friesl, 2022; Joseph et al., 2024).

This study argues that visibility functions as an interpretive amplifier. It does not generate power directly, but increases the likelihood that symbolic signals will be treated as evidence of influence. When organizational attention prioritizes visible outputs or communicative presence, actors infer authority from exposure rather than from structural position. Empirical research further shows that visibility cues can bias evaluation processes even in systems designed to reduce hierarchy (Schweisfurth et al., 2023). Visibility, therefore, becomes decoupled from control, reinforcing systematic misinterpretations of power.

Symbolic Authority and Managerial Illusions

The framework introduces symbolic authority as distinct from both formal authority and structural control. Symbolic authority refers to organizational signals that communicate legitimacy, competence, or importance without granting decision-making influence. These signals include performance metrics, leadership narratives, strategic promises, and recognition practices. Managerial illusions emerge when symbolic authority is interpreted as structural control (Audretsch & Fiedler, 2023). Crucially, these illusions are not individual cognitive errors but systemic outcomes of hybrid governance arrangements. When multiple governance logics coexist, organizations generate overlapping and partially inconsistent signals of authority. Actors respond rationally by relying on visible cues, even when these cues do not accurately reflect underlying control structures.

As a result, patterns such as visibility without decision authority, performance without influence, and participation without control become recurring features of organizational life rather than isolated anomalies.

The Decoding Logic: Separation of Power Dimension

The Control–Power Decoding Framework analytically separates three dimensions:

- **Control** — structural influence over resources, agendas, rules, and organizational conditions.

-**Visibility** — the degree to which actors receive organizational attention and recognition.

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- **Symbolic Authority** — legitimacy signals that communicate influence without guaranteeing control.

The contribution of this framework lies not in redefining power itself, but in clarifying how power is systematically misinterpreted within hybrid organizational contexts. Rather than attributing organizational tensions to leadership failure or organizational politics alone, this study argues that many recurring tensions arise from misinterpretation: actors respond to signals that do not accurately represent underlying power structures. By positioning power as an interpretive problem embedded within organizational design, the framework provides a structured lens for analyzing why hybrid organizations repeatedly produce misaligned expectations between performance, visibility, and influence. This conceptual clarification establishes the foundation for applying the framework in the following section.

Interpreting Power in Practice: Applying the Control–Power Decoding Framework

This section demonstrates how the Control–Power Decoding Framework can be used to interpret recurring organizational patterns in hybrid power systems. The vignettes presented here are analytical illustrations rather than empirical cases. Their purpose is not to provide evidence in a statistical sense, but to show how managerial illusions arise when symbolic indicators of authority are interpreted as structural control. Prior research has consistently shown that visibility, authority, and influence do not necessarily align, particularly in complex organizational environments where multiple governance logics coexist (Brahma & Economou, 2024; Christensen, 2024; Joseph et al., 2024).

Importantly, the vignettes do not aim to exhaust all possible positions within the control–visibility matrix. Instead, they focus on recurring patterns in which symbolic signals are most likely to be misinterpreted as structural control. In this sense, the section highlights interpretive tendencies rather than providing a comprehensive mapping of all structural positions.

Visibility without Decision Authority

In many organizations, visibility is commonly treated as a proxy for influence. Individuals who are publicly recognized, frequently present, or positioned close to senior leadership are often assumed to have decision-making authority. However, research on organizational attention suggests that visibility primarily serves as a mechanism for directing attention rather than as an indicator of control (Shamai-Leshem et al., 2023; Joseph et al., 2024). Within hybrid power systems, visibility often serves a legitimizing role—signaling alignment, importance, or credibility—without transferring structural influence. As a result, actors may be perceived as influential while remaining excluded from decision-making processes.

Framework interpretation: Under the Control–Power Decoding Framework, this pattern reflects high visibility–low control (symbolic authority). The illusion emerges when visibility is interpreted as evidence of decision authority. The framework clarifies this misalignment by separating attention-based recognition from control over resources and decisions.

Performance without Influence

A second recurring pattern concerns the assumption that performance leads to power. Management systems often imply that high performance will translate into greater influence. However, research shows that performance metrics operate alongside existing authority structures rather than replacing them (Herath & Joshi, 2025). Institutional and network-based perspectives further indicate that performance recognition may reinforce legitimacy without redistributing control (Christensen, 2024; Brown et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2025). In hybrid environments, high-performing individuals may receive recognition while remaining excluded from agenda-setting or strategic decision-making.

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Framework interpretation: This pattern reflects a decoupling between symbolic authority (performance recognition) and structural control. The resulting illusion arises when performance is interpreted as influence. The framework highlights that performance signals can elevate visibility without altering underlying control structures.

Participation without Control

Contemporary organizations increasingly emphasize participation through cross-functional teams, open strategy processes, and collaborative decision-making structures. While these arrangements expand involvement, research on distributed decision-making shows that participation does not necessarily translate into influence over outcomes (Joseph et al., 2024; Michener & Sorelle, 2022). Within hybrid systems, participation may produce symbolic inclusion while leaving decision authority unchanged. Actors are present in the process, but remain peripheral to final decisions.

Framework interpretation: This pattern reflects symbolic inclusion without structural control, often associated with low control positions regardless of visibility level. The illusion emerges when participation is interpreted as influence. The framework distinguishes between involvement in process and control over outcomes, reducing ambiguity in how organizational roles are understood.

Synthesis: Patterns of Managerial Illusions

Across these vignettes, a consistent pattern emerges. Organizational actors rely on visible, measurable, or socially validated signals—such as visibility, performance, or participation—to infer influence. In hybrid systems, where governance logics overlap, these signals provide simplified cues for navigating complex structures. However, these cues do not necessarily reflect control. As a result, managerial illusions are not isolated misjudgments, but patterned outcomes of organizational design. Actors respond rationally to available signals, even when those signals misrepresent underlying power structures.

The Control–Power Decoding Framework provides a structured way to interpret these patterns by separating control, visibility, and symbolic authority. In doing so, it shifts analysis from surface-level indicators to the structural conditions that shape organizational outcomes. This analytical distinction forms the basis for understanding how power is perceived, enacted, and misinterpreted in hybrid organizational contexts.

Conclusion and Theoretical Contributions

This study seeks to explain how organizational power operates in contexts where multiple governance mechanisms—formal authority, performance systems, relational influence, and informal political arrangements—coexist without forming a coherent structure. It shows that, under such conditions, power cannot be understood through hierarchy or performance-based governance alone. Instead, power operates within hybrid systems that generate overlapping and often contradictory signals of authority (Brahma & Economou, 2024; Christensen, 2024; Joseph et al., 2024). The central argument of this study is that organizational power must be understood not only as a structural condition but as an interpretive process. While existing literature has explained how power is distributed—through resources, authority, and institutional positioning—it has paid less attention to how these signals are interpreted in practice when they do not align. This study demonstrates that hybrid governance arrangements systematically produce conditions in which symbolic indicators of authority are interpreted as evidence of control, even when such control is absent.

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To explain this mechanism, the study introduces the Control–Power Decoding Framework, which distinguishes between control, visibility, and symbolic authority, and demonstrates how misalignment between these dimensions produces recurring patterns of managerial illusions. These patterns are not isolated errors but structured outcomes of organizational design in hybrid environments. By separating control from visibility and symbolic authority, the framework enables the identification of positions such as symbolic authority and hidden power, and clarifies how these positions are misinterpreted in practice. From a practical perspective, these misalignments are not merely interpretive but consequential. When organizational actors rely on visibility, performance, or proximity as proxies for power, they may align themselves with individuals who lack actual control while overlooking those who shape decisions behind the scenes. Such misreadings can influence decision-making, collaboration patterns, and career trajectories. At the same time, leaders may unintentionally reinforce these dynamics by designing systems that are structurally coherent but communicatively ambiguous, allowing symbolic authority to be mistaken for actual influence.

Contributions of the Study

This study contributes to the literature in both theoretical and practical terms:

Theoretical Contributions

1. It reconceptualizes organizational power as an interpretive process rather than solely a structural condition.
2. It extends existing power theories by situating them within hybrid governance systems, where multiple logics coexist without full integration.
3. It introduces the Control–Power Decoding Framework as a conceptual tool that distinguishes between control, visibility, and symbolic authority.
4. It explains the emergence of managerial illusions as structured outcomes of misalignment rather than individual error.

Practical Contributions

1. It provides a diagnostic lens for identifying misalignments between visibility and actual control in organizational settings.
2. It helps explain why employees may misinterpret authority and align with symbolic rather than actual power holders.
3. It highlights how organizational design and communication gaps contribute to persistent misunderstandings of power.
4. It offers a foundation for leaders to better interpret, and potentially redesign, how power is signaled and understood within organizations.

Future Research Directions

Although this study is conceptual, it establishes a foundation for future empirical investigation. Future studies could empirically test the proposed framework in real organizational contexts, particularly within Thai corporations, to examine how actors interpret power signals in practice. Comparative studies across Southeast Asian contexts may further reveal how different institutional and cultural environments shape the dynamics of hybrid governance and the interpretation of power. In addition, longitudinal research could explore how misalignments between visibility and control evolve over time and influence organizational outcomes, including decision-making, performance, and career mobility.

Ultimately, this study does not seek to prescribe solutions or to render organizations more equitable. Instead, it offers a conceptual tool for making power structures more legible. Shifting the analytical focus from formal position to control and from visibility to structural influence

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enables a more precise interpretation of organizational dynamics. In contexts where ambiguity is not an exception but a condition, the ability to interpret power accurately becomes a critical form of advantage. It does not make organizations more just—but it makes them more understandable.

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