

THAI YOUTH COMMUNITY IN URBAN AREAS WITH CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN GLOBALIZATION - ENHANCING OR DEGRADING?

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Abstract - Thai youths are living in the midst of rapid cultural change and increasing intercultural exchange. To some extent, they have adopted different foreign cultures, assimilated and synthesized them in order to create a way of life which belongs to Thai people. Thus, the question of Thai culture is more complicated than it seems to be. It is the fact that transformation of Thai culture would be regretted by some, welcomed by others. Some will more readily accept the inherent tension of the transition process as creative; others will quickly reject it as destructive. However, cultural exchange is by no means mono-dimensional and one-sided. It should be noted that cultural transformation also provides opportunities through cultural diversity and cultural independence for the development of each country. In addition, cultural diversity is needed for rich human experiences. In a word, the right act that each Thai youth needs to do is to carefully pick and choose aspects of globalization to improve Thai youth culture and life styles.

Key words - Thai youths; transformation; culture; diversity; globalization.

1. Introduction

Although the term globalization has been common in anthropology only since around 1990, it has spawned an impressive range of books and journal articles. Critics of globalization contend that, even if increased trade promotes material prosperity, it comes with a high spiritual and cultural cost, running roughshod over the world's distinctive cultures. In addition, it cannot be denied that technology has now created the possibility and even the likelihood of a global culture, especially the Internet and cable TV which are apparently sweeping away cultural boundaries. According to Klausner, Eastern, including Thai, traditional values are undergoing dramatic changes as the winds of a technologically driven modernization buffet the East and bring the powerful forces of individualism and egalitarianism in their wake. As a result, the question "Will national identity, especially youth identity, inevitably fall victim to the internationalization?" [10] has immediately been raised in almost every developing country that is considered to be under the threat of assimilation. Thailand is no exception. There are a number of debates on the issue whether or not Thai youth identity has been destroyed by Globalization, or it should be considered cultural diversity, instead.

2. The Transition of Thai youth community in the Age of Globalization

2.1. Definitions of "Globalization"

As Higoott and Reich pointed out "Globalization" is "a most overused and under specified term" [8] nowadays. There are a number of authors, especially those who works in the field of anthropology, have been trying to approach a definition of "globalization" in their own ways. It is by no means easy to define the term

'globalization' precisely. Wolf sees globalization as "a hideous word of obscure meaning, coined in the 1960s, that came into ever-greater vogue in the 1990s" [3]. According to Beck, "Globalization also means: a confrontation between and pulling together of local cultures needing to find a new content within this 'clash of localities'" [2]. From Dicken's viewpoint, globalization is much more recent than internationalization because it implies functional integration between internationally dispersed activities [5]. Giddens defines globalization as *'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa'* [6]. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, *"Globalization is the increasing interconnectedness of people and places as a result of advances in transport, communication, and information technologies that causes political, economical, and cultural convergence"*.

The last quotation will be used as the working definition for this article.

2.2. Overview of the impact of Globalization on Southeast Asia

There is no question that globalization has triggered unique dynamics in terms of communication and cooperation between people, institutions, societies, nations, and different cultures; and that the cultural, social, and economic effects of these dynamics are extremely contradictory. Part of the tendency of cultural homogenization is, for example, the spread of images regarding ideals of beauty and family and the homogenization of Western patterns of consumption and lifestyle with their negative ecological effects. Processes of globalization, however, also produce completely new cultural forms of expression and open up new possibilities for communication and participation. That culture is, more or less, always dynamic and it constantly adapts to changing societal, political, economic, and ecological conditions [2].

In South and Southeast Asia, most speakers underlined the continuing resilience and centrality of the nation-state as "a still viable format to absorb, regulate, and negotiate globality". The nation-state dominates the relationship with society, producing a conservatively biased, "selective" kind of globalization, which incorporates economic liberalization and some cultural elements, but hardly any of the political dimensions. The effects of globalization through the mediation of the state on civil society are, therefore, quite ambiguous. "There still exists a strong respect for authority, which is supposed to set the norms. At the same time, however,

new social spaces have been opened up. The experiences in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore display certain similarities. All three are involved in a race to catch up with the West, which has led to an opening-up of their economies. Economy has become a cultural feature in itself, whereas globalization has been transformed into a national project” [2].

At the same time, questions are raised about identity and diversity re-definitions and crises; violence and survival; human rights, citizenship, migrations and the search for global citizenship; new developmentalism, disintegrative tendencies and the changing character of political society, civil society and the state and its capacity to cope with rapid changes and challenges [12].

In my opinion, both internal and external conditions and forces, sometimes separately, sometimes in combination, have contributed to shaping the transformation process. One cannot deny the impact of such values as individualism and egalitarianism associated with the external forces of modernization, Westernization and globalization.

2.3. Characteristics of the Thai incorporated in Thai culture

There is no easy explanation for the profound restructuring of traditional Thai beliefs, attitudes, behavior and world view.

“What is the meaning of ‘Thai culture’ in the global context? In this age of virtual realities and sophisticated fabrications it can be whatever the vendors and the advertising agencies conjure up, provided sufficient signifiers of Thainess are present. The fabrications throw into the question the authenticity of this Thai culture” [12].

From Santhian Koset’s point of view, the question of Thai culture is more complicated than it seems to be:

“Now we come to the subject of Thai culture. What is tradition? What is Thai? This is a very difficult question. What is the genuine Thai? They say that this is genuinely Thai. The real Thai is the culture which we see now. We speak Thai. Our manners are Thai. These things which appear distinctly Thai, where did they come from? We adopted different foreign cultures, and we assimilated and synthesized them in order to create a way of life which belongs to the Thai people with Buddhism as the center. This is the real Thai” [14].

In another effort, Hongladarom defines ‘culture’ as patterns of belief, behaviour and actions shared among a large community to build civil society, and ‘Thai culture’ as *“fluid and dynamic, with no essence attached to it, changing it naturally, beginning with proposing and propagating the ideas to be introduced to the population”* [9].

2.4. The Transition of Thai youth community in the Age of Globalization

Along with television and cinema, the Internet changes in political structure and international business expose us every day to new cultures, values and attitudes, whether or not we perceive it. New forms of

communication have brought about the vision of a “global village” and “globalization”, not only of business and finance, but also of culture. [4] Thai youth culture is no exception.

The point is that when a community is exposed to new ideas or new environments, the culture of that community is subject to a dramatic change at all levels, resulting in “a shift in culture” over time. Shifts in culture can, of course, result from that community, but, at the same time, can be brought about by an outside culture, with a different set of assumptions and values. Shifts in culture can be important or sensitive; they can be fast or slow. In Klausner’s opinion, all developing countries, to a greater or lesser extent, are in “the throes of cultural transformation”. Such a transition from traditional to modern “must not be conceived of as a zero sum game”. Though the change is “pervasive and its direction seemingly irreversible, traces of the past persist”. [10] These cultural signs deeply imprinted a Thai youth culture on the transition process.

Let’s take an example from Janssen’s research for illustration. After interviewing seven Thai applicants to know the reason why they wanted to work for international companies, Janssen discovered that five of them mentioned being part of ‘the new generation’. They felt part of a new generation doing things differently from their parents’ generation.

“They have consciously sought out international companies to work for. Reasons are different ways of working and social interaction then in Thai companies and career opportunities. Specific reasons they mentioned were: being able to speak directly without the worry of offending people easily, less reverence to older people and people of higher status, people coming to the point more quickly, open relationships, a pro-active attitude of colleagues versus a more reactive one, colleagues not saying they understand while they don’t, a systematic way of working and all tasks carried out must have a valid reason. These reasons are closely related to culture and people’s attitudes. It seems that these people, feeling part of a ‘new generation’, feel better working in an environment where certain Thai values are less present and work processes are handled in a Western orientated way. ‘I wanted to work for this company because my style is too aggressive for Thais. I want to be able to say everything, of course in a polite way and with respect. For a Thai company I’m too direct’ - Thai Management trainee, Dutch Brewery Company. Yet, still many ideas, opinions and feelings are the same as those in traditional culture. For example the respect for elders, ‘kreng jai’ and ‘naam jai’ are values they hold high and act to accordingly. The data from the interviews suggested that while they hold these values high, they feel better in a working environment where these values are not expected to be in place every minute of the day and are more important than the work processes and their results. The existence of this ‘new generation’, how small or large it may be, is not illogical when we look at the processes of globalization and the high introduction rate of new media that younger people always seem to catch up faster with

then their parents. This 'new generation' clearly resembles Bunrak Bunyakhetmala's concept of the 'synthetic Thai' who are more open to the influences of new technology and have developed a different cultural identity than their parent's. One of the greatest differences in identity between the 'synthetic Thai', the 'new generation', and their parent's generation is the feeling of individuality. From the five people interviewed it seemed that they have shed of some cultural habits they deem inefficient under certain circumstances while still holding on to these values while interacting with people who value them high" [7].

3. Thai Cultural Transformation in the Global context - Positive or Negative?

3.1. The reaction to globalization and the undeniable reality

Thais have, for generations, adopted, adapted and accommodated to foreign influences in their dress, language, forms of entertainment, sports, art, music etc. Ms Duangkamol, who has been in charge of various researches in Gender Studies in Thailand, said: *"Nowadays, Thai boys and girls have more freedom to do what they want in different fields of their personal lives. They are no longer under strict supervision. Western-style is gradually seen as appropriate form for them"*, (Interview Ms Duangkamol, the officer of Southeast Asia Studies in June, 2014 in Bangkok).

Thus, there are a number of Thais who think that the *"import of Western products and life style conflicts with more traditional Thai culture"* [7].

Klausner pointed out an interesting point that once a high-ranking official in the Culture Ministry expressed his consternation that not only the Thai language, but also Thai dress and Thai food were under threat due to foreign intrusions and incursions. It should be noticed that even the traditional Thai and Thai culture are being challenged by a new, and often antithetical, set of values identified with a civil society and globalization: individualism, egalitarianism, rule of law, public participation, good governance and attendant transparency and accountability, engagement and commitment, competition etc. [11] Thai culture and Thai identity are in the process of transformation and the traditional culture of the past is no longer the social reality of today as it takes on new forms and patterns. However, in certain cases the adaptations made should be viewed as enhancing rather than destructive. Nowadays, thus, when one refers to Thai culture, one should be well aware of the traditional patterns as well as the changes and refinements in the cultural mosaic.

3.2. The problems of "cultural interaction" and "culture shock"

According to Saihoo, culture may be seen as 'a system of shared meanings and values' that a collectivity of persons accepts and uses to continue their existence as a coherent social group. The smaller the group is, the easier the sharing of meanings and values becomes. The larger and more differentiated the group becomes, the more

complicated sub-cultures of sub-groups with specialized functions are. Due to differences in functional necessity, the sub-culture of one sub-group is basically different from the sub-culture of another sub-group though these sub-cultures may be interacted and finally integrated into one: the whole culture of the people of the nation. The 'bureaucratic culture' of the government officials, the 'military culture' of career soldiers, the 'business culture' of businessmen, the 'student culture' of students, etc. all are interrelated to form the overall culture. *'Cultural interaction' in this sense would mean any interpersonal or inter-group action that is based on the sharing of meanings and values"* [15]. Problems and difficulties in cultural interaction arise when there is a clash of cultures, when the interacting parties do not agree about the common set of meanings and values for their common activity. Hence, it can be inferred that in the present global context when cultural transformation has been introduced and discovered or used and reused by oneself resulting from borrowing or imposing by others from foreign origins in order to replace the old ones, some old forms may be retained but with a different function because of the new meaning and value given. The problem is how to put the new and the old values in harmony when new practices seem to be inevitable. There exist differences based on one's own preference for the old or the new or in the combination of giving and taking. Thus, it is challenging to create a desired level of social harmony as Klausner said:

"if the tensions and conflicts in the society, resulting from the process of cultural transformation, are to be effectively managed and productively channeled, the bureaucracy and the civil society will have to resolve their mutual fear, wariness and suspicion. New mechanisms drawing these two communities together in cooperative, collaborative partnerships will have to be created" [10].

On the contrary, once the culture transformation has been seen as a profound negative experience while encountering another culture, it will somehow lead people to culture shock which is defined by Adler as follows:

"Culture shock is thought of as a profound learning experience that leads to a high degree of self-awareness and personal growth. Rather than being only a disease for which adaptation is the cure, culture shock is likewise at the very heart of the cross-cultural learning experience. It is an experience in self-understanding and change" [4].

The culture shock can be evoked by being exposed to any other culture, as a result of being on a 'foreign' culture territory, by cultural changes in the home culture, or by being exposed to fundamentally different cultural forms on the home ground. The fact where the encounter occurs, and how different the cultures are, will have a profound influence on the depth and extent of such a shock. Some arguments have been centered around which shocks occur: following this line of inquiry, there are a multitude of possible shocks, such as the role shock, language shock or cultural fatigue when individuals are exposed to a 'foreign' culture.

Adler describes five phases of a culture shock:

- (1) **The contact phase:** the individual experiences “excitement and euphoria”, the new culture is seen ethnocentrically.
- (2) **The disintegration phase:** the cultural differences become increasingly “noticeable, marked by confusion, alienation and depression” on the side of the individual.
- (3) **The reintegration phase:** the individual strongly rejects the second culture. The choice is made to either regress to earlier stages or to move on to a higher level of adaptation.
- (4) **The autonomy phase:** this stage is marked by the increase in understanding the second culture and a feeling of “autonomy and competence” on the side of the individual.
- (5) **The independence phase:** the individual cherishes the cultural differences, has an increased self- and cultural awareness and displays creative behavior to accommodate the new culture in its own worldview [1].

3.3. The need for modification, adaptation and accommodation

Each individual will experience a profound change in its identity which is obviously different somehow. Most of them may strongly resist such a change. Yet, after some rejection about new factors in the new culture, the individual will learn how to adapt and live with it better than ever. Dahl confirmed:

“If the individual is exposed to other cultural values, a reflection process starts. To various extents, the human mind starts to review, anticipate, generalize, analyze and plan, and starts an active transformation process. The individual ‘grows’” [4].

Doctor Montira shared the same viewpoint:

“It is undeniable that there has been a remarkable change in the Thai youth mind-set and value-orientation. However, what should be noticed is that while Thai youth gradually become accustomed to change, they still respect the family and community values. This is easy to understand because, in the Thai belief, if they can put what so-called ‘old and new values’ in harmony, they will be able to face and overcome the great waves of difficulties to achieve better life”, (Interview Doctor Montira at Chulalongkorn university in June, 2014 in Bangkok).

With the growth of individuals, the society of which they form part also grows. About this, Kim firmly stated: *“Ultimately, the intercultural communication experiences of the individuals contribute to the evolution of the social systems of which they are part” [4].* In other words, if enough individuals change and in the same way, then we speak of culture change.

Furthermore, benefits from culture transformation are obvious. Ruben and Kealey stated:

“While learning and growing, the individual also learns to better cope with intercultural stress. Some indications are that the more stress is experienced, the more adaptation takes place. Through the continuous

stress-adaptation-growth process, the individual learns to ‘function’ in the new environment: their internal meaning structure is expanded to accommodate the new environment, and the individual is able to experience what is beyond the borders of its previous cultural consciousness” [4].

Kim shared the same viewpoint:

“The individual grows to become a multicultural person who has a broadened understanding of human conditions and cultural differences and a view of things that are larger than any one cultural perspective” [4].

This way of viewing things will of course, in turn, influence the ability to react flexibly in an intercultural encounter: the intercultural person will have the flexibility to adapt to the situation, and creatively manage any intercultural stress and possible conflict. Kim said:

“At this stage, one achieves the maximum capacity to communicate with individuals who are significantly different in cultural backgrounds, and are able to make deliberate choices of actions in specific situations rather than simply being dictated by the normative courses of action in a given culture” [4].

Because of dynamic, evolving and changing society, culture is not static either. As long as human beings live, think and create, culture will be “processual and evolving”. Therefore, it is not new or astonishing, that culture as a system “continuously modifies, adapts to new conditions that impinge on it, and adopts new mechanisms and methods, not only to survive but also to thrive if possible”. From time immemorial, most cultures have confronted, at one time or another, external forces and internal problems that may threaten to disrupt and even destroy them. Some cultures persistently tried to protect themselves from being transformed totally or destroyed completely. However, the fight for survival is not without some sacrifices or compromises. The acts of modification, adaptation, and adjustment often require great skills in both “nurturing” the “desirables” in a culture and “balancing” against forces, especially the “undesirable” ones that sweep on one like the torrential tides in a big storm [16].

4. Conclusion

There is no doubt that most of us welcome the conveniences and opportunities provided by the new technology and especially the internet. We may even embrace them as they give us access to information and knowledge. However, cultural exchange is by no means mono-dimensional and one-sided. Cultural differences or cultural transformation are not solely a source of conflict as well-known as “clash of cultures”, or that globalization processes cause the homogenization of different cultures. It should be taken into consideration that cultural differences or cultural transformation also provide opportunities through cultural diversity and cultural independence for the development of each country. In the end, it is the almost unlimited human capacity for adaptation and self-organization that makes the area of intercultural encounters and cultural convergence so interesting.

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