

Thainess that (Not) Thai in the Multicultural Society of the Lower Mun River Basin

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Abstracts

The concept of Thainess and its implications in a multicultural society have been a topic of significant interest and debate in the lower Mun River Basin. This academic article aims to delve into the history and consequences of Thainess creation within this region. The study explores how Thainess has evolved over time, particularly during the era of Absolute Monarchy, with a strong emphasis on religious beliefs during the reign of King Mongkut. Furthermore, it examines the transformation of the modern state and the establishment of a distinct territorial identity during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, as a result of governmental reforms. According to these reforms, individuals residing within the Thai state are considered Thai people, characterized by their proficiency in the Thai language and adherence to Thai culture.

However, as political administrations changed, the formation of Thainess took on a different trajectory, primarily centered around Thai citizenship and the acceptance of the authority of governors and a hierarchical society. This approach often clashed with the cultural and linguistic identities of the ethnic groups residing in the lower Mun River Basin, who have distinct languages and cultural practices of their own. The state's attempts to coerce these groups into relinquishing their identities in favor of adopting Thainess and raising awareness of their Thai nationality have not yielded the desired results. In fact, these ethnic communities have demonstrated resistance to the implementation of Thainess creation, expressing readiness to seek citizenship in neighboring countries if compelled by the state. Their close ties to neighboring nations, fostered through shared cultural borders, languages, and ethnicities, have contributed to this persistent resistance.

As a response to these challenges, the Thai state has recently shifted its focus towards recognizing and preserving local cultures, establishing them as part of the national cultural fabric and acknowledging all ethnic groups as Thai people. This reorientation acknowledges the importance of diversity and inclusivity in the face of a multicultural reality within the lower Mun River Basin.

By examining the historical development of Thainess and its impact on the ethnic groups of the lower Mun River Basin, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding identity formation in a diverse and culturally rich society. The findings shed light on the ongoing struggles, negotiations, and potential resolutions within the framework of Thainess creation in this unique region.

Keyword: Thainess That (Not) Thai; The Multicultural Society; The Lower Mun River Basin

Introduction

In the trend of the world called “Globalization” linking the vast world to a small world which is known as “Digital”, it has affected in Thai culture and Thainess to be mixed with the diverse western and eastern cultures. It is unable to distinguish the true principle of Thai culture, even though Thai culture is the result of creating a “Thai nation” and “Thainess”, which has shaped the systems of thinking, belief and relationship of Thai people within the state with the same culture as “Thai culture” through various processes driven by state to create the Thainess based on Thai culture. Therefore, the status of Thai culture is as a tool to create a trend of Thai nationalism since the reign of King Mongkut or known as the Absolute Monarchy until the Democratic period. The trend of Thainess creation and Thai nationalism has continued until the present time. The state is trying to combine Thai nationality and Thai nationalism under the conceptual framework or the positive attitude under the framework of Thai nation with Buddhism as the national religion. In addition, the most important thing is to build loyalty to the King.

Lower Mun River Basin refers to the area at the end of the Mun River or Lao Khong Province or Isan Province during the reign of King Chulalongkorn who reformed the government in the northeastern region, which is known as Surin Province, Si Sa Ket Province and Ubon Ratchathani Province in the present. These areas are diverse in unique ethnicities and cultures of several ethnic groups, such as Laos, Kui, Khmer, Yer and Chinese who traveled to trade in these areas since the reign of King Chulalongkorn. In addition, there are many other ethnic groups presenting the Lower Mun River Basin as an international society since the Absolute Monarchy. Until now, the states of all ages have tried to create national unity based on Thainess. Therefore, this type of article will be found in 2 issues: To study the history of Thainess creation of the Lower Mun River Basin and study the impact of Thainess creation of the Lower Mun River Basin after the completion of the Absolute Monarchy. In addition to collecting various data, there is a study process in the social sciences as follows. This qualitative research used ethnic groups living in the Lower Mun River Basin consisted of Surin Province, Si Sa Ket Province and Ubon Ratchathani Province which provided important information as a unit of analysis. The data was collected starting from primary and secondary by studying the basic information about ethnic groups living in the Lower Mun River Basin from books, academic articles, researches, textbooks and various journals. After that, the data was collected from site using in-depth interview from the key informants including participatory observation and non-participatory observation.

The data was basically analyzed basic during the interview and analyzed based on research conceptual framework later. Then rechecked this information to see if any parts had been missed using content analysis to categorize the obtained data distributed it to make it clearer and easier to analyze and connect to ethnic groups in the Lower Mun River Basin. After that, the data was synthesized based on the objectives by analysis descriptive methods in order to make it easy to understand and conclude.

Content

The Southern Mun River Basin was the area that the government was firstly interested in. Because during the Absolute Monarchy period, the ethnic groups in the northeast, especially the Laos ethnic group who had the highest number after Thai people. In addition, the area factors of the Lower Mun River Basin were interested by France, which established the French colonies in Indochina and invited Lao ethnic group to join France and pointed out the brutality of Thai people to Laos ethnic group and other ethnic groups in the area. Therefore, the government's focus was on the ethnic groups of Laos, Cambodia and etc. by focusing on creating Thainess and Thai nationalism through religion. During the reign of King Mongkut, he used Theravada Buddhism to spread religious teachings while using monks as a tool to teach Thainess by distributing monks to different areas in the Mun River Basin on behalf of forest temples for religion and Thainess.

At the same time, the ethnic groups living in the area adopted the above concepts and applied them to their beliefs until religion became a part of their cultures, such as the tradition of morale, paying respect to ancestors or even government reform during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. He combined various cities in the Lower Mun River Basin including Ubon Ratchathani, Khu Khan and Surin in order to upgrade to Lao Khong Province and northeastern provinces to create Thai nationality under the same territory. But the ethnic groups did not feel the unity under being Thainess by reflecting in the form of a rebellion with merit as recorded "And that rebels are Khmer and the mixture of Laos which more than all other nations". Therefore, it could be seen that during the Absolute Monarchy period, although the state tried to create various ethnic groups in the Lower Mun River Basin to hold the status of being Thai people like central Thai people, but the ethnic groups did not have a sense of being or feeling Thainess. On the other hand, the ethnic groups had bounded feeling with the neighboring countries such as Lao People's Democratic Republic and the Kingdom of Cambodia due to ethnic ties, similar languages and cultures as well as easily accessible borders. Regarding this point, Saichon Sattayanurak (2550), Thai scholar, pointed out that "Thainess" in the Absolute Monarchy period represented the characteristics of loyal people to the Royal Institution holding Buddhism and bounded a way of life to Thai culture. Thai people must speak Thai language, had Thai manner, morality and civilization based on the idea that most of the Thai traditional culture must be preserved, then adopted the western material prosperity. So that Thainess would not be seen as barbaric, while maintaining a social structure that centralized power and divided people into hierarchies.

After the change of government in the year 2475, especially during the World War 2, the trend of Thainess or nationalism became an important tool that leaders raised to create unity. The Thainess in a Democratic period had changed since Thainess in this period was focused on the citizenship of the state by creating a discourse of Thai people emphasizing on their personalities, there were having Thai art, loving freedom, loving advancement, being diligent and having unity but did not conflict with the principle of loyalty to the King and Buddhism. These were the needs of national leaders that wanted to emphasize on behalf of a leader as an ordinary man, not a king like in the past. Especially in the period of Field Marshal Por Pibulsongkram was powerful, the nationalist concept like "Racism" was therefore used intensively with the goal of preventing Chinese people from going into political power and discouraging economic power to open the way for national capitalism policy. When the World War ended, then it continued to the Cold War period, the meaning of "Thainess" returned to the center of the idea of loyalty to the Royal Institution, explaining that because the Royal

Institution placed the nation in peace, stability and progress as well as placed the Buddhism as the main source of morality. It emphasized on knowing the status, not encroaching upon each other, loving Thai government, speaking Thai, knowing Thai literature and Thai art and having Thai traditions (Saichon Sattayanurak, 2007) The important thing was the discourse “Thai government” that had a great influence on the overall Thai society until the present, which emphasized that Thai people must accept the Thai government. First, Thai society must accept the power of the guardians and government officials who were representatives of the state. Second, Thai society must accept the social structure that divided people into hierarchies believing that it would put society in order, stable and peaceful Including the acceptance of the privilege of certain groups and the injustice occurred to oneself or others in society. And finally, there must be regulations and discipline that accepted inequality, knew one’s status, did not use freedom beyond limits and not create chaos. The person who took a role in defining “Thainess” in this period was M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, whose goal was to use Thainess to “Organized power relations in Thai society” (Saichon Sattayanurak, 2007)

During the Cold War and after the World War until now, Thai society had entered the context of economic and technological development and changed quickly, while the definition of “Thainess” was still adhered to the same principle. These specified regulations were set in Thai social relations and were considered too selfish to confront the changes in society (Saichon Sattayanurak, 2007)

The Lower Mun River Basin society after the change of government in 1932 was still a society of ethnic groups and cultural diversity of ethnic groups. These ethnic groups had own languages, traditions, culture and beliefs. The state tried to apply the concept of Thainess, being Thai people or even the concept of Thai nationalism to harmonize with local culture based on “Heat 12 and Kong 14” by using education as a tool to create unity. That policy aimed to create a new generation with a sense of being Thai through the Thai learning process by allowing youths to learn and communicate in Thai language, hold Thai traditions and assimilate local culture with the central culture determined by the state. The result of performing that policy after the change of government, although it did not as strongly oppose as in history, but the state was not able to successfully transform a society of ethnic groups in the Lower Mun River Basin into Thai society, since the ethnic groups still maintained their cultures firmly. Assistant Professor Burachon Sukkhum, Community Development Scholar said that the culture of ethnic groups, especially the Kui, continue for a long time. The belief passes on from generation to generation and is a strong culture. It is difficult to change Kui into Thai. While Mr. Prayut Thila, Cultural official of Si Sa Ket Province agrees with this concept and tries to create the uniqueness of each ethnic group to be outstanding and then become the province's identity. Another reason indicating that the creation of Thainess in the Lower Mun River Basin is not successful is the use of communicative language. Regarding this point, the state expects Thai citizens to use Thai language to communicate. But in the Mun River Basin society, the languages of the ethnic groups are mainly used, such as Yer communicates in Yer language, Khmer communicates in Khmer language, Kui communicates in Kui language and Laos, the largest ethnic group, still communicates Lao language. Referring to the finding from samples, Miss Ananya Motajit and Mr. Kiattrakul Srimanee, it was found that the modern youths do not communicate in Thai language because it cannot represent self-identity and the accent is different. While Miss Nareerat Leela, northeastern teacher who works in Bangkok, still uses Lao language to speak with Isan people because they are unable to communicate in Thai

language like Laos language. Therefore, they have to express lots of effort in using Thai language in communication.

Hence, “the creation of Thainess, Nationhood, or Thai Nationalism” had a lot of problems in the Lower Mun River Basin society. The creation of “Nation” or “Nationhood” and “Nationalism” is a cultural invention that had a specific characteristic originated from imagination created by human to be used as a tool to drive society into the same goal. This idea had been raised in a serious academic debate since the late 18th century onwards. Benedict Anderson, a scholar of Southeast Asian History and Indonesian Studies, had analyzed the origin and studied the formation of the above concept written in the book *Imagined Communities: Reflection on Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. He proposed that Nationalism and Nationhood were:

“Imagined because of the members of even the smallest nation, even though he had never known all his fellow members and had never seen them all or even never heard of their names. Nonetheless, in each person's mind, there was a common image of community.” Also, he stated that “Nation is a political imagination which imagined with both sovereignty and scope since birth” (Benedict Anderson, 2017)

Therefore, this may be summarized or made easier to understand that the origin of the nation in the definition that Anderson has defined was formed from the fact that people were grouped together into communities. These people had all dream and imagination as a unity without border differences of languages, religions, ancestors, roots, or even races and ethnicities to obstruct that vision and imagination. Therefore, the Nationhood was considered “Imagined community” formed under the framework of a modern state with sovereignty and clear boundaries which formed into concrete at least since the end of the 18th century onwards. Furthermore, Anderson also proposed that an important condition that allowed this concept to be effectively passed on to the public was that the state must had a social institution, knowledge and various types of technology to be used as a tool to thoroughly pass on those ideas to citizens. Whether museums, maps, printing presses, languages, academic works or even memories and the population census were considered tools of creating nation as well. These were considered as important parts that could drive the ideas about nation and/or nationalist concepts to the public with great power.

However, the creation of Thainess in the Lower Mun River Basin, a multicultural area with several ethnic groups living together, such as the Laos the highest number of people, there is also Kui, Khmer, Yer, Thai-Chinese and others at least 10 groups have settled and been living in the area since prehistoric times until present. These ethnic groups have their own languages, cultures and traditions which continue the identity of the communities or ethnic groups. Until the end of the reign of King Mongkut and the reign of King Chulalongkorn, who had a plan regarding Thai identity and Thainess by sticking to the central culture as the main or national culture. Therefore, the state was trying to change these ethnic groups living in the Lower Mun River Basin to adopt national culture as a community culture. The promotion of national culture during this period time as the Lower Mun River Basin area has a high potential for loss of territory to Western imperialism, France, that colonized and established French Indochina in Vietnam in the year 112 B.E. Hence, to encourage ethnic groups to have the same customs and patterns as the royal or central court is one of the most important solutions. But the state's policy has been opposed by indigenous groups in the form of riots who do not accept state power, such as the rebellion of the spirit, until the whole country of Thailand has changed

the government from Absolute Monarchy to the western government. The state was trying to implement policies to create Thainess, for instance, in the period of Field Marshal Por Pibulsongkram had issued 12 state popularities to promote Thai identity and had been applied continuously. Until now, the state tries to create a national identity based on the same culture under the same tradition and culture. The result of the government policy of creating Thainess under the same culture seem unsuccessful. Therefore, the state should pay attention to the importance of each region culture, that is Thai culture without trying to impose a central culture on Thai culture, but pay more attention to local culture. However, although the policy of creating Thainess in the last 2 decades had less friction, but the cultures of ethnic groups are still the cultures that the government should give more importance to and support to avoid disappearing together with the prosperity and allow the technology to replace the society of ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The definition of “Thainess” is a political movement that has occurred and has been concentrated since the creation of a modern nation state during the reign of King Rama 5 onwards. Throughout the period from the beginning to the present, the meaning of “Thainess” has the essence of the concept of loyalty to the King, Buddhism and the way of life bounding to a civilized Thai culture. However, in each period, there are additions and changes in some aspects so that “Thainess” was completed and fulfilled the needs of the country's leader at that time. While Thai society is diverse in ethnic groups, especially in the Southern Mun River Basin, there are the ethnic groups of Kui, Yer, Khmer and Laos. These ethnic groups have their own language, traditions, cultures and beliefs. The Thainess creation group derived from the concept of the same state and culture. So, it is necessary to define policy to be harmonized with the local culture to promote in parallel with the national culture. The diagram below represents key point of Thainess that (not) Thai in the multicultural society of the lower Mun river basin.

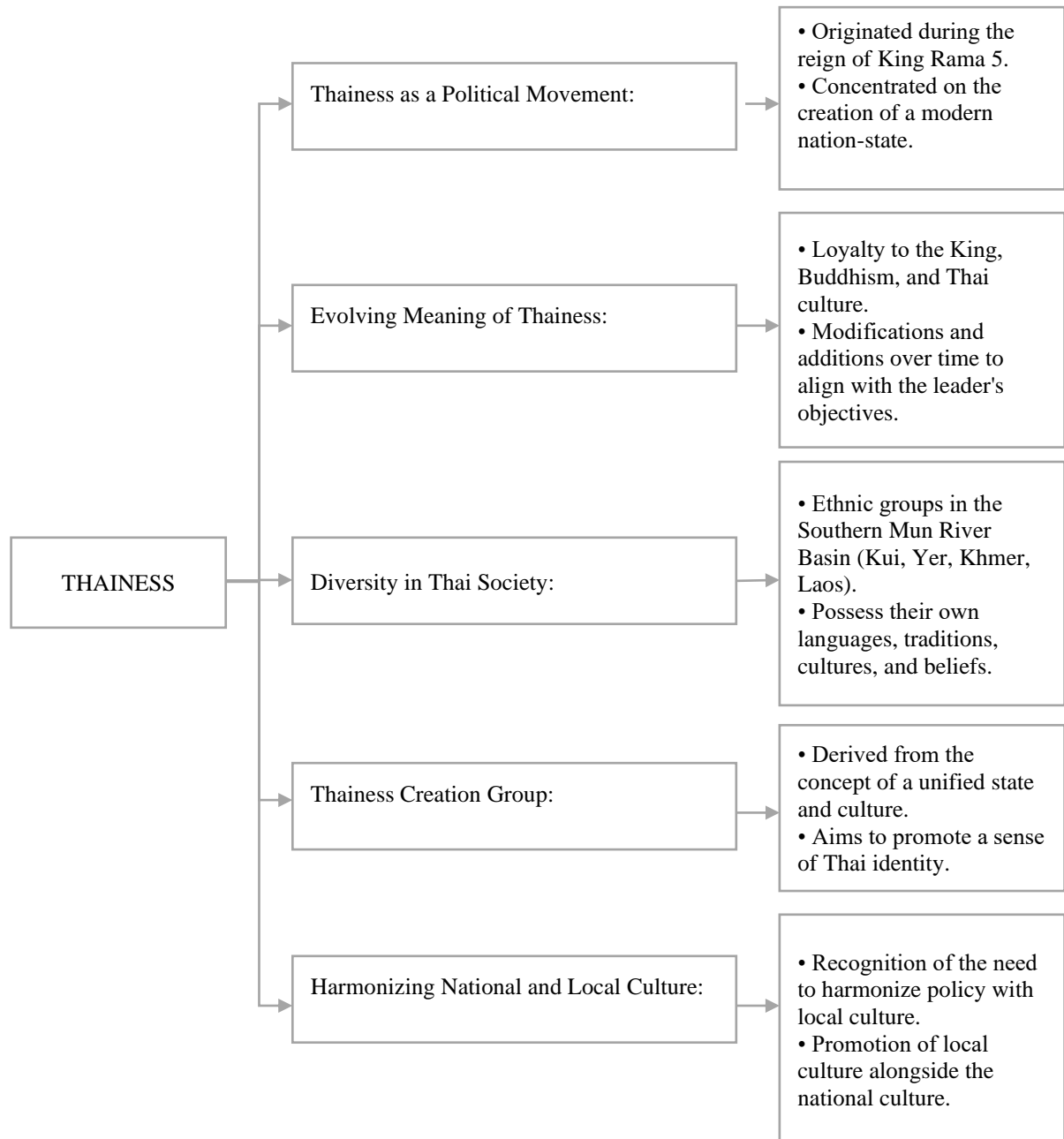


Figure 1 key point of Thainess that (not) Thai in the multicultural society of the lower Mun river basin

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