

The Contested Construction of Thai Cultures

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I have approach the concept of culture as a social knowledge, or knowledge system, and or social construction. I purpose to explore that how 'Thai culture' has constructed? I read some of academic writing on Thai culture and discover that Thai cultural writings have been at least 4 major movements on the production of Thai culture in the period of 80 years. The first movement, the early modern Thai culture was constructed by the states official agency and elite intellectuals who aimed to unite different 'classes' and preserve an unequal social relation. However, the second movement, academic intellectuals and liberal writers attempted to criticize the cultural representation of the official agency about the 'origin' and 'authentic' of what called "Thai culture", or "Thainess". The third movement, Thai culture have been involved with identities construction and consumption of people. Not only consumer and producer but also academic intellectuals became 'new cultural agency'. And the fourth movement, Thai culture has been created by 'rural' or 'subaltern' people. Increasingly, this 'suburban culture' has being challenged to all of 'good values' of Thai culture of an elite, academics intellectual, and cultural consumer in city.

1. The Cultural Construction by the States Official Agency

As we all know that at the present Thailand is a constitutional monarchy state, or the Kingdom of Thailand. The main construction of modern Thai culture has begun since the political change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in 1932. We can say that the attempt to modernize Thai culture has already begun a few years before this

year. I focus my investigation in this period of eighty years because I have the assumption in this period that Thai society had been begun to be a 'new society' of the nation-state. The state had reinvented of culture and also created a body of knowledge of culture and teach their subjects to have culture, or teach their subject to be civilized.

In the early period of Thai modernization, elites who had been educated from western countries began to construct Thai culture or "Thainess" related to monarchy, nationalism,



Figure 1 : national-anthem illustrations on Thai T.V. (channel 3) during 2004 to 2008.

Origin: www.YouTube.com, 7 Nov, 2011.

and Buddhism. Their “Thainess” still has been presented by media and education until now such as video of Thai-nation anthem on Thai T.V. (figure 1)

Saichon Sattayanurak (2003) explains that Thai culture in the colonial period or in the regime of the absolute monarchy was constructed by the most of influential intellectual the Prince Krom Phraya Dhamrong Rajanupab (1862-1943). At that time Thai society that called “Siam” was influenced by the concept of social progress, the global economic crisis, the growth of Chinese merchants, and abolishment of slave. The Prince aimed to promote a dictatorial regime, bureaucracy, and ‘class’ structure in order to govern people. He created the identity of people means that follow an order of officials which mean monarch authority; particularly just after releasing the people from slavery. He inherited a motto that “different people in Siam take shelter under royal protection” (*Bhothisomparn*). He propagandized that each person has duties to each other with kindness rather than classes’ exploitation (Saichon, 2003). However, in the late 1930s after the absolute monarchy had been replaced by constitutional monarchy, the Prince emphasized the meaning of government official as ‘slave’ (*Kha*) of the His Majesty King which means that the recipient of the Royal Command work for the country. He promoted rural people as “*Kha*” and “*Laos*” to imply their less civilization; therefore the state of the King has to use (modern) knowledge to develop those people. In addition, he still value of ‘high, or low family’ – or differentiation by birth into a ‘high’ family of royal and ‘low’ family of ordinary people. Thus Saichon criticize that these Thainess constructions stilled the unequal social structure even though the political regime had been changed (Saichon, 2003).

These constructions had been used again during the 1930s to 1940s when ‘Siam’ was renamed to ‘Thailand’ (in 1939) in order to fight against communism. According to Saichon Sattayanurak (2002), ‘Thai culture’ at that time was linked with nationalist ideology by the major intellectual Luang Wichitwathakan (1898-1962) in the period of Field Marshal Por Pibunsongkhram government (1940s to 1950s). In addition, he reconsidered that traditional institutions, such as the ruling by the king, Buddhism religious worship, ideals and customary way of lives are valuable for his anti-communism. He emphasized these values of institutions in a genre of the collective memory in national history - all classes

have the same ancestor who sacrificed and fight against an enemy of nation. Therefore people must accept and trust the nation-state leader in order to fight against communist who was being represented the enemy at that time. The cultural construction by the states official agency convinced that no class and cultural conflict and no inequality in Thai society because the leader is a good Buddhist and sacrificer; he will lead his people in peaceful modernity (Saichon, 2002). Another major intellectual *Phraya Anuman Ratjadhon* (1888-1969) had a role in the reign of Pibunsongkhram. He resisted communism by offering an image of local people who have their own tradition and cultural heritage, in particular Buddhism, temples, and monks which make the village a peaceful and formalistic way of life (Saichon, 2007c: 371-372).

Since 1950, Thai elite also use Buddhism and monarchy to resist against both communism and the western cultural occupation. Saichon Sattayanurak (2007a and 2007b) explains that the major elite intellectual Mom Rajawong (the great-grand-child of a king) Kukrit Pramoj (1911-1995) was installing Thai identity that verified the great value of Thai royalty. He suggested an image of ‘Thainess’ from the absolute monarch period that was a factor of peace, organization, stability, and progress. This Thainess also differed from “communism culture”. But he offered an image of rural people especially that they fall into the cycle of “stupid-poor-painful”. He also promoted that the absolute power leader is both clever and have a goodness of Buddhism to help people leave from poorness; he supported the political authority of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat government (1959-1963) even though he will regulate people without a constitutional rule and the Council of Representatives. This ‘Thainess’ was based on people’s accepting *Sarit* because he exercised the absolute power to ‘develop’ or to ‘modernize’ the country and people. At that time, Kukrit need to define ‘Thainess’ in order to communicate the people that the “American culture’ was destroying the ‘goodness’ of ancient culture – including the roles of traditional institutions of The King and Buddhism. He, therefore, promoted that the King not only develops the country and helps people to escape from poverty, but also helps to conserve ‘Thainess’ for challenging with the ‘alien culture’ (Saichon, 2007a and 2007b).

We can see that the construction of Thai culture by elite

stilled the unequal social structure and the centralized political power. Prince Krom Phraya Dhamrong Rajanupab created ‘Thai culture’ and ‘Thai identity’ for promoting the regime of the absolute monarchy before the 1940s. Luang Wichitwathakan linked “‘Thai culture’ to nationalist ideology which included royalty, Buddhism, and custom; he aimed to fight against communism during the 1930s to 1940s. Phraya Anuman Ratjadhon weighed ‘Thainess’ of local people if they have their own tradition and cultural heritage that means Buddhism which form the way of life of villager. Another ‘Thai culture’ was constructed by Kukrit Pramoj aimed to resist both communism and the cultural occupation of Western culture. It also promoted the roles of traditional institutions of The King and Buddhism.

2. The Academic Critique of ‘states official culture’

Although the construction of ‘Thai culture’ of elites is a powerful definition but we also can see the critique of contemporary intellectual though, for instance, the series books of Saichon one of contemporary historian. Her critical books are being represented the challenged knowledge of whatever claimed “‘Thai culture’” that always linked with political project of governor, particularly royalist and the state official agency. Saichon’s writings are being representing the knowledge or cultural movement of intellectual nowadays.

Since the 1970s, according to Pattana Kittiaras (2003), ‘Thai culture’ of elite was initiated by two important movements: the first, the movement of student and people fight against the dictatorial government in 1973, and the second,

the movement of progressive intellectuals, authors, and activists after this year (Pattana, 2003: 87). Many intellectuals in Thailand started noticeably to criticize the Thai cultural knowledge constructed by elite and official agency. For them, “‘Thai culture’” has never been a “‘pure Thainess’” but it always mixed with the other cultures such as Indian, Chinese, Cambodian, and also Western culture, for instance. I would like to show you the comparing between the traditional Thai dance on left-side and the traditional Cambodian dance on right-side of figure 2; I see that they are the same style.

Which picture is very Thai? ‘Middle class’ intellectual in particularly the late twentieth attempt to criticize the ‘origin’ and ‘authentic’ of “‘Thainess’” which has been promoted by the official agency. One of them is, Srisak Vanlibhodom (1991) presented that during the eighth and ninth Buddhist century, elite leaders received Indian culture and ideology to useful their governing; and also authorized their status and social institution. ‘Siamese’ or ‘Thai’ art, at the same time, was also influenced from another place such as Indian, Cambodia, and Sri Langkha. For example, in King Rama I to King Rama II of *Chakri* period (1782-1824), the local and ethnic performance; for instance *khon* (masked dance), puppet drama, Chinese opera, *Mon* (ethnic) dance, were supported by elites who prefer to present their credit and authority with to support the artist group (Srisak, 1991: 1-20). According to Srisak, Thainess ‘origin’ should be hybrid culture rather than authentic Thai. In addition, Michael Wright (1991) explained that in the nineteenth century or the King Rama III (1824-1851), Siamese elite saw themselves as civilized group because they lived in Hinddu Buddhist civiliza-

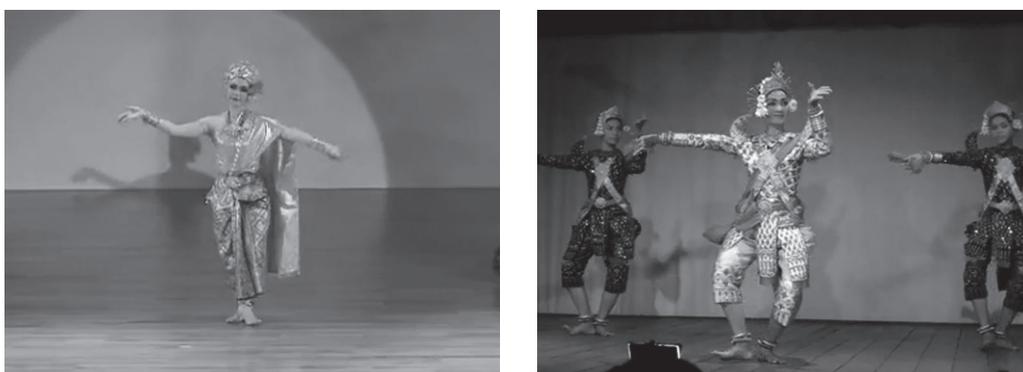


Figure 2 : the example of traditional Thai dance and Cambodian dance
Origin: www.YouTube.com, 7 Nov, 2011.

tion. The elite insulted continuously Westerner (*Farang*) as the uncivil group. However in the period of King Rama VI era (191-1925) when Siam entered a 'modern' era, the reference of 'civilization' translated a hierarchy from Hindu-ness and folk-ness to Western. Importantly Field Marshal Por Pibunsongkhram government (1938-1957) prohibited the performance of many folk cultures that were accused as an obstacle of the modernization of Thailand (Wright, 1991: 31-36). Both Write and Srisak are pointing to the conflict of Thai cultural construction.

Srisak, Wright, and also Saichon are examples of critical intellectual who attempted to divide their knowledge and position from the knowledge of official agency. They criticized that the reference of 'origin' or 'authentic' of 'Thai culture' has been linked to the political conflict and competition of governor and dominant class. They, therefore, aim to criticize the unequal relation between governors and their people.

3. Thai culture in the age of consumption

Nowadays we can see that there are two types of Thai culture at least combined with the global and local images for example goodness, beauty, peaceful and environmental friendly, modern and also simple lives. The question is that who is going to buy or to use it? The answer will be in the global consumption such as tourism and cultural commoditization. This chaotic change allows an academic intellectual become the new cultural agency who will educate governor and people; and, will conserve and/or commoditize "Thai culture". 'Thai culture' is not only forms of performance and art, it is a sign produced and consumed by people for identifying their own identity in the global-local context.

From studying of Anchala Phochanasomboon (1991), the private drama school became the 'cultural agency' as well as the official agency during 1960s -1980s. Especially, private drama groups popularized the cultural performance such as traditional Thai dance (*ramthai*) of the official agency in public space: television. This 'high art' or official culture knowledge had been become to popular culture in term of 'Thai cultural consumption' of middle class in city (Anchala, 1991). In case study of Paritta Chalermpong Koanantakool (2002), middle-class Thainess consumers adopt the traditional Thai dance as a recreational activity for amateur

practitioners in the 1980s and the early 1990s. They were educated and attracted by many private dance schools and higher educational institutions. They practiced 'Thai dance' rationally and internalized emotionally for submitting their own identity that associated with the cultural knowledge of official agency (Paritta, 2002). Thai dance is known now as a 'cultural property' of the country. The Thai dance practitioners, differ from an official agency and intellectual, prefer their knowledge consumer rule to producer rule.

My work (Pramote Pakdeenarong 2004) studied on the traditional tube-skirt, *Pha Sin Tin Jok* of Mae Chaem district in Chiang Mai province. I argued that the consumption of *Pha Sin Tin Jok* had never meant the material consumption of *Pha Sin Tin Jok* but it was more a symbolic consumption of a valuable local tradition. Since Mae Chaem district was associated with tourism and 'Northern (*Lanna*) localism' in the 1990s and 2000s, it was emphasized with the representation of old tube-skirt is high or authentic value' of local art-culture. The localism and conservatism group saw the modern development of government was destroying this local value. I criticized that the tube-skirt knowledge of local-conservationism intellectuals usually represented to media and tourism; because it was corporate with the desire of outsiders: academics and consumers in urban rather than it was presented by the local people. For example, the outsiders prefer to know that those villagers will grow cotton plants by themselves in order to weave the tube-skirt. In contrary, villagers have never used the cotton from their garden for the tube-skirt because it is too bad for weaving; they, and also their ancestor, always buy a qualified thread from city markets. I criticized that the 'voices' of local people were usually subsided by the ideological and desire of the outsiders (Pramote, 2004). The knowledge construction of *Mae Cham* culture is representing the 'field' of contested meaning of local culture in Thailand. This contestation is not battling between official agency and academics or ordinary people; but between the powerful consumption and representation of 'outsiders' or city people and the identities affirmation of local people in the space of media and tourism consumptions.

Difference from above intellectual movements, the writing of critical historian Saipin Keawpetchngambhasert (1995) was fall down. She criticized the official knowledge of Lady Mo (1771-1852) - the heroine in Nakhonratchasima

province who fight against the enemy of Siam, the King Anuwong of Loas; and has been promoted the honesty of provincials, particularly it represented the 'good citizen' who honest the loyalty and the nation. The monument of Lady Mo was constructed in 1934. This Lady Mo story was used to promote the nationalism ideology also. Saipin attempted to criticize (and publicize) that the fighting story of Lady Mo was written for politics. The story had been never written by writer in that period until the reign of political centralization of the King Rama V; and it was publicize increasingly after the end of absolute monarchy – the government prefer promoting the national hero from local to the king. However Nakhonratchasima people permitted completely the story of official agency because they translated it for daily life such as to make a votive offering for Lady Mo. According to Charles F Keyes (2002), the story of Lady Mo has been belonged to of national history and knowledge. The knowledge has carried out self-consciously by local people of the ruling elite - who seek to maintain a unitary and hegemonic narrative about the history of the Thai nation. Local people make a votive offering cult of Lady Mo have taken their authority neither from that official or academic knowledge but from the 'sacred power' they believe. The power is also projecting because it is expressed in emotive acts; votive makers usually desire for winning their problem by the helping of Lady Mo's power, rather than their logical or rational acts (Keyes, 2002: 130).

We can see that the studies of Anchala and Paritta represent that middle-class consumer and academic intellectual became the 'cultural agency' as well as the official agency, particularly they preferred the construction of 'Thai culture' from the consumer position. We can see from my studying that the knowledge of an academic intellectual and conservative developer win over consumer outstandingly particularly when it was reproduced through public space of mass media and education; even though it is differed radically from the knowledge and experience of local people. And we can see from the critique of Saipin that Thai culture is the contesting field of knowledge constructions of different social/political groups; the notice of Keyes, local people used consciously the national story/knowledge for problem-solving in everyday life. I see that our question is not only how to they negotiate the 'other' or 'outsider' knowledge but also who is the real director of a 'new knowledge or value' –

villager, local people, or the new national administer in this country? I would like to see that the public space of knowledge: mass media and educational and cultural institutions for instance is the field where all 'new' powerful leaders: official agency, academic intellectual, consumer of sign, and capitalist administer, are using it in order to construct the new cultural ideology of people. If, therefore, local people have never occupied and controlled this public space really, and have never written their own story and identity in the space by themselves; they will be directed (and re-directed) by new (and new) governor unchangeably. However I think that whenever the national administrators demand to preserve their own power, they will be contested by people who attempt to affirm and present their own identity and self-consciousness in public affairs.

4. Thai cultural movements from below

All the above mention, the cultural production was too formal and very institutional construction of Thai culture which gives no space for the local expression. The local people do not their own 'subjectivity'. We, therefore, would see local cultural expression especially people in the province or countryside. The folk opera of northeastern provincial called "*molum*", for instance, which shows that they also could produce their culture. But usually it has been denied or insulted its value by official and intellectual visions; it is not 'culture', or it is a worthless or dirty performance. The northeastern folk opera (*molum*) is the performance of the Northeastern people with singing in the Lao language. According to Phornsuang Thaothawee



Figure 3 : the traditional *molum* performance
Origin: www.YouTube.com, 7 Nov, 2011.



Figure 4 : the *molum moo* performance

Origin: www.sahavicha.com, 25 Jan 2012.

(2000), before 1957 it was told the local myths and the stories of a sacred writing of temple - the palm leaf book, by skillful performer. The *molum* performers also took both religious and secular beliefs to perform in front of as well as to teach the audiences. Each performance was done by only one or two performers who dress with casual clothes; singing together with traditional musical instrument made from bamboo called “*can*” (figure 3). The audiences of this *molum* were impressed on the performers’ knowledge and sharp rhetoric. However the first new style *molum* was appeared alongside Thai modernization during 1947 to 1969; it had been called “*molum moo*”, the performance with many performers who dress the luxurious clothes; they perform together with the modern musical instruments; with the light and sound, to excite the audiences (figure 4). In addition *molum moo* performers touch on the secular life of ordinary people rather than religious; and they become the voice of the government for the battle against the communist movement during 1969 – 1989. In addition, the secondary new

molum called “*luthong molum*” or “*molum plern*,” was being modernized with the exciting rhythm of music and dance; it less aware about the rhetorical intelligence of the performers. The third new *molum* called “*molum vieng*” presented the intelligence of performers; but they usually dress in luxurious clothes. The performers of *Molum vieng* attempted to convince the local schools to conserve the ‘true’ pattern of traditional *molum*. During 1989 – 2000, the fourth new *molum* called “*molum sing*” (figure 5) highlights on the enjoyment and excitement: sexual attraction, nude and seductive dancing, and obscene speech. It was emerged alongside the young worker movement from rural area to city who became the main productive providers of their family, and also became the new sponsor of *molum* performance at village (Phornsuang, 2000).

I see that although this kind of ‘Thai culture’ has being invented by ordinary people or villager however it has been seldom popularize and accept in the cultural construction of national media. It, therefore, has been limited by taste and modern ideology of urban consumer and producer. ‘Thai popular culture’ form below was sometimes supported by the official agency, academic intellectual, consumer, and especially tourism agency if it was representing the ‘good value’ of local community and holistic society in Thailand. For example it was representing the harmony, sacrificial mind, and virtuous villager.

Pattana Kitiarsa (1999) studied the urban spirit-medium cult was portrayed an “outlawed religion” by official agency and the Sangha order, particularly in the past. However people seemed to search for a ‘religion’ that was meaningful and relevant to their uncertain lives, and that institutionalized



Figure 5 : the *molum sing* performance

Origin: (left side) www.karaoke-soft.com, 25 Jan 2012; (right side) www.oknation.net, 25 Jan 2012.

or state-sponsored religions could not provide. Thai press and media invented and represented negatively the spirit-medium's images and narrative as those of a deceiver, an irrational spirit mentor, or an unreliable public representative. However the spirit-medium cults were being represented the religious practices and beliefs of the subaltern people. In addition, they became to the promoted commodity of media such as mysterious magazine and T.V. program in order to sell an image and reputation of cults' figures. The spiritual-medium cult was being represented a system of multi-vocal signs as primarily expressed by the marginal or subaltern segment in the contemporary process of Thai cultural construction (Pattana Kitiarsa, 1999).

'Thai popular culture' in the *molum* case of Phornsuang was changed from sacred and religion teaching to secular and emotional liberation. The modernized *molums* highlighted on the desire of people such as excited and luxurious performance. The urban spirit-medium cult, Pattana shows, the cultural construction of the subaltern people join to the commoditizations of media and charm producer. This 'Thai culture' was constructed by the multi-voice (and multi-interest) of both producers and consumers.

5. Remark

The constitutional monarchy of Thailand at this time, the political powers of monarch and capitalist administer have being decentralized increasingly; however the cultural power of them still have been operated and promoted powerfully by media and educational and cultural institutions. Comparatively, our old and new administers are the master of 'knowledge factories'; they control the 'machine' of cultural production of this country. They occupy a public space and majority rule sponsored by national institutions and capitalist media. They also fight among them to 'sell' the 'good thing', 'good culture', or 'suitable value' to consumer and people.

At villages and local places, people wish to liberate themselves from all of the tensions of cultural domination. They construct a diverse culture at local level. But their cultures and 'local wisdoms' were sometimes promoted by the dominant cultural agency if it had been commoditized, or used for supporting the political authority of the (new and new) leaders and country administers. As I consider 'Thai

culture,' included both national and local cultures, is a social knowledge and constructed system therefore it is the political invention rather than legacy of our ancestor.

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