

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

Thailand has been an agricultural society for most of its history. Popular beliefs, practices, lifestyle, activities and their earnings, particularly in the rural areas, have often been based mainly on agriculture. As described in *Thailand: National Report on the Implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity*, a national report from the Office of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy and Planning states that Thai people live in an unusually fertile area. They plant rice as their main staple and it, in turn, provides their main source of income. They grow other seasonal plants like soybeans, tobacco, shallots, garlic and many other crops to supplement their earnings, depending on the geographical conditions and availability of water (5). This economy is complemented by agriculturally-themed rituals and festivals meant to bring blessings on their crops. Blessing ceremonies, for example, are held to improve the physical and spiritual well-being of villagers and their guests. Another ritual is Hae Nang Maew, in which the villagers hold a parade featuring a female Siamese cat, whose color resembles that of a cloud, in a basket around the community in order to ask to be blessed with the rain from Deva (a forest divinity). The majority of private expenses involve the equipment and supplies that are needed for agricultural activities, farming and livestock. Villagers live simply, planting vegetables, eating the vegetables they cultivate, using herbal medication, and enjoying their participation in local community activities.

These factors contribute to a picture of a serene, basic lifestyle. Toiling in the fields, tending crops, taking care of livestock, and managing the household budget, all these leave them exhausted by the evening. Preparing family meals also adds to the workload. After a hard day's work and the evening meal, it is likely that a typical farmer would be exhausted and retire early in order to recuperate so that they can wake up the following morning, feeling fresh and ready for another day of work on the farm, in an unending cycle. The only means of entertainment would be a black and white television set, which can provide the whole family with a source of entertainment before each one retires to his or her own sleeping quarters. The house property is open with no fences and no front gates. Entrances are left wide open to welcome all visitors. Everybody knows each other and is ready to help out when needed. This has created a tight social framework where disputes are unlikely to occur, and if they do at all, disagreement can be readily settled among themselves.

However, as globalization has started to play a more important role in society, the Thai way of life, in general, has been affected and has gradually changed. The traditional way of life has started to fade away as people embrace new technologies. New high-tech forms of machinery have become available to increase the product yields, along with the availability of genetically-modified seeds engineered to increase yields. Sharing the work-load in the fields among neighbors no longer seems necessary. Oxen and buffaloes that were used to plow the paddy fields have been replaced with many types of machinery, such as tractors, for convenience and lower cost. Rituals aiming to bless the farmers, as well as to increase their agricultural yields do not seem to be necessary anymore. People tend to be more independent in doing their fieldwork, nonetheless, they still have a common purpose, which is to become financially secure.

All of this results in a loss of community ties, friendship, and a sense of fraternity among the members of community. The old way of life begins to fade away and people start practicing a more modern lifestyle, by focusing on technology, such as acquiring machines to lessen the work load in the fields, taking loans to advance their investment, and maximizing the use of the natural resources that are available to them. The traditional Thai image of a harmonious life of moderation and balance seems to be fading away.

Increasingly, Thai citizens remark on these problems, which have resulted from modern practices. Due to the high cost of machinery and hired hands, there is no guarantee that agriculturists will have a desirable return from such costly investments. Many people are unable to produce enough to sustain their family consumption and worse, many run into debt as they are unable to repay the bank loans. Thus, many have begun to return the harmonious, more traditional method of agriculture. Meanwhile, His Majesty the King, having traveled extensively across the country, has personally acknowledged the problems that rural people have been facing. Therefore, King Bhumibol Adulyadej has initiated a farming experiment called *sustainable development* or *sustainability within the palace vicinity*. Rice has been grown using organic fertilizers, pest control was conducted using non-chemical pest resistance, fruits and vegetables are grown seasonally and the product is canned and marketed locally.

Thereafter, people have become inspired and have shown a desire to broaden these practices and spread knowledge using media as a means of moderation.

Advertisements, folk songs, documentary films, print media, and TV series have been produced to convey the message and ways in which the whole country can fruitfully follow His Majesty's advice.

Television is a medium widely and conveniently accessible to a great number of people. Television drama is one of the alternative platforms for some producers, who have been inspired by King Bhumibol Adulyadej's scheme to produce work celebrating the sustainability concept. It is worth noting that some people in rural areas have never abandoned a traditional agricultural lifestyle in tightly knit communities. Realizing the interest in traditional methods of agriculture and the enthusiasm for sustainable lifestyles, *Phu Yai Lee Kab Nang Ma*, a novel published in 1967 and written by the renowned Thai female author Kanchana Naknant, was adapted into a popular television drama on Channel 3, broadcasted in the year 2009. Although there are many versions of this drama, this latest version has been selected because the content and the details are most relevant to current social and economic circumstances. Fans were enthusiastic, and the two leads, Trisadee Sahawong and Chermal Boonyasak, received good reviews for their performances. The novel and the series are set in a period in which globalization and modernization have unsettled people's lives. *Phu Yai Lee*, who has a degree in Agriculture, and *Khun Ma*, the main characters, try to sustain their community by applying the concepts of Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) and Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT). They also attempt to urge people to retain a simple way of life in terms of professions, culture and traditions in their communities. Thus, *Phu Yai Lee Kab Nang Ma* has been chosen as a basis of analysis in this study for its relevant and substantial content. Therefore, to explore the reflections of SEP and PROUT portrayed in the story, SEP will be used as a framework to analyze characteristics of the main characters, the conversations, the activities, the beliefs, the culture, and life style of people. PROUT, initiated by Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, which is similar to SEP, will also be employed in the analysis

Wichit Srisa-an explained in the opening keynote speech on “Learning Together for Tomorrow: Education for Sustainable Development” at the Opening Ceremony of the 10th APEID International Conference that the overall concept of SEP contributed by His Majesty the King is an ideal method to build awareness among Thai citizens of the importance of compatible, sustainable lifestyles within the limits of domestic resources and while applying local knowledge and wisdom. At the same time, people are also able to remain flexibility to adjust to the changes brought about by globalization. SEP consists of three components, Moderation, Reasonableness, and Self-Immunity, as well as the two conditions, Knowledge and Morality (2), the details of which will be illustrated in the chapter which follows.

SEP was developed not only for applications in the agriculture and business sectors, but also for use in the educational sector. In a document issued by the Ministry of Education, “Towards a Learning Society in Thailand: an Introduction to Education in Thailand” it was explained that the SEP approach is to be actively implemented in all educational institutions in the current Thai educational system. In regards to educational policy, the Ministry of Education is setting educational strategic plans, which incorporate the concepts that enhance moral and ethical values into a core study program. These plans are expected to improve the quality of education by implementing SEP to promote moderation and harmony among local communities in order for them to be able to succeed in a sustainable manner (10).

A similar approach and philosophy are obviously seen in PROUT, the approach created in 1959 by an Indian philosopher, Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar, in response to the changes taking place in the world resulting from the spread of capitalism in the 1800s.

In the article, “The Progressive Utilization Theory (PROUT): Alternative Economic and Spiritual Model for The Welfare of All,” Dada Maheshvarananda, director of the PROUT Research Institute of Venezuela in Caracas, and Mariah Branch support Sarkar’s concept stating, “PROUT is a holistic set of dynamic concepts that can be applied appropriately by citizens and leaders to help their region or country prosper and achieve self-reliance in an ecological way” (32).

The PROUT theory aims to seek methods to fulfill the basic needs of the individual and the community, to ensure social freedoms, to promote moral leadership, and to promote economic democracy ("Mission Statement"). PROUT and SEP are both set up to solve the economic, social, and political problems people face as modern living becomes more complex and difficult.

In summary, both the SEP and PROUT theories aim to promote self-reliance, social cooperation and balance between environmental and spiritual needs. Thus, these two theories are an appropriate framework to analyze the main characters, the activities, the beliefs, the culture, and life style of people in the agricultural community represented in the television drama, *Phu Yai Lee Kab Nang Ma*, and how these people, with the guidance of the major characters, are able to meet their basic needs and also prosper.

Consequently, this study will focus on the reflection of the SEP and PROUT approaches in the television drama *Phu Yai Lee Kab Nang Ma*, which is based on the novel of the same title. Even though the original book was written in 1967 and was adapted on 2009, almost forty years apart, as a television drama, it effectively reflects the existing lifestyle of many people today, both in towns and in remote villages.

Presently, Thai people are facing a similarly profound cultural shift toward modernization. Therefore, the problems and concerns represented in the story are still vitally important to Thai audiences. The analysis will illustrate the vivid scenario of how the agricultural practices of people in the community initiated and encouraged by Phu Yai Lee and Nang Ma allowed them to become self-reliant, to work alongside their neighbors to achieve satisfactory agriculture yields and to maintain equilibrium. Moreover, it will become clearer how these theories can be utilized within the context of a rapidly changing world. Also, all the parties concerned, families and local communities, as well as private and government sectors, are encouraged to cooperate with each other to promote the preservation of Thai traditional ways of life and to live prosperously during the changing circumstances by utilizing the SEP and PROUT approaches.

1.2 Purpose of Study

- 1.2.1 To analyze how the SEP and PROUT approaches are portrayed through characteristics of the main characters, the conversations, the activities, the beliefs, the culture, and life style of people in the television drama *Phu Yai Lee Kab Nang Ma*.
- 1.2.2 To raise awareness on how Thai communities as a whole can profit from such approaches, as seen in the drama.

1.3 Educational Advantages

- 1.3.1 A better understanding about the SEP and PROUT theories is to be achieved and the advantages of the approaches for Thailand's economic, social, and educational development are to be recognized.

1.3.2 Thai people can accordingly apply the approaches in order to succeed in terms of economic and social disruption in a rapidly changing modern world.

1.4 Method and Scope of the Study

The analysis of this qualitative research will be based on a content and descriptive analysis through a detailed study presented in *Phu Yai Lee Kab Nang Ma*. The SEP and PROUT approaches will be employed to obtain the relevant evidence to describe the reflection of SEP and PROUT. The farming scheme, characteristics of the main characters, the conversations, the activities, the beliefs, the culture, and life style of people in the story will be mainly analyzed to understand local wisdom, lifestyle, beliefs, as well as the benefits derived from the application of the two approaches.