

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

As stated in chapter 1, the objectives of this research are (i) to study how votive *Phlaeng Khorat* was constructed, and (ii) to decipher the process of power contestation as appeared within cultural practices in different geographical locations i.e., public space, ‘sacred space’, and ‘mundane’ space. To answer these questions by way of conclusion, I sum up the findings in the thesis in three sections: first, the appropriation of local culture by the central state; second, the process of local responses which vary in different geographical space, and; third, the meaning of modernity. While “modernity” is usually related to the concept of “rationality”, ‘rationalization’ involves a contradictory process of becoming the obliteration of ‘irrationality’.

6.1 The Cultural Domination of Local Culture by the Central State

Looking back at Thai society, *Tanes Wongyannawa* (2006) points out that the nation-building agenda is channeled not only by military force but also through the daily life of the citizens without them noticing it. His example is from food culture. *Tanes* finds that Lady *Plean Pasakhonwong* who was the pioneer author of Thai cook book “*The cook*” (*mea kao hao pa*) in 1908, King Rama V period, was the key actor in the standardization of Thai food. She published her work by looking up to her model, Isabella Becton, ‘*The book of household management*’ (first printed 1861), which was the most popular cook book, in the 19th century and the first half of 20th century in Britain. The formalistic construction of Thai food culture before the publication of cook book was from words of mouth and out of the thin air. The cook book had signified the first step of the incorporation of local knowledge under the central written culture. *Tanes* points out that we could ‘read’ beyond the food to see the social hierarchy within Thai social structure from the cook book. In the first volume, the

book discusses the preparation of food for sacred ceremonies; special food to be given to sacred spirits such as divine and other spiritual beings. These sacred foods, after being offered to the sacred spirits, could be eaten only by upper class people such as monks and nobles. Ordinary people were not supposed to be eating the food as it would be ‘improper’ or ‘impertinent’ as lower class people should not try to elevate themselves through the action of eating the same food as the upper class (*Tanes*, 2006: 252-258).

However, by reading the same cook book does not guarantee that the food can be prepared by the same standard or achieve the same taste (*Ibid.*, 263). With rising classification of food according to the social status, the standardization has ceased to be meaningful (*Ibid.*, 263-264). *Tanes* argues that we have never been completely standardized by the central state such as the food standard. Although the Thai state is trying to modernize a so-called “Thai culture” as a single standard, it has always been, in some degree, resisted by and reacted upon through the subjective belief, feeling, and environment that each social-class distinctively possesses.

Borrowing the idea from *Tanes*, I consider the process of cultural appropriation through the “standardization” of *Thao Suranari*’s monument. The monument of *Thao Suranari* portrays *Thao Suranari* in central Thai elite costume of *Pha Sin* or skirt tube and *Pha Sabai* or wrap-around with one end brought over a shoulder, having *Dok Kratum* hairstyle as typical of central Thai woman. *Thao Suranari*’s central Thai clothing style imply the symbolic domination and political symbol of the central state power over *Nakhon Ratchasima*. It also symbolizes the successful state appropriation of culture by Thai-zation of *Thao Suranari* into Thai elite costume.

The general process of standardization of Thai culture into ‘polite’ form was influenced in the 1930s by *Luang Wichitwathakarn*, who tried to construct the ‘civilized’ central Thai culture. Although he had done nothing to *Phlaeng Khorat*, his conception has influenced *Maw Phlaeng* and the local intellectuals to a certain degree. *Maw Phlaeng* reconstructed the ‘traditional’ *Phlaeng Khorat* to comply with the ‘civilized’ polite culture. Some of them reinvented the votive *Phlaeng Khorat* under the influence of the work of *Luang Wichitwathakarn* and his attempts to construct

‘civilized’ Thai-ness. The votive *Phlaeng Khorat* was therefore adapted to comply with the ‘civilized polite standard’.

As mentions in chapter 3, an education institution such as Teacher College or Rajabhat University had played an important role in constructing a unified an ‘appropriate’ knowledge of *Phlaeng Khorat*. The book by Thaworn Subongkotch et al. (1979) is an example of how knowledge of *Phlaeng Khorat* was constructed. In the book there are ‘histories’ of *Phlaeng Khorat*, types of songs, appropriate costumes to wear. The author of the book established his authority on what ‘standard’ *Phlaeng Khorat* should be like.

After ‘standard’ ‘traditional’ *Phlaeng Khorat* had been reinvented, it achieved a status of a ‘representation’ of local culture. It became a common property and a ‘heritage’ of *Khorat* people. When *Thao Suranari* became a cult in the 1970s, *Phlaeng Khorat* had been employed as an appropriate votive gift to *Thao Suranari*. As a ‘traditional’ performance as existed in the time of *Thao Suranari* it should be a votive gift that she should prefer.

However, as a votive gift, certain amendments and adaptations had been made to *Phlaeng Khorat*. It changes from a dialogical performance of male and female *Maw Phlaeng* contesting in verses to outwit each party into a monologue singing where male and female *Maw Phlaeng* take turn in singing to praise *Thao Suranari*. This reflected the complexity of state appropriation, not only of the ‘standard’ ‘knowledge’ of *Phlaeng Khorat* but it reflected the complexity of *Thao Suranari* as a historical person acknowledged by the state power that must be treated with high respect. As a historical person acknowledged by the state, only appropriate local culture such as *Phlaeng Khorat* is an appropriate gift. This signifies the submission of local culture to the highly respectable state-approved figure.

6.2 Cultural Contestation from Below

Having said that the central state had been successful in dominating local culture, I did not mean to suggest that the central state can dominate local culture all the time or in every geographic place.

There are two studies on local Thai musical culture that discussed the appropriation of central state and defiant local responses (i) *Chutipong Kongsantia*'s study on *Phlaeng Sor Long Nan* and (ii) *Kriangsak Chetpatanavanich*'s study on *Phlaeng Lukthung Kam Mueang*, so I would like to examine these two studies briefly for the sake of further argument.

Chutipong Kongsantia (2013) explains that *Phlaeng Sor Long Nan* represents the politics of identity in Nan province. *Chutipong* addresses in his study that 'traditional' *Phlaeng Sor Long Nan* as an entertainment talks about sexuality and aggressiveness. During the 1930s-1970s, there was more freedom for people to compose the lyrics that challenged social norms. *Chutipong* interprets that the 'mundane' verses in *Phlaeng Sor Long Nan* is the way of unleashing emotions and behaviors limited by social norms and morality (Ibid., 135). Not until in the 1990s that the national artist composed a new *Phlaeng Sor Long Nan* and claimed that the song was originated from sacred ceremonies and elites. It is put into writing by a performer, who is regarded as a national artist/performer by Office of the National Culture Commission (*Chutipong Kongsantia*, 2013: 45-50), so his composing has become a standardized version for other artists and performers to refer to (i.e. the song turns out to be formal and included dance moves representing how sacred it was) (Ibid., 59). As a result, *Phlaeng Sor Long Nan* is frozen (i.e. unchangeable) in the standard polite form, and its sacredness is closely associated with this, despite its origin of "rude" expression of emotions in mundane life (Ibid., 135). *Chutipong*, however, suggests that local performers sometimes still struggle to "improvise" into the way they please.

Kriangsak Chetpatanavanich (2007) studies the transformation of Northern Thai folk songs. During the modernization period northern folk songs were unpopular. But later they were revived and transformed into *Phlaeng Folk Song Kam Mueang*, singing about the story of a rural society in the Northern region of the exotic, traditional, and 'primitive'. *Kriangsak* suggests that this *Phlaeng Folk Song Kam Mueang* constitutes a third identity as in-between rural and urban identities. The singers contest the appropriation of central state power by freeing its identity according to the 'irrational' rural ways of life and rude behavior (*Kriangsak*, 2007: 201-204). The singers portrays the 'irrationalities' and rudeness of the rural people as

entertaining and funny. They also imply the ‘unbalance’ modernization of rural and urban society. *Kriangsak* suggests that this reflects the construction of third space and identity as a contestation to central power (Ibid., 205-208).

The case of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is a little bit more complicated than outright defiance to state authority. As a votive performance, it manifests itself as an appropriate, ‘polite’, culture, in compliance with state regulation of ‘standard’ culture. Especially, when performed in front of *Thao Suranari* monument statue in the public space in the town center, appropriate ‘polite’ words in “monologue” singing in praise of *Thao Suranari* is used. In this sense, it is more similar to *Chutipong*’s study which discussed how *Phlaeng Sor Long Nan* had been frozen through state appropriation.

However, when performed in the village level, differential responses from audiences can be observed. In the village, which is further away from state power (compared to the public space in town where the official monument was situated), villagers would conform to the polite standard of votive performance when local officials were present. They also observed “polite code” of behavior during official ceremony. But once the official ceremony was over, villagers would demand for *Maw Phlaeng* to either sing the new applied *Phlaeng Khorat Cing* which is more energetic or to sing the old ‘real’ ‘dialogical’ *Phlaeng Khorat* which is more responsive to mundane fun. In this sense, it is close to *Kriangsak*’s observation of the defiant nature of rural people in inventing *Phlaeng Folk Song Kam Mueang*. However, the crucial difference is that while *Kriangsak*’s northern villagers had invented a “new” identity through the construction new lyrics that reflected modern life, (and this may be comparable to *Phlaeng Khorat Cing* which used modern fast-rhythm music) what the villagers in rural area in *Khorat* was demanding was the need for mundane fun, either through the form of the ‘modern’ *Phlaeng Khorat Cing* or ‘back’ through the traditional mundane *Phlaeng Khorat*.

What I would like to suggest here is that cultural contestations can be related to geographical space. In the public space in town center which is formally an ‘official space’, local culture was performed in compliance with ‘standard’ demand by the central state. But in place further away from the center of power such as in the village, people conform only when authoritative figures or local officials are present, and only

during official ceremony. But after the official ceremony audience will demand for 'real' cultural performance that is suitable to their tastes.

6.3 The Contradiction within Modernity

6.3.1 The Idea of Rationality

In discussing the development of modernity as in the European model, the work of Max Weber has been one of the most important pillar in laying an understanding of how modern society has been developed. According to Weber, "rationality" has been a foundation of the development of modern state. While "rational law" is the basis of a new form of state, "rationality" and rational "principle" permeates into nearly all spheres of modern life, whether they be the art, the music, and even the architecture (cf. Giddens, 1971: 183). However, the spread of the rationalization process within modern society is not necessarily homogenous, and most importantly, not without contradictions.

Weber differentiated two types of rationality, formal rationality and substantive rationality. By "formal rationality" he means "the degree to which conduct is organized according to rationally calculable principle" (Ibid.,183). Formal rationality is related to science as it is based on the belief that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces..." (Ibid., 183).

However, there is another type of rationality, that is, the "substantive rationality". Substantive rationality is defined as "rational calculation to the furtherance of definite goals or values" (Ibid., 184). As such it does not have to be "scientific" in the sense of having to follow, or operate under certain rules and regulations. It is a process of how best to achieve a desired object.

Though Weber characterized modern society as a rational society, he acknowledged both types of rationality which can operate at the same time, which can cause certain contradictions.

In his book, the Protestant Ethics and Spirit of Capitalism, though Weber discussed the emergence of modern "Protestant" principles or ethics and their

emphasis on the “secular”/worldly “rationality” (for example of “hardworking” in order to earn money) but this secular rationalism or rationalization, is a “complex phenomenon” (Ibid., 127). As mentioned earlier, “rationality” does not progress evenly as society develops into modernity; one cannot assume a “unilinear development of rationalism” (Ibid., 127). It has been pointed out that “rationalization” within the economic sphere tends to develop the fastest, which imply that “thoughts” in other spheres may not develop as fast. People may still cling to other ‘traditional’ beliefs and practices.

Ulrich Beck (1994) is another theorist who is interested in the uneven development of rationality in modern society. Though ‘modernity’ is believed to be occupied by ‘scientific thoughts and classifications’, and believed to unite different individuals, to construct the social collectivity with rationality and progress, to construct modern institutions for controlling all its subjects; so that individuals became ‘rational subjects’; but this may never totally be complete. On the contrary, modernity can lead people into the realm of uncertainty, their lives can be at risk (i.e. they never know what will happen tomorrow - they are entitled to unexpected changes) (Beck, 1994: 20-21). They have to depend more on themselves in facing the insecurities. As a result, modernity can create multiple and contradicting rationalities.

In the case of *Thao Suranari* cult, if people respect *Thao Suranari* and prayed that she can grant them favor, this may appear to be irrational, and unscientific, to the ‘modern’ eyes. But then when these people succeed in whatever they ask the sacred spirit for, that ‘irrationality’ turned out as ‘rationality’ because they actually receive an output from their input, (in this case, from their asking). Their action of vowing may be what Weber might call “substantive” rationality.

In Thai society, according to *Chaiyan Chaiyaporn* (2007), it is difficult to pinpoint that the Thais believe in a spirit power more or less than scientific reasoning. Even intellectuals believe in ghost and spirit. Thai ‘subjects’ are in ambiguous discourse of modernity. While they accept the modern power of the elites, the politicians, and the government; the ghost, the spirit, and the magic also has a place (*Chaiyan*, 2007: 164- 70). So, “Thai modernized subjects” are not the same as

scientific reasonable subjects. It is possible that there could never be a complete standardization of the modern ‘subject’ and institutions.

Regarding the contradictory standard, the study of Pattana Kitiarsa (1999) discusses the phenomenon of urban spirit-medium cults. Although the cults are portrayed as an outlawed or un-religion by Thai official authorities and the Sangha order, they are acceptable as a social discourse. The practitioners of the cults resist against the order of official and Sangha with the powerful motto: “*You may not believe, but never offend the spirits*”. The urban spirit-medium cults represent the religious practices of the subaltern to earn something in a manner that institutionalized, state-sponsored religions cannot provide. Thai people seem to search for a “popular (materialistic) religion” rather than fundamental (doctrinal) religion, because it is meaningful and relevant to their disoriented and uncertain lives. They believe in this popular religion, even though it should be “non-sense” for scientific thinking, because it answered to their ‘modern’ needs for material wealth such as luck in lottery (Pattana Kitiarsa, 1999).

The votive performance influences people to think that *Thao Suranari* is sacred. This is why the votive act should be performed in the public space (i.e. if the votive is not performed in a public space, people will not think that she is sacred). The presentation of *Thao Suranari*’s story in public space is a process that rationalizes the relation between the sacred spirit and votive *Phlaeng Khorat* to become a “substantive rationality” to the public eyes.

6.3.2 The Co-existence and Contradiction of Tradition and Modernity

Weber’s earlier study (i.e. before the Protestant Ethics and Spirit of Capitalism in 1904 – 05) on the agricultural labor in eastern Germany in 1892, though mainly discussing the change in agricultural structure affecting the lives of agricultural labor, did provide an interesting contradictions in forms of social relations. While the change towards commercialization in agriculture created a new group of “day-laborers” and an attitude towards “economic individualism”, he pointed out that, to a certain degree, certain group of “day-laborers” still preferred to be “bonded” labor which guaranteed employment in large farm and still clung to the traditional pattern of patronage system

(Giddens, 1971: 124). This finding seemed to suggest the co-existence as well as contradiction of traditional “form” of social relations within the more modernized and commercialized “form” of agricultural relations.

When he later developed the book on the Protestant Ethics and Spirit of Capitalism, he focused more on the change towards economic individualism (which had been observed to have emerged among day-laborers in commercialized agriculture) and suggested that this attitude of economic individualism have become an “ethic” of the new spirit of capitalism (Ibid., 124).

Weber discussed the emergence of Western capitalism as related to the rise of Protestantism. Contrary to the Catholic church, whose “surveillance” “over everyday life was loose” (Ibid., 125), Protestantism instituted an ethic that “governed” from the external as well as “internalized” into the “thoughts” of individuals. “Hard-working”, “frugality”, as well as “modesty” are some of the well-known example of Protestant Ethics that are related to the “spirit” of capitalism (cf. *Jamaree Chiengthong*, 2006). Weber’s study significantly point to the relation of the “construction” of ethics that facilitate the development of a new form of economic activities towards capitalism. Of course, he also suggested the “significance” of “rational thoughts” within modern capitalist development.

In a developing country such as Thailand, the role of development of “modern” capitalism is not related to religion, but falls upon the State. And since the change in 1932 to become a modern “democratic” state, state needs to legitimize, and stabilizes its power in order to “govern” and “administer”.

The further complexity of the post-1932 state is to establish its authority and legitimation over the pre-1932 state. The Prince *Bovaradej* rebellion was a failure attempt of the pre-1932 “traditional” elites to regain its power. *Nakhon Ratchasima* which was the stronghold of the Prince *Bovaradej* rebellion had to prove its loyalty to the new centralized Bangkok government.

The construction of the monument of *Thao Suranari* has already been discussed of how state creates a symbol of domination over *Nakhon Ratchasima* which is an “in-

between” geographical region, as well as culture; between the dominating central elites and the northeastern. I have also discussed how *Khorat* people did not resist, but on the contrary, co-operate and adapt the symbolic domination of the centralized *Thao Suranari* into local kin of *Ya Mo*.

Despite of change into modern “democratic” state which involves the construction of “citizens” based on the idea of “equality”, certain “form” of “traditional” patron-client relations and a hierarchy form of power structure still form a part of Thai society. I interpret that the cult of *Thao Suranari* has been used to perpetuate the patron-client system in the Thai society in a sense that people will have to subject themselves on the upper authority or ‘those in the top’ for help, or to ask for favor. Votive performers worship the being of *Thao Suranari* as the mother or patron who supports clients for fighting against the insecurities of modern life. The clients lead themselves to visit the monument place to ask for favor by offering votive *Phlaeng Khorat*. Patron-client relations which are maintained through the traditional act of worshipping sacred spirits gives the state “reason” to command order.

The magical/spiritual sense of the cult of *Thao Suranari* overlapped with the rationalization of modernization. The state takes advantage of the belief in magical sense of the sacred cult, as the symbolic representation of this sacred cult coincides with the symbolic authority of the state.

According to James C. Scott (2013), old belief dominated by the “great traditions” can usually find their place in the new one. It is easier for the ordinary people to accept the great tradition and adapt it to fit their pre-existing norm. From this conceptualization, it can be seen that to some extent the state’s appropriation of some cultural norm can be co-opted by some pre-existing cultural traits of the subordinated. This is what David Attwell (2002) called the way of keeping continuity of traditional culture when it is confronting with modernity.

In modern society, the belief in sacred spirit is not lost, but is taking a new life. It seems to fit well with the explanation of Rosalind C. Morris (2000), that the traditional practice of spirit cult survives because of some old memories and stories of a powerful person in the past are being told repetitively, so the spirit cult is not in

oblivion. Its core characteristic is the nostalgia for origin. The cult of *Thao Suranari* and votive *Phlaeng Khorat* reproduces the origin of *Khorat-ness* which can be traced back through the bravery of *Thao Suranari*, a local person, who has become a ‘national’ heroine.

Having been constructed by the central state, *Thao Suranari* monument had evolved into being a cult. This reflected that, ordinary people can find ways to adapt symbolic domination to suit local needs of traditional belief in sacred spirit. The cult was constructed through hybridization and selection of certain practices. It is not only involved with the daily life of the individuals where people vow for certain favors; but also involved within the sphere of politics, where local politicians ‘vow’ to her to legitimize their power.

Moreover, the votive *Phlaeng Khorat* is modernized from the traditional version where lives were related only to agriculture. Nowadays, the votive portrayed in its content more immediate issues (e.g. lottery winning, economic gains, career promotion, etc.). Yet, the performance patterns are both ‘traditional’ (as in costumes) as well as ‘modern’ (as in ‘civilized’ polite language form). The juxtaposition of both makes votive *Phlaeng Khorat* as the symbol of compromise between the tradition and modernity.

In discussing the concept of “modernity”, Joel S. Kahn (2001) suggested that “modernity” is usually involved with the concept of “citizenship” (Kahn, 2001: 4). In developing country, the burden of constructing a ‘modern’ citizen usually falls on the state. He cited an example of Malaysia’s Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamed’s Vision 2020 who announced that Malaysia should strive to construct a “modern democracy based on the equality of all citizens” yet “...in the process of social modernization, elements of traditional culture must be preserved...” (cited in Kahn, 2001: 5). This modern citizen, enriched with selected valuable traditional culture, must also be capable to function within the modern “business jungle” (Ibid.).

According to Joel S. Kahn (2001), while on the one hand the study of change towards modernity can be in a form of study of change in social structure, but on the other hand, it can involve the exploration of the study of mind or subjective perception

of circumstance of ordinary people. Rather than perceiving a change within Thai society as a single cultural movement, I have tried to show the latent traditional traits that may persist within the movement towards modernization.

While the study of spirit cult, for example, that of Pattana Kitiarsa (1999) discussed the emergence of cults as a response to economic instability of the modern world, which I agree, I would like to advance the argument by looking at the side of the state and its (reason) in the ‘tolerance’ of emergent cults. While certain cults might be disapproved of by the state (such as cults wherein worshippers have to contribute large sum of money), *Thao Suranari* cult had co-existed with state approval, because certain aspects within the cult contain state-approved traditional traits, which does not interfere with the construction of modern subject.

Thao Suranari cult and the offering of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* represented the value of imagined kin of traditional Thai society. *Thao Suranari* is often referred to as *Ya Mo*, Grand Mother *Mo*. The offering of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* reflects one’s reverence to one’s grand-parents. This traditional virtue of gratitude is compatible with a good modern citizen. And as mentioned earlier, *Thao Suranari* never approved of the asking to avoid military conscription. This is also compatible with state’s attempt of construction of modern subject. Apart from that, it is usually believed that *Thao Suranari* only helps those who help themselves first, so this is compatible with the “hard-working” ethic in the spirit of capitalism. For *Khorat* people to be proud of being Thai citizen, who can be a part of the development policy of the central state, they have to work long hard for career advancement and economic successes. Yet, while they want those material successes, they also long for certain moral values, such as kinship ties and gratitude. The combination of these can be accommodated in the worship of *Thao Suranari*.

The construction of votive *Phlaeng Khorat* has reflected the exploitation of the sacredness of *Thao Suranari* by the local people to gain some benefits from the construction of the monument by the central state, while they at the same time being subordinated to the state’s authorities.