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Thai Decorum (Sombat Phudee): Principles of Good behavior or Means of Class Oppression

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Abstract

This research aims to find Thai ethical principles applicable to Thai people, which are principles of Thai behavior that everyone should treat each other and live a good life. These principles are to be applicable not only with male and female, but also child and adult, the poor and the rich, ordinary persons and those in position. These principles can be applied to every Thai and still retain the Thai uniqueness. From documents or teachings of Thai people about the principles of behavior, it can be seen that “Thai Decorum” can be used as principles for everyone in society. But many Thais distort and use “Thai Decorum” as a tool to oppress others, causing many oppressed people to cast doubt on their dignity as human beings.

Keywords: noble, serf, slaves, Thai ethical

Introduction

In the past, Thailand organized social status in order to determine identities, rights and duties that people in society must treat each other accordingly. Social status was divided into two major classes: the ruler and the ruled. The ruler consisted of the monarch, the royal family (princes) and the aristocrats. They were educated classes and were called nobles. The ruled consisted of the commoners and the uneducated slaves. They had the status of being degraded to be ruled, called slaves. The slavery system was abolished in 1905 because of the humanist western concept. It views that all people are equal and there are no master. No man was a slave anymore during the reign of King Rama V. Thus, this made people having equal human status according to Western ideas. When education was extended to the people, the practice demonstrating that a person was an educated person was addressed in a book called “Thai Decorum (Sombat Phudee)” written in 1912 by Chao Phraya Phra Sadet Surendrathibodi (Mom Rajawongse Pia Malakul). This book was for Thai people to use as a principle of behavior and conduct when the Westerners came to Thailand to see Thai people



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behaving as a country of civilization and having equal status with Westerners who came into contact with Thailand, while maintaining the Thai uniqueness.

Objective

Objective: To study that can be used as principles of behavior or as a criterion for judging the ethical behavior of Thai people and also be able to clearly demonstrate the cultural identity of Thailand

Scope of research

1. To study Thai ethics by using the concepts in the moderate postmodern philosophy.
2. Research period
12 months period from March 2021 to February 2022

Research Methodology

This research is a qualitative research. It studies Thai ethics in Thai Decorum (Sombat Phudee) by using hermeneutic method and postmodern philosophical paradigm.

Research Finding

The paradigm or underlying belief system in human mind is not a decision-making capacity. It is just an understanding capacity of each that could be shared with one another. At present, all five paradigms are mixed together in reality. There is no single dominant paradigm. We must have knowledge of paradigms because in today's society, especially Thai society, there are still five paradigms of thought, which are: Prehistoric paradigm, ancient style, medieval style, modern style. And the post-modern style as follows (Kirti Bunchua, 2017).

1. A primitive paradigm which believes in the power of the heavens, which is the most important core belief in living a good life. A safe life is possible because of the sacred things above.

2. An ancient paradigm in which there is a fundamental belief system in the mind that everything in this world has a fixed law. Believe that success lies in obeying the rules of the world, so try to research the rules of the world. And strictly follow

3. The medieval paradigm with the basic belief system in the mind based on the belief in the afterlife, permanent happiness exists in the hereafter, and every action is charitable or is unwholesome to result in the next life. The medieval paradigm with a fundamental belief



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system in the mind based on the belief in the afterlife, permanent happiness exists in the world beyond action. So, everything is charity or as a merit to affect the next life

4. The modern paradigm believes that knowledge of science and mathematics can solve all problems in human life.

5. The post-modernist paradigm believes that dialogue is a thoughtful and open way of accepting the good of every idea and is able to bring together ideas by that doesn't necessarily have to be thought alike, creating an atmosphere of unity in diversity.

Thai society in the past organized people according to social stratification in order to determine the status, rights and duties of the people. This idea came from India, which defined people into castes. There are four castes – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras – to determine social status. The caste is a fixed set from birth and unable to change. In Thai society, there are two major classes, namely the ruler and the ruled. However, the division of status in Thai society is not fixed like that of India. A person's status can be changed by being either promoted or degraded.

The inception of class arises from the belief in human inequality. Thai people believe that "karma" causes human beings to be unequal. People are born into a noble class such as kings, lords or nobles because in their past lives, they had accumulated a lot of merit. They are called "gentry". On the contrary, those who had accumulated less merit were born as proletariat or slaves and were referred to as the "commoner". Having such beliefs, the commoner had difficult life. They lived with poverty and were insulted by the gentry by using the word "scurrilous scum (Prai Sathoon)". This word and "cad trait (Sandan Prai)" make Thai people believe in inequality. It is natural to have "the gentry" and "the commoner" in Thai society. The commoner cannot compete with the gentry in terms of prestige or power. (Mallika Masudi, 2016)

As a result, those who belong to the ruling class, especially the nobility, must possess qualifications, which appeared in the royal decree during the reign of King Boromkos. There are four qualifications. First, they must be born in a noble family. Second, they must be mature, more than 31 years old. Third, they must be competent. Fourth, they must have wisdom. In addition, there are four other elements for the nobles. Firstly, Chantha Thibodi, meaning that they must serve the king by offering things that the king desires. Secondly, Viriya Thibodi, meaning that they must have diligence in performing official duties. Thirdly, Jitta Thibodi, meaning that they must have bravery in times of war. And lastly, Vimangsa Thibodi, meaning that they must be smart in making decisions about government work. However, these elements



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are flexible because either ordinary people or foreigners can join a noble service if they have done good deeds to serve the country, or what the king or the royal family wish. (Manop Thawornwatsakul, 2006, p. 276)

Wisdom or the knowledge in ancient times, those who would have the opportunity to learn it were only the descendants of the lords and nobles only. In the study of the lords and nobles, in addition to learning books, spells, Pali language, or warfare, those who would dedicate themselves to be servants of a monarch, or a high-ranking lord must study the customs and manners. This includes getting acquainted with senior officials and their fellow ministers, which will be beneficial to them in the service. The subjects obtained from the consecration is the knowledge about government regulations. Positioning themselves according to their duties, etc., means that the children of the nobles have more chance to become civil servants than those of the commoners or slaves. Because the commoners have to work hard for the king. They have to enlist labor for the royal to do civil work such as repairing temples, building palaces, digging canals, etc. The duration is 6 months per a year, known as "In one month and out one month". When they finish the government work, they can leave and go back to work on their own. If there was a war, the commoners had to join the war, thus making life difficult.

In order to modernize Thai society and make it acceptable to foreigners, King Rama V announced the Emancipation Act for Slave Abolition in 1905, allowing Thailand to reduce number of commoners and slaves. This Act proclaimed all slaves to be free on April 1, 1905. For other types of slaves than slaves in the pawn house, the king had to reduce the monthly fee by 4 baht from April 1905 onwards. Then, there was also a provision to prevent those who were free and decided to become slaves again. When the slaves changed the owners, it was forbidden to raise the price as well.¹ Since then, Thai people have been independent and become freemen. Without masters, they have to decide what kind of life they want for themselves. However, living without practicing proper ways of life according to Thai Decorum, these freemen were seen by the foreigners as savage who were uneducated, both physically and verbally.

In Thailand, patronage system has existed for a long time and has never disappeared from Thai society. Therefore, most people think that good persons are those who put friends and family above principles and rules. One of the characteristics of Thai is preferring enjoyment

¹ [Online] from: <https://th.wikipedia.org/wiki/การเลิกทาสและไพร่ในประเทศไทย>.



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and avoiding conflict. It is evident in one part of the Thai national anthem that “This Thai is peace-loving.” Thai people therefore create an atmosphere of friendship by smiling at each other until they become known in the eyes of foreigners. This turn out to be a culture of “Siam Smile” or “Land of smiles”. It is this patronage system that makes many people, even many Thai, misunderstand that the Youngers have to respect and obey the elders. There are many ways for the young to show respect for the elders. In Thai view, children or minors must obey rules and manners that must be done to adults or elders which, if not followed, will result in bad consequences for themselves and their family. At the same time, adults or elders should be compassionate to them also. (Temsiri Bunyasing & Thanarat Sirisawat, 2016) This tradition will only help the group or those who follow it survive. However, many elders abuse and distort it until it becomes a bad thing in the patronage system if a child or a minor break the rules and manners that must be done to the elders or elders. At the same time, adults or elders should have mercy in response to the fact that the children must obey the elders and do as the elders say, “Be a child who is docile”.

Results and Discussion

In Thai Decorum, we can see that this book was written in purpose of teaching principles of Thai people’s behaviors. It is divided into ten chapters as follows: chapter 1 about keeping order, chapter 2 about avoiding improper behaviors, chapter 3 about showing respect, chapter 4 about cultivating qualities of a beloved person, chapter 5 about making oneself dignified, chapter 6 about doing work well, chapter 7 about being kind, chapter 8 about being unselfish, chapter 9 about maintaining honesty, and chapter 10 about not doing bad things. From all the categories mentioned, good people must behave in a consistent manner, both physically, verbally and mentally. We can see that Thai Decorum consists of principles of behaviors and conducts according to Thai viewpoint. This could be interpreted that Thai Decorum is ideology to be achieve or that it is a state of being to a certain degree for Thai people. We cannot deny that when Thai people meet for the first time, they will begin to judge people whether that person is a good person or not. It is a matter of conduct in regard to greetings. We can see from the fact that many parents try to teach their children to be “good children” and are loved by the people they meet by teaching them to pay homage or greet them, for example. When we read Thai Decorum, we will find that the actions are not specified only to the poor or the rich, to the Ph.D. (philosopher) or those who complete basic education, to men or women. These principles could be applied to everyone who is Thai.



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However, in the matter of the elder and woman, it is said in verse 3 of chapter 3 that the noble one leaves a seat for the elder or woman because in Thai society, the elder and woman are small and weak.

Thai Decorum of the aristocracy is placed as a rule of conduct, which has become a matter of Thai etiquette, becoming a fear that if it does not comply with the specified rules, it will be judged that it is not done. For example, in chapter 3, verse 1, it states about physical body that “the noble sits with a polite manner before an elder”.² The way of sitting was not clearly defined. Just stated that to sit in a polite manner only. However, if we look at the matter of Thai etiquette that the Department of Cultural Promotion has said about sitting in front of adults, it indicates that the noble should squat (pappiap) in front of adults. They can squat to either side but should not use arm. The noble must sit up straight, keep feet together, and put hands on the front of legs. He should put both hands together, turn the left hand up and the right hand down. Fingers should be inserted between the finger spaces, like hand composition. If legs are folded to the right, then put the hands together on the front of the left leg. He must not stare into the eyes of adults but should look down on the ground. This sitting position is used by both men and women. For sitting in a chair in front of an adult, the noble must sit in moderation, not cross-legged, not stooping, sitting up straight with both hands intertwined on top of your legs. Men must sit, with knees slightly apart, heels close, toes slightly raised. Women must bag their skirts before sitting, with knees and toes close together. They may allow the toes to overlap slightly and hunch over to use both lower arms placed on the front of the legs and both hands together. (Department of Cultural Promotion, 2015, pp. 51-55)

Comparatively, we can see that the way of sitting specified in Thai Decorum is more flexible than what is stated in Thai etiquette. Thai etiquette has been laid down as a rule, thus giving a sense of rigidity that, if the behavior does not meet the criteria that have been laid, it will be judged as wrong. Today we will find that many women wear pants to work. They are more flexible and suitable for working. Therefore, if women would sit cross-legged or sit with knees slightly apart, heels close, toes slightly raised like men, it would not be considered wrong in any way. We would have to consider right and wrong from the situation, place and time. The word “good person” according to the concept of Thai people is probably not a perfect person in the ideal world. Nevertheless, being a good person in the Thai sense is

² Office of the Basic Education Commission, 2554, p. 3.



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having a desirable personality that Thai people think they should be. Some people think about themselves that they might be a “good person” to a certain degree, not one who is absolutely “good” or “bad”. The reason is that what is right in one situation will be right in another. Diversity of life experiences is thus a foundation of ethics by refining people to become morally perfect. After all, not every human being can be born perfect, but everyone relies heavily on learning and experience, especially about the actions in a specific situation. We, as human being, learn by trial and error.

Therefore, “good people” in the sense of common people, “villagers”, are therefore used in a broad sense and refer to those who possess desirable characteristics in one area or a combination of many. This is based on the belief that a good person must possess desirable characteristics because desirable characteristics can produce good results. They are not determined by knowing the rules or traditions very well, or by possessing wealth. Being a good person must at least produce good results in practice. This creates the value of foreseeing the results of the practice and benefit both oneself and others. It is not good just because one can blame others for being wrong. The noble does not embarrass others and knows how to respect people.³

The qualities of the noble are characterized as criteria to measure the value of a person or a person's actions. It is the principles to train one to be virtuous. The purpose is to know how to make decisions in various situations or how to behave as “people with good behavior,” rather than to make rules of conduct or fixed criteria as written in Thai etiquette. In Thai etiquette, the rules force people to do the same and make them admit that it was right in an unwilling manner. If they couldn't follow it, they would be judged as “wrong” or “not trained in etiquette” or “bad manners”. Some people may use harsh words as “scurrilous scum (Prai Sathoon)” or “cad trait (Sandam Prai),” which are against the goal of creating noble people. This is because when someone is judged that their actions or behavior are wrong by others, what follows is that most of the judged who experience this kind of situation will feel worthless. Especially in Thai society, the judges are teachers who qualify in etiquette or behavior lecture. If the act is the person's first offense and the conviction is a judgment before the community or in a public place that causes the offender to be insulted from people in society. He or she would feel valueless as a member of society because one's actions are inoperable or deviant from the rules of society. In Thai Decorum, the criteria that in this case

³ Thai Decorum, chapter 4 on good speech in verse 3 and on good will in verse 1.



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is found in chapter 7 that a good person is a kind person. There are two verses in the matter of speech: first, “He does not ridicule the wrongdoer” and second, “He does not use oppressive speech”, both of which are the result of the mentality that a good person takes care of others. The mind is gracious, and the person will not be harmful. He or she does not aggravate those who are defeated and does not be angry with the young. He or she will have the heart to help others who are weaker by reasoning and good will. He or she will teach the wrong so that they will learn and develop themselves in the future.

In fact, what appears in today's society is that adults often use the term “Be a child who is docile” as an intimidating power. They force a child or a minor to obey and the obeying is based on the principles of behavior as written in Thai Decorum, combined with Thai Etiquette that has been formalized to conduct people’s behavior in society. They are used as a tool to measure only ethical aspect of the young. When a child behaves inappropriately by the standard of this established Thai etiquette, a child will be judged on his or her worth or viewed by society as a “bad person”, as “bad manners” or as someone who is “untrained in manners”, or sometimes uses “uneducated”. There might be some harsh words, such as “scurrilous scum (Prai Sathoon)” or “cad trait (Sandan Prai)” as mentioned before. However, the elders forget that everyone, regardless of age, being a male or female or any gender, having primary, secondary, or bachelor's, master's, or doctoral education (doctoral degree), everyone has equal human status. Judging people only from behavior according to Thai etiquette might not be enough. People's values are also measured in other areas, such as competency, luck, beauty, culture, health and citizenship.

We must not forget that at present commoners and slaves in Thailand do not exist anymore. All people are equal in the status of citizens of Thai society. They are different only in their duties and roles at certain space and time. By following the roles and duties, that person could have the status of a child or an adult, an elder or a minor in a given situation. For example, at an academic seminar, a person may have both the status of an elder because of the age, but at the same time, he is a child in the way of qualifications because of knowledge and skill. In doing his duty, each person must rely on the principle of mercy and being considerate. This must be in the hearts of all people, whether children or adults, elders or youngers. This is Thai way of living which foreigners see as a society of kindness, generosity where people live together like relatives with warmth. Everyone is each other's uncles, aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers, and this indicates the identity of Thailand.



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Conclusion: Conclusion and Discussion

Therefore, Thai Decorum can be regarded as the principles of Thai conduct, and it is not a tool for class oppression to make others feel worthless of their human dignity. It is based on the grounds that everyone must treat each other with kindness and consideration. The practice of virtuous behavior is reflected in the form of bodily actions, heartfelt speech, and good will. If a person could adhere to Thai Decorum, he or she will be a person of desirable personality according to Thai perspective. This is because if we look at the meaning of Thai Decorum as “qualities of a good person,” it can be seen that these qualities mean personal traits which appear in body, speech, and mind. These are the elements that may lead to the success. It may be according to the needs of others, or it may make others happy.

Finally, everyone should remember that there is no more proletarians or slaves in Thailand for more than a century. All Thai people have the same status. One important thing is that identity of Thai people is unique, which is based on living together in the form of relatives. This can be regarded as the sacred relationship that foreigners used to have before, but nowadays some nations have longed for such a relationship because nowadays this relationship has faded or has been lost by some nations.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for application to the society

In everyday life, one's actions may be right or wrong, but this does not mean that one's wrong actions will make them all bad, or his or her dignity of a human being must be devalued. The way one knows that his or her actions are wrong and deserve to be revised must be learned not only from textbooks or enforcement of cultural patterns or rules. This is because knowledge is partly derived from his own life, not from enforcing how to do it right by some patterns of action or specific rules of etiquette. What is right in one situation may not be right in other situations. However, by saying this, it does not mean that letting each person do his or her own way is right because the act of self-indulgence is only right according to just the thought of that person. Each society should have principles in conducting oneself as the goal of making people to be good people for a good society where people live together in happiness. Being a good person in the view of Thai villagers does not depend on learning the rules of correct action. It is about training one's personality and behavior until they become accustomed to what is called “morality” so that each person can know how he should make



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decisions in various situations, especially life-long self-improvement. A person who has developed his or her morality in different situations is the one who knows how to make decisions in different situations, or how to behave in such a way that it is called “good” and to act correctly in various situations. This is called practical wisdom, and this kind of learning is live-long.

2. Suggestion for the further research

Study the properties of aristocrats from the point of view of those who have a materialist view that when a person who has a materialist view reads or behave according to Thai Decorum (Sombat Phudee). These people will have a purpose in life or use Thai Decorum (Sombat Phudee) to achieve his goals or the ideals of life that they have set.

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