

## Spiritual Impact of Thailand's Urbanization on Culture and Traditions: A Historical Approach

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### Abstract

Impacts of urbanization on spirituality may vary from changing lifestyles, opportunity inequities, rise in non-communicable disease resulting in changes of culture, traditions and health. The objectives of this study are as the followings, a) Review and demonstrate the impact of urbanization on spirituality through changing cultures and traditions in Thailand evolving modern society (after World War II) b) Study the people's perception of the impact from urbanization as well as health status in urbanizing area. The study consists of 3 phases, in the first phase, reviewing papers about the evolution of Thai cultures and traditions from 1950s to present in correlation with the country's national socioeconomic development plan and focus groups on impact of urbanization on culture and traditions are used. In the second phase, questionnaires evaluating the perception of the impact of urbanization on age-specific health are analyzed using chi-square. As a result, urbanization in correlation with The National Socioeconomic Plan shows evolution of influence on spirituality concerning cultures and traditions. Focus groups reveal dissatisfaction overshadow the benefits of urbanization while questionnaires demonstrate the impact of urbanization upon health perception with 189 out of 298 participants (63.42 %) yield conclusion of high perception of urbanization impact upon health and spirituality (57.98% - 68.89%) at 95% confident interval with statistical significance only in the early working life and elderly group. Urbanization have influence on culture, tradition and health in various ways, changing the population spirituality. Support from social system, Buddhism, families and communities should strengthen actions as a buffer preventing spiritual collapse from urbanization.

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## 1. Background

For the first time in history that more than half of the world population live in urban areas. In the year 2030, it is estimated by the World Health Organization (WHO) that sixty percent of the world population will be living in cities. Urbanization is therefore inevitable at the global level, in which the wave of urbanization in Thailand is of no exception. The impacts of urbanization may vary from changing lifestyles, opportunity inequities, environmental change, rise in non communicable disease as well as changing social values and people's spirituality, moreover, the context of spirituality that have been altered by urbanization are both directly and indirectly reflected through culture and tradition, revealing the way of life and thoughts of the people.

## 2. Objectives

The objectives of this study are as the followings

- 1) Review and demonstrate the impact of urbanization on spirituality through changing culture and traditions in Thailand evolving modern society (after World War II)
- 2) Study the people's perception of the impact from urbanization in Thailand.

## 3. Method

The study is organized into 2 phases. In the first phase, two tools including reviewing papers and focus groups are used. Review of papers about the evolution of Thai culture and traditions from 1950s to present (the interested timeframe is chosen in order to compare with collaborative research from South Korean side) are performed to dissect the change evolves in

culture and tradition in correlation with the country's national socioeconomic development plan (5- year plan). Three focus groups from 4 regions of Thailand consists of the community representatives from the Northern, North – Eastern, Central and Southern region of Thailand attending three different conferences are discussing the character of community culture and traditions before and after perceiving the arrival of urbanization.

In the second phase, questionnaires evaluating the perception of the impact of urbanization are enrolled in 298 participants. These impact mainly focus on health and social wellness. The participants are divided by questionnaires concerning different age groups ranging from mother and child health, adolescent health, early working life health, late working life health and elderly health, then analyse each group perception of urbanization on health and spirituality using chi-square .

## 4. Results

Determining the results of the reviewed articles, the researchers divided the timeline from 1950 to present into 4 periods in correlation with the National Socioeconomic Development Plan.

### 4.1 Traditional Thai Society (1950 – 1976)

In this quarter of a century period, trial and error of economical council establishment only proved failure and not until 20 October 1960 that the first National Socioeconomic Development plan was established. This period include the first three National Socioeconomic Development plan. These plans contributed to social welfare and reorganized infrastructure including railway transportation system,

irrigation system, water powered – electricity dam. Extending education to regional areas was seen including the establishment of Chiangmai University in the North and Khonkaen University in the Northeast (The 1<sup>st</sup> plan). Exports of agricultural goods served the majority of the country's economy. Family planning in order to control the population was introduced in the 3<sup>rd</sup> five year plan. The spiritual status of Thai Society in this era is considered self fulfilled, Buddhism – based and caring agricultural society, which resulted in character of culture and traditions as the followings.

1) Geography – based culture

The geography of Thailand supported the prerequisites for doing agricultural occupation, including fishery. Doing agricultural occupation was the people's pride and family members acted as self – labor and farmers were the landlords. Extended families were the norm. Being in depth is considered shameful. This Agrarian society is generally for intra community consumption, otherwise domestic trade in higher proportion than international trade. Traditions that were generally seen such as “unite harvesting” in which neighbors took turns in harvesting each other rice fields and “row boat racing” which showed the attachment of Thai people and the rivers.

2) Buddhism involvement in culture

Although Thailand claimed that there was no national religion, but the majority of the people were Buddhist. In the rural area Buddhist temples, called “wat” were the center of school education, community spiritual bonding and an institution which acted as social leaders, as well as in urban area, only that urban areas may had more social resources that represented

the function of Buddhist temples. Making merit was considered routine activities. Beneath the belief and faith in the preaching of Lord Buddha, there were also older belief on supernatural and superstitious power, mainly from Hindu beliefs. Some Monks were then branded as having extra sensorial perception powers apart from being teachers, herbal doctors and psychological counselors. Amulets and Buddha image were considered sacred in the same manner.

3) Cultural diffusion from the West.

Cultural diffusion from the West was primarily from films, musics and daily used product, which were concealed to urban area and only in high mid – level income and high level income families. Western ways of life gradually developed in these areas as seen physically in architectural design of buildings, dramas and soap operas and spiritually as seen in changing values and beliefs, women's education and more proportion of nuclear families.

**4.2 Transitional zone (1977 – 1996)**

The term “transitional zone” or “grey zone” was intended to represent the condition where there were less truly rural area in this period. The previously called rural area became more closely to “suburban” area character. This period included the period of The 4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> National Socioeconomic Development Plan. The hallmark in these plans is to distribute and expand economics development to regional areas, despite of global economics decline and the rise in oil – price governed by OPEC as seen in the establishment of the Eastern Seaboard Industrialized zone. The involvement of using high technology instrument and technique were prominent, giving rise to the question that Thailand were becoming Newly Industrialized

Countries (NICs) or Newly Agriculturized countries (NACs). Skilled laborers were promoted to serve the industries. Education, healthcare and social welfare are more managed and distributed with justice in a system requiring good governance. The changed patterns in culture and traditions are considered in the following domains.

1) Transferring laborers to urban areas

The effects of this phenomenon changed the picture of an “elderly’s village” where young adults left their home province to work in urban areas, which also resulted in farmers selling their rice fields since there was no available and affordable labor. The domino effect also got its impacts on the holding of local traditions and ceremonies, in which there were few local young adults to be the spearheads, followed by the trend that these ceremonies that are symbolic to the community were getting extinct. Only 3 forms of traditions that were still able to restore their position. Firstly, nationwide festivals such as Songkran (traditional Thai lunar calendar’s New Year day) which at the same time were the symbolic period of labor getting back to their families and hometown. Secondly, lavish and colorful festivals where there were activities with lots of drinking, dancing and gambling such as the “Rocket festival” in the North and Northeast of Thailand where villagers built huge rockets and fired them skywards to tell the angels that the rainy season should be started. Finally, main Buddhist religious ceremony seemed to be well positioned, as a result of people’s hard life, seeking for spiritual resources and attachments, being a national holiday and the long history of attachment between Buddhism and the commu-

nity, in which many Thais start their being Buddhist since birth and so on.

2) Western personality dominance

In this period, Thai society became more westernized including a) the way of life that became more and more westernized ranging from costume, adapted western food and eating habits and family recreation activities. b) alignment of thoughts such as the picture of “salary man” became more prominent”, in which skilled laborers were preferred by the workplace. Trend of specialization and sub specialization became prominent affecting various sectors including healthcare and manufacturing industries. Competitive society decreased the caring of Thai traditional society, resulted in accumulated stress in population. Festivals and traditions became out – of – reach as well as family forming became more difficult.

#### **4.3 Remodeling Human Resources (1997 – 2006)**

During the 8<sup>th</sup> National Socioeconomic Development Plan, Thailand faced the high impact economic crisis (Tomyum – Kung Crisis), whereas companies and people got bankruptcy. This crisis led to the conclusion of putting human resources as the center of development, both economic and social development. Thai culture and traditions got revised formally and informally by government, NGOs as well as academics to propose the idea and concepts of building sustainable Thai cultures and traditions in order to give immunity to Thailand’s fragile human resources sector. In the 9<sup>th</sup> five – year plan, experts were invited by the office of National Socioeconomic Development Board to synthesize His Majesty the King’s royal remarks on sufficiency Economy, then submitted to His

Majesty for royal consideration. Sufficiency means moderation in all modes of conduct appropriately, including sufficient protection from internal and external environments at the individual, family and community level. Thailand's Economic performance, reported by Asian Development Bank indicated the GDP growth of 5.2 % in 2002, the highest since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The picture of Thai culture at the period may be seen as the balanced trend between transitional society and adapted Thai traditional norm and value. For better understanding, it can be said that input or content was delivered from adapted traditional norm and value, while the process was delivered using the character of transitional society as seen in ecotourism, creative economy and holistic healthcare. The strategy for human resources development and immunizations seems to be on the right road. Unfortunately, the main obstacles of this strategy is the populist and capitalist policy of the running government.

#### **4.4 Thailand Lost Decade (2007 – present)**

The coup d'état in 2006 and its consequences of political movement, nation's unity questioned, and flood disaster have turned this period into Thailand's "Lost Decade". This results in the followings

1) Thai culture has once again turn to Buddhism physically and spiritually, i.e, Thai Buddhist, physically participates in ceremonies and events, make merits at a higher rate than before. Meanwhile, Thai Buddhist spiritually take the preaching from Lord Buddha original speech, Dharma and monk's preaching to find solution in their life and work.

2) National identity becomes an issue of interest at the national level in order to create unity among political groups.

3) Education system and Healthcare system are continuously reformed followed the increased demand. Education in Thailand at present is considered the most important factor to guarantee success. This lead to the reason why Thai parents are the first in line concerning investment in their children's education. Entering university is quite normal in Thailand, and a large proportion of these graduates continue for higher education. The Universal healthcare coverage having entered its second decade, gets more popularity than before in the age of careful monetary spending. In the beginning, the coverage is controversial about the balance of accessibility and quality, in which model development and improvement is still dynamic, but at least, the policy enhances concerns in health, especially the grassroots and the outreached. It can be claimed that the culture of prompt health seeking behavior at early illness is the product of this policy.

4) Korean Cultural Wave.

Korean cultural wave is welcomed by Thai population, mainly from teenagers as well as academics. The boredom from Western culture, including Japanese culture in modern Thai society may be the first instinct underlying this welcoming red carpet, in which Korean cultural wave, especially Korean pop – music, Korean dramas and movies are good alternatives. The resistant is minimal, comparing to resistant for western culture at the beginning. It may be that Thai population are getting used to cultural diffusion but there are still some uniqueness to explain this phenomenon. Firstly, Korean

culture is considered a good example for national branding and national identity, in which Thailand at this point is on the quest for repositioning national identity. Secondly, the perception of Korean culture is seen as learning and exchanging different culture, not cultural invasion. Finally, the way of life values and norms for moral and ethics for Thai and Korean are similar in many ways.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> phase, another tool used is the focus groups. The 3 focus groups from 4 regions discussed the character and issues of concerns perceived after urbanization. The results are categorized into 3 domains as follows.

Domain 1: Lifestyle changes have influence on culture.

The focus group points out concerns that changing lifestyles results in hurrying life pattern and less concern on maintaining traditions. The quality of life is primarily influenced by the level of income and spiritual need is less important than physiological need. “Wat” became symbolic and are used for some events such as making merit on important Buddhist days, cremation and are no more the center of community spiritual attachment. Modern lifestyle does not promote healthy conditions for maintaining cultures and traditions.

Domain 2: Drivers of traditions

Drivers of traditions are not the whole community, rather it is driven mainly by local state administration, especially at the

municipal level on the basis of campaign promotion, for festivals, tourism purpose with little concerns of spiritual fulfillment.

Domain 3: Blending of Western culture

Government policy in many occasions try to stigmatize that Western or any other culture are harmful for Thai culture in the opinion of the community. In fact, Western culture diffusion are welcomed by communities as long as the context of the culture is appropriate. For example, western culture such as coyote dancing, loud music in religious ceremony are not considered as preferred actions, even in Western countries themselves.

In Phase 2 of the study using questionnaires, 189 out of 298 participants (63.42 %) yield conclusion of high perception of urbanization impact upon health and spirituality (57.98% - 68.89%) at 95% confident interval, correlated to WHO prediction of urban development to 60% by the year 2030. When grouping the participants into different age groups ranging from mother and child health, adolescent health, early working life health, late working life and elderly health, then evaluate each group perception of urbanization on their group's health and spirituality, only two groups consists of early working life and elderly shows item questions with impact of urbanization on health and spirituality with statistic significance (Table 1, 2)

**Table 1** Early Working Life

Factors affecting health		Perception of urbanization impact on health			
		Low	High	Sum	p-value
1. You have sleeping difficulties due to stress.	no	12	5	17	0.127
	yes	21	22	43	
2. You have throbbing one side headache.	no	12	9	21	0.807
	yes	21	18	39	
3. You have slurred speech or hand tremor when angry or disappointed.	no	22	18	40	1.000
	yes	11	9	20	
4. You have stomach bloating.	no	16	12	28	0.755
	yes	17	15	32	
5. You have hypertension.	no	25	18	43	0.437
	yes	8	9	17	
6. You have back pain and muscle strain when sitting at work for a long time.	no	6	6	12	0.697
	yes	27	21	48	
7. You have adequate sleep	no	6	13	19	0.013
	yes	27	14	41	
8. You have your meal regularly.	no	6	8	14	0.297
	yes	27	19	46	
9. You have safe sex by using condom.	no	15	20	35	0.025
	yes	18	7	25	

Each question is rated the score from 1-5 and all questions score are accumulated , which high perception is given to the total score of > 27 (> 60% )

**Table 2** Elderly

Factors affecting health		Perception of urbanization impact on health			
		Low	High	Sum	p-value
1. You have adequate income.	no	18	23	41	0.665
	yes	9	9	18	
2. You have rights to demonstrate opinion at home.	no	12	18	30	0.366
	yes	15	14	29	
3. Your healthcare system have a department especially for elderly	no	18	19	37	0.564
	yes	9	13	22	

**Table 2** Elderly (cont.)

Factors affecting health		Perception of urbanization impact on health			
		Low	High	Sum	p-value
4. Your healthcare providers respect your folk knowledge.	no	22	22	44	0.263
	yes	5	10	15	
5. You have an elderly club.	no	14	14	28	0.535
	yes	13	18	31	
6. You are victim of domestic violence.	no	8	3	11	0.047
	yes	19	29	48	
7. You feel as a family burden.	no	8	10	18	0.893
	yes	19	22	41	
8. You have transportation difficulty to healthcare.	no	16	17	33	0.636
	yes	11	15	26	
9. You feel lonely and neglected.	no	10	16	26	0.318
	yes	17	16	33	
10. You have mental problems and concerns.	no	9	19	28	0.046
	yes	18	13	31	
11. You have been verbally abused.	no	9	19	28	0.046
	yes	18	13	31	

Each question is rated the score from 1-5 and all questions score are accumulated, which high perception is given to the total score of > 33 (> 60% )

## 5. Discussion

Thailand structural components of culture and tradition possesses strong roots and associations. The background of Thai culture, i.e. geographic component, Buddhism, social norms and values themselves also have rooted for centuries in Thai society. Urbanization in Thailand in the past few decades is prominent and is estimated to be already passing the estimation of WHO that predicts 60 percent of population living in urban area by the year 2030. The evolution of Thai culture and traditions strongly and directly reflects the spirituality of Thailand’s population surfing the wave of

urbanization. Reviewing the history and evolution of Thai culture and traditions in correlations with the National Socioeconomic Development, results in better understanding of the changed spirituality and trends concerning the future of Thai culture and traditions. This will aids in a strategic plan that allows culture and spirituality to guide urban development, in contrary to past scenario that urbanization remodel culture and spirituality, which only comply to urbanization. The focus groups reveal mainly negative points of urbanization, which in fact, from previous review from several source in Phase 1, the positive points are also presented e.g. healthcare services,

transportation system, etc. but masked by negative feelings towards urbanization. In Thailand, it is known that urbanization is driven from economic sector and population housing, without enough community participation or public hearing. Urbanization, therefore means that people have to adapt their lifestyles. Urbanization from industries also mean that erupting health problems are imminent. The phase II of this study intends to demonstrate that perception of impact of urbanization is real and maybe perceived differently by different age in society. Statistic insignificance in this study in other age group does not mean that there is no impact of urbanization but this insignificance is due to the fact that participants in each group individually is too small due to restricted budgets to manage recruitment of higher population amount. In the early working life group where there is shown statistical significance in some items, it is logic that in urban area sleep disturbance in a competitive and stressful environment will be common. The use of condom in Thai male has many limitations from underlying beliefs that using condoms will not satisfy sexual partners as well as his own self and mate-swinging culture and sexual affairs is rising among office workers, which they wrongly beliefs that have low risk than paying to have sex with prostitutes. In the rural area, where there is high performance of healthcare volunteers giving advice to uncomplicated sexual relationships populations show more usage of condom in men. In the elderly group with statistical significance, domestic violence and neglected care in elderly is a rising problem from several reports, whereas verbal and emotional abuse is the most prominent.

In rural areas, depression in the elderly is rising along with attempted suicide. The national statistic department defines the cause from 2006-present due to debt, low price of agricultural products and lack of social support from close relatives particularly sons and daughters.

## **6. Conclusion**

Urbanization have influence on culture and tradition in various ways, changing the population spirituality. Social support from social system, economics, Buddhism, families and communities on the other hand are not only the roots of culture and traditions, but act as a buffer to prevent spiritual collapse from urbanization.

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