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UNDERSTANDING THE FORMATION OF MORAL AND POLITICAL-ETHICAL VALUES AMONG HIGH SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN CHIANG MAI, THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

What are the moral values and characteristics of political-ethical judgment among Thai youth in Chiang Mai Province, Thailand, and how do they understand and reflect the moral framework and political identity within the context of Thai political-cultural norms? This study addresses these questions by applying moral foundation theory to the Thai political and cultural context to assess youths' moral and political judgments. The study analyzed responses across eight domains (Rights and Freedom, Equality, Justice, Honesty and Loyalty, Harmony, Empathy, Authority and Respect, and Peace) using data collected through an online questionnaire hosted on the Thai Moral Foundations Research Project website. The findings, based on 137 responses from participants aged 15–20 years, reveal that honesty and loyalty, together with justice, are the most strongly endorsed moral values, and form a fairness-oriented core. Authority, respect, and equality are also highly valued, whereas rights and freedom receive the lowest level of endorsement. These results suggest that Thai youth in Chiang Mai construct a pluralistic moral framework in which fairness, honesty, and legitimate authority coexist with emotional sensitivity and a selective endorsement of individual rights and freedoms. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Thai youths' political identities, highlighting the dynamic interplay between traditional cultural values and ongoing democratic transformation in shaping their moral and political reasoning. Overall, these patterns may be interpreted as reflecting a hybrid moral framework.

Keywords: Moral foundation; political ethics; Thai youth; moral politics

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Thai politics has been characterized by deep polarization among political groups, challenging the moral narrative associated with royal-nationalist ideology (Jarernpanit, 2019). The political conflict between 2013 and 2014, which culminated in the military coup on May 22, 2014, led by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) under General Prayut Chan-o-cha, represents a critical moment

in the evolution of moral-political legitimacy in Thailand. The NCPO justified its intervention by citing escalating unrest triggered by mass protests organized by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) from November 2013 to May 2014, led by Suthep Thaugsuban and members of the Democrat Party, while supporters of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship and segments of the Red Shirt movement opposed the protests. This confrontation quickly intensified to both an ideological and moralized political struggle in which the PDRC framed its opponents as immoral, illegitimate, and a threat to the monarchy, social stability, and the nation, contributing to violence, social division, and ultimately military intervention in 2014 (Jarernpanit, 2018; Siha, 2016).

Moralized politics reflect theoretical insights from Jonathan Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), which explains how people rely on intuitive moral foundations, such as care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity, to make political judgments (Haidt, 2012). In *The Righteous Mind*, Haidt argues that humans are evolutionarily predisposed to form cohesive moral communities and justify their own moral positions while viewing opposing groups as morally deficient. This framework helps explain how the PDRC constructed the moral narrative of "muan mahachon khon dee" (the great mass of good people). This discourse justified its political actions and delegitimized opponents, reinforcing a binary division between "good" and "bad" citizens.

While MFT offers a useful framework for examining the moral bases of political judgment, it should not be applied uncritically. Its main strength lies in its capacity to move beyond a narrow understanding of morality as only justice or harm and to show that political disagreement often reflects different moral priorities rather than merely differences in information or rationality. Previous studies have applied MFT to explain ideological differences between liberals and conservatives, attitudes toward cultural war issues, and variations in moral reasoning across political groups (Graham et al., 2009, 2011; Iyer et al., 2012; Koleva et al., 2012). In this sense, MFT is important because it provides a framework for analyzing why people may interpret the same political event, leader, law, or protest through different moral lenses.

However, the application of MFT has limitations. First, the original foundations were developed mainly within Western psychological and political contexts; therefore, their direct application to non-Western societies may overlook local moral meanings, religious traditions, and political-cultural norms. Second, some studies have raised concerns regarding the measurement invariance of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire across countries, suggesting that the same moral items may not always have the same meaning in different cultural settings (Iurino & Saucier, 2020). Third, MFT tends to classify moral concerns into broad psychological domains but does not fully explain how moral values are shaped by specific institutions, such as family, school, religion, state ideology, social media, and political conflict. Therefore, the present study did not treat MFT as a fixed universal template. Instead, it used MFT as an analytical starting point and combined it with Thai political culture to examine how moral judgments are constructed within the specific sociopolitical context of contemporary Thailand. Cross-cultural studies also show that moral foundations must be interpreted with caution as moral concepts and measurements may not operate in the same way across countries and cultures (Iurino & Saucier, 2020; Kemp, 1957). Therefore, applying MFT to Thailand requires attention to Thai moral meanings, Buddhist ethics, royal-nationalist ideology, hierarchical social relations, and the context of political polarization.

In the context of Thai political culture, formation of moral narratives has long been influenced by elite-dominant discourse and Buddhism, both of which shape political, moral, and social orders. Jarernpanit (2018) explained that the concept of the Thai moral community is formed by the combination of power, beliefs, and emotions, particularly through the monarchy's charismatic authority and religious morality. This moral community has long influenced how Thai people understand political legitimacy and moral and social order, which are also linked to the meaning of being a "good person." This concept is important because Thai politics have often been judged by moral categories rather than solely by legal, procedural, or institutional criteria. Political actors, citizens, and movements are frequently evaluated based on whether they are perceived as morally good, loyal, grateful, respectful, honest, or protective of the national order.

As a result, Thai political conflict is often framed not simply as a disagreement over political ideologies and policies, but as a moral struggle over competing political meanings and interpretation of justice, citizenship, and good governance (Jarernpanit, 2018, 2019). This moralized political imagination and legitimacy help explain why values such as loyalty and harmony remain powerful in Thai society. Thai elites have also promoted political narratives linking electoral politics, rural voters, and populist politicians to corruption and moral decline, shaping middle-class urban attitudes toward democracy since the 1950s (Jarernpanit, 2019). In this discourse, elected politicians are constructed as inherently corrupt and dangerous, while the moral guardianship of bureaucrats, military leaders, and unelected institutions is portrayed as necessary for national stability. This rhetoric intensified after the 2006 military coup, with politicians portrayed as morally bankrupt buyers of votes, and legitimized unelected mechanisms—such as appointed

senators and independent bodies—through narratives of morality and virtue in the context of Thai-style democracy (Prompanjai, 2019).

Following the 2014 coup, the NCPO promoted the 12 Core Values, which emphasize patriotism, obedience, gratitude, discipline, and loyalty to the monarchy as normative moral principles for Thai citizens (Chobphon, 2024). These values reflect the longstanding ideology of royal nationalism and continuity with the moral discourse embedded in state-building projects since the 1950s. Their purpose is to reinforce a uniform moral identity and cultivate political compliance during authoritarian rule. However, these moral frameworks faced significant resistance, particularly among Thai youth.

After the 2014 coup, students, academics, activists, and civil society actors mobilized to challenge the state's authoritarianism. Groups such as Thammasat Students for Democracy, the New Democracy Movement, and the Center for Student and Youth Activism organized symbolic demonstrations, including the Finding the Dove march, public readings of 1984, and "sandwich protests," to criticize military rule and demand democratic rights. High school movements, such as the Education for Liberation group, opposed the NCPO's moral indoctrination, particularly its 12 Core Values, and called for constitutional reform, the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, and reform of monarchy. They also participated in the no-uniform protest organized by Thai high school students in 2020 (Lertchoosakul, 2021).

These youth movements highlight a broader transformation of Thai society. Since the 2006 and 2014 coups, Thailand has experienced increasing tension between traditional cultural-moral frameworks rooted in hierarchy, royal nationalism, and authoritarianism and emerging values emphasizing rights, equality, human dignity, justice, and democratic political ethics, particularly among the youth and new middle-class groups. This tension reflects what Jürgen Habermas (1988) calls a "legitimation crisis" of the modern state: traditional sources of moral authority fail to meet the expectations of a society seeking new moral and political frameworks aligned with contemporary realities.

Similarly, Chiang Mai was one of the earliest provincial sites where students and citizens gathered since the red-shirt movements and the Free Youth protest at the Democracy Monument in Bangkok. On July 19, 2020, hundreds of students and citizens gathered at the Tha Pae Gate, echoing the three major demands of the Free Youth movement: the dissolution of parliament, constitutional reform, and an end to the harassment of citizens exercising freedom of expression (Student protests, 2020). This event indicates that Chiang Mai was not merely a peripheral location but also an active political space where youth translated national democratic demands into local civic action.

Chiang Mai's political significance is also reflected in the continuity of student and youth mobilization in the province. Reports from Chiang Mai in September 2020 indicate that large numbers of students and young people participated in pro-democracy activities organized by schools and universities, including Chiang Mai University, and local youth networks, such as the Wilar Party and Community of MorChor. These groups emerged as prominent student-led activist networks during the 2020 pro-democracy movement. They advocate political reform, human rights, and academic freedom (Will, 2020; Thai Enquirer, 2020).

These activities involved both formal political demands and symbolic practices such as the three-finger salute, democratic plaques, school uniforms, political freedom, and public speeches. Such symbolic repertoires are important because they reveal how youth political participation is closely connected to moral claims about justice, freedom, and the future of Thai democracy. In addition, Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (2020) listed Chiang Mai among the provinces with the highest number of protest activities outside Bangkok during the first three months after the Free Youth protest. These findings suggest that Chiang Mai provides a meaningful provincial context for studying how the youth interpret moral values and political ethics linked to their political and democratic ideals.

Therefore, this study focused on youth in Chiang Mai Province, which has been an active site of youth-led political expression, particularly during the 2020 movement. It provides a provincial perspective beyond Bangkok, allowing us to examine how youths interpret national political conflicts and democratic aspirations in a regional context. Consequently, the sample was not intended to represent all Thai youth statistically. Rather, it offers an analytically relevant case for understanding how moral values and political ethics are formed among youth in a politically active provincial educational center. In particular, the focus on youths aged 15–20 years in Chiang Mai allowed this study to capture a generation situated at the intersection of school socialization, university-based political engagement, digital activism, and local experiences of democratic mobilization. These young people grew up after the 2006 and 2014 coups, engaged in political debates on social media, and witnessed youth-led demands for constitutional reform, political accountability, freedom of expression, and institutional change. Their moral judgments are therefore likely to reflect not only abstract moral principles but also concrete perceptions and experiences of authority, hierarchy, justice, and civic responsibility.

Consequently, the eight moral domains of MFT are understood as a Thai-contextual adaptation rather than a direct replication of Haidt's original foundations. "Honesty and Loyalty" reflects the Thai moral expectation that a good person should be sincere, faithful, grateful, and reliable within social relationships and institutions. "Authority and Respect" reflects the continuing importance of hierarchy, seniority, institutional legitimacy, and socially recognized authority. "Harmony" and "Peacefulness" reflect the cultural and political value placed on avoiding open conflict, maintaining emotional order, compromise, and preserving unity within the community. "Compassion and Benevolence" reflects Buddhist and relational ethics in which moral action is associated with kindness, sympathy, and concern for others. Meanwhile, "Rights and Freedom," "Equality," and "Justice" represent democratic and liberal values that have become increasingly visible among younger generations, especially regarding facets such as public criticism, freedom of political expression, and human rights.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section introduces Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) as the primary theoretical framework for examining the moral values and political ethics of Thai youth. In addition, it reviews key ethical concepts to provide a foundation for understanding political ethics in the Thai context.

2.1 Moral Foundation Theory (MFT)

MFT was developed by social and cultural psychologists (led by Jonathan Haidt) to explain the intuitive bases of human moral judgment and behavior across cultures (Haidt, 2012; Graham et al., 2013). The theory proposes that human morality is built upon a set of innate but culturally shaped moral foundations—evolved psychological systems that guide how people evaluate what is "right" or "wrong." In its most widely used form, MFT identifies six core foundations that are expressed and emphasized differently across societies (Haidt, 2012).

MFT's main contribution is its treatment of morality as plural rather than singular. It challenges the assumption that moral judgment is based only on justice, rights, and avoidance of harm. Instead, it argues that people evaluate political issues through different moral lenses (Graham et al., 2009, 2011; Haidt, 2012). This is important for political analysis because political disagreement often involves different moral priorities, not simply different levels of knowledge or rationality.

In this regard, MFT helps explain why people across societies often hold different views on morality and political decision-making. Support for specific ideas, such as accepting discrimination or emphasizing respect for authority, varies according to the moral foundations that are most important to a particular individual or society. For instance, those who place a high value on Care and Fairness tend to support protecting the rights of disadvantaged groups and helping those who are harmed. In contrast, those who prioritize Loyalty, Authority, or Respect may take a firm stance on maintaining social order and are more likely to support protecting their own group. Different emphases on these moral and ethical foundations can therefore foster solidarity among those who share the similar values generating division between groups with different moral orientations.

However, even though humans may have different moral and ethical foundations rooted in their beliefs, religions, and cultures, MFT helps us understand that moral beliefs and judgments are shaped by multiple moral bases that influence how people live and make decisions in various contexts, at individual and societal levels. Studying these foundations can deepen our understanding of moral behavior and reveal moral differences across cultures and within different groups.

MFT (Haidt, 2012) classifies moral values into six foundations:

1. Care: Concerns caring for others and preventing suffering. It underlies moral judgments that view harming or causing pain to others, especially children, vulnerable people, or the weak, as wrong. It is closely related to compassion, kindness, and the protection of those in need.

2. Harm: Emphasizes avoiding harm and protecting the integrity and rights of others. It is reflected in opposition to violence, cruelty, exploitation, or practices that expose others to danger or injustice.

3. Fairness: Relates to justice, equality, and proportionality in social relationships. It supports moral concerns regarding fair treatment, equal opportunity, reciprocity, and the just distribution of benefits and burdens in society (Graham et al., 2011).

4. Loyalty: Reflects the importance of loyalty, solidarity, and commitment to one's group, community, or nation. It concerns standing within one's in-group, maintaining unity, and valuing those on one's side, whether defined by ethnicity, religion, ideology, or other forms of social identity.

5. Authority and Respect: Concerns respect for legitimate authority, social hierarchy, and rules that maintain order. It supports moral judgments that value obedience, duty, tradition, and deference to leaders, elders, and social institutions perceived as rightful authorities.

6. Sanctity/Purity: Relates to the ideas of purity, cleanliness, and avoidance of what is perceived as contaminating, degrading, or morally tainted. It can involve religious or spiritual notions of sacredness, as well as secular concerns about bodily and mental integrity, self-control, and avoidance of polluting practices.

In later developments of the theory, an additional foundation, liberty/oppression, was proposed to capture concerns about freedom from domination and resistance to illegitimate control. MFT helps explain why individuals and groups across cultures and the political spectrum can have very different views on what counts as moral or legitimate. Because people differ in how strongly they endorse and prioritize each foundation, they can reach opposing conclusions about the same political issue (Haidt, 2012; Graham et al., 2013).

For example, empirical research consistently finds that liberals and progressives tend to prioritize Care and Fairness and are more likely to support policies that protect vulnerable groups, reduce inequality, and expand rights. Conservatives tend to place greater weight on Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, and are more likely to support the preservation of social order, traditional norms, and group cohesion (Graham et al., 2009, 2011).

Previous studies have extensively applied MFT to political ideology and public opinion. Graham et al. (2009) found that liberals tend to rely more strongly on individualizing foundations, especially Care/Harm and Fairness/Cheating, whereas conservatives tend to draw on a broader set of individualizing and binding foundations, including Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, and Sanctity/Degradation. Graham et al. (2011) further developed the Moral Foundations Questionnaire to map moral domains across individuals and groups. Koleva et al. (2012) showed that moral foundations help explain attitudes toward culture-war issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, immigration, and religious freedom. Iyer et al. (2012) also demonstrated that libertarian morality differs from both liberal and conservative morality, particularly through the lower endorsement of binding foundations and a stronger concern for liberty.

These studies show that MFT has become an influential framework for analyzing how moral intuitions shape political and ideological attitudes. For instance, the Purity/Sanctity foundation is a powerful predictor of conservative opposition to sexuality-related issues and other behaviors perceived as morally contaminating (Koleva et al., 2012). MFT has also been applied to understand libertarian political morality, showing that libertarians tend to score lower on traditional binding foundations (Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity) but higher on Liberty-related concerns and individualism (Iyer et al., 2012).

Within this theoretical framework, individuals who emphasize Care and Fairness are more likely to support the protection of marginalized groups' rights, resist discrimination, and expand social protections. By contrast, those who place greater weight on Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity are more likely to favor maintaining social order, defending in-groups, and preserving traditional hierarchies and moral norms (Graham et al., 2009; Haidt, 2012).

However, MFT has important limitations. First, although the theory claims that moral foundations are broadly available across cultures, much of its early empirical development was based on Western samples and political categories. Consequently, the direct use of MFT in non-Western contexts may overlook local moral vocabularies, religious traditions, political histories, and culturally specific meanings of authority, loyalty, freedom, and justice. Second, cross-cultural measurement studies have questioned whether the Moral Foundations Questionnaire operates equivalently across countries. For example, Iurino and Saucier (2020) found difficulties establishing a stable measurement invariance of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire across 27 countries. This suggests that moral foundations may not be expressed or measured in the same manner across societies. Third, some critics argue that MFT is stronger as a descriptive framework than as an explanatory theory. It can identify which moral domains people endorse but does not fully explain how these values are produced through family, education, religion, media, political institutions, or social movements.

Therefore, this study used MFT critically and contextually. It did not assume that the original moral foundations can be directly transferred to the Thai context without modification. Rather, MFT is treated as an analytical starting point for examining the moral structure of political judgment. This theory is useful because it helps classify moral concerns into broader domains, but it must be adapted through Thai political ethics and the concept of the Thai moral community. Haidt's six-foundation framework was applied to this study because it provides a broad moral vocabulary that includes both individualizing concerns, such as care, fairness, and liberty, and binding concerns, such as loyalty, authority, and sanctity. This dual structure is particularly relevant in Thailand, where the youth's political reasoning appears to involve both democratic and traditional relational values.

For this reason, the present study adapted MFT to eight Thai political-moral domains: Rights and Freedom, Equality and Fairness, Justice, Honesty and Loyalty, Authority and Respect, Social Harmony and Reconciliation, Empathy (Compassion and Benevolence), and Peacefulness. These domains are not intended to replace MFT but to translate it into a Thai sociopolitical context. Rights and Freedom partly correspond to Liberty/Oppression. Equality, Fairness, and Justice are linked to Fairness/Cheating. Empathy is related to Compassion, Benevolence, and Care. Honesty and Loyalty are connected to Loyalty/Betrayal but are adapted to Thai relational ethics. Authority and Respect are linked to Authority/Subversion but are explained within Thai authority structure and culture, while Harmony, Reconciliation, and Peacefulness reflect Thai cultural concerns regarding social order, emotional restraint, non-confrontation, and collective stability. Thus, this study builds upon MFT while adapting it to Thai political-cultural contexts to examine how Thai youth articulate moral-political judgments and understand moral values amid ongoing social transformation and shifts in the traditional political-social order.

2.2 Understanding Thai political ethics

The public's perception and understanding of politics often frame politics as a realm of power and interests rooted in human nature and portray politicians as inherently entangled with benefits and power. This makes politics a profession that frequently invites debate over ethical standards regarding which political actions are considered right and wrong. Moreover, notions of justice in law and ethics are not identical. The law aims to preserve social order, and judges' actions are based on legal rules and intent. In contrast, political ethics concerns what constitutes right action in politics, namely the pursuit of justice and the upholding of values within human political life.

The term "ethics" refers to a state of good conduct; it is also called "morality," meaning prohibitions against actions that would cause harm to oneself or others. "Virtue" (*khunatham*) refers to prescriptions that benefit oneself and others. Ethics thus encompasses both morality and virtue and extends more deeply into religious principles and customary traditions (Thanasathit, 2013).

Ethics, therefore, is established through norms, rules, and standards that define what is considered good and right—even if these are not always written as formal regulations binding every member. If someone violates what society considers an ethical standard, they may face social sanctions. Thus, ethics is a quality of conduct that society expects from its members: correctness in behavior, inner freedom within the bounds of conscience, and recognition of the individual's duty to promote social prosperity. To act ethically, a person must know what is right and what is wrong—this relates to the concept of values, which refers to a tendency or orientation that guides how a person behaves based on what they have thoughtfully considered acceptable and worthy, both for themselves and for society, and which they consistently follow over time. Thus, values refer to ideas about what is good in conduct, developed through careful consideration of the consequences of that conduct. Mere attitudes or beliefs are not yet values unless they are accompanied by deliberate reflection on their consequences and consistently translated into practice (Kaewponngam, 2014).

In Western philosophy, debates about the nature of goodness in ethics have a long history. Teleological approaches focus on the consequences of actions, aiming at the highest human good (the Supreme Good) as the ultimate end, with rightness and law serving merely as a means to realize the highest good (Thai Tham Philosophy Group, n.d.). Teleological theorists have sought to identify the highest ideal and proper functions of humans. A significant strand of this tradition is utilitarianism, represented by thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham, John S. Mill, and Henry Sidgwick, who assess right and wrong by the consequences of actions for all affected, including the agent. Thus, to judge whether an action is right or wrong, we must primarily consider its outcomes.

In contrast, Immanuel Kant, a central figure in the tradition of moral purism or formal ethics, emphasizes strict adherence to virtue and reason. Kant explains that judgments of right, wrong, and goodness are derived solely from human will. For Kant, what distinguishes human beings from other animals is "reason," whereas sensory pleasure and satisfaction belong to the animal nature that remains in humans and ought to be eliminated (Dubbink & van Liedekerke, 2020). Human beings should instead be educated to live purely by reason, without being led by emotions.

Therefore, judging whether an action is right or wrong is not, for Kant, a matter of consequence (as in teleology) but of motive—the purity of the intention behind the action. Here, motive refers to the purpose of the act. Virtue is the highest good, rooted in goodwill. Goodwill is guided by reason, aligned with moral law, and inherently obligatory (Ezedike, 2020). Practical reason is self-legislating and universal to human nature, and moral law must likewise be universal. Reason knows itself clearly and must be obeyed unconditionally (Klemme, 2010). We must obey moral law for its own sake, without regard to external consequences. Moral law exists prior to experience, is not derived from it, and is independent of changing empirical conditions.

For Kant, moral law is therefore categorical and unconditional. It is not a means to some other end but a law in and of itself. It is not a method for achieving happiness; we follow moral principles for the sake of

morality. For example, one should do good for the sake of goodness and give alms for the sake of giving. The most important element is "goodwill," which is free and independent of anything else. One should act on duty for duty's sake, not for any other reason. The will should be guided by reason, not desire. A good will unites virtue and happiness in the hereafter. Kant argues that the consequences of an action cannot determine its moral worth; nothing in this world or beyond can be called good without qualification, except goodwill (Ezedike, 2020; Iwuagwu, 2019; Kanpanpong, 2011).

Thus, the inner law—practical reason or conscience—is the highest moral standard. It is binding, unconditional, and entirely rational. Goodwill is moral goodness itself; happiness is an increase that flows from virtue. Acting from duty forms the basic concept of Kantian ethics (deontology): duty for duty's sake, without regard to personal gain. A sense of duty becomes the key motive of morality (Dubbink & van Liedekerke, 2020). Rightness and responsibility are central, while goodness and ultimate ends are secondary. Any action motivated by self-interest deviates from moral motivation.

However, a common critique of Kantian ethics is its "dryness" and the exclusion of feelings and emotions from moral life. Acting from reason or duty alone does not necessarily guarantee moral action, and acting from feeling does not necessarily indicate immorality. Thus, between acting for collective benefit without regard to means and motives and acting from duty and rational intention, even when the results may not promote overall social welfare or justice, we must ask what human beings should choose as the basis for shared values and goodness or rightness in social and political life, which is one natural form of human association.

While Western ethics evaluate moral rightness by considering will, duty, and consequences, Eastern ethics, such as those in Thailand, emphasize values and ethics grounded in Buddhist principles, as reflected in earlier definitions and in Kaewponngam (2014). He notes that "ethics" (*chariyatham*) comes from the words "Chariya" (conduct; acts that should be practiced) and "dhamma" (virtue taught in religion; principles of practice; truth; justice; rightness; norms; law; all things). According to the Royal Institute Dictionary (Royal Institute, n.d.), ethics is defined as "dhamma that is to be practiced; morality; moral rules." According to this definition, ethics can be broadly divided into two levels: the level of householders (*lokiya-dhamma*) and the level of those who have renounced household life (*lokuttara-dhamma*), thus integrating religious morality directly into ethical principles.

Jarernpanit (2018) conceptualizes what she calls a Thai "moral community," referring to a social formation in which charismatic authority, religious belief (including Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, animism, supernatural forces, and occult practices), and emotionally charged political ideologies converge around the moral-charismatic authority of the king. This form of community resembles a quasi-sectarian (cult-like) structure, created through shared systems of beliefs, values, perceptions, and moral norms. The moral community functions as a mechanism that balances social forces, cultivates shared beliefs, emotions, and understanding, while also regulating personal impulses shaped through interaction with society. This helps explain why the moral community has become a defining characteristic of Thailand's political and social order and cultural identity. This has resulted in Buddhist moral principles becoming deeply intertwined with politics. In this configuration, correctness is judged through moral standards, and political legitimacy rests more on moral authority than on democratic consensus. Jarernpanit describes this condition as a form of "moral democracy," in which the legitimacy of electoral democracy is questioned and viewed as less credible than morality-based political authority. This moralized conception of politics justified the 2006 military coup, which aimed to eliminate the Thaksin regime and reform Thai politics by reviving moral-political ideals, restoring social order, and protecting the monarchy.

Another critical issue is whether religious moral principles can serve as goals for political action. The moral ends and paths of religion are often not realized in the actual operation of politics within the modern state. Wongyannava (2016) argues that politics and religion should be separated because morality, as a political goal, belongs to an ideal or utopian order, not intended as a direct political objective, but rather as a tool for critiquing politics. Ultimately, moral ideals cannot be fully realized in the reality of the state. Similarly, in his discussion of "freeing Buddhism from the state," Taweesak (2017) suggests that if the Siamese-Thai state is to develop into a modern democratic or liberal-democratic state, it must become religiously neutral, protecting genuine freedom and equality of religion. This requires separating religion from the state, treating religious organizations of all faiths as private, and preventing mutual interference. The state should not use religion as a political instrument, and religious institutions should not seek state power. Such separation would benefit both democratic development and freedom, equality, and diversity within Buddhism itself.

Accordingly, Sangkaew (2013) examined Max Weber's reflections on political ethics and argues that, although ethical concepts are rooted in historically linked ideas of goodness, modern society has increasingly rejected the blending of religious influence with the secular political sphere. Although ethics is a human creation that has been sought after since ancient Greek philosophy, the transition to modernity has pushed

religious morality out of the political domain. Consequently, expecting politicians to embody the qualities of religious prophets becomes unrealistic in a modern state.

The ethical situation of Thai youth became highly visible during the 2020 youth-led protests, which posed an extreme challenge to traditional social norms and ethics. Lertchoosakul (2021) showed that high-school students played an important role in the movement and were motivated by grievances against repressive, authoritarian education systems, conservative social norms, and unaccountable political institutions. The White Ribbon movement, no-uniform protests, three-finger salute, and student speeches reflected moral claims about dignity, justice, freedom, equality, and accountable authority. McCargo (2021) argues that the 2020 Gen Z protests represent a disruptive generational challenge to established political norms. These youth movements show that Thai youth were not merely expressing political dissatisfaction; they were also redefining political ethics by questioning whether obedience, loyalty, and respect for authority should remain unconditional.

However, Thai youth's political ethics should not be interpreted as a simple rejection of traditional values. Many young people continue to value honesty, loyalty, respect, harmony, and peace, but increasingly evaluate these values through the lens of justice, fairness, equality, and accountability. This means that respect for authority may remain important, but authority must be morally legitimate. Loyalty may remain meaningful but must not be used to silence criticism or protect injustice. Harmony may still be valued but not at the expense of rights, dignity, or political truth. Therefore, the ethical situation of youth in Thai politics is marked by tension between the inherited moral community and emerging democratic morality.

This tension is directly relevant to the present study. If Thai youth strongly endorse Honesty and Loyalty, Justice, Authority and Respect, and Equality, this pattern should not be read as simple conservatism or liberalism. Rather, it may reflect a hybrid moral structure in which traditional relational ethics coexist with democratic expectations of fairness and accountability. Understanding this hybridity requires combining MFT with Thai political ethics and youth political studies. MFT helps identify the structure of moral domains, while Thai political ethics explain why these domains carry particular meanings in Thai society.

Therefore, the question of which values and ethical standards should guide political judgment in Thailand remains controversial, particularly in its modern state, in which values and pluralistic beliefs are increasingly diverse. Applying principles of political ethics requires critical analysis and reflection so that the legitimacy of political power can be independently scrutinized and criticized, ultimately leading to a shared and more widely accepted ethical basis in society. Thai youth ethics reflect a pluralistic moral foundation in which fairness, justice, honesty, loyalty, authority, harmony, compassion, and rights are negotiated. This framework allows the study to explain not only what moral values Thai youth endorse but also why these values matter in their political and ethical reasoning in contemporary Thailand.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research design using an online questionnaire administered through the Thai Moral-Political Foundations Research Project website (https://thaimoralpolitics foundation.com/index.html), which included a test of moral dilemmas requiring respondents to make moral and ethical judgments.

An online questionnaire allowed respondents to participate anonymously and freely express their views. The online format also enabled standardized presentation of all questions, automatic recording of responses, and systematic screening of data prior to analysis. To ensure respondent eligibility, the questionnaire included screening questions to verify that respondents were within the target age range. Individuals outside the target age range could also complete the questionnaire; however, only respondents aged 15–20 years were included in the analysis. Responses were categorized and analyzed according to age group and gender. The online system recorded only the completed questionnaires for analysis; incomplete submissions were excluded from this study. Moreover, the questionnaire was designed with clear wording and a consistent five-point rating scale to reduce misunderstandings and improve response reliability.

Chiang Mai was selected as the study area because it has been an active site of youth-led political expression, particularly during the 2020 movement. The researcher contacted high schools to request their consent to introduce the research project to their students. For Chiang Mai University students, the researcher used online channels, including student Facebook pages and online university community, to persuade participants to complete the questionnaire. In accordance with human ethics regulations, the researcher explained the study and obtained informed consent before participants completed the questionnaires, both on-site and online. Online data collection provided anonymity protection and transparent data-cleaning procedures.

3.1 Population and sample/Key informants

This study targeted youth aged 15–20 years residing in Chiang Mai Province. This age group was selected because high school and university students have become visible actors in youth-led political movements, both during and after 2020. Therefore, this age group represents a politically meaningful generation whose moral reasoning reflects broader changes in Thai political culture.

The sample consisted of 137 participants within the target age group. The sample size exceeded the minimum requirement of 132 participants, as calculated using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 0.05 margin of error. The final sample included respondents from upper secondary schools and early university levels in Chiang Mai. As the study used an online platform and non-probability recruitment, the sample should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all Thai youth. Rather, it provides an exploratory case for understanding the moral foundations and political ethics of the youth in a politically active provincial educational context.

3.2 Data

Data were collected through researcher-operated website. Data were collected from the participants between August and October 2025. The website addresses privacy concerns by not collecting personally identifiable information and by not requiring preregistration, thereby allowing anonymous participation.

Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to stop answering at any time. To verify and improve data reliability, the researcher conducted data cleaning before analysis. Responses were checked for eligibility based on their age and connection to Chiang Mai; incomplete questionnaires were removed. The dataset was reviewed for duplicate entries, repeated response patterns, straight-line answering, extremely short completion times, and inconsistent demographic information. Responses with failed quality checks were excluded from the analytical dataset. These procedures were performed to ensure that the final dataset reflected valid and meaningful responses from the target group. Additionally, the data collection protected respondents' privacy and maintained data integrity.

The online Thai Political Moral Foundations Test adapted Haidt and Graham's (2007) MFT to the Thai sociopolitical and cultural context. The conceptual framework incorporated core moral domains identified in MFT alongside themes derived from the content analysis of Thai political ethics and culture, including rights and freedom, equality, fairness, justice, honesty, loyalty, social harmony and reconciliation, compassion and benevolence, and authority.

The test consisted of two sections:

1) Basic demographic information such as age, gender, place of birth or study, and educational level.

2) Moral and political-ethical judgment, consisting of 40 questions (e.g., "I place importance on respecting my own rights and freedoms as well as those of others (Rights and Freedoms"). Responses were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale to measure the perceived and moral importance or ethical appropriateness of each item across eight-domain moral domains.

3.3 Data analysis

All test administrations and data analyses were conducted through an online-based system. A dedicated web-based platform (https://thaimoralpoliticsfoundation.com/index.html) was developed to ensure secure access, data collection, and data confidentiality. The platform provided sufficient data storage capacity and integrated analytical functions that generated dashboards and analytical outputs, enabling efficient data processing, visualization, and dissemination to general users.

Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean scores for each of the eight moral-political domains. These scores were used to identify the moral values most strongly endorsed by the participants. Matrix analysis was then used to examine the relationships among the eight domains and to identify broader moral clusters. The results were interpreted through MFT, Thai political ethics, and culture, which applied the concept of the Thai moral community. Thus, the analytical approach went beyond reporting mean scores to examining how youths perceived and experienced their moral values and political ethics judgment in contemporary Thai society.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The total number of participants aged 15–20 years was 137, including 43 men, 87 women, and 7 participants who identified as LGBTQ+ (Table 1). Most of the respondents were upper-secondary students in high schools in Chiang Mai, with some early university students.

Table 1: Participant profile by gender (n = 137)

Gender category	Frequency	Percentage
Men	43	31.4%
Women	87	63.5%
LGBTQ+	7	5.1%
Total	**137**	**100.0%**

The radar chart (Figure 1) presents the mean scores across eight political-moral foundation domains for youth participants (n = 137). The statistical results revealed varying levels of endorsement across the eight moral values and political-ethical domains as follows:

1. Honesty and Loyalty received the highest mean score (M = 4.34), indicating that young people strongly value truthfulness, integrity, and commitment to their relationships and communities.
2. Justice followed closely (M = 4.31), demonstrating that fairness, accountability, and non-discrimination in legal practices, political, and social systems are highly prioritized.
3. Authority and Respect showed a relatively high score (M = 4.13), suggesting that youth still recognize the importance of respecting legitimate authority and maintaining social order, though not as strongly as honesty or justice.
4. Equality and Fairness also ranked high (M = 4.08), reflecting support for equal treatment, anti-discrimination, and fairness in societal structures.
5. Compassion and Benevolence scored moderately high (M = 3.90), indicating that kindness, empathy, and helping others remain important moral considerations and ethics.
6. Peacefulness received a mean score of 3.78, showing that youth value non-violence and conflict resolution, though it is not their strongest moral foundation.
7. Social Harmony and Reconciliation scored slightly lower (M = 3.77), suggesting that maintaining collective harmony, reducing conflict, and compromising for unity are not top priorities compared to justice or honesty.
8. Rights and Freedom had the lowest mean score among the eight domains (M = 3.44). Although still above the midpoint, this indicates that youth in this sample place comparatively less emphasis on individual rights, civil liberties, and personal autonomy than on other moral principles, such as honesty, justice, and authority.

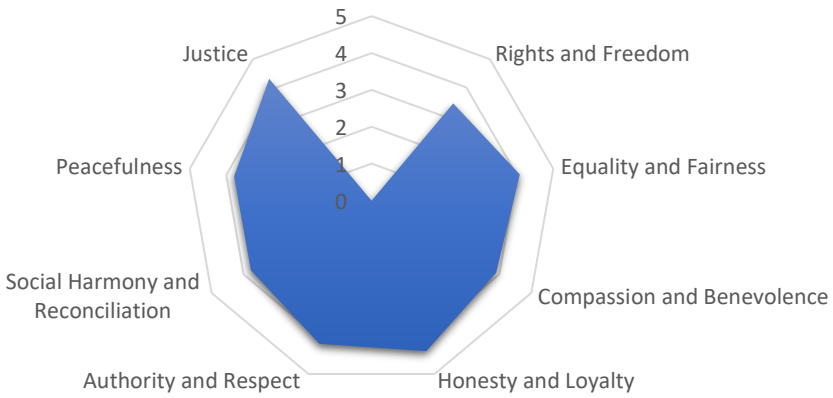


Figure 1: Mean scores across eight domains of political moral foundations, as assessed by the Thai Political Moral Foundations Test among Thai youth participating in the study

Overall, the statistical pattern shows that youth participants prioritized relationship-based and justice-oriented moral foundations (Honesty and Loyalty, Justice, Equality, Authority) over individual autonomy (Rights and Freedom) and collective harmony (Social Harmony, Peacefulness).

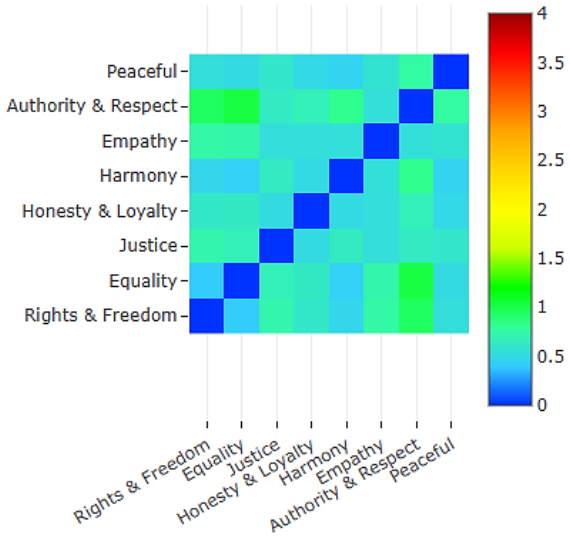


Figure 2: Matrix relations of eight political moral foundation domains, represented along both the horizontal and vertical axes

The matrix (Figure 2) illustrates a dynamic network of associations in which certain moral foundations cluster together while others stand apart. The color scale ranges from blue (low association) to red (high association), with numerical values from 0 to 4 indicating the relative strength of cross-decoding similarity between pairs of moral domains. Each moral foundation demonstrated strong within-domain consistency, confirming that the conceptual categories used in this study are coherent. These diagonal values affirm the reliability of the youth's moral judgments, indicating that each domain is processed as a distinct moral idea and value.

Beyond the diagonal, the cross-domain patterns offer significant insights. Rights and Freedom show low to moderate similarity with most other moral values, especially Authority, Respect, and Harmony. This suggests that youths tend to process liberal values centered on autonomy and individual rights, independent of traditional or collectivist values. Interestingly, Rights and Freedom showed the strongest association with Equality, suggesting that youths who value rights also value fairness and anti-discrimination.

Equality and Justice appear closely linked, forming a strong moral pairing. Their association implies that fairness in treatment and procedures operates as a mutually reinforcing moral principle. Justice also aligns with Honesty and Loyalty, indicating that Thai youth view integrity and fairness as jointly constituting moral correctness in political life.

Honesty and Loyalty substantially overlap with Authority and Respect. This reflects a more traditional component of youth moral cognition—the belief that loyalty and respect for authority remain important moral obligations. However, this relationship is not absolute. The matrix shows weaker connections between authority-related values and Rights and Freedom, suggesting that loyalty to the group or respect for hierarchical relationships does not override liberal democratic ideals.

Harmony and Peacefulness created a cluster, along with Empathy. These foundations exhibit moderate cross-domain similarity, indicating that youths understand emotional sensitivity, nonviolence, and reconciliation as related to moral virtues. Empathy appears to be an important bridge within this cluster linking emotional morality with social stability and conflict avoidance.

Taken together, the matrix reveals three major clusters in Thai youth moral cognition and ethical judgment: (1) a fairness cluster involving Justice, Equality, and Honesty and Loyalty; (2) a traditional-collectivist cluster involving Authority and Respect, Harmony, and Peacefulness; and (3) an emotional cluster involving Empathy, Peacefulness, and Harmony.

Overall, the cross-decoding analysis demonstrated that the youth's moral cognition and ethical judgment are both integrated and differentiated. They rely on interconnected networks that blend fairness, social order, emotional sensitivity, and respect for legitimate authority. They also distinguish individual rights from traditional values, suggesting that modern youth navigate a pluralistic moral landscape in which liberal principles coexist with cultural norms. Understanding these cognitive relationships provides crucial insights into how young people form political identities and make moral and ethical judgments in moments of moral-political dilemmas.

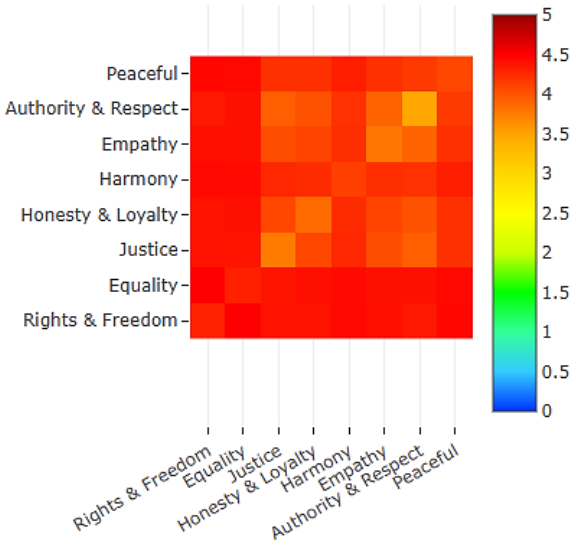


Figure 3: The figure illustrates similarity patterns across eight political moral foundation domains

The matrix (Figure 3) shows predominantly warm red-orange tones, suggesting substantial conceptual overlap among the moral domains during participants' evaluations. The matrix displays consistently high decoding values, ranging from approximately 3.5 to 5.0, as indicated by the predominantly red-to-orange colour spectrum. A key feature of the matrix is its consistently high diagonal values, which indicate that each moral foundation is most strongly predicted by its own conceptual domain. Among these, Honesty and Loyalty, Justice, and Authority and Respect display extreme diagonal intensities, suggesting that these domains exhibit more robust, differentiated conceptual patterns than others.

Generally, warm coloration reflects moderate to high levels of association across the moral domains. This supports the idea that moral reasoning relies on an integrated cognitive-affective system in which individuals rarely evaluate moral issues in isolation. For example, the strong warm clusters between Honesty and Loyalty and Justice, and between Authority and Respect, imply that these values tend to be engaged. Notably, Peacefulness, Harmony, and Empathy formed another high-similarity cluster, suggesting that youth participants may process these values through shared affective and social networks. These patterns reflect the collectivist orientation of many Thai youths, in which emotional regulation, social harmony, and interpersonal understanding are integrated into moral judgment.

At the same time, Rights and Freedom showed slightly lower but still moderate associations with several domains, particularly Justice and Equality. This separation may reflect the growing yet still-emerging cognitive distinctiveness of liberal-individualist values among Thai youth in Chiang Mai, who may be navigating between traditional collectivist moral norms and modern democratic civic ideals.

Overall, the matrix demonstrates that although Thai youths in Chiang Mai hold distinct moral concepts, their moral judgments appear to be interconnected, highlighting the multidimensional structure of moral-political reasoning. The intense color across domains suggests that their political-moral judgments are shaped by overlapping emotional, social, and cognitive processes rather than rigid ideological categories. This matrix underscores the complexity of moral identity formation among contemporary Thai youth, whose value systems are simultaneously influenced by cultural traditions, social expectations, and emerging democratic aspirations.

The youth participants in this study showed the highest endorsement of Honesty and Loyalty and Justice, which closely corresponded to the individualizing foundations of Fairness/Cheating and Care/Harm. This suggests that young people rely heavily on moral principles involving fairness, accountability, integrity, and equality when making political judgments.

This pattern aligns with previous study findings that young generations tend to prioritize justice-based and fairness-oriented concerns, particularly in contexts of perceived political injustice or corruption (Koleva et al., 2012). The Chiang Mai Thai youth case strongly values justice and honesty, which reflects the broader generational shift observed in many democratic and democratizing societies, in which young people increasingly demand transparent governance, equitable treatment, and moral accountability.

At the same time, the relatively high score for Authority and Respect indicates that Thai youth still retain respect for legitimate authority but interpret authority less rigidly than older generations do. This reflects a tension between cultural expectations of respect and emerging democratic ideals, emphasizing the critical evaluation of institutions, consistent with Thai sociopolitical changes.

Rights and Freedom ranked lowest among the eight domains. This suggests a comparatively weaker endorsement of the Liberty/Oppression-related concerns. This may be partly explained by socialization within hierarchical families, schools, and political structures, wherein deference to teachers, parents, and state institutions remains a normative expectation. This is also consistent with research showing that in collectivist societies, individual autonomy is often subordinated to relational or group-based moral concerns.

These findings must be understood within the framework of Thai political ethics. Thai moral norms have long been shaped by Buddhist moral teachings, hierarchical social structures, royal-nationalist ideologies, and political narratives of moral guardianship (Kaewponngam, 2014; Thanasathit, 2013). The strong youth endorsement of Honesty, Loyalty, Justice, and Authority mirrors these entrenched cultural expectations.

However, the moderate emphasis on Harmony, Peacefulness, and Empathy reveals that although Thai youth value social cohesion and emotional sensitivity, these affective foundations are not prioritized over Justice or Fairness. This contrasts with earlier generations in Thailand that emphasized harmony and non-confrontation as core moral obligations. The shift suggests a growing willingness among youth to tolerate conflict if it serves justice-related goals—reflecting patterns observed in recent youth-led movements for democracy and human rights (Lertchoosakul, 2021). The weak association of Rights and Freedom with collectivist foundations such as Authority and Harmony also supports the argument that younger Thai citizens increasingly question traditional authority structures and view political legitimacy through democratic rather than moral-hierarchical frames (Jarernpanit, 2019).

Notably, Rights and Freedom stands apart, with weaker associations across clusters. This supports research suggesting that liberal values in Asia are cognitively distinct and often secondary to relational values unless reinforced through political participation or civic education (Iyer et al., 2012). Youths may neither entirely reject traditional values nor fully adopt Western-style liberal individualism, according to the matrix results.

The relatively high values assigned to Authority and Respect should be interpreted with caution because the study sample may not represent the entire Thai youth population. Youth participants appeared to combine respect for legitimate authority with strong concerns for justice, honesty, accountability, and equality. This pattern may reflect a hybrid moral foundation in which democratic ideals coexist with cultural expectations of hierarchy, relational responsibility, and social harmony, which aligns with the conceptualization of the Thai moral community (Jarernpanit, 2018).

This hybrid profile helps explain why Thai youth engage in political actions that emphasize justice and transparency, while still respecting cultural norms and emotional bonds within communities. This suggests that their political identities were constructed at the intersection of tradition and democratic transformation. This finding may reflect what this study calls a characteristic of Thai neoconservatism, distinct from U.S. neoconservatism (Dusanic & Penev, 2009), yet rooted in selective respect for authority, moral accountability, and democratic aspirations (Dusanic & Penev, 2009; Metheechutikul, 2021).

However, rather than describing this pattern as evidence of Thai neoconservatism, this study treated it as a context-specific moral configuration among participants—one that reflects the negotiation between inherited collectivist values and emerging democratic aspirations. Further research with larger and more diverse samples across regions, educational levels, and political backgrounds is required before broader claims can be made about Thai youth's moral-political identity.

The finding that Thai youth continue to place a high value on Authority and Respect distinguishes them from youths in many Western contexts, where authority-based foundations have declined significantly. This suggests that a distinctly Thai hybrid moral identity balances democratic ideals with cultural expectations of hierarchy, aligning with the conceptualization of the Thai "moral community" (Jarernpanit, 2018). The study found that Thai youth construct a pluralistic moral framework in which fairness, honesty, and legitimate authority coexist with emotional sensitivity and selective support for rights and freedoms.

Therefore, the political and moral foundations of Thai youth in Chiang Mai are multidimensional, interconnected, and culturally embedded. Their strongest values are fairness-oriented and relational, while autonomy-based values are emerging but not dominant. Cognitive and neural analyses confirmed that intertwined networks of fairness, authority, empathy, and harmony shape moral reasoning. These insights offer an important foundation for understanding regional youth political identity and their responses to moral-political dilemmas in contemporary Thailand.

The strongest finding, namely, the high endorsement of Honesty and Loyalty, suggests that Thai youth continue to value relational moral integrity. In Thai society, honesty is not only an individual virtue; it is also connected to trustworthiness, social responsibility, and moral credibility in public life. Similarly, loyalty is not limited to political loyalty and loyalty to monarchical institutions. The combination of honesty and loyalty, therefore, reflects the continuing influence of relational ethics, in which moral judgment is shaped by one's

responsibility toward others and expectations of sincerity, reliability, and gratitude within social relationships. This helps explain why Honesty and Loyalty were the highest-scoring domains in this study.

This study does not suggest that Thai youth in Chiang Mai have abandoned traditional values nor have they fully adopted Western-style liberal individualism. Instead, their moral reasoning reflects a negotiated moral framework shaped by Thai cultural socialization and changing expectations of democratic legitimacy. This interpretation conveys that their moral foundation is culturally translated and politically reinterpreted. In this case, loyalty and authority are not merely conservative foundations, and fairness is not merely an abstract liberal principle. Loyalty may be tied to relational responsibility, authority may be contingent on moral legitimacy, and justice may become the key standard by which youth evaluate both traditions and democracy. Thus, these findings expand upon MFT by demonstrating how moral domains operate within a specific political-cultural context and within a generation experiencing political transformation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the political-moral foundations of Thai youths aged 15–20 years, most of whom were high school and early university students in Chiang Mai. The integrated results from descriptive statistics, cross-domain matrix analysis, and matrix decoding provide a rich and multidimensional understanding of how contemporary Thai youth construct moral values, make ethical judgments, and organize their political cognition.

5.1 Prioritization of relationship-based and justice-oriented morality

The study found that Thai youth strongly prioritized Honesty and Loyalty and Justice as their core moral values. These findings emphasize the importance of integrity, accountability, and fairness—moral principles that guide interpersonal conduct and political evaluation. Likewise, the scores for Authority and Respect and Equality and Fairness were relatively high, suggesting that youths simultaneously valued legitimate social order and equitable treatment. Together, these domains form a stable fairness-duty cluster that reflects both traditional Thai cultural expectations (loyalty, respect, social order) and democratic norms (justice, equality).

In contrast, Rights and Freedom had the lowest mean score among the eight domains. Although still above the midpoint, the gap in value suggests that individual autonomy and civil liberties are less strongly emphasized than collectivist and relational moral duties. This pattern may reflect the cultural socialization processes, educational environments, and political contexts in which youths navigate authority, family hierarchy, and state institutions. Similarly, Social Harmony and Reconciliation and Peacefulness scored moderately, indicating that conflict avoidance and social cohesion are important but not prioritized over justice-based moral reasoning.

5.2 Cognitive structure and moral clustering in youth ethical judgment

The cross-decoding matrix revealed how youths cognitively related to different moral domains. Strong diagonal values confirmed that each domain constituted a coherent and psychologically meaningful construct. Beyond this point, distinct clusters emerged.

5.2.1 Fairness cluster

Justice, Equality, and Honesty and Loyalty showed high cross-domain similarities, indicating that fairness, integrity, and moral correctness are viewed as interdependent principles. Participants appeared to associate truthfulness with justice, suggesting that ethical public conduct and fairness in political life are cognitively fused.

5.2.2 Traditional-collectivist cluster: Authority and Respect, Harmony, Peacefulness

These foundations reflect the shared cultural norms of hierarchy, conflict reduction, and social order. Their interconnectedness suggests that Thai youth in Chiang Mai continue to rely on collectivist social values, even when they adopt modern political ideals. They can be understood as moral projects that seek to redefine authority. The question is not whether youths reject authority, but the kind of authority they view as legitimate, such as honest, just, fair, and respectful of human dignity.

5.2.3 Emotional-empathy cluster

The cluster of Empathy, Harmony, and Peacefulness highlighted the role of affective sensitivity in moral judgments. Empathy serves as a bridge that links emotional concerns to collective well-being, reinforcing the idea that Thai moral reasoning integrates emotional intelligence with social stability.

Meanwhile, Rights and Freedom consistently showed weaker associations with collectivist and authority-based values. This indicates that autonomy-oriented moral reasoning is cognitively distinct, suggesting that liberal values are developing but are not yet deeply integrated into youth political cognition. Its strongest association with Equality indicates that youths who value rights also tend to support fairness, which is consistent with global patterns of youth democratic values.

5.3 Integrated moral processing

The decoding matrix showed a uniformly high level of neural similarity across domains, indicating that moral reasoning among Thai youth is integrated and networked rather than compartmentalized. Although cognitive distinctions exist at the conceptual level, neural patterns exhibit overlapping activation for fairness, authority, empathy, and harmony. This suggests that moral-political judgment engages a broad system of cognitive-affective networks.

Notably, Honesty and Loyalty, Justice, and Authority and Respect exhibited the strongest and most differentiated neural signatures. These are likely the most cognitively entrenched moral values among Thai youth in Chiang Mai. Harmony, Peacefulness, and Empathy constituted another neural cluster, underscoring the strong interconnection between emotional and social morality. Rights and Freedom showed slightly weaker neural coupling with the authority and harmony domains, reflecting the cognitive-neural distinctiveness of liberal moral concerns among youth navigating contemporary political tensions, cultural expectations, and shifting civic identities.

These results indicate that the participants place strong value on moral integrity, fairness, accountability, loyalty, and legitimate authority. Simultaneously, the positive endorsement of Compassion and Benevolence, Peacefulness, and Social Harmony indicates that emotional and collectivist values remain meaningful. Rights and Freedom received the lowest score but remained above the midpoint, suggesting that liberal autonomy was present but not yet the dominant moral foundation among the participants.

The results suggest that justice, honesty, and integrity form the core of youth moral judgment. Honesty and Loyalty reflect relational ethics and the importance of trustworthiness in Thai society. Justice reflects emerging democratic expectations of fairness and accountability. Together, these values create a bridge between traditional Thai collectivist morality and contemporary democratic ideals.

In conclusion, the findings highlight that Thai youth's moral reasoning is shaped by a hybrid moral foundation that blends traditional collectivist values, relational ethics, and emerging democratic ideals with fairness, honesty, and integrity as central anchors of moral judgment. Authority remains respected but is not uncritically tied to personal rights or freedoms.

The implications of this finding are important for understanding the political identity of regional youth in contemporary Thailand. Thai youth may continue to respect authority and value social harmony, but they increasingly judge authority and harmony through standards of justice and legitimate authority. They may value rights and freedoms, but these values are negotiated within relational and communal obligations. They may inherit traditional moral expectations but also reinterpret them in light of democratic aspirations. This moral hybridity helps explain the complex character of youth political participation in Thailand, where demands for justice, equality, and accountability coexist with continuing concerns for loyalty, respect, and social order.

Empathy and social peace are emotionally integrated but yield to justice when they come into conflict. Individual rights and liberties are valued but treated with caution, reflecting Thailand's cultural norms and political environment. The study's results, when interpreted through the lens of MFT, moral community, and Thai political ethics, provide important insights into how a new generation constructs moral judgments and navigates political dilemmas in a society undergoing rapid social and political transformation.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this study is its sample size and selected study area; thus, it does not claim to represent all Thai youth. Additionally, the online design required careful data screening to ensure response validity. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as descriptive evidence from this sample, rather than as national estimates for all Thai youth. Further, the analysis relied primarily on aggregated domain means. Future research should analyze item-level data, reliability coefficients, factor structures, and correlations among the domains. Future studies should also compare youths across different regions, educational backgrounds, age groups, and political experiences. Qualitative interviews could also deepen the understanding of why young people prioritize some moral values over others.

DECLARATION

1. Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

2. Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process
The author used ChatGPT (chat.openai.com) to proofread and improve the language of the manuscript. It did not author any part of the article. All content was written, reviewed, and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript. In addition, a professional language editing service proofread the manuscript.

3. Data availability statement
General data are available on the research study website (https://thaimoralpoliticsfoundation.com/). There are no preregistration details included with the link, and the data is anonymous.

4. Ethics statement
This work has been approved for the human ethics committee [COA. NO. CMUREC No. 68/100] on May 8, 2025. Informed consent was obtained from all human participants. Participation in this study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were used solely for academic research purposes.

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6. Contributor Role Taxonomy (CRediT)
Thannapat Jarernpanit: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration.

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