

Revival Movement of Lanna Culture

Mr. Yamaguchi Satoshi

COE Research Associates, UCRC Osaka City University Japan

Introduction

For a few decades, many sociological and anthropological studies have found that "traditional culture" is not succeeded for many generations without any change, but the modern product with more complicated process. "Tradition" was constructed at various moment in the history. And the cultural descriptions, including ethnographies, travelogues, were involved within the process to form the authenticity of the "traditional culture". And it has been discussed how the "traditional culture" is created, and how the authenticity of tradition was established. For example, in South-east Asia, the culture in Bali is one of the most tourist attraction, but the form of music and dance that today we see as traditional Balinese style was created in the 1930's, under the Dutch colonization, through the relationship between the local and the western tourists. (Yamashita 1996)

However, the discussion with such deconstruction of the "tradition" tends to go into the analysis of the discourses and the texts, easily away from the real situation of the practice of the people. "Tradition" is often one of the important elements in the practice by the local people to deal with various social changes.

And it is often considered that the "tradition" is created through the relationship between the region, or community and the outside of it in various historical contexts. But the community is not a simple unified unit where the people share a common value system, or are ruled by its norm as conventionally described. It consists of various individuals and groups that often conflict and negotiate each other. It is not a closed unit, always in the wider social, economic, and political relationships beyond it. And its boundary is not always stable, but consistently defined and redefined through the various social process. And we should take an aspect of individual into consideration.

And it would be also necessary to pay attention to the aspect of performance in the traditional culture, especially obvious in music and dance. They are based on individual expression and creativity, even though according to some idioms defined as traditional, or classical. They are emotional experience for both performers and audiences, as they are in complicated social relationships at the same time. Even if it is seen as traditional or classical, each performer has their own personal style or individuality. The traditional music or dance has not been all the same as long time ago, they have been changing, even though slowly and gradually, with the social background and the practical creativity of the performers.

---Culture of Northern Thailand---

The provinces of northern Thailand correspond to territory of kingdom of Lanna Thai that was established in 13th century and ruled this area. Though Burma overruled the region during 16th to 18th century, it lasted until around the end of 19th century with annexation by the central government in Bangkok. Then, in 1930's this region officially became the provinces of Kingdom of Thailand today. The distinctive culture of northern Thailand was shaped through this long history of the region. As architecture, crafts, language, rituals, music, and dance. Majority of the people in the region is Thai-Yuan (khon muang), living in lowland and valleys, characterized with their rice growing. Their language is called "kham muang", one of the dialects in Thailand today, but it is one of the Thai language family. It has its own letters different from that of the central, standard Thai language, though the letters have been succeeded mostly in the Buddhist monasteries. Though the economy was mainly subsistence with rice growing with small scale of the agricultural and forest production, the region has had strong relationship with northern Burma and Yunnan in south China with the caravan trading by Thai-Yai. Thai-Yai is the ethnic group mainly lives in Shan state of Burma and the boarder area in northern Thailand. And northern Thailand is the region that many ethnic groups reside. There are Thai-Yai, Luwa, Thai-khoen, and so on. And in the mountain area there are various ethnic groups called hill tribes, each ethnic group has their own language and culture. The trekking tour to the villages of hill tribes is one of the main attractions for the foreign tourists visiting northern Thailand.

General Map of Thailand (Tanabe 1984:89)

With the economic growth from 1980's to 1990's in Thailand, this region also has been modernized, especially in the cities. Chiangmai city has been urbanized rapidly, and the people's life has been changing. However, there seems to be growing attention to the local northern Thai culture today. More books on northern Thai (or Lanna Thai) culture are published than before. There are more young people to pick up and learn the traditional music instruments.

I met one of the leading musicians of younger generation playing the traditional northern Thai music. He said, he started to play the traditional music when he was 15 or 16 years old. At that time he was not familiar with the old music, there was no traditional musician around him as today. He just bought the tapes of the traditional music sold at the record shop in the city and listened to them. He got interested in , and he learned it with himself. What he was attracted was its unusualness. As he learn it with himself, he was finding out traditional musicians and has been keeping learning the music from them. Now he plays most of the traditional instruments, teaching it to many young people and building the traditional music instruments. And he is trying to create "Neo-Lanna music" that he calls, with elaborated arrangement of the old instruments. It includes ensemble work of Pia. Pia is the old instrument with one or few strings plucked by fingers, making the sweet tone of harmonics. Pia was played in religious rituals in the old age, and then popular among the young men in early 20th century in northern Thailand, but after that it nearly disappeared for many years. Though it used to be played alone mostly, he is making arrangement with a few Pia, and arrangement of Pia with other instruments.

Playing Pia

Pia with other instruments

Rural Development NGOs and Cultural Revival

Networking of the revival movement

In northern Thailand, the rural development movement by NGOs has long, active history. Since the 1970's, the younger generations of the rural development NGOs went into the villages for the rural development. There they have learnt the way of life in the villages in the effort for the better life of the people. Many of them found it necessary to develop the villages with their own way, rather than modernization or industrialization. There are many projects with diverse object and methodology, in northern Thailand has rich natural resource and the agriculture that could maintain the subsistence economy before the money economy prevailed. So they have been trying to find the way for the local people not to depend solely on the market economy. Such activities are often called "alternative development" that does not deny the market economy, but support the subsistence of the villagers with the available local resources, as the natural resources, agricultural method, skills of handicrafts, indigenous social relationship, and so on, retained in the communities for long time. And from 1980's, as many other parts of the world, the environmental issues arose in Thailand. In northern Thailand, the deforestation was crucial issue. In northern Thailand, the life of the rural villagers was still closely connected with the forest. Timbers and foods collected in the forest are important resource for the life. So it was necessary to find the way to sustainable usage of forest, rather than the simple conservationism. Then much attention was paid to the traditional method of sustainable utilization of the forest that many of the villages had for a long time. In the terms of community forestry, social forestry, or agro forestry, many efforts were carried out for the sustainable use of the forest for the local villagers.

Through those development projects, they encountered the rich old culture of the local people in everyday life, not only the culture related to the production, but also rituals, dance, music, and so on. And as they found that such local culture is easily disappearing with the modernization, they thought that it should be kept alive for the next generation.

In such a point of view, several NGOs cooperated to organize "Festival for the continuity of Lanna (Ngaan Suubsaan Lannaa)". The first festival was held at the Chiangmai city in 1997 with the support of TAT(Tourism Authority Thailand). Then it was held annually until 2001 with growing support from various sectors, the governmental and the municipal, universities, temples, NGOs and individuals. The festival featured every aspects of the traditional culture as music, dance, religion and rituals, handicrafts, agriculture, and so on. In the name of "Lanna", they did not see it as the kingdom of rice cultivating lowland Thai (khon muang), but it emphasizes Lanna as the region of diversity, including all the ethnic groups in this region.

Then they found it necessary to have more projects to succeed the old culture to the next generation. But they do not conserve the traditional culture as it has been, make the older culture alive for the coming new culture. In 2000, "School for the continuity of Lanna culture (Roongrien Suubsaan Phuum Panyaa Lannaa)" was established in Chiangmai city with the support of various organizations and individuals.

With the aim of succeeding the culture from older generation to next generation, it works as a kind of coordinating center, not only as a school for instruction. It deals with the all aspects of the culture, as way of life, agriculture, the language, the letters, handicrafts, rituals, local medicine, music, dance, and so on. It collects the information about them and makes the wide network of the people and various organizations, as people who have such knowledge or skills, who are interested in them. The network extends boundlessly, from the individuals, NGOs, the temples, the public schools and the universities, to the municipality and the governmental institutions. Through such networks, it exchange the information cooperates with the other organizations and individuals. And it organizes the classes teaching the dance, the music, the language, and so on at the school and supports the classes at various places in the region. It also organize the seminars, camps, and various events, in order to create opportunities to touch the culture for the people, especially for the young generation.

Office of the Roongrian Suubsaan Phuum Panyaa Laannaa

Weekly music class in Mae Rim, Chiang Mai Province

Conclusion

Revival movements of traditional culture would be often considered to reinforce or produce a kind of identity, such as ethnic identity, or national identity. But this movement in northern Thailand, briefly described so far, emphasizes the diversity of the region. It is not by an excluded ethnic group to reinforce a single ethnic identity. And it is based on the voluntary networks of co-operation and mutual help with various individuals and organizations, both governmental and non-governmental.

We should focus on the people's practice. After the sociological and anthropological study on northern Thailand about 15 years ago, I have been more involved in performance of music, both creating my own music and traditional Irish music. This experience often let me consider the relationship of the traditional culture and the personal _expression in social context from so practical standpoint. It would be necessary to see how the people create, or deal with the traditional culture, how they utilize it, or how they enjoy it, in their everyday life faced with real social, economic and political situation.

Notes

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