

Thai Values, Indications of Change and Potential Internet Impacts

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Abstract

The development of communications technologies has been central in the process of modernisation over the long-term, and has resulted in widespread but variable cultural hybridisation in third-world countries. So, the researcher has investigated the possible impacts of Internet usage on core Thai cultural values; a questionnaire survey and interviews of samples of Thai university students and staff were undertaken in 2004.

Analyses of information gathered in interviews and statistical analyse showed that most traditional beliefs, related to four major value dimensions, were only slightly affected by use of the Internet. However, some changes in beliefs related to basic values were found in the students, particularly values related to Buddhism, occult practices, and to social relations among individuals. The potential of Internet technology to increasingly impact on Thai culture is discussed.

KEY WORDS: Core Thai Values, Communication Technology, Value Dimensions, Changed Behaviour Indicators, Future Internet Impacts

บทคัดย่อ

พัฒนาการของเทคโนโลยีการสื่อสารมีบทบาทสำคัญอย่างยิ่งต่อกระบวนการสร้างความทันสมัยในระยะยาวและมีผลทำให้เกิดการผенผันระหว่างดั้งเดิมทางวัฒนธรรมในประเทศไทยที่สามอย่างกว้างขวาง ดังนั้นผู้จัดได้ศึกษาผลกระทบของการใช้อินเทอร์เน็ตที่มีต่อค่านิยมหลักของวัฒนธรรมไทยโดยการใช้แบบสอบถามและการสัมภาษณ์กลุ่มตัวอย่างที่เป็นนักศึกษาและเจ้าหน้าที่ในมหาวิทยาลัยไทย ขึ้นในปี 2547

การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากการสัมภาษณ์และจากทางสถิติแสดงให้เห็นว่า ความเชื่อทางด้านประเพณีและวัฒนธรรมของกลุ่มเป้าหมายที่มีต่อค่านิยมหลัก 4 ประการของไทยนั้น มีผลกระทบจากการใช้อินเทอร์เน็ตเพียงเล็กน้อย อย่างไรก็ตามมีการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางความเชื่อเกี่ยวกับค่านิยมข้างต้นเกิดขึ้น กับกลุ่มเป้าหมายที่เป็นนักศึกษา โดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งค่านิยมที่เกี่ยวกับพุทธศาสนา ไสยาสต์ รวมทั้ง ความสัมพันธ์ทางสังคมของบุคคล ศักยภาพที่สูงขึ้นของเทคโนโลยีอินเทอร์เน็ตที่ส่งผลกระทบต่อค่านิยมทางวัฒนธรรมไทย

1. Introduction

In order to investigate if perceptions of traditional Thai values (specifically in Buddhism, Supernaturalism, Hierarchy and Affiliation) had changed among Thai University students and staff as a result of Internet usage, questionnaire surveys and interviews were undertaken in 2004 (Bilmanoch, 2006a). The results of these surveys and associated literature reviews have been summarised and discussed in Bilmanoch (2006b, 2007a, b), but the prime objectives of this overview paper are: to synthesise the key findings about interactions of new communication technologies and core cultural values; to set the results of limited academic samples within a broader national context; and comment about on-going or potential change, relating to the Internet, in Thailand.

2. Origins of Values, Modernisation and Communication Technology

The extensive literature on these topics has been discussed in some detail by Bilmanoch (2007a), but key points are re-emphasised below. Every society has its own particular values (or value dimensions) derived from the broader culture which has, in turn, evolved over many generations through internal interactions and responses to external influences. Traditional Thai society is largely based on a mixture of Buddhist and supernatural beliefs, with a hierarchical social order and a network of personal affiliations. The social hierarchy is modelled on the 'Sakdina' concept (Keyes, 1987: 30), but permits a degree of social mobility for individuals; the extensive kinship and affiliative system is reported to stem from the need for extensive co-operation within village communities in order to successfully undertake agriculture—especially rice-growing (Hanks, 1972).

In Thailand the idea of modernisation has been valued for over a century. King Mongkut (Rama IV) (1851-1868) initially increased interaction with Western Imperial powers; King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) then continued implementing governmental reforms (Blofeld,

1972; O'Sullivan & Songphorn Tajaroensuk, 1997). The active official importation selectively of Western ideas, customs and products continued under successive rulers during the early 20th century. There was general agreement, among the elite and intellectuals, that Thailand should become civilised (siwilai) on the European model. Ideas and practices from Europe were transferred, localised and hybridised in the Thai cultural context (Thongchai Winichakul, 2000: 528-546).

The process of modernisation in Thailand has been shown to be very long-term and has been accompanied by substantial technological and social change; this is due to active official acceptance of Western ideas and very effective political manipulation of the communication technologies. Most developmental change has been focussed on Bangkok and a few regional centres, and the pace of change has been accelerating especially in the last 30 years. The rate of change in rural areas, where 75% of the population still live, has been more gradual, accentuating the attitudinal differences between affluent urban cultures and more traditional agricultural approaches (Spielmann, 1994: 47). The unprecedented decade of boom times (1987-1997) discussed by Pasuk Phongpaichit and Baker (1996, 1998) resulted in enormous socio-economic changes in selected areas outside Bangkok.

This process of modernisation in Thailand has been greatly facilitated by the telecommunications technologies, although these same media have been subject to political manipulation. The phase of modernisation now described as globalisation started in Thailand in the mid 1980s, but accelerated after the commercial introduction of the Internet in 1992.

3. Globalisation and Internet Impacts

The rapid growth in communications technology has been encouraged and, in part, resourced by government with the objective of creating a knowledge-based society (National Information Technology Committee Secretariat, 2003). The Internet is recognised as a key medium in the process of direct change, because of its interactive nature and diverse capabilities.

Interpretation of the key drives and exact mechanisms vary; but in the analysis of globalisation's cultural consequences, it is assumed that changes occur in local regions in response to global impacts. Although it is clear that diffusion of the pervasive Internet is

extensive at the global utilitarian level, with strong impacts on some sectors (e.g. commerce), it does not overwhelm local traditions and indeed may reinforce certain basic/core values. This recognition that the process of change shows differentiation or variation in national or regional situations is being increasingly acknowledged (Huntington, 1993; Robertson, 1994; Hall, 1996; Goonasekera, 2002; Chitty, 2004).

Early studies concluded that individual modernisation was facilitated by working in complex, rationalised and technocratic environments, as well as urban living and exposure to the mass media (Inkeles & Smith, 1974). Subsequent analyses, of globalisation's cultural consequences, incorporated theories of cultural imperialism and cultural homogenisation, with the assumption that a change in local regions would occur in response to global impacts (Appadurai, 1990; Robertson, 1994; Pieterse 1995; Fang & Sun, 1999; and Kraidy, 1999). More recently, a number of scholars have argued that globalisation proceeds as hybridisation (Gershenson, 2003).

It can be argued that globalisation's cultural process can be explained in terms of the dialectic relationship between the global and the local culture. It is suggested that global culture will be formed through an interaction among cultures, even though western countries dominate international values at present. Most non-western countries have strongly been encouraged to adopt the standards of these universal values. So the logical end result of globalisation is a common global culture across nation-states or regions. However, globalisation studies must also take into account the variations in local tradition in a more substantial way (Jang & Chon, 2003).

Thailand is a rapidly developing country which is modernising with high technology; but it is still a conservative country that is undergoing substantial social change and political turmoil in major urban areas. In turn these changes are impacting on the rural areas through family interaction and communication technologies (Mills, 1999: 127). The concept of cultural hybridity applies to Thailand, but the situation there is unusual for two reasons. First the monarchy still retains enormous influence and second there are no significant regional, alternative political or economic systems to be accommodated. Indeed, despite the current problems in the south, this overall unity in combination with the capacity to adapt and indigenise external ideas may well be the reason why core values are relatively stable and a long-established social system continues to function.

Aspects of the persistence and resilience of the four core dimensions investigated have been previously discussed (Bilmanoch, 2007a), but can be summarised as follows. Buddhism is a practical principle as a way of life and its inclusiveness is clearly demonstrated in its accommodation of consumerism and wealth acquisition. The continuing popularity of a practice such as merit-making could be due to its benefits for the individual, but also its flexibility; it can be an individual act, when convenient, or it can be a group activity and combined with a social event. Both established and reformist Buddhist groupings have adapted to changing conditions and are effectively utilising modern technologies to communicate and promote Buddhist values.

Aside from close association with Buddhism the various forms of supernaturalism have complementary social functions. While Buddhism has been viewed as a code for regulating behaviour supernaturalism, on the other hand, has been viewed as a way of calming or relieving everyday anxieties in an unpredictable environment. The use of the Internet to consult astrology and/or amulet web-sites arguably serves a similar function. Tanabe (2002) argues that an enduring aspect of 'Thai personhood' is an unstable equilibrium between the person and external supernatural power that generates anxieties and insecurities. Tanabe goes on to suggest that locality-based techniques for stabilising the mind/body relationship have given way to more individually-based techniques for dealing with new anxieties and insecurities in the contemporary urban, industrial and global environment. The changes in spirit mediumship, explained in Bilmanoch (2006a, 2007a), are an example of how supernaturalism practice is adapting to changed situations (Tanabe, 2002: 62-64).

In addition, the comprehensive commercialisation of services or products associated with Buddhism or supernaturalism (described in Bilmanoch, 2006a) has directly contributed to the persistence of these core values. The intense publicity has resulted in increased awareness and knowledge of these long-established beliefs-so reinforcing them.

The persistence of the hierarchy and affiliation core values does not involve the same type of commercial promotion or fashionable lifestyle influences. As explained in Bilmanoch (2006a), categories of the hierarchy (based on sakdina) are intact, but the main criteria for separating classes have changed from areas of land or number of workers controlled to financial assets. The strength of affiliative values could be due to several

factors, such as: the fact that 75% of the population still live in rural areas, where affiliations are still important in co-operative agricultural activities; the fact that most urban people still have family and contacts in rural areas and are aware of the need for co-operative affiliations in order to maximise the benefits from limited resources; the fact that in the new, unfamiliar and changing urban environments different types of affiliations are equally important as a means of enabling individuals to cope with new challenges.

4. Student Survey / Staff Interview Results and Implications

As no studies on change in basic Thai values, related to the Internet, had been done and for other reasons outlined in Bilmanoch (2006a) this study was considered appropriate-a decade after introduction of the Internet. The investigations attempted to examine within the university context (in three regions), if student and staff perceptions of Thai core values, regarding Buddhism, supernaturalism, hierarchy and affiliation had changed through commercial and social usage of the Internet. Conclusions and suggested implications are as follows.

The first general research hypothesis: that Internet use among Thai university students and staff from the three different regions (Bangkok, Chonburi and Ubon Ratchathani), has had a minimal effect on their perceptions of certain core Buddhist values, has been confirmed in both groups.

The strongly held Buddhist beliefs of the respondents acted to positively affect and regulate behaviour and operate as a form of social control. These beliefs and values serve as a guiding system for acceptable forms of conduct, as well as, in some cases, a mechanism for controlling anti-social behaviour. Respondents strongly adhered to and followed the teaching and rituals of the Buddhist faith. The strength of Buddhism is still evident in Thailand, although in metropolitan Bangkok, individuals go to the temple less often than rural people. Buddhist teachings are the foundation of the moral system in which value and belief systems, such as the Law of Karma, life after death, merit and sin, and indebtedness, are mingled. Buddhist ceremonies and festivals are still performed although there is now a greater tendency to perform them in a less structured way and attendance is less frequent. Going to the temple appears to be more of a social gathering or for merit-making rather than showing the individual to be a true Buddhist.

These findings are consistent with a strong general acceptance of 'religion', but a trend for it to be a package of lifestyle activities—so effectively promoted by the reform movements, using modern media. The total staff and student group comparison for this dimension showed similar responses to all questions except the one about 'Women and marriage preference'; the disparity here may reflect the emotional immaturity of many students in comparison with the older staff group.

The second general research hypothesis: that Internet use among Thai university students and staff from the three different regions (Bangkok, Chonburi and Ubon Ratchathani), has had a minimal effect on their perceptions of certain core supernatural beliefs, is also confirmed.

Belief in spirits remains very strong, and the necessity to appease and pay respect to the world of spirits is always present. It is believed that spirits could easily abuse their power if offended or confronted, so it is wise and politic to pay respect to avoid antagonism. It should be emphasised that the strongly and deeply felt fear of spirits is the basis for an effective social control mechanism. The need for supernatural support to cope with difficulties in their lives is still required by many Thais. Worship of sacred objects continues, though the pervasive fear involved has significantly diminished.

Homage and respect for supernatural forces pervades everyday life and, at the individual level, is demonstrated in a variety of spiritual practices; these include strict observance of Brahmanic rituals, making vows and consulting astrology. Respondents still rely on astrologers as they did in the past; no difference was observed in terms of education level. The total staff and student group comparison for this dimension showed similar responses for five questions; the differences in the other two questions appear to be associated with much higher levels of student uncertainty. These findings are consistent with the suggestion that the extensive commercialisation of Supernaturalism has had the effect of raising awareness and reinforcing supernatural beliefs. The modern communications media have been used to very effectively promote supernatural objects (such as amulets) and other services as fashionable modern products or lifestyle activities.

The third general research hypothesis: that Internet use among Thai university students and staff from the three different regions (Bangkok, Chonburi and Ubon Ratchathani), has had a minimal effect on their perceptions of core values of hierarchy, has been confirmed.

The hierarchically structured Thai society is one in which form and performance still play a major role and individuals are regularly faced situations related to inequality. At the same time, respondents placed a very positive value on avoiding overt public criticism of the anti-social aspects of the system such as inequality, patron-client associations or powerful people. They found such open conflicts to be psychologically disturbing and tried to avoid them. Such values and attitudes had the inevitable result of muting protest, criticism, and legal actions when faced with unfair treatment and or abuse of authority by people from higher classes groups or powerful men. There was also general acceptance of the privileges of rank and status and the obligation to show respect and deference to those in higher social classes, whether it was in terms of rank, seniority, wealth, or power. While individualism was important to the respondents, it was necessarily subdued and constrained by adherence to the demands of hierarchy.

The cultural practice of respecting seniority is still practised by a large majority of these samples, but there are indications that it is declining among urban youth. In this context, respondents were expected to defer to the wisdom, as well as authority, of elders. Even educated and modern individuals accept this situation without question, criticism or challenge to the elders who command respect in the society. The progress of modernisation and the influence of technology does not appear to have reduced inequality in Thai society. The total staff and student group comparison for this dimension showed similar responses for four questions. The difference in responses, about the importance of association with powerful men, may be due to greater experience—and pragmatism—among older staff; whereas the lower student response about attitudes to seniority may be related to an urban youth culture.

The fourth general research hypothesis: that Internet use among Thai university students and staff from the three different regions (Bangkok, Chonburi and Ubon Ratchathani), has had a minimal effect on their perceptions of core values of social relationships, is

supported but there are indications of underlying change in this dimension. Indicators include the marginally significant p-value relating commercial Internet use with social relationships as well as the statistical correlation between social relationships and 'any change' responses.

Core Thai cultural values of affiliation ties proved to be stronger than technological development because respondents are encouraged to act independently or privately. They concede that the traditional lifestyle has value in itself. Family values have always been an important aspect of Thai society, and the traditional value of family ties still plays a key role in maintaining social stability. Like several decades ago, people now spend more of their free time enjoying social activities with family and friends. The respondents put a high priority on personal relationships with family and friends. This creates an environment in which members of a family relate more to one another to discuss problems. Surface friendliness among their groups had to be maintained as one was dependent on others for assistance, on a reciprocal basis, in life-crisis situations. Most respondents are expected to participate in group activities that serve to bind the individual to their group. They agree to accept the demands of tradition and modernity, with the potential of new technology emphasising individualism conflicting with traditional Thai group solidarity and attachment. The total staff and student group comparison for this dimension showed similar responses for two questions. The difference in responses, to membership of internet groups, may reflect a higher level of family commitments and obligations among older staff; but the reduced student majority, related to changing or altered relationships, may reflect a general phase (in this young group) of broadening of social contacts and uncertainty.

5. Internet in Thailand: Potential for Change

The importance of the Internet for facilitating change has been recognised for some years; its distinctive features such as integrative capacity, communicative power and lack of regulation have been cited as examples of why its potential impacts are so significant. But Internet access and use in Thailand is a good example of the apparent anomalies, or unexpected results, from the introduction of new technology to a traditional culture.

Concurrent with changes previously discussed, such as an increasing middle class and urban affluence, the emergence of a youth culture and the formation of new (or reform) religious movements, has been widespread adoption of modern Western

commercial practice-in which the Internet plays a central role. This has resulted in new 'religious' organisations being structured and organised on corporate models and, as explained in Bilmanoch (2006a), a transformation in the production and supply of many services or products associated with Buddhism and Supernaturalism. The unexpected outcome is that modern technology and sophisticated commercial marketing techniques are being used to support 'industries' that promote and reinforce long-established core beliefs (e.g. astrology, amulets).

Two other general points are relevant at this stage. First, the impact and influence of the Internet will almost certainly dramatically increase as it becomes a more live video (virtual face-to-face) medium. This will improve the effectiveness of communication because it will permit the use of subtle indicators, such as gestures or facial expression or tone of voice, in interpretation of messages. Second, the general gap between the minority, but affluent, urban populations in Thailand and the majority rural communities has been discussed and demonstrated in various ways and has the potential to slow national development. But, in addition to existing differences, without active Government intervention or assistance in rural areas the so-called 'digital divide' could become enormous.

From the literature surveyed for this study, two ways in which the Internet might play a significant role in facilitating change in core Thai values have been identified. The first relates to the democratisation of Buddhism, the second relates to youth culture.

As explained in Bilmanoch (2006a, 2007a) one of the main aspects of the fragmentation of Buddhism and development of reformist movements (such as Santi Asoke and Thammakai) has been an increase in democratisation of the religion. This is shown in various ways but a common trend has been increasing importance of autonomy for the laity in reaching religious goals-often through meditation. Buddhadasa has proposed that lay people can achieve spiritual salvation in this life (a 'free mind'—*cittwang*) by adopting a meditative approach to everyday work (Jackson, 1988: 192-194).

This increase in lay religious autonomy will be greatly enhanced by the Internet because of its special features (Bilmanoch, 2007a) and as discussed by Taylor (2003: 10-11; 2004: 81). The combination of continuous ready access, vast reference information and non-hierarchical interactivity will inevitably lead to a reduction in direct contact with monks. This is already happening as five staff respondents in this study, said they could learn about

Buddhism from the media and didn't need monks; again Taylor (2003: 10) questioned the future role of monks. The Internet's rhizomatic qualities (discussed in Bilmanoch, 2007a) mean that connectivity and subsequent impact is cumulative and re-inforcing, but any significant control is impossible.

These same rhizomatic qualities are an important component of the continuing development of the Thai urban youth culture (Bilmanoch, 2006a). Again the features of the Internet enabling the spontaneous and autonomous access to knowledge, together with discussion forums (chat rooms) and special languages meet demands or expectations of young people for freedom from parental control. The decline in respect for seniority already documented could be expected to continue as individual, immediate values of youth are reinforced at the expense of older community values-now viewed as irrelevant by youth.

6. Conclusions

In summary, this study has confirmed the four general research hypotheses indicating that the perceptions of students and staff in the three regions, generally have not changed since the introduction of the Internet, in relation to Buddhism, supernaturalism, hierarchy and affiliations. More specific null hypotheses, tested with the student samples, relating two types of Internet usage with change in particular value dimensions were also verified; but correlation values directly related some variation in particular dimension questions to geographic locality. The combined comparison, discussed in Bilmanoch (2007b), indicates that the attitudes of the staff and student samples were similar although, not surprisingly, student responses show more uncertainty and dissent in all dimensions. Most respondents considered the Internet as an effective modern technology: a valuable source of information, entertainment and socialisation.

Although results of this study indicate that majority attitudes to the four dimensions investigated are unchanged, there are some implications that will be useful for future cultural change studies. First, attitudes to some smaller personal (individual) choice issues, within dimensions, have altered. For example, Buddhist practices such as praying and offering food to monks are valued by both groups of respondents at less than 65%. This means, the frequency of praying and offering food to monks, are reduced by Buddhists. Second, responses to related questions appear inconsistent and it is impossible to give a detailed explanation or interpretation of results. For example, on the issues of the importance of

ordination and marrying with ordained men, attitudes by both groups of respondents are already changing, but reasons vary between samples. Third, there are some marked changes indicated, where the pattern has altered but the number of people still practising is high. For example, the response to belief in spirits indicates a high level of uncertainty or confusion. On this subject some individual attitudes may not be very rational and the total percentages may be masking the real situation; because people often resort to traditional ways of dealing with forces or power that they do not understand. This study suggests that further research should concentrate in a more comprehensive way on specific values that appear to be changing.

Although this study suggests that perceptions of the four dimensions remain stable, this finding must be considered within the context of the limitations of the sample. First, it was drawn from the affluent middle class, which is a small percentage of the population. Second, the sample was purposely drawn to include people with similar characteristics (students and staff within public universities), and change was ascertained by asking each group to compare the present with the past. Future research on this topic of changes, within the Tertiary Education sector, should use a variety of more representative samples. For example, it would be interesting to examine changes in these values among the students and staff from private universities who study or work in international programmes.

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