Kopi coffee shops: Political interaction spaces for Trang locals

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ABSTRACT

This article explored the social interactions relating to political communication among urban residents of Trang province using Kopi coffee shops. The data of this qualitative research were collected through non-participant observations and through in-depth interviews with nine customers covering three different age periods, and three employees and Kopi coffee shop owners. The target group was selected using purposive sampling criteria. The survey was conducted to select Kopi coffee shops that were outstanding in being a place where people had social interactions, in the commercial area of the city. Staff from the Cultural Authority of Trang Province and Officials of the Provincial Administration were interviewed to select three Kopi coffee shops with different ages.

The results of the study revealed that Kopi coffee shops are important communication places for people in the community. They support social activities to help people in the community by being a place for competing economic, political, and changing social powers, for political communication through social symbols, and the center for transferring news and information. In addition, Kopi coffee shops provide a venue for local people involved in politics to build relationships even though political gatherings in public have not been allowed by the National Council for Peace and Order since 2014 up to the present. Nevertheless, Kopi coffee shops are still involved in self-building in terms of thought and negotiations with other powers in society. The article acknowledges the understanding of social relationships and the community of the local culture. Furthermore, further research is recommended into stimulating the topic of social activity and the participation of the community.

Introduction

Human beings are social animals that live together and communicate using language, body movements, and symbols. Social interactions among humans can be classified into many aspects for instance; economic and political aspects. From the political aspect, language enables humans to do many activities together as it is said "Politics is questioning about something which exists and makes it a problem or causes it to become a problem leading to an argument (Charoensin-olan, 2008)". Thus, politics is all around us. In Thai society, in addition to public or government places related to administration, Kopi coffee shops known among Southerners as "Ran Kopi" are another place where people in the community meet to exchange opinions, discuss, communicate, or have interactions concerning politics.

"Ran Kopi" refers to any coffee shop with a local and traditional atmosphere where tea and coffee are sold. It is a place where people exchange opinions, information, and have social interactions. Particularly, in Trang, Kopi coffee shops originated in the time when Trang was an important

trading town on the world's sea routes as a major seaport in this region (Ministry of Culture, 2011). Furthermore, in the 1950s during the anti-US military uprising in Southern Thailand, the Government of Thailand was under the control of Field Marshal Pibulsongkram, At that time, there were many areas in Southern Thailand that were considered to be run by communists, so that all social activities were shut down in order to prevent and decrease the prospect of a communist uprising. However, a Kopi coffee shop was declared to be an exception even though technically it is a public space (Phongphaibun, 2001). From the past to the present, Kopi coffee shops have existed and the number has expanded (Dam, assumed name, personal interview December 6, 2014). Even though physically the rows of old wooden houses have been replaced by concrete ones, mentally, the important features and atmosphere of interaction among people are still there. In the city of Trang itself, many Kopi coffee shops are still open because people in the community still give importance to this type of meeting place resulting in its popularity.

The survey in Trang province found that the road heading into the city center has many small and large Kopi coffee shops, open to service people traveling in all directions. Kopi coffee shops are used by patrons of all ages and gender sitting at tables sipping tea or coffee and talking. The topics of their conversations or interactions are mostly related to politics from local to national politics. They use the Kopi coffee shops to have interactions directly and indirectly. Therefore, this article aimed to depict the interactions on politics in Kopi coffee shops among people in the community as these shops provided public space for interaction among people in the community to discuss and dispute matters related to their way of life and political interaction.

Objective

To investigate political interactions in Kopi coffee shops in the Mueang district of Trang province.

Research Question

What are the political interactions in Kopi coffee shops in Mueang district of Trang province?

Research Method

The study on Kopi coffee shops: Spaces for political interactions among people of Trang province in the local administrative area of Trang city municipality, Mueang district, Trang province used qualitative research which was designed as follows:

Study Area Selection

The study area was in Trang city municipality, Mueang district, Trang province where social interactions are outstanding and diverse as people are interested in and give importance to politics at the local and national levels. A primary survey was conducted using a questionnaire asking local people about Kopi coffee shops that they thought were popular in the Trang city municipal area. The target group was selected using purposive sampling criteria. The survey was conducted to select Kopi coffee shops where people had social interactions and where the shops were in the commercial area of the city in an important street where people were passing through to other districts or to important places in Trang province. Three Kopi coffee shops of different ages were selected to obtain different perspectives: one shop had been established for more than 30 years, one for 10—20 years and one for less than 10 years.

Additionally, the criteria of the survey, also considered notable social interaction in the area by interviewing staff from the Cultural Authority of Trang province and Officials of the Provincial Administration, Department of Arts and Culture. Finally, the survey was undertaken in all three shops known in this study as A Kopi coffee shop, B Kopi coffee shop, and C Kopi coffee shop.

Informants

Informants in the Kopi coffee shops were divided into two groups. The first group was patrons coming to have food in the shops, Their political interaction was studied as the stage for discussion in the community and to determine importance of Kopi coffee shops in social activity. Patrons were further subdivided into three age groups: elderly people over 60 (3 people), workers aged 20—60 years (3 people), and school-age children 15—20 years (3 people). In addition, employees and owners of the shops were interviewed (3 people).

Data Collection

Data were collected through non-participant observations of each patron's behavior in the Kopi coffee shops and through in-depth interviews with the employees and Kopi coffee shop owners to obtain their viewpoints of political interaction in the Kopi coffee shops before and during the period when political activity was restricted.

Data were collected using different instruments as follows.

1. Data were collected from related documents and study reports as well as related theories from the National Library of Thailand, Khunying Long Athakravisunthorn Learning Resources Center, and the Internet. The secondary data collected from these sources were used to determine the scope of the study.
2. Guidelines for interviews were drawn up from analysis, synthesis, and review of related literature.
3. Field data were collected through interviews with two groups of informants to cover the objective of the research.

Research Instruments

The questions for interviews were written and divided into two sets as follows.

Set 1 The contents of the questions for the two groups of informants covered their viewpoints on political

Figure 1 Context of Kopi coffee shop

activities in the Kopi coffee shops before the restrictions on political activities were imposed.

Set 2 The contents of the questions for the two groups of informants covered their viewpoints on types of activities and political symbols at the national and local levels in the Kopi coffee shops during the time when restrictions on political activities were imposed. The interview questions passed quality inspection checking by Thesis advisors, to obtain data consistent with the objectives of the research study.

Data Analysis

1. Data collected from documents: To scope the data and in accordance with subjective classification, the data from the interviews and non-participant observations were categorized according to study issues, arranged according to their relationships, and classified according to the objective that had been set.
2. The data were processed, analyzed, and classified according to the objective of investigation of social interactions, particularly political interactions in the Kopi coffee shops in the two periods: 1) before restrictions on political activities were imposed when there was a change in government in 2014, and 2) period during which the restrictions on political activities were imposed in 2014. Then, all the data were interpreted and conclusions drawn using descriptive analysis.

Study Results

Context of Kopi Coffee Shop

It can be said that Kopi coffee shops can be found in every soi or lane in the Mueang district of Trang province. The three Kopi coffee shops in Mueang district selected for the study were located in a commercial area along a street conveniently accessed, similarly decorated, housed in contemporary cement buildings, with metal chairs easily moved and put away because most Kopi coffee shops put this kind of chair along the footpath in front of the shop. Two types of interior decoration were found inside these Kopi coffee shops: a retro Chinese coffee shop style, and a contemporary style with three main areas: a product-display area for patrons to choose the products, a food and drink making area, and a waiting area where patrons can consume their food and drink or wait for their food if is to take away. These three areas are clearly separated but patrons can see the food production process or food preparation (Figure 1).

Most patrons interacted in the Kopi coffee shops in the area where they eat their food and where tables are set. Some shops also placed coffee cups, small bowls for dumpling sauces, spoons, forks, other table utensils, and different kinds of drink together. Kopi coffee shops B and C had their shop signs for patrons to remember the name of the shops but Kopi coffee shop A did not. Nevertheless, most patrons assigned a name or symbols that were understood and used for communication in their own group. For example, a shop may be called the Red Chairs Kopi Shop by students because all the chairs in this shop were red while it might be called Ko A Kopi Shop by people in the neighborhood because "Ko" means brother, and the owner of the shop's name is A, and thus Ko A or Brother A is used to represent the name of the shop, and for people in the group to remember it.

Kopi coffee shops in Mueang district can be divided into two groups according to their opening hours: morning and afternoon. There are only slight differences between these two groups; for example, Kopi coffee shops that are open in the afternoon do not sell Trang roasted pork like most of those open in the morning. Such a difference is one of the factors that Trang locals use to decide which Kopi coffee shop to go to.

Kopi Coffee Shops and Trang Society

Kopi coffee shops in Mueang district of Trang province not only sell local food and drink but also are places where different groups of people meet. This could be seen through the patrons who mostly came in with another person or in groups with relatives and family or friends.

"…*I come for social reasons mostly with friends or relatives*…"

(Muong, assumed name, personal interview, December 4, 2014).

This quotation shows the point of view that Kopi coffee shops are important with regard to social activities for the people in the community as an area of public space available for people of all ages and for social interaction between people in their group (Figure 2).

Additionally, it was found that people in the community gave importance to socializing in Kopi coffee shops and had different criteria for choosing their Kopi coffee shops. For example, when they have relatives or friends from another province visiting, Trang locals will take their visitors to a Kopi coffee shop, and if they want to have a Trang delicacy like roasted pork, they will go to a shop that sells it (Muong, assumed name, personal interview, December 4, 2014). Tourists who come with a tour company or by themselves can choose a Kopi coffee shop by asking around or reading a guidebook that recommends where to have Trang roasted pork, the Trang delicacy (Bee, assumed name, personal interview, December 4, 2014). For locals, their choices of Kopi shops are not specific but rather made based mostly on location, that is, whether they are near their homes or offices, and in a commercial area (Lueang, assumed name, personal interview, December 6, 2014).

"When we want to eat out, we just talk to each other to decide which shop to go on that day; we don't have any one particular shop in mind …"

(Phon, assumed name, personal interview, June 14, 2015).

Besides having food and drink, social interactions occur in the Kopi coffee shops.

"… Depending on the friend to talk to, if no., I will stay for a while and back home …"

(Leng, assumed name, personal interview, May 1, 2015).

This quotation shows that patrons spend time eating and talking to exchange opinions on everyday life matters, news and information, and national and local politics.

Kopi coffee shops, spaces for political interactions

Especially in Trang city municipality or the community called "Thapthiang", Kopi or coffee has been sold for such a long time that Kopi coffee shops are a familiar sight for people in the community and are a part of their way of life.

Every morning, people take their family and friends to have food and drink in Kopi coffee shops.

"In the past, there were only a few shops open in the morning, not like today. Mostly people came to eat and talk about news; some did not have a TV at home so they came to Kopi shops to listen."

(Khim, assumed name, personal interview, December 5, 2014).

When people gather at the Kopi shop or coffee shop after they have finished tapping rubber trees or before going to work in the morning, they have roasted pork, steamed dumplings, sipping tea or coffee and talk about various things in their daily life, about the economy, society, and politics. They often have interesting interactions about social issues, particularly politics. Therefore, the gathering is simply called "the Coffee Council" where people talk, criticize, and exchange opinions on national and local politics (Jiang, assumed name, personal interview, May 1, 2015; Chaii, assumed name, personal interview, June 14, 2015). During elections, there are large and small campaign posters inside and also outside in front of Kopi coffee shops. Election candidates walk in to campaign and distribute leaflets in the shop (Jan, assumed name, personal interview, June 19, 2015). An employee of A Kopi Coffee Shop said that when there are elections, canvassers come to the shop and ask for permission to post campaign posters for their parties, and all the parties running in the elections are allowed to do so; no one particular party is given special favor. This is to prevent patrons' feeling uneasy and misunderstanding that the shop owner is a canvasser for a particular party.

"… Campaign posters of any party can be posted in our shop; when we allow one party, then we allow all parties …"

(Bee, assumed name, personal interview, December 4, 2014).

In addition to posting campaign posters and distributing leaflets in Kopi coffee shops, canvassers introduce candidates and their policies. Most canvassers are well known in the community, and they come to eat and drink in the Kopi shop and speak to patrons in the shop about policy, and persuade them to vote for the candidate of their party (Chaii, assumed name, personal interview, June14, 2015; Jan, assumed name, personal interview June

Figure 2 Examples of patrons in Kopi coffee shops

19, 2015; Dap, assumed name, personal interview, December 4, 2014).

It was also found that Kopi coffee shops are get-together places for people with local administrative power. They come to have meals with their colleagues or members or canvassers of their party; so they meet in a place which is open and can be seen by people in the community (Dap, assumed name, personal interview, December 4, 2014). This is to create an image that it is easy to access and to build relationships between people in the community and members of local political organizations.

As a result of the announcement of the National Council for Peace and Order on prohibition of political assembling, when asked about political activities in Kopi coffee shops, owners of the Kopi coffee shops and their employees said that patrons talk less about political issues, and when they do, they talk more about news and new information than criticize the political administration of the government (Leng, assumed name, personal interview, May 1, 2015; Dap, assumed name, personal interview, December 4, 2014).

Nevertheless, it was found that there are still a few activities related to local politics. For example, there was a group of administrators coming to the Kopi shop in a van of a Tambon Administration Organization for dinner. It looked like they came to have dinner together after work; there were two to three subordinates choosing dishes from the menu and they took care of everyone in the group during the meal. It can be seen that Kopi coffee shops are not only used as a place for political criticism to be aired and for holding politically related activities, but also sometimes for political interactions among people with administrative power.

Kopi coffee shops or the "Coffee Council", for political communications among Trang locals have existed for a long time, and they have changed over time according to the social context. However, relationships of people in the community through the use of Kopi coffee shops can still be seen unchanged from past practice.

"*As I remember, there were Kopi coffee shops in Thapthiang since I was born and even when my father and grandfather were born. At that time there were no newspapers and no televisions to watch or listen to news. If we had questions and did not know whom to ask, we could just go to ask people at the Kopi shop.*"

(Khao, assumed name, personal interview, June 14, 2015).

Furthermore, documentary historical data revealed that Trang was an important seaport in the past, and many travelers came to this seaport including Chinese who brought with them a culture of drinking coffee which has been integrated with local culture and the Kopi coffee shop has been used for communications until Tambon Thapthiang or Thapthiang sub-district grew into Trang town.

Figure 3 Posters in Kopi coffee shop

The symbols appearing in Kopi coffee shops have become clearer as can be seen from posters announcing funerals posted in the Kopi shop (Figure 3). Funeral posters are posted in Kopi coffee shops because the deceased's relatives want to dispatch the news to relatives and friends who live far away so that they can attend the funeral at the place and on the date written on the posters.

Moreover, the Chinese culture poster influences the local Trang resident's way of life, by providing information on upcoming events such as a vegetarian festival and inviting the public to participate in celebrating the anniversary of shrines. It can be said that this is a way that the Chinese, who have come to settle in Trang and have become Thai Chinese, express their identity through a sign that reflects relationships in the community, and they express their social influence through the Kopi coffee shop.

Conclusion and Discussion

Kopi Coffee Shops, Spaces for Political Interactions

Political interaction is a part of the social interactions of people living together and communicating. The way of life relays from generation to generation in the society. Political interaction is a part of corporation, to create the benefit and advantage of group members through the activities in the social space that it is mutually acceptable to perform (Patjuappakaree, 2010; Sangkharat, 2014; Sengphacha, 1998). Political interactions use the Kopi coffee shop not only for national and local political criticism but also for holding activities that support politics such as introducing political candidates, speaking about political parties, and distributing news and information about elections by posting posters and distributing leaflets about election candidates. Employees of Kopi coffee shops said that during elections (national, provincial and local), the shops are used as one of the campaign sites by candidates, their parties, or their canvassers directly and indirectly. Moreover, Kopi coffee shops are used for social interactions by people from all walks of life from the locals of the community to people with political power. The results of this research, especially social issues are discussed as follows.

The study on political interactions in Kopi coffee shops found that Kopi coffee shops are places for political interactions among people in the community as can be seen through the communication they have in their local dialect, election campaign posters posted by the public sector to invite people to cast their votes, and by candidates, trying to persuade people to vote for them. Thus, these are ways that Kopi shops are used in transferring national as well as local political information. The findings above show that Kopi coffee shops in Mueang district of Trang province are one of the places used for social interactions, particularly political interactions among people in the community. It can be said that Kopi coffee shops are places where people criticize politics and exchange political opinions and information. This is in agreement with what is usually seen in Kopi coffee shops where importance is given to important persons who come in to have their meals, particularly during elections when there are constant political activities going on in the Kopi coffee shops concerning the election campaign,

criticisms of policy, and support for candidates. According to Mueanho (2013), the area is a stage for showing social negotiation power because people can use the Kopi coffee shops as a medium for criticism and exchange of political opinions at the same time as demonstrating their own power through their social interactions there. Thus, Kopi coffee shops can be compared to their political speakers speaking for those who have no administrative and political power in the community, and this changes the meaning of the Kopi coffee shop from being a place for trading, eating culture, and a place representing a way of life, to being a place for political negotiations. Hence, the meaning of the Kopi coffee shop has changed according to its situational context.

Nonetheless, this study found that the political interactions of people in Kopi coffee shops do not need to be constrained to the same beliefs or opinions because canvassers or people in the community have their own preferences. Therefore, interactions in Kopi coffee shops do not have to always be in agreement, and this tends to be contrary to Surasit (2010) who states that interactions of groups in society are more easily made if they have similar beliefs, and when groups have interactions in matters that can be linked, they will understand the similar matters as well as different ones.

Kopi Coffee Shops, Spaces for Social Negotiation Power

Trang Kopi coffee shops are places for building the social power base of Trang locals, especially Thai Chinese descendants who settled in the area where Tambon Thapthiang is now located before the native people came here after Trang town was moved from Tambon Kantang. Trang Kopi coffee shops are important for communication among groups of people, especially Thai Chinese, who in the beginning used the shops for posting news and information for communication. People in society have jointly designed symbols for their communications to eventually have a type of funeral announcement poster informing their group members of such events and their timing. This is one way of expressing oneself among Thai Chinese in Trang. In addition, it shows the networks of the groups through the posters which may show the family tree of the deceased. It is also an invitation to network members to attend the funeral. The spaces where posters are posted become public since the posters are easily seen by people who go there to eat almost every day. Thus, the information promulgated in the public spaces in the Kopi coffee shops is seen more easily than in temples and on municipal bulletin boards. Therefore, the Trang Kopi coffee shops are places where power is negotiated in the community which corresponds with Foucault's concept that power is everywhere and everyone can build power depending on the context that supports the person or the group; power does not refer to oppression or obsession but to stimulation and creativeness (Foucault as cited in Tosakun, 2005). Here, Kopi coffee shops are places where Trang locals build power, stimulate relationships, and create social networks to support the way of life in their society. Thus, power is not only used to identify and limit rights but also to create self or social groups in creating or strengthening the way of life through cooperation in solving problems in society

(Phuanghat, 2005). Humans are social animals who want to be part of a group, or a member of society, to have ties and to be accepted through interactions with others. According to Maslow (as cited in Kendra, 2015) in addition to the need of being accepted, being in a group helps strengthen the group in operating the way it wants to in order to achieve its objectives which is to build power, to create social networks, to build energy, and to express self in society. It is power that is reflected through the behavior of members of society, the opinions of people in the community in negotiating, building, and showing self socially, through negotiating in the economic system, political system, and through building community power and the social networks of people in the community.

Therefore, Trang Kopi coffee shops are more than restaurants and coffee shops or places where people socialize with others because activities in the Kopi coffee shops, the relationships of people, and the historical and cultural contexts in the community reveal networking of power in the community to show self and to find the opportunity to negotiate power in society. Nowadays Trang Kopi coffee shops are used as discourses of Trang food culture by groups of power through media in social communication. This phenomenon has prompted Trang locals to realize and give value to Kopi coffee shops, and the meaning they give to Kopi coffee shops as places for political interactions and power negotiations.

Recommendations

Studies should be conducted on social interactions in other aspects regarding Kopi coffee shops in order to provide a broader understanding of the social interactions in Kopi coffee shops and to obtain a better understanding of the Kopi drinking culture of people in the community.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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