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Clan culture and solidarity ties as positive indicators of democratic development in Thai-Isan communities

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Article Info

Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to analyze the principal and most prominent political culture shared among villagers in rural Northeast Thailand and how it helps facilitate and uphold democratic development. In-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and focus groups were used to collect data from four rural villages located across Nong Bua Lamphu and Udon Thani provinces in Northeast Thailand. The 65 informants included knowledgeable people in the community, leaders, and villagers, as well as individuals from outside the communities, including academics, intellectuals, and politicians. The findings showed that the principal political culture shared among villagers is strongly linked to their longstanding adherence to clan culture and their strong solidarity ties. These features of traditional society in Northeast Thailand help to maintain democratic development at the local and community level by fostering harmonious love and unity among the villagers, which manifests as a collective social commitment, or what is called a "social trust." This social trust is what motivates villagers' voluntary political participation. It fosters among villagers a belief in their own political efficacy, a consciousness and understanding of individual and community rights, and a feeling of civic responsibility. These are all important attributes of a civic culture and serve as the central foundation for democratic development at the local and community level.

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Introduction

Political culture refers to the significant components of a political society that indicate its members' thoughts, beliefs, values, and political behaviors toward their political system. This political culture serves as the central foundation of any society or country's governing political system (Chilton, 1991; Faulk, 2000). For any political system to function and govern with stability, it must have as its foundation a political culture that facilitates that governance (Nakata, 2012).

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The importance of political culture in democratic development was described by Inglehart & Wayne (2000), who said that the survival of any democracy depended on its ordinary citizens and whether or not their attitudes, values, and beliefs were consistent with democratic principles. In other words, the success of any democratization process relies on the norms, values, and traditions of citizens, embodied in their everyday codes of conduct, being in line with democracy's materialization. This is a prerequisite for secure and stable democratic development.

Research on the political culture shared among Thai villagers at the local level has revealed evidence of a civic community culture that is both prominent and connected to democracy. For example, in Kanchanaburi Province in the west of Thailand, villagers were shown to have a strong awareness and sense of responsibility for community problems, demonstrated especially by their ability to gather into united groups to solve problems in their community. Villagers shared core values that placed importance on solving public issues together. They also valued opportunities to exchange political opinions and knowledge of the community development process, as well as having a capable community leader. These were important components upholding a strong community, which created an important foundation for democratic development to occur at the local community level (Kertpolsert & Yamnill, 2021).

While such academic findings have found strong links between governing systems and democratic political culture, academic findings focused on Thai society remain inadequate to guide and advance Thailand's development of a democratic political culture (Promgird, 2013; 2014; 2016). No functioning democracy can exist without strong local communities, which can be likened to the foundation of any society (Wasi, 2007). Therefore, research on democracy at the local community level sets the groundwork for democracy, and research on political culture and democratic development at the local community level should be prioritized and is worthy of our attention (Phongphit, 2020; Wasi, 2007).

We were drawn to study rural villages in Northeast Thailand (a region known locally as Isan) due to the distinct culture in the area. The local culture, including the character and personality of Isan people, has been influenced by the cultures and traditions of Tai-Lao Mekong Basin communities (Chaithieng, 2017). Their distinct culture led us to wonder what principal political culture they might share that would help facilitate and uphold democratic development. Generally, a strong foundation of democratic political culture among local communities should lead to strong democratic development at the national level (Natsupa & Ouitrakul, 2017).

Previous academic research has focused on social and cultural conditions in Northeast Thailand, (Srisontisuk, 2014) but few studies have discussed the political culture as an asset to democratic development, a gap in the research which we aim to fill. This article begins by outlining the central concepts related to civic culture, then describes our qualitative methodology, including in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and focus groups used to collect data. This research article points out how the principal political culture in Thai-Isan can be developed into political values which support civic culture and serve democratic development at the local level. Finally, the findings are analyzed from a Political Sociology perspective. Furthermore, civic culture theory is employed to discuss and elucidate these findings in terms of their relationship with democratic stability.

Literature Review

Civic Culture and Democratic Development

This research uses the conceptual frameworks of democratic political culture and civic culture. These frameworks are derived from the classic, foundational question: What types of political culture are favorable toward upholding a functioning and stable democracy? According to these frameworks: for political and governing systems to function, there must exist a political culture that facilitates or supports their maintenance. Political culture affects the structures and political behaviors of a people within a country. Therefore, if a society aims to develop a political and governing system toward democracy, that society must at the same time, in parallel, develop a democratic political culture or civic culture. Doing so will bring security and stability to the democratic system (Almond & Powell, 1966; Almond & Verba, 1963; Faulk, 2000; Nash, 2010).

Almond & Verba (1963) proposed a novel concept related to political culture when they proposed "civic culture" a form of political culture that integrated 3 pure types of political culture, namely, parochial, subject, and participant political cultures, with the latter being the principal and most prominently represented They posited, such was the most facilitative of a stable democracy, as under this type of political culture, members of a society are the most deliberately engaged, believing in their own political efficacy. Their participation in politics

is constructive and voluntary, and they possess a true democratic consciousness.

Almond & Verba (1963) and Eckstein (1992) insist that a democratic system can only be stable when its political institutions are in line with the political culture shared by its citizens. Incongruency can lead to political instability, ultimately destabilizing the democratic system. It follows that in order to successfully develop a democracy, a country must in parallel advance a democratic political culture, or a civic culture.

Kymlicka (2002) added to previous work that modern democratic societies require citizens who are engaged in thoroughly investigating and critically scrutinizing policy. Citizens must have the ability to keep their politicians accountable, and state officials must have a sense of responsibility toward their own duties and actions. Citizens must actively engage in public affairs through a process of civil deliberation. These citizen attributes constitute the core civic virtues on which modern democracies are founded and which will lead to the development of a stable democracy.

In a compelling discussion of civic culture at the local community level, Janmaat (2006) states that in a "civic community," people tend to show a high level of interest in participating in elections and referendums and in following the news, with higher rates of newspaper readership. Such communities also tend to have a greater number of clubs, sports associations, and other social and cultural organizations. These features, argues Putnam (1993; 2000), lead to shared social trust among community members and effective social networks, which, in turn facilitate cooperation and collaboration – all important factors that form the basis of stable democratic development.

In summary, a political culture that contributes to democratic development implies members of a society that believe in their own political efficacy, have high levels of political interest and participation, and are predisposed to critically scrutinizing policy. Yet, while the concept of civic culture remains important, certain academics argue that in the modern social and political context, highly complex economic and social factors come into play and divide individuals or citizens based on their opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. Therefore, it is difficult or nearly impossible for members of a society to share a coherent, principal political culture that is congruent with the political systems and institutions governing them. The ensuing discussion has led to an important question about the civic culture proposition, namely, is there *only one form* of political culture that can help to uphold a democratic system. In addition, a gap in the civic culture proposition suggests that certain contexts have been understudied, such as those contexts in which political structures and institutions are incongruent and where differences occur between political cultures within the same society. (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Mattes & Bratton, 2007) Given that political culture can vary between regions, this article aims to present specific, distinctive cultural aspects of villagers in rural Isan. This culture is noteworthy and signals a positive influence on stimulating political participation among Isan locals. Ultimately, it helps to indicate the direction of democratic development in Isan, which can lead to national democratic development.

Rose & Shin (2001) particularly challenge the civic culture proposition, suggesting that in some societies where there is a clash between democratic and authoritative political cultures, the coexistence of these incongruent cultures actually tends to support the creation of a more stable democratic system. They propose that *when a country's citizens aim to uphold a democratic equilibrium, this can actually slow down or delay democratic development*. Rather, Rose & Shin maintain that in countries just beginning to develop their democratic system, democratization is most efficient when the political structures and institutions, as well as the political culture of the citizens, are incongruent. Inglehart & Welzel (2005) point out that citizen opposition against political structures and institutions during this first phase of democratization ultimately leads citizens to come together to fight for the common good, a fight which forces righteous reform of the political systems and institutions and sets the stage for a stable and functioning democracy in the future.

The concept of civic culture has attracted significant interest and has been applied as a framework in political development and democratic development analysis, both at macro and local levels. Despite debate around civic culture as a form of political culture, and while there is insufficient empirical evidence to prove its effectiveness in the development of a democratic system, civic culture is worthwhile as a conceptual framework that has potential in the realm of democratic development and political sociology.

Methodology

In this study, we used phenomenological qualitative methods with the village as our basic unit of analysis. The criteria for selecting four rural villages across Nong Bua Lamphu and Udon Thani Provinces were based on

the fact that these villages, which are ancient, traditional communities in Northeast Thailand, are culturally distinctive from national baselines. The characteristics and habits of the people are often shaped by Thai-Lao traditions practiced along the Mekong River, which is the root of Isan culture. Furthermore, this region was also a political battleground of the People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT) under the leadership of the Communist Party of Thailand during an era when locals were at war against state rulers. Recently, this region has been a political battleground for political movements such as the "red shirts," an anti-government political group consisting of a substantial number of members who emerged from shared dissatisfaction with a series of political events and prolonged ill-treatment. Consequently, it is safe to assume that "Northeast Thailand is a crucial representation or the political epicenter of the struggled and oppressed" (Boossabong, 2007). The researcher conducted the study during the years 2020–2021. These historical and political contexts justify the purpose of this study to understand the principal political culture of people in rural villages in Northeast Thailand.

Participants

The target groups, which comprised of five informant group, are below (Table 1):

1. Village sages (Local wisemen): This group included 15 informants in the community who had information and knowledge about political issues, traditions, culture, and the context and history of the village. The individuals were village philosophers, leaders of religious ceremonies, and respected elders in the community. Individuals in this informant group had to have lived in the village for more than 40 years.

2. Village leaders: This group included 15 elected village representatives with magistrate or administrative responsibilities and who were also charged with maintaining peace and order within the village. They included the village head, the assistant village head, representatives from the village committee, and the subdistrict head, among others.

3. Villagers: Altogether, 15 villagers who were residents of the four target areas participated in the study. They included rice farmers, small farmers or gardeners, sellers or traders, and laborers, among others.

4. Academics and intellectuals: This group included 10 individuals who were knowledgeable about political culture at the village level and who had an understanding of the sociopolitical context in Northeast Thailand. They were academics, members of the press, NGOs, and political activists.

5. Politicians: These were 10 individuals with direct experience in politics, either at the national or local level.

The target groups were selected using purposive sampling methods based on the snowball technique. Initially, a call for recruitment was made to individuals who were knowledgeable about political culture. Those who volunteered to participate in the study were then asked for advice on who else could act as informants in each of the five target groups. This process was repeated with each informant until data saturation had been reached and data were sufficient for in-depth analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This occurred after the target groups had reached a total of 65 informants.

Table 1 Summarizes the five target groups, including the data collection methods used and type of data collected from each group

No.	Target Group	Nong Bua Lamphu Province (2 villages)	Udon Thani Province (2 villages)	Total (65)	Data collection /Issue
1	Village sages (Local wisemen)	8	7	15	*In-depth interview* *Social and cultural issues
2	Village leaders	8	7	15	*Focus group* *The history of political assembly among villagers *Relationships between villagers as relevant to political activities
3	Villagers	7	8	15	*Focus group* *The history of political assembly among villagers *Political activities *Attitudes and behaviors of villagers toward political matters
4	Academics & intellectuals	5	5	10	*In-depth interview* *The history of political assembly among villagers *Attitudes and behaviors of villagers toward political matters
5	Politicians	5	5	10	*In-depth interview* *The history of political assembly among villagers *Attitudes and behaviors of villagers toward political matters

Data Collection

In-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and focus group discussions were used to collect data. In-depth interviews involved detailed conversations between the interviewer and interviewees, aimed at obtaining comprehensive information regarding attitudes, values, thoughts, and beliefs about political matters or the principal political culture within the community. Focus group discussions were conducted to ensure comprehensive and accurate data collection, as participants were selected based on shared or similar (homogeneous) characteristics and could provide valuable insights within the target villages. These discussions allowed all participants to express their opinions and interact equally (Pothisita, 2019). Additionally, non-participant observation techniques were employed to support data collection. This method involved observing phenomena or events of interest related to the principal political culture from an outsider's perspective. The researcher focused on three key aspects: observing public spaces in the community, political activities, and the surrounding context within the target area (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994). During in-depth interviews, the researcher also conducted observations to understand the gestures, attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviours of the target group that were not expressed verbally. Field notes were taken during each observation to ensure the accuracy and precision of the data.

Semi-structured interviews were designed based on the following topics: (1) the social and cultural context of the village, the history of political assembly or political struggle among villagers, villager relations, and notable customs and traditions relevant to political activity; and (2) the political culture shared among villagers and deemed to help uphold democratic development. To ensure the validity of the study, the accuracy and reliability of the data were examined using triangulation. Prior to analysis, data were investigated for accuracy and precision across different conditions of time, space, and persons.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive analytics, and findings were discussed with the aim of describing the political culture phenomena that help to uphold democratic development in rural villages. The discussion gave particular focus to the conditions leading up to and sustaining the positive relationship between the local political culture and democratization.

Ethical Considerations

This research project was approved by the Committee for Ethics in Human Research of Khon Kaen University under Project Code (HE633151), on 11 November 2020. All informants completed a consent form. They were fully informed of the research objectives as a protection against any potential adverse effects or risk. Throughout the research project, the researchers strictly adhered to all ethical guidelines for human research.

Results and Discussion

Community Background

This section will discuss the general social context of the four rural villages in Northeast Thailand (Isan), the target areas for this study. The villages, located in Nong Bua Lamphu and Udon Thani Provinces, could be characterized generally as traditional, rural societies. The majority of villagers are organized around kinship networks or "clans." A core value among them is a shared interdependence, a traditional norm adhered to for generations. Villagers mainly practice agriculture or are day laborers. They place trust in their village leaders and village administrative committee to be a liaison and disseminator of news when it comes to social, political, and resource management issues, as well as managing the wellbeing of all villagers in the community. The majority of villagers adhere to traditional customs and traditions passed down for generations, influenced by the Tai-Lao culture of the Mekong Basin. They tend to believe in strict Buddhist principles and teachings and to respect and honor their elders, such as the leader of Buddhist ceremonies and the village philosopher, according to those individuals' particular expertise.

Clan Culture or "Isan Identity"

This study found that, in general, the villagers' values align with a longstanding strong tradition of clan culture, or "Isan identity". This shared culture has helped to manifest interdependence among Isan people at every institutional unit in society, from kinship networks to neighborhoods, village compounds, temples, schools, and local administrative organizations. The positive relationships and shared clan culture have led to an ethos among villagers of harmonious love and an appreciation and tenacity toward their village. The distinct clan culture that has been a part of these communities for generations has created a *shared identity* among the villagers.

Since communities in rural Northeast Thailand have been influenced by traditional culture rooted in East Asian societies, kinship systems are highly relevant, and villagers prioritize feelings of gratitude toward their ancestors and respect toward their elders. The importance placed on kinship systems and the respect held among villagers based on kinship relationships help villagers to feel a part of the same clan, and strong bonds are formed among them which help to further unify them (Puckadhikom, 1977).

The individual identity of Isan people arises from interactions at the macro level involving religion, ethnicity, and new cultural influences. This leads to a process of identity formation that becomes the social identity of the Isan people. This identity is expressed through their sense of what it means to be Isan, including questions such as "What are the personality traits of Isan people?", "What are their thoughts and feelings?", and "How do they share a sense of community with other Isan people?". These questions have coalesced into shared social practices within Isan society (Regulate Social Practice) and meaningful representations through the Isan language, ritual patterns, food culture, occupations, and local wisdom. These elements are significant to the daily life and political culture of the Isan people (Chalermsan, 2020; Fuengfusakul, 2003).

The cultural identity of the Isan people has roots in the Tai-Lao ethnicity, characterized by unique and distinctive cultural structures and practices. This identity is expressed through language, food, ideologies, beliefs, community grouping, settlement patterns, and local traditions. Moreover, this cultural identity also influences the formation of political identity (Hall et al., 1980) particularly the political identity of the Isan people within the "Red Shirts Movement." This movement reflects a spirit of rebellion against authoritarian state power, a love for justice, a belief in rights, freedom, and human equality, and a shared belief in their political efficacy. These factors drive the Red Shirts group to participate in politics actively.

Although participants in significant political events come from various parts of Northeast Thailand and possess different political experiences and goals, they exhibit unity in their political movement toward democracy. This unity is attributed to the Red Shirts Group's distinct political culture, characterized by a sense of solidarity and clan culture.

This clan culture and sense of solidarity leads to a clear political identity among the Red Shirts, including the establishment of "Red Shirt Villages" and self-identification as the "Red Shirt Masses" Sometimes, they refer to themselves as "Phrai" (Subjects) as a strategy to overcome with the "Ammart" (Bureaucracy) and feudal lords who oppress through state power. These factors facilitate the group's cohesion and their struggle for democracy. Ultimately, the political identity of the Red Shirts Group contributes positively to the development of democracy at the local community level.

Clan culture, or "Isan identity," can be discussed in terms of four of its prominent features: (1) housing settlements, (2) ceremonies and beliefs, (3) food culture, and (4) livelihoods and local wisdom, as explained below:

1. Isan housing settlements are distinct for their relationship with natural geographical features. It is common for Isan villagers to build their houses on a hill or higher ground nearby the rice fields and a natural water source, such as a brook, pond, or lake, with the hopes of occupying a piece of land that is suitable for agriculture. They tend to build large wooden houses to accommodate the comfort of any family members staying with them. They build their houses in close proximity to other relatives so that they can easily rely on each other in case anyone experiences any troubles or difficulties or for agricultural labor, such as when planting and harvesting rice and for other special farming tasks that require help. The close proximity of Isan houses to one another helps foster positive relationships among local villagers in the same community and reflects their shared values and way of life based on cohabitation under kinship systems, as well as their Isan clan culture. These traditions that Isan villagers adhere to around housing settlements differ from those found in the rest of Thailand.

2. Common rituals, traditions, and beliefs among Isan villagers have a significant influence on their way of life and reflect a shared identity among them. For example, phithi bai sri su kwan, or the "soul calling ceremony" is a ceremony that calls the soul back into the body. It brings strength to family members, helping them to overcome any problems or obstacles they are facing. This ceremony tends to take place at various times throughout one's life among close relatives or people significant to an individual. For example, it is organized during marriage ceremonies, when building a new house, or when welcoming new circumstances into one's life, such as a promotion, retirement from the civil service, or before and after a trip abroad. The ceremony reflects the love and closeness shared among Isan people and the care and attention they give one another. These qualities and feelings of fellowship lead to the shared clan culture and ultimately contribute to Isan people's successful collective enterprises. The expressive behaviors demonstrated through rituals such as the soul calling ceremony reflect the values and local wisdom shared between Isan people.

3. Isan food culture is notable for the close connection between food and the Isan way of life. Isan people maintain a food culture that reflects the knowledge and local wisdom passed down to them over generations. For example, vegetables, fruits, and animals that are easy to find in the local area are gathered and hunted to eat in local dishes. Generally, the basic staples of every Isan household are sticky rice, eaten from a sticky rice basket, and a fermented fish chili sauce. Beef is eaten during special occasions and celebrations, such as during traditional merit making ceremonies or at weddings. Isan people tend to eat together in groups, and there is a belief that older people or close relatives should be called over to eat together. Local people call this "kin pha khao hom gan" (coming together to eat) and recognize it as an important opportunity to talk and exchange opinions and thoughts about problems in daily life. This food culture reflects a harmonious and cohesive love that is a part of Isan people's character. Another distinct feature of Isan food culture is that when an Isan person relocates, setting up house in a new location, they tend to continue to cook their local foods, reflecting their Isan identity and clan culture. Isan food culture is based on the concept of self-reliance through self-sacrifice and adherence to a minimalist way of life, consistent with an agrarian society that requires one to rush to the fields early in the morning and return home late at night. This is reflected in a teaching known among Isan villagers: "We eat to live; we don't live to eat." Isan food culture, therefore, is a clear indication of the clan culture shared among Isan villagers.

4. Isan livelihoods and local wisdom are rooted in the traditional agrarian way of life and truly reflect "Isan" identity. Aside from agriculture, Isan people have various livelihoods that have been inherited from their ancestors and passed down over generations. Some of these include the local morlam or professional folk singer, the leader of religious ceremonies, the *brahmin* with expertise in performing soul calling ceremonies, the thao jam who guards the ancestors' spirits and liaisons between them and the villagers, the medicinal doctor, and the traditional Thai masseuse. Outside of the farming season, Isan villagers tend to apply local wisdom passed down from previous generations to various skilled occupations, such as basketry, pottery, carving, weaving, and carpentry. These livelihoods, rooted in local Isan wisdom, underly the "Isan" identity or clan culture, which connects Isan people as a network and as part of the labor sector. Whenever or wherever Isan people relocate, they tend to bring with them their knowledge and local wisdom, which they can use to earn extra money or supplementary income. Therefore, this knowledge and local wisdom

should be upheld as another important part of the Isan identity and clan culture.

Clan Culture, Solidarity, and Democracy at the Local Level

The theoretical origins of clan culture and the solidarity ties that emerge as a result were described by philosopher Tocqueville (2000) when in Europe's enlightenment period he introduced republicanism as a concept in governance. Tocqueville suggested that solidarity ties can naturally emerge among members of a state organized as a republic, and that these ties could be seen in "civic communities," where community members voluntarily participate in political activities to the extent that a clan culture develops among them. These bonds form the basis for solidarity among the group members, as well as the community's distinct identity, and serve as an important element of "social capital."

Ultimately, when community members feel solidarity in their community, a "civic consciousness" arises within them wherein the citizen is recognized as being central to political decision-making that prioritizes the common good. This helps to strengthen and broaden "civil society," an important contributing factor to the formation of a civic culture that is foundational to true democratic development.

Tönnies (1957) further clarified that such united and strong relationships are most prominent in traditional rural societies prior to industrialization and are particularly powerful in village communities.

The present study found that the clan culture shared among Isan villagers has led to stronger bonds of solidarity and unity. Both clan culture and solidarity ties have been conducive to Thailand's democratic development at the local community level. Two major phenomena are discussed below:

1. The first phenomenon shows that clan culture and solidarity ties among community members have led to the emergence of mutual aid and interdependence in the villages via *natural mechanisms*. When any problem in the community occurs, a shared social commitment or type of social capital called "social trust" emerges in the community as well. This can manifest in sharing food, the borrowing and lending of money or property between relatives and helping to take care of each other's houses and the community's shared resources, as well as other activities. The clan culture and solidarity ties between community members help to bring peace and security to the village, a beneficial context from which democratic development can take place at the local community level. (Putnam, 1993; 2000) Villagers in the present study's first focus group confirmed this finding, asserting that:

"Clan culture is a distinct part of Isan people's identity. We view each other as brothers and sisters, part of the same family, especially if we share the same lineage. All the uncles and aunts live nearby. We live together as a big, extended family. So, we're generous and hospitable toward each other. We share our food. If there are ever any problems, we don't abandon anyone. We always find a way to help so that we can rely on each other. For example, if we ask our relatives to help us plant or harvest rice, they're always glad to come out and help. If there's any compensation for that in the form of payment, it won't be much, but they're still happy to come. Whenever there's any merit making celebration or event, we also come together [and unite in solidarity] to help pull it off successfully."

(villagers, first focus group, January 10, 2021).

Village leaders shared a similar perspective. In one of the in-depth interviews, a village leader explained:

"Local Isan people like to help each other, especially to pull off activities for the common good. You'll notice that when we call on people to gather in big groups, we can easily get people out. This is because of who we are as Isan people – we're of the same clan, and we like to do things in groups. Especially if we're in the same extended family, if we share the same lineage, we'll show up to help immediately. And Isan people tend to prioritize activities that we can do together for the common good of the village and to help bring progress to the village. Isan people are connected by these feelings of unity and solidarity. It's a distinct characteristic of Isan people."

(village leader, personal communication, February 3, 2021).

Testimony from villagers and village leaders showed that clan culture and solidarity ties have created an important foundation for democratic development at the local community level. Clan culture and solidarity among Isan people are important because *they speak to the feelings and opinions of the community members which have naturally emerged as opposed to having been motivated extrinsically or as a result of different tools or techniques*. Sociological theorists such as Habermas (1987) have suggested that the importance of "clan culture and solidarity ties" among community members lies in the collective, principal "political culture" that emerges and that reflects community members' acceptance and

capacity to live together in a pluralistic society, another important foundation of democratic development.

Taylor (1992; 2012) said that clan culture and solidarity ties among members of the public foster a type of political legitimacy, which is necessary and a prerequisite for political stability in the development of a democratic system. This is because democratic political activity by citizens tends to be carried out by groups, clubs, associations, and organizations managed by the collective. Whether the political activity is voting in elections, holding discussions in deliberative systems, or carrying out other forms of political participation, all of these activities entail members of the public exchanging opinions with each other. When members of the public share a clan culture and solidarity ties, they can be said to share a common ground, or a point of consensus, from which the political decision-making process can occur. This leads to political participation by the collective and is another important foundation of democracy. Therefore, villagers' ability to maintain certain aspects of their traditional local culture, namely their clan culture and solidarity ties, is not only helpful for keeping their community strong and facilitating political participation among citizens but is also an important foundation of democratic development at the local community level.

2. The second phenomenon that was observed among the present study's target villages was that clan culture and solidarity ties *have led villagers to form civil society groups aimed at participating in political movements and struggles according to democratic ideals*. These aspects of Isan culture have led to an understanding among villagers of their own individual and community rights and have helped them to believe more in their own political efficacy. For example, after Thailand's 2006 coup, villagers came out in force in a show of intense political participation, resisting the military coup that had toppled the government of Thaksin Shinawatra. The Thaksin government had implemented favorable policies from the perspective of many Isan grassroots communities to the extent that villagers had seen improvements in their quality of life. (Natthaphatthanunth, 2015).

Therefore, during the resistance against the coup, villagers played an important role as political actors, ardently demanding recognition of their individual and community rights and the honor, dignity, and value of the "Isan identity," a political stance based on democratic principles. The vast participation of villagers from provinces throughout Northeast Thailand in lively and packed demonstrations and

protests eventually led to the crowds being dubbed "the red shirt mob." (Kongkirati, 2012).

After organizing politically as "the red shirt mob," villagers further developed their political activism, setting up "red shirt villages" in many provinces of Northeast Thailand. These were referred to as the first democratic villages in Thailand, as the idea for them originated from a system of collective deliberation among leaders, including leaders of political parties, village heads, village committee members, and villagers who shared the same political ideals. While there was a plurality of political ideals and political goals among the members of the red shirt village political movement in Northeast Thailand, the movement was able to bring many different groups together under one coalition due to their shared clan culture and solidarity ties. This narrative is consistent with the firsthand experience of village leaders in the second focus group, who explained:

> *"Our village used to be a red shirt village. I was the village leader, a representative of the grassroots. We wanted to call for our political right to have representation. So, whenever there was a speech by the Pheu Thai Party, I'd invite my close friends and relatives and the youth from our village to go listen. Everyone was united and came together to be a part of the political movement. When we got to the main stage, we'd meet up with other red shirt friends from all over the place, all education levels and all walks of life. Some were retired civil servants. Some were high-status entrepreneurs. But as soon as we were there together, we felt a fellowship among us. We were united in our collective fight for democracy…"*
>
> (village leader, second focus group, December 13, 2020).

Another informant, a politician who gave an in-depth interview, relayed their experience:

> *"Isan villagers are known for their ability to gather together into organized, united groups, especially when it has come to going out and demanding our political rights on behalf of the red shirts. I'd say it is a clear example of a politics of the people that also reveals the power of Isan people. In the red shirt villages, there was open political discussion, and we'd open up the stage for people to give their speeches using the Isan language. We'd eat Isan food together. This beautiful shared culture is what created*

> *feelings of solidarity among the red shirt villagers, and that's what helped Isan people to be able to move in the same direction in terms of our political activism until finally, we succeeded."*
>
> (Politician, personal communication, January 9, 2021).

Aside from these observations, political activity among the villagers was also linked to their local traditions. For example, villagers would lead soul calling ceremonies and hold banners related to the red shirt villages in traditional long drum processions. The soul calling ceremonies, in particular, are an ancestral tradition closely tied to the local cultural customs of Isan people, and they would be held as part of certain activities on important, auspicious occasions. Adherence to these local customs has helped to support villagers' own feelings of worth through the mechanisms of clan culture and solidarity, which help to uphold the collective political beliefs and ideals of the public sector in their political struggles according to democratic principles.

In summary, underlying the phenomenon of widespread political participation among Isan people on behalf of "red shirt groups" has been a shared clan culture from which emerges a collective solidarity that is conducive to political participation. At the same time, local communities that lack strong relationships among community members can face obstacles leading to lower levels of people's political participation in the democratic system. (Sniderman et al., 1991; Whiteley, 1995) Therefore, the fact that villagers in Northeast Thailand share a clan culture and solidarity ties helps to support and uphold strong communities and villages and also sets the important groundwork for democratic development at the local community level in Thailand, as explained below (Figured 1):

Figure 1 The Conceptual framework for democratic development at the local community

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

This article presented the findings from a political sociological analysis that sought to answer the question, *"What principal political culture shared among villagers in rural villages of Northeast Thailand helps to support and uphold democratic development?"* The research was based on the assumption that the local place or region that contextualizes a community is an important factor in determining and distinguishing the political culture (Wongtrangan, 1989). Political culture has been shown to be influenced by different social contexts (Pye, 1972; Nakata, 2012). The learning processes and experiences propagated through the social context produce distinct beliefs, values, and behaviors among members of a society or community that are politically relevant and can differentiate them from other societies.

This research also posits that political culture plays an important role in democratic development. Therefore, to successfully conduct democratic development, a society must first build a political culture based on democratic principles, or a civic culture. Before achieving this, there must be a basic understanding of the principal political culture that already exists in that society or local community. The researcher believes that past government efforts to develop democracy have focused primarily on developing the political system's structures and institutions but have not successfully instilled a civic culture among the Thai people. This includes encouraging political participation, fostering a sense of political efficacy, recognizing individual rights, and acknowledging community rights. These elements of civic culture are essential for supporting the development of democracy.

The research findings indicate that in rural northeastern Thailand, the study's target area, the principal political culture is characterized by a distinct clan culture and strong solidarity. This culture has become a unique identity of the local community. Both clan culture and solidarity are conducive to local democratic development as follows:

1. Mutual Support and Social Trust through Natural Mechanisms: When community members face difficulties, a social bond obligates mutual aid, fostering "social trust." This trust creates civic virtue, where people volunteer to help their community and society. It also encourages villagers to participate in managing their communities, forming the basis of civic culture (Fukuyama, 2001).

Ultimately, such a culture promotes peace within the village, benefiting local democratic development. Clan culture and solidarity serve as a consensus in political decision-making processes (Taylor, 1992; 2012). Maintaining these cultural elements strengthens the community, supports political participation, and forms a foundation for local democratic development.

2. Formation of Civil Society Organizations: Clan culture and solidarity lead to the formation of civil society organizations, facilitating collective political movements. This culture helps villagers understand individual and community rights and believe in their political efficacy. An example is the "Red Shirt" movement, which emerged after the 2006 coup, demonstrating intense political participation. Despite the diversity of ideologies and goals among members from various northeastern areas, the underlying clan culture and solidarity unified the movement. Conversely, a lack of these cultural elements hinders political participation in a democratic system.

This research challenges the findings of Dalton & Shin (2011), who suggested that in farmers' societies or rural villages, people often withdraw from politics. However, this study found that in northeastern Thai villages, the prominent political culture of clan culture and solidarity leads to a civic culture where people are interested in political participation, supporting local democratic development.

Recommendations

Research on political culture at the local community level is important for truly setting the groundwork for democratic development. *No democracy can function without strong local communities, which can be considered the foundation of a society or nation.* The present study found that clan culture and solidarity ties have a role in upholding democratic development at the local community level. However, due to the dynamic nature of political culture and its interdependence with constantly changing social and political factors, the researcher recommends further study, as follows: (1) Are there other forms of political culture that help to facilitate democratic development at the local community level?; (2) How can we maintain the form of political culture that currently exists so that it remains long into the future?; and (3) Conversely, are there any forms of political culture that obstruct democratic development at the local community level? Future research should aim to answer these questions in order to build on the basic knowledge necessary to develop and strengthen Thai democracy in the future.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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