

Thainess in Contemporary Performances on Thailand's Got Talent

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Abstract

The talent competition on the television programme, *Thailand's Got Talent*, illustrates that certain groups of competitors seek to build their performances' identities by making use of "Thainess". Although "Thainess" in the context of globalized society is based on cultural diversity, these performances merely select some prominent national features or well-recognized "Thai identity", for example, the three main institutions of the nation, ways of life, dance, architecture, games, and habit so as to attract and impress their audiences by creating collective mood rooted in a sense of nationhood or being partisan to common culture—which will affect the audience's votes. In terms of producing for creative economy, "Thainess" is part of creative activity in making contemporary performing arts interesting, and it also becomes a "selling point" on international stage.

Keywords: Thainess, contemporary performances, Thailand's Got Talent

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Introduction

During the past ten years, there have been several programmes regarding talent show competition on Thai television. One of the well-known programmes is *Thailand's Got Talent*, broadcast on Channel 3 since 2011, whose copyright was licensed by *Britain's Got Talent* in UK. The programme is about the talent competition of individuals or groups of any ages with any sorts of talent. Each episode is annually broadcast around 3 months; it is divided into 4 rounds, i.e. pre-casting, audition, semi-final, and grand final. The result of semi-final and grand final rounds is principally based on the vote from audiences around the country.

Among those who were able to get through semi-final and grand final rounds in Episode 1-3 (2011 – 2013), there were certain teams making use of Thai cultural elements in their performances. For example, the Kit Buak Sip (lit. positively-thinking or creative art) group used classical and contemporary Thai dance in association with shadow performance. The BS Crew group combined dancing with Thai boxing. The Tee Sin (lit. manner of art) group told the folk tales through using contemporary Thai dance and mats. The Thai Gym group presented traditional lifestyles and children's games through rhythmic sportive gymnastic. These performances clearly reflected the use of Thainess to build their works' identities. This paper therefore aims to illustrate how Thainess was built in Thai social context. It also studies how and for what purpose Thainess is employed in the performances. Only those in the semi-final and grand final rounds of the 2011 – 2013 episodes will be focused in this study.

Constructing Thainess in Thai Social Context

What is Thainess is quite difficult to explain due to the fact that it is rather vague to specify. For example, Massaman Curry, which has become one of favorite Thai dishes for westerners, was originated from the Muslims of the Malay Peninsula. When looking back into Thai history, the Thais realized the difference between themselves and their neighborhoods like Mon, Burmese, Malay, Laotian, Khmer, Vietnamese on the basis of language, lifestyles, culture, politic, and religion (Sulak, 1991). According to Benedict Anderson (1996), nation is an imagined political community in that its members will never know nor meet most of their fellow-members, even those in the smallest nation. Nonetheless the image of their communion exists in the mind of each member. In this regard, the nationhood is invented by creating nationality and language.

In her study of the Thai intellectuals' works during 1892 – 1992 in order to show how Thainess was constructed in the society, Saichol Sattayanurak (n.d.) says that when Siamese or Thai ruling class had to face the threat from Western imperialism during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (1868 – 1910), they then chose to accept Western knowledge and material progress to maintain the essence parts of Thai culture. Some royal traditions, for example, were redefined to avoid the accusation of being barbaric. At the same time, the elites sought to ensure that Thainess could justify political structure whose power was centralized by the monarchical institution, and that it could justify social structure by dividing people into different classes according to their birth background. Later in the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910 – 1925), some journalists, civil servants, and Thai-born Chinese tried to construct the notion that Thai nation was belong to the people. As a result, the king redefined "Thai nation"

and “Thainess” by focusing on building a political unity which the monarch was the heart of the nation as well as hold and wielded supreme power. He also redefined Thai nation as a nation comprising people whose livelihood was intricately linked with Thai culture and who were loyal to the heart of Thainess, i.e. the royal institution and Buddhism. King Vajiravudh’s construction of a king-centered ideology of Thai nation resulted in the awareness of the nation’s totality among Thais all over the country. Following King Vajiravudh, Prince Patriarch Wachirayan Warorot helped promote and delineate the king’s ideology of Thainess by transforming the ideas into Buddhist-based concepts which were disseminated through sermons and monastic education to the extent that the image of “nation, religion and monarch” became more discernible. In constructing Thainess, moreover, nation, religion and monarch were inseparable.

After the 1932 revolution changing the political regime from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, the political structure remained centralized in the hands of the political ruler. The state ideology of the absolute monarchy regime, however, was not radically changed by the new rulers; they merely chose certain ideas that met the ruler’s needs, made them clearer, and modified their justifications in response to changing political situations. For example, the monarch was defined as the center of the nation for the purpose of the unity and solidarity so as not to make any hindrances against the supreme power of rulers in the new regime. Nationalist ideas were promoted particularly when Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram took office during 1938-44 and again in 1948-57. Phibun established new cultural conditions by campaigning for the policy of nation building in which he associated the development and civilization of the nation with culture to obtain cultural hegemony through the propagation of nationalism and national culture. The pivotal figure who helped support Phibun’s task successful was Luang Wichit Wathakan, who controlled the national arts as the Director-General of the Fine Arts Department. Luang Wichit effectively and successfully made use of history and myths to arouse a sense of nationalism and patriotism through a large number of his writings including dramatic works.

From the 1950s onwards, the most distinguished intellectual who played an important role in powerfully constructing Thainess was Momratchawong Kukrit Pramoj. He successfully managed to bring back the ideology of Thainess based on the absolute monarchy regime in such a way that it could dominate Thai people’s way of thinking profoundly. His well-known novel, *Si Phaendin* (lit., *Four Reigns*), helped revive the value of Thainess in terms of the loyalty to the monarchical institution, the relationships between social classes, and various aspects of Thai arts and culture relating to kingship and Buddhism. It can be said that this literary work helped promote the ideology of royalism successfully in that it clearly and effectively portrayed the significance of monarchical institution for social order, peace, security, stabilization, and progress.

Thai social and cultural structure has dramatically and rapidly changed since the late 1960s as a result of the policy for country’s development. The middle class has expanded and the nouveau riche has emerged; while the grassroots has become poorer. The economic inequality has increased so much that the existing order in the social relation could not handle. This caused Thai people were confused with the old value of Thainess, which led to the crisis of Thai identity. Particularly from the late 1980s onwards, the economic growth became a national agenda, which resulted in the

expansion of commerce and investment. New capital groups were then founded. These capital groups tried to step into power and political influence either through supporting political parties or entering the political arena themselves (Anuthee, 2012). This was a starting point that new ruling class had an opportunity to join in determining Thainess in the present day. Such current Thainess is more open to cultural diversity as seen from the people's consumption of foreign commodities without thinking of Thai identity prescribed by the nationalistic ideology earlier. Kasian (2001), a scholar in political science, described this phenomenon as "liberating the consumption from the national identity of the consumers". Thus, the ideology of Thainess, which was defined by the ruling class since the absolute monarchy regime, has been shared by other cultures introduced into the society due to the globalization and the capitalism.

In the midst of cultural diversity in the society, however, Thai identities such as language, traditional arts, food, manners, ways of life, and so on, are usually selected to be a representative of Thainess. For example, when presenting the picture of Bangkok to foreigners, the glory of the Grand Palace is shown instead of the pictures of traffic jam and slum. It is certain that this is a matter of tourism promotion; on the other hand, this reflects some desires and imagination yearned for, i.e. the glory of the past which cannot see it today. Such nostalgic phenomenon is clearly discernible in the globalized society where the people seek for their own identities under the consumerist culture which makes people consume what less or hardly differs. Traditional wisdoms regarding arts and culture are therefore demonstrated whenever talking about Thainess.

Thai Identities in Contemporary Performing Arts

Thai performing arts have long developed side-by-side with the growth of society. Archaeological evidence shows that Thai singing and dancing have originated from those of indigenous people since the prehistoric period before the settlement of the Thais (Sujit 1989). After the society interacted with outside cultures, certain forms and elements of those cultures' performances were borrowed to blend with the indigenous ones, which became their own characteristics. Later, Thai performances has evolved in accordance with the social change and then it has passed down from generation to generation. The postures of Thai classical dance found today, for example, can be traced back to the early Bangkok period (Orawan 1987: 53-55).

The development of Thai dance clearly seen today is creating contemporary Thai dance which is based on a combination of Western and Thai dances. That is to say, Thai dance postures are mixed and choreographed by Western-style movement and concepts. Such contemporary dance pieces noticeably result from curriculums in Thai dance taught in universities including Buditpatanasilpa Institute, developed from the Dance and Drama School initiated by Luang Wichit. Under these curriculums, the students need to conduct their final projects on both traditional and creative dance pieces. This leads to an attempt to innovate and experiment on their works so as to clearly and properly reflect cultural identities.

Another channel giving a chance for these dance practitioners to contribute innovative works in the Thai performing art circle is a television programme, *Thailand's Got Talent*, of which four seasons have been broadcast so far. Interestingly, a number of

teams that passed through the semi-final and final rounds particularly in Season 1 – 3 made use of Thai cultural identities in their shows. In Season 3, for example, The Phet Jarat Saeng (lit., Glittering Diamond) group, whose members derived from the Bunditpatanasilpa Institute, showed the performance of various kinds of traditional drums accompanied by other instruments and contemporary dance. The Thai Gym team, mostly national-level gymnasts, presented traditional ways of life and children's games through the acrobatics, flexibility and grace of rhythmic sportive gymnastic. Also, the Sorn Sin (lit., Art Bow) group narrated the stories based on classical literary works by using traditional martial arts, Thai boxing in particular.

Among these remarkable works, those of the Kit Buak Sip group and the I-Siam group, both of them being dance students and graduates from the Bunditpatanasilpa Institute, are able to communicate mainstream Thainess successfully. The Kit Buak Sip team combined traditional and contemporary dance styles with shadow technique similar to shadow puppetry or *les ombres chinoise*; while the I-Siam used the mixture of traditional and contemporary dance styles with 3D projection mapping technique. In terms of the form, their performances were very impressive, as Pornchita Na Songkhla, one of the judges, commented on the I-Siam performance: “you can amazingly mix and match Thainess and modernity” (Workpoint Entertainment and Sony Music (Thailand), 2013, July 28). In addition to using contemporary dance movement which created Eastern and Western ambience, the I-Siam in the final round competition also applied sign language in the performance to communicate the story to every group of audiences, particularly the deaf.

Not only were their artistic forms very attractive to audiences, but their contents were also impressive. Basically, their stories were taken from well-known literary works like *Ramakian*, a Thai version of Indian epic *Ramayana*, however, the stories were reinterpreted to communicate with contemporary audiences. Although the issues in their contents seemed to be conservatively and nationalistically addressed, they fitted into the current situation of Thai society where political schism, chaos, and insurgency were the main crisis. It can be said that these contents really moved the audience as seen from their reaction while seeing the performances. In the final round of Season 2, for example, The Kit Buak Sip team illustrated the country as a home with conflict; however, this home could become peaceful because of having a “father” who managed to instill a sense of goodness into their children. It is well known that the “father” here refers to the king.

Furthermore, the performance also reflected his great love towards every member in his home, his teaching on perseverance based on his royal composition, *Mahajanaka*, his assuaging the people's sufferings. The shadows of religious places including those of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam were demonstrated on screen. The final scene portrayed the shadow of Rama on the background of Siriraj Hospital where the king has been convalescing. At this scene, the audiences in the studio joined the blessing to the king in unison, which marked a great success of this performance. It can be said that the performance reproduces the ideology of Thai identities consisting of the three main institutes, namely, nation, religion, and monarch. Nevertheless, due to the diversified culture in the society, Thainess in this performance needed to comply with such social change. It is noticeable that religion here in the three main institute could not merely refer to Buddhism as it had been understood earlier, other religions like Christianity and Islam were added to cover all people's faith.

Likewise, the I-Siam in the final competition at Season 3 presented the issue of beautiful Thainess in which the discourse regarding Thai arts, culture, and people's generosity was raised in the opening scene. Following this, the Democracy Monument, a symbol of political change to democracy regime, political clash, material and technology's growth, and disasters were narrated to represent the social change. Then, the final scene showed asking for God's bless for the people's happiness and concord and ended with the portrayal of the three main institutes by demonstrating a Buddhist sanctuary and a drawing of the king in the middle of Thailand's map.

Conclusion

Considering such phenomena in Thai performing arts in terms of marketing psychology, Thainess is raised to communicate and impress Thai audiences in the hope of making partisanship. It is plausible that Thainess here is used for gaining the votes; on the other hand, it becomes a tool for developing Thai contemporary performing arts suitably. Thainess is currently part of creative activity in making contemporary performing arts interesting, and it also becomes a "selling point" on international stage. These performances exemplified the artistic and innovative idea of these performers which should be tangibly supported in earnest for the purpose of artistic development of the country as well as all humanity.

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