Creating Community: "Secure Housing" and Social Order in Thailand

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Abstract

Community has long been considered an important form of social organization in many parts of the world. At the level of governance, communities, loosely defined, are often the targets of "outreach," "engagement," or policies aimed at "development." On an individual level, people forge identities according to places or characteristics around which they feel a "sense of community." But what happens when "community" is not just as a sense or a loosely-bounded social construct, but a formal legal entity? This research investigates a slum upgrading policy that operates by forming just such entities. The *Baan Mankong* ["Secure Housing"] program provides urban residents facing eviction with access to home loans and legal land tenure, but only as communities. To take part in the program, residents must be part of an official *chumchon* ("community"). Residents are often aided in forming these *chumchon* by two very different organizations: (1) the government-sponsored agency that administers the policy, and (2) an activist network made up of other *chumchon*, which facilitates the arduous process of organizing households to go through the many stages of Baan Mankong upgrading. Once formed, the *chumchon* is the unit through which households negotiate with landowners, take out loans for physical upgrading, and gain rights to occupy land collectively. Through Baan Mankong, thousands of households have become bound to *chumchon* financially, spatially, and politically. My proposed dissertation project looks into the origins and

effects of these chumchon in terms of the ideologies and discourses that underlie them and the individuals that comprise them.

Keywords: Thai Community, Western words in Thai context, a case study of the Secure Housing program

Introduction

Today, the word *chumchon* appears so frequently in Thai parlance that it is difficult to imagine the language or society without it. Yet, less than a century ago, this was precisely the case. The purpose of this article is to trace the trajectory of this word – which in English translates as "community" – from its initial coinage to its contemporary use. To do this, both historical and ethnographic methods are employed. The term *chumchon* has taken on a very specific meaning in the urban context, referring almost exclusively to settlements of the urban poor. In the construction of this new definition, a new type of social unit has also been created, as well as a new form of collective identity available only to the urban poor. This identity can be both empowering and stigmatizing at the same time.

Methods

In telling the story of *chumchon,* secondary literature, archival sources and expert interviews were relied upon to trace the inception of the term and its initial uses. For contemporary uses, an ethnographic approach was employed, focusing primarily on an in-depth case study of the Baan Mankong [Secure Housing] program, which provides loans to communities to upgrade housing and legalize land tenure. This ethnographic research included 16 months of fieldwork between 2015 and 2018, with the bulk being undertaken between June 2017 and June 2018.

"Community" Becomes *Chumchon*

Evidence suggests that the word *chumchon* was coined in the years immediately following World War II. The Thai-English dictionary written by George McFarland in 1944 shows no entry for *chumchon* under either of the term's root words, *chum* and *chon*. In McFarland's 1890 English-Siamese dictionary, the entry "community" contains translations that include *ban* ["home" or "village"] and *muban* [the administrative designation for "village"], both of which are still in use (S. G. McFarland). The dictionary also contains the term *mu ratsadon nai tambon neung*, which is more of a description than a single term, suggesting that the concept of community was something that did not have direct translation.

Thailand's ambassador to the United Nations during the 1950s, Wan Waithayakon, also known as Prince Naradhip Bhongseprabhan, is commonly credited with bringing the word into official use (Reynolds)each essay in this book follows a word as it travels around the globe and across time. Scholars from five disciplines address thirteen societies to highlight the social and political life of words in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The approach is consciously experimental, in that rigorously tracking specific words in specific settings frequently leads in unexpected directions and alters conventional depictions of global modernity.Such words as security in Brazil, responsibility in Japan, community in Thailand, and hijāb in France changed the societies in which they moved even as the words were changed by them. Some words threatened to launch wars, as injury did in imperial Britain's relations with China in the nineteenth century. Others, such as secularism, worked in silence to agitate for political change in twentieth-century Morocco. Words imposed or imported from abroad could be transformed by those who wielded them to oppose the very powers that first introduced them, as happened in Turkey, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Taken together, this selection of fourteen essays reveals commonality as well as distinctiveness across modern societies, making the world look different from the interdisciplinary and transnational perspective of "words in motion."Contributors. Mona Abaza, Itty Abraham, Partha Chatterjee, Carol Gluck, Huri

Islamoglu, Claudia Koonz, Lydia H. Liu, Driss Maghraoui, Vicente L. Rafael, Craig J. Reynolds, Seteney Shami, Alan Tansman, Kasian Tejapira, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing","ISBN":"978-0-8223-9110-4","note":"Google-Books-ID: 0uvSbo8AA5UC","language":"en","editor":[{"family":"Gluck","given":"Carol"},{"family":"Tsing","given":"Anna Lowenhaupt"}],"author":[{"family":"Reynolds","given":"Craig J."}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2009",11,13]]}}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} . As an important figure in an era of translating Western words and institutions into the Thai context, Prince Wan is also credited with creating the terms of Western liberalism *prachathippatai* [democracy], *ratthathammanun* [constitution], as well as finance in the case of *thanakhan* [bank] (Mehl). In the context of post-war era liberal institution-building, community took on a particular importance as the major Western powers and their new intergovernmental organizations were providing assistance for "community development" in the form of aid to Third World countries (Baker and Phongpaichit; Boonyothayan).

Although Prince Wan may have formalized the use of *chumchon* in official written language, it is up for debate as to whether he was the first to use it. As Reynolds explains, the liberal, Western framework that Prince Wan represents was only one of several intellectual currents that may have been in search of a way to express a concept of "community." Among these were two schools of communitarian thought: the Marxist movements that were making their way from China into Southeast Asia and a strand of thought coming from leaders of the Indian independence movement (Reynolds)each essay in this book follows a word as it travels around the globe and across time. Scholars from five disciplines address thirteen societies to highlight the social and political life of words in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The approach is consciously experimental, in that rigorously tracking specific words in specific settings frequently leads in unexpected directions and alters conventional depictions of global modernity.Such words as security in Brazil, responsibility in Japan, community in Thailand, and hijāb in France changed the societies in which they moved even as the words were changed by them. Some words threatened to launch wars, as

injury did in imperial Britain's relations with China in the nineteenth century. Others, such as secularism, worked in silence to agitate for political change in twentieth-century Morocco. Words imposed or imported from abroad could be transformed by those who wielded them to oppose the very powers that first introduced them, as happened in Turkey, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Taken together, this selection of fourteen essays reveals commonality as well as distinctiveness across modern societies, making the world look different from the interdisciplinary and transnational perspective of "words in motion."Contributors. Mona Abaza, Itty Abraham, Partha Chatterjee, Carol Gluck, Huri Islamoglu, Claudia Koonz, Lydia H. Liu, Driss Maghraoui, Vicente L. Rafael, Craig J. Reynolds, Seteney Shami, Alan Tansman, Kasian Tejapira, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing","ISBN":"978-0-8223-9110-4","note":"Google-Books-ID: 0uvSbo8AA5UC","language":"en","editor":[{"family":"Gluck","given":"Carol"},{"family":"Tsing","given":"Anna Lowenhaupt"}],"author":[{"family":"Reynolds","given":"Craig J."}],"issued":{"date-parts":[["2009",11,13]]}}}],"schema":"https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json"} . The actual term *chumchon* may have simply emerged as the winner among many efforts to come up with a way to express a concept that was very much in the air at the time. These different movements all saw community as a key unit of political organization, albeit often serving ideologically opposed goals.

While the term *chumchon* may well be the result of accidental collaboration between opposing political theories, the tensions between these ideologies would play out in concrete ways on the ground through the battle for the hearts and minds of villagers as different groups attempted to create *chumchon* in their own ideal vision. As the Cold War intensified in the 1950s and 1960s, Southeast Asia became a battleground between capitalist and communist forces. The Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), influenced primarily by Maoist thought, gained traction not just with the Chinese-Thai population, but also with a class of young people rising through the country's many newly-formed universities, many of whom hailed from the rural provinces (Lertchoosakul). The government, perceiving a threat from the countryside, instituted the Department of Community

Development under the Ministry of Agriculture and began training large groups of community development workers to live among rural villagers, gain their trust and teach them how to become a strong community and resist the communist threat. This effort was supported by the United States Operations Mission, which later became the United States Agency for International Development (Boonyothayan).

The 1970s saw an intensification of the struggle for community between the CPT and the Thai government, under the patronage of the U.S. This was also a period in which new ideas of community gained influence and a distinctly Thai intellectual tradition around *chumchon* began to form. After two clashes between the military and student activists in October in 1973 and 1976, in which many students were killed, a great number of CPT members fled to forests and villages of Thailand in an effort to escape government persecution. This generation of activists would later be known as the Octoberists (Lertchoosakul). In the countryside, they worked among the villagers, much as the community development workers did. According to Sansonthi Boonyothayan, a former community development worker, these two groups of mostly young people were quite aware of each other's presence and missions. Some were even individually acquainted and did not harbor personal animosity toward each other.

The narrative of a community being put forth by the Department of Community Development was quite clear: become a strong community and you will get support from the government (Boonyothayan). On the other side, the messages coming from the student activists were likely quite mixed. While most of these activists operated as cells of the CPT, their actual beliefs frequently diverged from the Maoist doctrine of the CPT. Many held quite liberal ideas about freedom and democracy (Baker and Phongpaichit; Lertchoosakul). In the end, many were not so much advocates of a communist revolution as they were against the current authoritarian state with its strong Western influence. After the downfall of the CPT and their return from the forests, many Octoberists would ultimately put their considerable community organizing skills to work in the service of striving for the ideals of liberty and equality and against imperialism (Lertchoosakul).

As the complex and inconsistent ideologies of the Octoberists suggest, the conflict between capitalism and communism was only one dimension of the political struggles playing out in Thailand in the 1970s. For some, the clashes between Western liberalism and the various strains of the Eastern left that were playing out on Southeast Asian soil all represented imperialism of the major world powers. During this period, two related schools of thought around the concept of *chumchon* arose from Thai intellectuals searching for alternative forms of political organization that better represented the native social order of the region. However, neither of these schools were without clear Western influence.

The community culture school of thought arose, ironically, from Thai community workers working with Western NGOs and Catholic missionaries in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Chatthip Natsupha, the most prominent voice of the community culture movement, the four major forebears of this intellectual tradition developed their approach by working on the ground with these international agencies. This grassroots work led them to develop an approach to community development work that emphasized respect for native culture and traditions. Following this work, Natsupha would come to articulate community culture as a theory of the natural way of life of many Southeast Asian societies. The community culture school of thought asserted that societies in what is now Thailand and the surrounding nations have for centuries organized themselves not as nation states, but as affiliated communities. This aligns with other theories of the mandala system or galactic polities that other scholars have used to describe early Southeast Asian civilizations. What Natsupha brings to these theories is the framing of these settlements as *chumchon*. He thus claims for *chumchon* a history that predates the word itself. The theory of community culture is not purely a description of the past, though. It is also a prescription of how the society should be, of what is more natural and more just, in keeping with this native social formation. Natsupha describes community culture as a form of anarchism, a stateless society based on related, but mostly self-sufficient, communities. He makes the call for a resurgence of community culture in the face of the hegemony of the Westphalian system that has forced

national boundaries of the modern nation-state on the entire world. Natsupha and other advocates of the community culture school thus believe that a more just society lies not in the pursuit of the interests of an independent Thai state, but rather in the weakening of the state and strengthening of community.

The community rights school of thought shares some of the same beliefs as the community culture school, but it differs in its approach to the state. Similar to community culture, the community rights movement asserts that the way of life in communities in the region of Thailand is incompatible with the individualism asserted by Western liberalism. However, unlike community culture, community rights activists seek to expand Western ideas of human rights to conceive of rights as a concept that can apply to a collectivity. In the abstract, this can apply to ideals such as human rights. In concrete terms, the most prominent achievement of the community rights movement is collective land rights. Unlike the community culture movement, the community rights school of thought conceives of community not as an alternative to the state, but rather as a unit of organization that must be recognized by the state, as well as an organization can make demands of the state collectively in a way that the individuals within the communities cannot because of their marginal status (Santasombat; Ganjanapan).

While the community rights and community culture schools of thought were both initially conceived in rural contexts, their influence traveled to the city through the movement of both people and ideas. Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s and 1990s, rural migrants flooded Thailand's cities and Bangkok, in particular. In the absence of other housing options, these migrants built small settlements on empty land, constructing a patchwork of slums throughout the city. They carried with them many aspects of rural life and to this day residents of such settlements are known as *chaoban* [villagers] (Rabhibadhana). In the 1990s, the newly created Bangkok Metropolitan Administration began officially recognizing these settlements and designated them as *chumchon* with a typology that ranged from *chumchon meuang* [urban community] to *chumchon eh at* [congested community] based on their population densities, income levels, and the physical

state of settlement (Endo)Thailand, offers upward mobility but is fraught with risk. For members of the urban lower class, residence and occupation are closely inter-connected. Shifts in priorities in housing, occupation and education as family circumstances change affect the way they deploy their limited financial resources, while home fires and job lay-offs make it necessary for poor communities to accommodate frequent changes of residence and variations in production and consumption. People with limited resources are extremely sensitive to uncertainty. Living with Risk examines how lower class communities in the inner city and the urban fringe of Bangkok view their employment prospects and living conditions, and how they manage risk. The author draws on two case studies, one considering the situation of women who became self-employed after losing factory jobs during Thailand's economic restructuring in the late 1990s, and the second a community displaced by a devastating fire. The book's detailed examination of the dynamics of the informal economy makes a substantial contribution to the literature on development economics in urban areas.",”ISBN”:”978-9971-69-782-2”,”note”:”Google-Books-ID: M9aBBgAAQBAJ”,”shortTitle”:” Living with Risk”,”language”:”en”,”author”:[{“family”:”Endo”,”given”:”Tamaki”}],”issued”:{“date-parts”:[[“2014”,3,14]]}}}],”schema ”:”https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”} .

The 1980s and 1990s was also a period of NGO proliferation and grassroots activism. Many of these organizations were led by Octoberists and came out of the same generation as the founders of the community culture and community rights movements (Lertchoosakul). Activists organized poor people around the country in both urban and rural areas into networks of communities in order to advocate for progressive causes, especially land reform. This networked community movement reached its apex in the Assembly of the Poor protests in 1994 (Missingham). During this wave of community-based organizing, the ideas and methods of previous eras cross-pollinated and intersected with even more influences from abroad.

Just as community ideology in Thailand had transformed in Thailand in the post-Vietnam war era, international community-based

movements were also transforming. Additionally, just as in the post-World War II era, communities traveled both sides of an ideological divide. On the radical side, communities organizing in the style of Saul Alinsky arrived in Asia by way of Christian missionaries. This style of urban organizing would find a home in Thailand through the efforts of Octoberist Suwit Wattanoo, one of the original organizers of what is now the Four Regions Slum Network (FRSN), founded under that name in 1997.

The other major influence on community thinking came from international development. Beginning in the 1980s and gaining steam in the 1990s, major international organizations, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, along with smaller aid agencies of Western governments, began funding community-based projects through local NGOs. This movement in international aid was based on the concept of good governance, which asserted the importance of an active civil society, in addition to a functioning government, in creating development that reached all citizens (Charoensinolan).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, these numerous strands of influence began to weave together to form the prototypes of what would later become the *Ban Mankong* program. Community-based activist movements, most notably the FRSN, lobbied the government to stall evictions and argue for the rights of the urban poor to live and work in the city. To do so, they successfully arranged long-term communal rental agreements with government agencies and created a new form of land tenure, the community deed. They worked in conjunction with finance and architecture professionals educated abroad to come up with novel finance mechanisms that could fund *chumchon* as a whole corporate entity rather than the individuals within them. These new legal entities representing the *chumchon* are housing cooperatives, which are administered by the Department for the Promotion of Cooperatives under the Ministry of Agriculture, the same ministry that oversees the Department of Community Development that ran anti-communist campaigns in the 1960 and 1970s. When the first *Ban Mankong* programs were launched, they were financed through the newly-founded CODI fund, which received funding from the World Bank. After – and sometimes even before –

going through the *Ban Mankong* process, Bangkok communities are officially registered as *chumchon* with their respective districts, giving them access to water, electricity and monthly funding for community development activities.

The coming together of these different influences has impacted both the meaning of the word *chumchon* and the concrete lived experiences of *chumchon* members. In the contemporary urban context, it can be argued the meaning of *chumchon* is considerably narrower than the English "community," which can be used to describe anything from traditional, geographically-bounded neighborhoods to a loose feeling of affiliation between people with a shared interest around the globe. On the other hand, *chumchon* connotes not just a defined geographical area, but an area with a particular type of people: poor.

While technically people of higher income levels who live in close proximity could register as a *chumchon* with their district, this rarely, if ever, happens. In an interview, the head of the community development department of one Bangkok district said directly that the term *chumchon* does not really apply to places like *muban chat san* – planned developments – or other middle income housing. Middle income people would not register as a *chumchon* with the district, even though they could get money for activities, because the label *chumchon* would imply that they are poor.

At the same time, in practice *chumchon* are subject to the demands of many other organizations. To be part of the FRSN requires attending and conducting meetings, carrying out organizing activities, demonstrating to others that one is putting in the 'work' on behalf of others in a similar situation. This is nothing compared to the requirements of the *Ban Mankong* program itself. Banks, CODI, district offices, and the various other agencies involved demand documentation of membership, proposals, receipts and proof of good internal governance in order to receive recognition and funding.

In adopting the label of *chumchon,* residents of poor settlements may accomplish three things. First, they avail themselves of government resources by accepting a categorical label. Second, they stigmatize themselves in the eyes of other classes by adopting that

label. Third, they may find a source of empowerment by joining a social movement based on a class identity.

Conclusion

In the context of *Ban Mankong*, the members of *chumchon* often find themselves at the intersection of stigma, empowerment and discipline. While the label *chumchon* marks them as poor, appropriating *chumchon* as a means of forming a larger collective identity, as happens in the case of the FRSN, can create a feeling of collective efficacy, of being part of something larger than oneself.

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