

# Art and Culture in the Development Period to Modernization in the Reign of King Rama VI

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## II. OBJECTIVE

**Abstract**—The growth of Thai society in western style in the middle of Rattanakosin period can be defined as modernization/civilization. These terms had an influence on the development of the country in the reign of King Rama V owing to the governance reform, and cultures influenced by the West. Those were passed on until the reign of King Rama VI. The preference was not only for the renovation of architecture and arts based on Thai customs reflecting the prosperity and beauty of handicrafts but also for the acceptance of westernization. The remain of this acceptance includes the concept of such value as gentlemanly behavior like that in Victorian Era of the United Kingdom, and the support of women's status. Moreover, the wide spread of modernization leads to the movement to change the country's governance system from absolute monarchy to democracy by a group of people called Rattanakosin Era (R.E.) 130 party.

**Keywords**—Art and culture, development period, modernization, King Rama VI.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE adaptation of Thai society to modernization to become a civilized country began from King Rama IV after the opening of the country by the signing of trade treaty with the United Kingdom in 1855. This measure can be called 'Bend with the Wind' policy – that is to serve the obligation of powerful countries after the neighboring countries of Thailand were colonized by western countries. The concept of modernization or civilization in the middle of Rattanakosin era (The reigns of King Rama IV–King Rama VI) originated from the awareness of new world paradigm of powerful European countries with their core of power, and this resulted in the reformation of the country to be modern like those in western countries. This kind of modernization could be concrete westernization in terms of architecture, costumes, and new invented items with advanced technology as seen prominently in the reign of King Rama V. This concept was passed on continuously from one reign to another by the reflection of art with handicraft value together with the selective choice of the adaptation of western culture in Thai society. Moreover, some kinds of King Rama VI's mission as well as the spread of modernization concept caused the opposition of traditional governance and the call for the changing of governance system to western style government.

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The goals of this research are to find out body of knowledge concerning the adaptation of Thai society in the period of western culture expansion and to find out the suitable guidelines to maintain the existence of Thai culture among the influx of foreign culture from both the east and the west with the research purposes as follows;

1. to study the hand on of art and culture in the reign of King Rama VI.
2. to analyze King Rama VI's initiation concerning the art and culture in the aspect of its tradition and modernization.
3. to analyze the result of the country's adaptation to modernization in the reign of King Rama VI.



Fig. 1 The traditional Thai performing art [1]

## III. METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative research, conducting by gathering information from primary and secondary documents, formal and informal interviews 8 persons concerned, both individual and group, including applying historical methods to criticize information and interpreting information for evaluating the reliability, as well as paraphrasing the information by synthesizing and analyzing the concept of modernization, which could harmonize and describe the research content rationally.

## IV. RESEARCH RESULTS

The changes in art related to the idea, belief, and attitude of artists who created the artifacts influenced by the value of society in the period. At the same time, such changes were in line with each Royal Highness's preference. That is to say in the reign of King Rama IV and King Rama V, there was a turning point where Thai traditional art was replaced by Western art. A lot of western style buildings were constructed, and this reflected the decline of the popularity of traditional

Thai art in terms of its appearance and its concept deriving from the belief of Tri-phases including planning, shape and elements. However, later on King Rama VI had an initiation to rehabilitate traditional Thai architecture and art.



Fig. 2 The traditional Thai style building [2]

The prominent support of traditional Thai art and culture includes architectural work of art initiated by King Rama VI, namely the authentic traditional Thai style buildings and the applied traditional Thai buildings in which the blend of traditional art and western style art were applied by utilizing Buddhism based architecture in the construction of buildings for multipurpose. The highlight of both architectural styles is the construction of rooftop like top of castle decorated magnificently. Moreover, King Rama VI supported the work of art by reuniting the working units from various ministries to Performance Department, which is now Fine Arts Department responsible for preservation and development of Thai craftsman's work. Furthermore, King Rama VI supported the inclusion of Art Curriculum in school level so that traditional Thai craftsman work could be passed on to younger generation.

The reign of King Rama VI is regarded as the Golden Age of performing art both in tradition Thai style and modern drama influenced by western countries. The King wrote about 180 drama scripts both in Thai and Foreign languages [3]. The King took the roles of the director and the actor. In musicals, the King composed the lyrics and melody in Thai and English. King Rama VI also encouraged the involvement of his civil servants as the audiences and performers. It could, therefore, be seen that satisfying His Majesty's preference and being granted as His Majesty's favorite persons with good performance skill led to the prosperity of performing art.

The rehabilitation and support of traditional Thai art by King Rama VI as mentioned above does not really mean his ignorance of the notion of Thai art modernization employed by previous kings. King Rama VI styles of art reflect only external appearance, not including the belief of the original concept of universe in Tri-phases. Most importantly, His Majesty paid high emphasis on the importance of craft – its elegant and magnificent handicraft reflecting the unique identity of Thai traditional art [4]. Moreover, in consideration of modernization by referring to the value of western art, it was found that in the meantime the admiration of handmade artifacts and handicrafts by English society, the flashback of mass industrial manufacture, resulted in the decrease of art value. The popularity of traditional art was widened after the

Arts and Craft Exhibition in 1888. It can be concluded that King Rama VI, who was educated in the United Kingdom from 1893 – 1902, was also inspired by that event, and his initiation of the rehabilitation of the previous work of arts disclosed his vision to reflect the root of Thai culture to the eyes of various civilized countries [5].

The evidences indicating the influence of western culture on Thai society in the Reign of King Rama VI include various architecture, drama, and caricature portraits. The construction of buildings in the styles of previous Kings or western styles represented the prominent progress of the city while performing art and caricature portraits, which were His Majesty's personal preference, gained different support and were utilized as a means to gradually publicize the royal initiation to people in terms of the awareness of nationalism and being royalists. And this was in line with His Majesty's essential concern, which was mainly nationalism.



Fig. 3 King Rama VI's caricature portrait [6]

In terms of the development of the country by using art and culture work representing civilization, although the value of forms of traditional artifacts was defined as symbols of the prosperity of year gone by traditional Thai culture as shown through delicate handicrafts and elaborate craftsmanship, the influence of western culture was still be visible in these kinds of architecture, drama, and caricature portraits with the construction of buildings to represent the state of being civilized city. However, the performing art and caricature portrait drawings, can be regarded as the influence of western culture on His Majesty's education in the United Kingdom.

Based on the evidence of His Majesty's work of drama and caricature portraits, it is found that his work is closely connected with the popularity of art and culture in that period.

His Majesty's vision to promote the western way in Thai society, which is regarded as preliminary base and is passed on up to now, includes the value of 'gentlemanly behavior', the terms defined in Victorian English as being gentle, honest, and loyal to the Nation and the Majesty [7]. The club was, therefore, established under the Majesty's initiation with the purposes of providing area for recreation, social manner learning, and gentlemanly behavior practice, which was accepted socially. And this kind of behavior was adopted by the Majesty himself, so the King was named "Victorian Prince of Siam". Since the culture of socialization was adopted by His Majesty during his study in the United Kingdom, the meeting of club members was the chance of all members to

gain direct experience in western social behavior as well as western recreation activity practice. Moreover, in the occasion of each club establishment, various journals and newspapers were printed under His Majesty's initiation, and The Royal articles, and speeches aiming at publicizing the Royal's initiation and concepts or guidelines of desired behaviors including caricature portrait drawing, the base of journalists, were published [8].

Another activity designed to train men to have gentlemanly behavior was battle exercising and sports competition among members of the Scouts with the purpose of creating unity among members due to His Majesty's initiation about the lack of unity among civil servants [9]. The Scouts was established to serve the king's initiation to solve the problem by requiring the civil servants of all departments to come together to have battle exercises. The successful outcome of this activity was the elimination of the sense of divide among different levels of officials from different working units. Since every member had to respect commander of each level, and His Majesty was commander in chief, this resulted in the acquisition of being loyal and nationalism.



Fig. 4 King Rama VI and the football team [10]

The analysis results of King Rama VI's initiation in terms of art and culture disclose the relevance of the theory of modernization especially the state of being up to date in line with western countries. For example, during the flashback of the popularity of traditional handicraft in western countries, in Thailand there was also flashback of the rehabilitation of traditional Thai art and culture to show the national identity and the prosperity of Thai culture, which has been passed on recently. In terms of the definition of culture under the conceptual framework of European Empire Period, since culture was defined as modernization or westernization, Thailand had to show its high standard of culture in accordance with western criterion by creating art and cultural artifacts based on western value and by implanting the practice of gentlemanly behavior among the citizen. Meanwhile, the support of Thai women's status in accordance with that of western countries was also implemented by the change of Thai men's misconception concerning multiple marriage life with more than one wife, the superior of Thai male over female, and the encouragement of women's participation in social clubs and formal school education.



Fig. 5 Women's participation in social activity [11]

The spread of European culture to Thailand caused changes to imitate the growth of the world center of power in terms of materials, value, belief reflecting through arts and way of life. His Majesty was supposed to select the right forms of western culture and adapt it to Thai context. Therefore, based on His Majesty's initiation concerning the unsuitability of new governance system from western countries due to the lack of education among the Thais, such governance system was not adopted in Thailand. However, thanks to the expansion of education and the increase of interaction among foreign countries, the flow of ideas concerning new governance system enlightened among groups of younger military men calling themselves as Party of Rattanakosin Era (R.E.)130 with the aim of changing the country governance system, and decreasing the Royal authority enabling His Majesty to be under the constitution system.

The cause of political movement derived from the dissatisfaction of The Royal Consent concerning the governance of the country. The main contrast includes the concept of middle class people stating that if the country was governed under the justice law, the country would be prosperous like those in western countries. While His Majesty's concept stating that the King himself was the leader responsible for specifying the expression and the route to modernization.[12] Although the idea to decrease the Royal authority and to implement the new governance system like those in western countries carried out by Party of R.E, 130 was not successful, and this group was regarded as rebels, the idea concerning the implementation of new government system like western countries was passed on by a group of people with progressive idea, and later on there were changes in government system in the next reign.

## V. CONCLUSION

In the Reign of King Rama VI, the goal of the country development to be in line with civilized countries was passed on from previous reigns through the expression of the country's preference in Western arts, architecture, and parts of fine arts. However, the distinction lied at the rehabilitation of traditional Thai art and the creation of applied Thai arts by blending Thai art in the construction of buildings in western style. Moreover, the promotion of the rehabilitation of traditional Thai craftsmanship showing the elaboration, and

magnificence of bygone year Thai handicraft was emphasized. Art in the style of King Rama VI's preference, the flashback to traditional beauty of Thais, was regarded as modernization of the period, and was in line with the value of the Westerners, who admired handicrafts more than mass products manufactured by machines. Moreover, other kinds of art reflecting modernization included western style drama and caricature portrait drawing in journals and magazines. Furthermore, modernization included implanting the practice of gentlemanly behavior among Thai men like those in Victorian era in the United Kingdom, and supporting women's status in terms of changes from being under the power of males, and misunderstanding of multiple marriage life with more than one wife, to encourage women's involvement in education and society. However, these kinds of changes were among only royal consorts and civil servants. The expression of modernization had to be done only under His Majesty's preference and initiation.

#### VI. DISCUSSION

King Rama VI's preference of traditional Thai art and some parts of His Majesty's speech concerning the threat of civilization resulted in the interpretation that His Majesty was dissatisfied with modernization. However, based on His Majesty's duties and speeches, it was found that the development of the country to the state of modernization was one of the royal's policies. The rehabilitation of architecture and traditional Thai art was in line with the popularity of western countries at the same period. It could, therefore, be concluded this kind of art was contemporary art like that in civilized countries. His Majesty's initiation to implant the value of gentlemanly behavior, to use traditional Thai art as symbols, and to create the sense of being loyal to the Nation and the King reflected the notion of royalists and nationalism. His Majesty's initiation concerning modernization did not include the imitation of drinking behavior, gambling, and the flirtation with prostitutes. Moreover, implementation of the governance system in western style to uneducated people with the purpose of modernizing the country should be under His Majesty's approval.

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