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Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 12, Supplementary Issue, December 2023, pp. 43-104.

(<Supplementary issue>“Thailand at a Global Turning Point,” edited by Hayami Yoko)

How to Cite:

Saichol Sattayanurak. The Thai Middle Class and the Dynamics and Power of Conservative Ideology in Thai Society and Politics. In “Thailand at a Global Turning Point,” edited by Hayami Yoko, *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, Supplementary Issue, December, 2023, pp. 43-104. DOI: 10.20495/seas.12.SupplementaryIssue_43.

Link to this article:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2023/12/vol-12-supplementary-issue-saichol-sattayanurak/>

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The Thai Middle Class and the Dynamics and Power of Conservative Ideology in Thai Society and Politics*

Saichol Sattayanurak**

The Thai middle class have long been dominated by and benefited from a conservative ideology. Middle-class intellectuals have not only reproduced the ideology rooted in the meaning of the “Thai nation” and “Thainess” that was established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but have changed its meaning and created new conceptions of it. Various artistic and cultural practices have resulted in conservative ideology having an impact on the mental and emotional makeup of the middle class in general. Although the new way of life introduced by globalization and capitalization has created new ideas, value systems, and emotions that are more liberal and democratic, it has not completely replaced the conservative ideology among the middle class. The middle class therefore manifest many ideological contradictions.

Between 2005 and 2014, both conservative and democratic ideals were used to explain problems of the “Thaksin regime,” which led the middle class to join the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). Throughout the ten years of violent political conflict, middle-class intellectuals convinced the middle class that Thai society was not ready for electoral democracy, and also used an ultra-conservative ideology to instill conservative sentiments. The resulting ultra-conservative ideology became so powerful that it led to the middle class supporting a political role for the monarchy, judiciary, and military.

After the 2014 coup, the ultra-conservative ideology continued to be used by the Thai state and the elites in tandem with a moderate conservative ideology. However, the middle class no longer benefited from conservative ideals. The calls for democracy appeared clearer. Thus, it can be expected that the middle class are in the process of retreating from conservative ideology, although they remain psychologically and emotionally committed to the traditional Thai value system to some degree.

Keywords: Thai middle class, dynamics and power, conservative ideology

* This article is part of a research project titled “Changes of Thought, Value Systems, and Emotional Regimes of the Thai Middle Class, 1957–2017,” supported by Thailand Science Research and Innovation and the National Research Council of Thailand.

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Introduction

The study of Thai politics tends to focus on the elite. There are some studies on the middle class, but investigations into the political movements of the middle class still lack a historical perspective. This is so particularly when it comes to the ideology of the middle class, which has changed in complex ways in its ideas, value systems, and emotions. Studying the changes in middle class ideology from a historical perspective may, in addition to better helping understand the middle class, be useful as an approach to the study of ideological change and its complex relationship with politics in other societies.

This article uses the word “conservative” as an ideology that prioritizes the preservation and passing on of “Thainess”; this ideology centers the organization of hierarchical social relationships and power relations on the belief that “Thainess makes Thailand good.” It prioritizes the preservation of the “Thai spirit” as well as the arts, culture, and value systems rooted in the monarchy and Buddhism, which ensure order, peace, stability, and progress in society. For more than a century, elite intellectuals have effectively constructed, instilled, and reinforced such a conservative ideology by modifying its meaning as well as co-opting and countering new ideas (Saichol 2014). However, the power of conservative ideology does not derive only from the work of elite intellectuals. Middle-class intellectuals have also played an important role in reproducing and reshaping the conservative ideology created by the elite. This has greatly increased the mental and emotional influence of conservative ideology on the Thai middle class in general.

The term “middle class” in this article refers to the middle and upper levels of the middle class; it does not include the lower middle class or the younger generation, who have a different socioeconomic and ideological status. The term “middle class” is used in a broad sense and does not recognize the diversity of the middle class in terms of economic status, occupation, age, values, taste, etc. In fact, each section or member of the middle class has, to a greater or lesser degree, a different combination of conservatism and other ideologies. But here we will speak of the ideology of the middle class from only a general perspective or in the context of important trends.

This article intends to show that the middle class play an important role in reinforcing the dynamism and power of conservative ideology in Thai society and politics. It begins by analyzing the benefits that the middle class derive from conservative ideology, leading to an understanding of the reasons why middle-class intellectuals use various kinds of artistic and cultural practices to reproduce and reshape conservative ideology. It then analyzes the emergence of new ideas, value systems, and emotions that create

ideological contradictions in the minds of the middle class, before analyzing the compounding of conservative and democratic ideologies that drove the political movements of the middle class between 2005 and 2014. After that, it addresses artistic and cultural practices involving ultra-conservative and middle-of-the-road conservative ideologies that were used following the coup in 2014 in an attempt to control and dominate the minds of the people. This leads to an analysis of the conditions and factors that help predict that the middle class are in the process of retreating from conservative ideology.

I The Benefits to the Middle Class from Conservative Ideology

The middle class have benefited greatly from conservative ideology. Middle-class intellectuals have selected and adapted conservative ideals through various artistic and cultural practices, which has resulted in the majority of the Thai middle class having a strong mental and emotional attachment to “Thainess.”

The first middle class outside the bureaucracy consisted of Chinese immigrants who prospered in the Thai state; they leveraged conservative ideology by being “Thai-ified” in certain aspects in order to gain rights. In the 1950s–60s, more Chinese “became Thai” because China came under Communist control and the 1955 Thai citizenship law required people in Thailand to hold a single nationality. So Chinese who were unable to return to their country had to take Thai nationality, change their family name to a Thai name, and learn Thai in order to benefit from commerce and contact with the bureaucracy. The Thai government ordered Chinese schools to close, which led the Chinese to send their children to Thai schools. In addition, many Chinese capitalist families who “became Thai” and built networks with the Thai elite were highly successful, investing in various businesses, including those that received state concessions. The success of these Chinese people gave the ethnic Chinese middle class a sense of confidence in the stability of the Thai state and their own ability to prosper in it. Thailand became a land of hope, and both ethnic Chinese capitalists and the middle class benefited greatly from the country’s development policies. They were prepared to accept “Thainess” as part of their lives, while China became a Communist country beset by famine and the fires of war amid the large-scale violence that broke out during the Cultural Revolution.

Since before the development era, the Thai state has pursued policies very beneficial to the middle class, most of whom are of Chinese descent. The country’s partnership with the United States led to huge amounts of money flowing into its economic system, and the United States also provided scholarships under which, between 1950 and 1974, 1,500 “Thais” graduated and returned to enter government service, including

as university professors (Bell 1982, 61–74). Many in the middle class come from rural areas—possibly ethnic Chinese from various regions, or Lao from the Northeast and North, who “made their way up from farmer, landowner or village traders through various state projects” (Nidhi 2018). The rise of tourism has made “Thainess” even more important to the middle class because many significant tourist attractions, activities, and items are cultural in nature.

Both males and females of Chinese and Lao descent with sufficient education entered government service, which intensified the process of “becoming Thai.” There are many among the middle class who play the role of intellectuals, such as intellectually renowned monks, university professors, writers, magazine publishers, theater and film producers, etc. These intellectuals have all been molded by mainstream Thai intellectuals (important Thai intellectuals from the nineteenth century onward who inherited the nationalist ideology). The adoption of “Thainess” (or national culture) in the sense defined by mainstream intellectuals gives this group a higher social status and greater negotiating power with government officials. In addition, the value system in Thailand’s conservative ideology is consistent with the value systems in Hong Kong Chinese arts and culture, which have a great influence on Chinese people in Thailand (Teo 1997, 74; Fu 2008, 12; Kornphanat 2012, 96). Thai intellectuals of Chinese descent reproduced these value systems while combining capitalist ideals emphasizing worldly success with “Chineseness” and “Thainess,” to form an ideology of a “mat and pillow under royal protection” that responded to the needs and ambitions of the Chinese in Thailand and reduced the sense of shame in being Chinese (Sittithev 2015). The Chinese middle class could feel proud of both their “Chineseness” and “Thainess.”

In the case of the ethnic Lao middle class, mostly descendants of Lao immigrants forcibly relocated into the Lower North, Central Region, East, and Northeast from the early Bangkok period (Bung-on 1998)—when they were able to raise their status to middle class through the education system and government service as teachers, nurses, soldiers, police officers, etc.—they and their families were ready to “become Thai.” The similarities between the Lao and Thai ethnicity, language, and religion made it easy for Lao to take on “Thainess.”

For several decades, Thailand was a bureaucratic state. In the 1990s a group of large capitalists were voted into power. Thus, parliament has not been something the middle class can rely on politically. The solution has been to rely on the royal prestige of the monarch to counterbalance, hold to account, and control the power of both the military and parliamentary dictatorships. Therefore, the conservative ideology promotes royal hegemony, which is of great benefit to the middle class. The middle class believe that the reign of King Rama IX helped to lay the foundation of the political order after the 1932

revolution, when the country had to face changes and pressures from divisions and conflicts both internally and with other countries. The historical and cultural resources inherent in the monarchy helped to create national unity at times of crisis (Connors and Ukrist 2021, 5).

In addition, in a political context where the middle class lack institutional mechanisms to oversee and investigate those holding state power, the idea of “rule by righteousness” (or rule by good people) directly benefits the middle class, who use it to control the exercise of power by governments, government officials, politicians, judges, etc. Therefore, the idea of government by good people has always been important in the conservative ideology of the middle class.

The ideology of the patronage system has contributed to the power of conservative ideology, because Thai society accepts social hierarchy. This hierarchy generates great inequality in power, prestige, rights, opportunities, and the possession of resources and creates a complex system of patronage relationships. The middle class use the benefits of patronage relationships for stability in business, progress in government service, and protection of their own lives and assets. Even family and kinship relationships fall under the patronage system in which consciousness of favors and gratitude are more important than blood relationships (Akin 1984, 1–27). The long existence and the morality of the patronage system have therefore contributed to the continued strength of conservative ideology.

The benefits gained from a conservative ideology allow middle-class intellectuals to reproduce conservative ideals through artistic and cultural practices, reinforcing the conservative ideology that is inculcated by the elite and various state institutions and whose influence spreads into wider society. In addition to feeling a strong bond with the monarch and Buddhism at the heart of “Thainess,” the middle class are still committed to the Thai language and Thai virtues, literature, art, manners, etc. The meanings of “Thainess” in all these dimensions create ideals for living and managing social relationships that are believed to be correct and good, giving rise to prestige and a feeling of pride for having acted according to the standards of “Thainess” in all respects. They also affect the middle-class worldview as well as explaining the problems of life, family, society, or the nation along with their solutions. The enormous power of such a conservative ideology persists because of the artistic and cultural practices of middle-class intellectuals who have played an important role in various circles of society in recent decades.

II Middle-Class Intellectuals and the Artistic and Cultural Practices that Reproduce Conservative Ideology

Middle-class intellectuals have a wide range of statuses and roles, and therefore artistic and cultural practices, but the various forms of their artistic and cultural practices since the 1950s have had the effect of giving the middle class ideas, value systems, and emotions that are deeply committed to conservative ideology.

Famous monks with a reputation as intellectuals have a broad influence because they disseminate ideas in the name of teaching religion: they receive funds from donors to print books for free or cheap distribution. More recently, books have also been disseminated online. One famous monk's teachings emphasize "satisfaction with what one already has," living a "sufficient" life, not clinging to material objects, and aspiring for a peaceful life. Such teachings contribute to turning the middle class against the capitalist system because they project profit making as immoral greed and selfishness. Those who make large profits must therefore make merit or provide substantial help to society so they can be respected as "good people."

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu preached on the "absurdity in the new civilization (*dosa moha*)." He taught:

Please remember the worst evil of mankind, which is selfishness. . . . Technology or industry has given us money. . . . It provokes a lot of sin. . . . It is about unfairness and greed. . . . There is more competition, rivalry, and jealousy. . . . The value of the lives of others is disregarded. (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu 1984)

He added, "This greed and selfishness is about 'materialism'" that results in a political system that "is a democracy that is intoxicated with materialism" (Buddhadasa Bhikkhu 1984).

Somdet Phra Buddhakosajarn (P. A. Payutto), when he still had the monastic name Phra Bhramagunabhorn, presented a sermon on "Buddhist economics," teaching that consuming for pleasure is "desire (*tanha*)." The good path is to develop the mind to a higher plane with help and sufficiency and without exploiting others (Phra Bhramagunabhorn [P. A. Payutto] 2010, 35). His teachings on "Buddhist law" show that secular freedom is used in order to gain benefits as one desires, by "dividing and competing" (Phra Dhammapitaka [P. A. Payutto] 1996, 33), and his "political science of rule by righteousness" teaches that "wealth and power must serve righteousness" (Phra Bhramagunabhorn [P. A. Payutto] 2009, 48). He also proposed that people should be controlled and receive instruction from the state because "people are too weak, so cannot preserve peace" (Phra Bhramagunabhorn [P. A. Payutto] 2009, 97) and explained that

“human beings are at different levels of development.” Those who are “better people” than others should therefore have power over others. “Only when good is really great,” which is when “good people” have power, can there be a government “making good great, with work to create great benefit for the people” (Phra Bhramagunabhorn [P. A. Payutto] 2009, 42).

Buddhist teachings affect people’s way of thinking; people view others through the perspective of “good people” and “bad people” and believe that social problems are caused by “bad people.” The important causes of problems come from “inside the human mind,” comprising “desire (*tanha*),” which is the need for benefit, “impudence (*mana*),” which is the need for power or supremacy, and “erroneous beliefs (*titti*),” which are beliefs, opinions, and adherence to concepts or views that what they see or uphold is the correct truth (Phra Bhramagunabhorn [P. A. Payutto] n.d.). The capitalist system is based on *tanha*; it is a bad system, which makes people in capitalist society “bad people.” “Good people” are those who adhere to

knowing about themselves or knowing sufficiency in pursuit of wealth in a way that they like, and they are not excessively greedy. . . . They must know about spending. . . . They are people who know themselves . . . how much family, rank, position, duty, work, knowledge, and ability they have and who must behave in accordance with these conditions, and not mislead themselves. (DMC TV n.d.)

Buddhism also teaches that the “virtues of the righteous,” which means “the morality of good people,” makes them “truly good people” (MGR Online 2011). The influence of Buddhist thinking even led one economics scholar to declare: “Everyone is born . . . naturally as an innocent baby. . . . As human beings grow up, they are naturally overwhelmed by emotion, passion, desire and lust . . . and want to want without limits . . . and are diverted by base low emotions” (Suvinai 2008a).

Only some people “have eyes to see what is right” or can change into “truly good people” (Suvinai 2008a). Such concepts have become the standard ideas, value systems, and emotional basis for making the middle class accept inequality among humans and accept rule by “good people” while feeling contempt, hatred, or opposition toward “bad people.”

Astrologers play a role in strengthening conservative ideology. Astrology still appears in a great number of newspapers and magazines and is part of the process of socialization and social organization, which involves defining a happy life. As a result, traditional social norms are accepted, such as social class, ideas of karma and the results of karma, and male superiority (Chanokporn 2013). The belief is reproduced that the life of an individual and the life of the nation are already defined by “fate” and the “fate of the

nation.” Success or failure is therefore a matter of destiny (apart from “old karma” and the inspiration of “sacred objects”). The belief in fate and the fate of the nation therefore renders changing political, economic, social, and cultural structures unimportant.

Astrologers continue to play a role in managing political emotions. For example, they make the middle class feel that various serious problems are the result of their fate and the fate of the nation rather than failings by the government. Some astrologers affirm General Prayut Chan-o-cha as being a “good person,” for example: “His fate was that whenever he says anything, his audience doesn’t like it, . . . but he is sensitive, kind, has a teacher. . . . Outside he is rough, but deep inside he is a gentle person” (*Daily News* 2020). As the situation changes, fortune-tellers adapt their prophecies. Some simply recommend living according to Thai virtues, such as Busarin Pattamakom, a prominent astrologer and columnist, who said on April 8, 2020:

It’s been fully five months since Jupiter and Saturn retreated . . . this period is one of turmoil, divisions within the government and the atmosphere of our national society . . .

However, it depends on the stars and whose stars it is. . . . Some people are rich in contrast to the economy. . . . The important thing is to have “gratitude.” . . . If anyone has no gratitude, whatever they do, they will not prosper and be troubled for the rest of their lives. We must focus on gratitude. Diligence, patience, frugality, honesty, and gratitude are the ways of salvation. (*Matichon* 2020b)

Writers reproduce the idea that “this Thailand is good because of Thainess.” Such thinking has always existed in conservative ideologies, such as Sot Kuramarohit’s declaration in 1940 that in comparison with China, “there have never been hundreds of thousands of people who starve to death. This is Thailand—a Buddhist country that has peace. . . . I am a Thai who prides himself on being Thai, as all patriotic Thais should be proud” and “Thailand has never been a colony of anyone else” (quoted in Jirat 2016, 124).

Many Thai writers express love for the nation, religion, and king. For example, the novelist Piyaphon Sakkasem created plots showing that the deep love of a mother for her children and a wife for her husband should not equal love for the nation, even when the protagonist is a woman, ready to use violence to save the nation and realm for her children (Porntada 2007, 173–174). The novels of Prabhassorn Sevikul reproduce a meaning of “Thainess” that emphasizes being helpful, having faith in Buddhism, taking pride in the art and culture of Thailand, having gratitude and loyalty to the monarchy, and taking pride in the honor of being in government service (Nuntarat 2018). Many of Thommayanti’s novels have plots that focus on the struggle for national independence under the leadership of the king and create an image of the king as a righteous person, clever and excellent at war. Some stories offer images of Thai monarchs before the 1932 revolution

that popularized democracy. Thommayanti often emphasizes in her novels that “above love is duty, responsibility, sacrifice of even one’s life to save the nation, to save the realm.” The female protagonists in Thommayanti’s novels are all strong-minded, patient, resolute, and self-confident but still with a Thai female nobility that holds fast to the Thai value system (Teejuta 2015, 256–259).

The meanings of “masculinity” and “femininity” under patriarchal ideology as part of conservative ideology have also been intensively reproduced by many other intellectuals and through the use of international artistic and cultural media, such as textbooks, Children’s Day books, novels, product advertisements, columns in magazines and newspapers, etc. Even the recent “Boy Love” novels inculcate a conservative ideology. For example, *A Tale of a Thousand Stars* (which came out as a film and TV series in 2020) shows that the collective memory of the reign of King Rama IX is still very powerful and the original value system is still appreciated. The protagonist is a soldier who protects the nation in Pha Phan Dao, a village that “got its prestige from the king, who sent officials to teach how to feed oneself. . . . Now it operates tea plantations, coffee plantations, and a temperate flower nursery.” Even when a school was set on fire, the water used to extinguish the fire was “royal rain,” which caused the villagers to “join together to kneel and raise their hands to the sky from where the raindrops were continuously falling. Every heart was brimming with a feeling of gratitude.” The cunning enemy of the villagers is Sia Sakda, who represents the invasion of capitalism, while the “sufficiency economy philosophy” is glorified throughout the story (Natthanai 2021).

Many filmmakers tried to get their audiences to “yearn for a most splendid past” (Krisda 2007, 79–81). Between 1999 and 2003, all films that earned a lot of revenue showed images of idyllic Thai villages, because the economic crisis and globalization that engulfed Thai society gave the middle class an intense feeling that the last fortress of “Thainess” was the village—the village was invested with a representation of the “Thai nation” and “Thainess.” The images were of beautiful villages with warm relationships among mothers, fathers, and relatives and long-standing peaceful coexistence. The enemy of the village was intrusive economic change and urbanization. There were many films with storylines suggesting that Western nations were the enemy. These films “did not entirely reject Western culture but had the attitude of dealing with the West at a distance, with caution, suspicion, anxiety, or dislike because it will become a threat to Thai society or culture” (Ittidech 2018, 187–212). Some films criticize Western capitalism for causing exploitation: the value of beauty in a society that emphasizes external appearance and consumption results in humans beings being mentally abnormal, engrossed in a passion that leads to catastrophe for everyone (Chutima 2016, 241–284).

Many Thai films are based on popular novels that reproduce conservative ideology.

For example, *Thawiphop* (The Siam renaissance) by Thommayanti highlights the pain of the protagonist, who feels that Thai society “respects Westerners more than compatriots.” The protagonist says, “We still have the king. . . . This is the only thing that makes us feel that we are still us” (Natthanai 2009, 147–179). Many films highlight the Buddhist belief of karma, emphasizing the “consequences of bad karma,” using violence to punish those who make bad karma. Heroes and heroines are often good people. The villains are bad people who suffer “retribution.” In particular, Thai ghost movies often reproduce the belief in a “karma of excessive retribution.” Those who make bad karma “have to pay compensation many times over” (Jesada 2019).

Producers of contemporary Thai musicals choose language, scenes, soundtracks, and action that cater to the tastes of the middle class and are therefore imprinted on the emotions of audiences. Many musicals staged in the 2010s were based on popular novels of the past and intensively reproduced conservative ideology. For example, female protagonists consented to behaving according to the conventions and emotional standards of society, even if some struggled with rebellion in their hearts. In addition, some musicals emphasize that Western democracy is not suitable for Thai society. Democracy already exists in the Thai mind, and the abdication of King Rama VII was brought about by a royal graciousness that prevented the shedding of people’s blood. A popular contemporary musical, *Four Reigns, the Musical*, emphasizes the merits of “Thainess” and the exalted status of the monarch but also his closeness to the people, his concern for their suffering, and the prosperity he brought to the people. The female protagonist in *Four Reigns, the Musical* makes the following moving statement:

In the midst of the changing flow of life, much suffering . . . always passes because life . . . has pillars to hold on to . . . helping support the bodies and minds . . . of Thai people throughout the kingdom. . . . Where the drops of royal sweat fall, suffering will instantly dissolve. . . . He is what we love and rely on.

When “the king of the land” passes away, “our tears fall, flooding the sky, flooding the earth, flooding our hearts, and there is no candlelight that used to shine. It grows dark. All hope is extinguished . . . fade away.” Opposition to the capitalist economic system in order to preserve “Thainess” appears in this contemporary musical through the role of a merchant character who is so selfish that he has no regard for people’s lives or his impact on the nation (Arthri 2012, 237–263).

Pramoth Thatsanasuwan, a Thai documentary writer whose work has long been popular and reproduces conservative ideology, said, “I write so that Thai people know their own land. I write so that Thai people love their land, and cherish the land as our ancestors cherished it in the past” (Pramoth 1980). Travel documentaries in many

magazines and books that relate the “good things” in the provinces play a similar role to the writings of Pramoth Thatsanasuwan. In addition, publications of the Tourist Organization of Thailand (since 1979 the Tourism Authority of Thailand) offer a picture of the abundance and beauty of nature and the value or importance of ancient monuments and ancient artifacts that former monarchs have produced. The monuments and artifacts showcase the artistic and cultural progress of the nation and patronage of Buddhism. There are also field trips or excursions to places with “good things” that help emphasize to tourists that “Thailand is good because it has Thainess” (Pinyapan 2015, 139–149).

Humanities scholars intensively reproduce the meaning of the “Thai nation” and “Thainess.” Art history academics have constructed a meaning of art in Thailand to establish a nationalist ideology (Chatri 2018). When the Thai government turned to traditional art in the 1950s, it “reverted to a style that was claimed as the traditional architectural style, full of complex details and patterns, especially buildings related to the monarchy and Buddhism” (Chatri 2004, 420). It also led to art schools and institutions having art teachers with the responsibility of producing graduates with an appreciation of the beauty of Thai art, where appreciating a Thai style of beauty would naturally preach a firm love of, commitment to, and pride in the Thai nation and Thainess.

The creation of literary, musical, song, and drama knowledge also played a huge role in reproducing conservative ideology. For example, Chetana Nagavajara, the most influential humanities scholar between the 1970s and 2010s, uses a methodology of valuation and comparative studies to show that Thai art and culture is highly developed, equal to the West or even superior:

The inscriptions of Wat Pho are the strongest evidence . . . the monarch acted as an intermediary in bringing the knowledge of the people back to the people. The spirit of democracy was born here before we got to know the word. (Chetana 1989, 89)

The writings of Chetana Nagavajara reflect disgust with the capitalist system: capitalists and workers are “materialists,” placing importance on money and property until they forget their human values (Chetana 1983, 56). Even Bertolt Brecht’s Marxist drama has a moral evaluation, aiming to consider the characters as “good people” and “bad people,” even going so far as to say that poverty is caused by immorality. For example, “That evil comes from poverty is something we can’t deny. . . . These poor people never work because they don’t have work. When they have work, they do not want to work” (Chetana 1983, 56, 69, 117, 128–129). New concepts and theories from the West—such as post-structuralism and postmodernism—that aim at the deconstruction of mainstream thought include the ideas of “Thainess,” gender, ethnicity, etc., and independence from the dominant discourse. The ideas from these theories have been deliberately turned

by Chetana Nagavajara into Buddhist concepts in order to prevent humanities circles from deconstructing the discourse of “Thainess,” masculinity, femininity, and the view of most ethnicities in Thailand as inferior to ethnic Thais (Saichol *et al.* 2018, 230–285).

Knowledge of the humanities that gave power to conservative ideology also stemmed from the cultural practices of many other intellectuals. For example, Ekkawit Nathalang (2016) said, “Knowledge of the liberal arts . . . resulted in my later work in education founded on a conceptual principle based on Thai cultural society, especially the establishment of ‘Thai education’ without following the Western world too much.” Many academic books and journals in the humanities reproduce the meaning of “Thainess,” focusing on Thai cultural values. Some journals and books aim to criticize capitalist economic systems that undermine Thai culture (Reynolds 2022, 194).

Medical knowledge, especially psychiatry from the 1950s to the present day, is consistent with Buddhist teachings and humanities knowledge in Thai society in the sense that it sees the important problems as “mental”: the capitalist economic system creates psychological problems for Thais because it breaks up families and degrades society. Many leading psychiatrists have therefore disseminated information focused on mental development and proposed to the government that in addition to making Thai people more knowledgeable, “it is also important to develop the people psychologically, which is considered the most important thing” (Buntharika 2022, 6). Such conceptual compatibility has led some Thai doctors to become intellectuals with an interest in studying Buddhism as an approach to solving problems and developing the country in a conservative way, which this group of doctors submit has been recognized by various government organizations and civil society. And some doctors also tell stories about the royal duties of King Rama IX that have made citizens grateful for his kindness and made them believe that they should follow in his footsteps in helping the people (Kridikorn 2022, 168–216).

It is evident that middle-class intellectuals play a significant role in artistic and cultural practices as well as the creation and dissemination of academic knowledge, allowing conservative ideology to deeply influence the minds and emotions of people. However, the fact that conservative ideology has been able to remain powerful for a long time is not just the result of its being reproduced consistently. It is also the result of new meanings being created for old concepts and the meanings being changed for new concepts that have come to play a great role in Thai politics, such as “democracy” and “civil society,” which have the effect of giving the middle class the hope that Thai society will improve.

III Modification of the Focal Point and Meaning of Conservative Ideology by Middle-Class Intellectuals

Middle-class intellectuals are aware that in a changing and challenging social context with other ideologies, it is necessary to construct new concepts or modify the existing focal point and meaning of the original ideology in order to give it the power to explain problems and offer alternatives to Thai society in a significant way. This helps to prevent rapid and radical social changes as well as changes in undesirable directions. The cultural politics of middle-class intellectuals have created several new concepts, and since the 1990s—before which the state and the elite did not have their own outstanding intellectuals—these new concepts have been included in state policies or projects in order to closely direct, control, and govern the people. In the process, the people have been molded to have “virtues” specified by the state and the elite, so that they can control themselves from within and behave socially and politically within the framework desired by the state and the elite. This applies to their behavior in their roles as individuals, communities, and civil society, as will be analyzed below.

The concept of “rule by righteousness” was constructed in the early 1950s to offer an alternative to government and was different from a Marxist approach. By the late 1960s, Gen. Sawaeng Senanarong had applied this concept to support the power of the government of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn and reduce the importance of the elections:

[W]e must believe principally in rule by righteousness and use it with democracy . . . of the people and by the people, which can sometimes be a lack of perfection according to the stage of democratic development, but . . . if it is not for the people and then it is not democracy, according to this meaning . . . There must be faith in virtue. . . . Democracy is a matter of virtue. (Sawaeng 1977, 89)

After the 1997 constitution was enacted, elections became more important. The meaning of “rule by righteousness” was modified from emphasizing leaders being “good people” to emphasizing the people also being “good people,” because the people were the voters. Dhammapitaka (P. A. Payutto) played an important role in modifying the meaning of “rule by righteousness” to emphasize the virtues of the people, explaining that “if the people are of low quality, democracy will be bad democracy, because the quality of democracy depends on the quality of the people.” Therefore, people should be “good people,” knowledgeable, and able to think, see the truth, and make the right decisions (Phra Dhammapitaka [P. A. Payutto] 2000, 5–6; Surapol 2005). Such ideas have been abundantly reproduced to control the political power and behavior of the people. For example, Sangwon Liptapanlop stated:

A leader comes from election by citizens. To have leaders who are good and moral, they must come from citizens who are good and moral and support him with their votes. A society of rule by righteousness is therefore decided by its own citizens. (Sangwon 2016, 2)

It may be said that middle-class intellectuals increasingly see the importance of “the people,” but they also try to make people accept and behave according to the Thai value system because they want them to

live together happily under rights and freedoms, equality and impartiality under the rules of society, with harmony, mutual assistance, generosity to each other, compromise and interdependence, to allow society to live together in peace . . . protesting in opposition without violating the rights of others. (Anucha *et al.* 2020, 51–53)

Some scholars have adapted the ideas of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu as the concept of “Dhammic Socialist Democracy” to ensure the rule and coexistence of people in Thai society according to Buddhist or Thai virtues. They stress that “Liberalism is an opportunity for selfishness. . . . Liberal democracy is fully free. . . . Once it has power in its hands, passion (*kilet*) takes over the exercise of freedom following the force of passion,” as opposed to “Dhammic Socialist Democracy,” which promotes benevolence and the fair distribution of material wealth in the spirit of charity and sharing (Thaweewat 1997, 84–104).

The “Dharma Land, Golden Land” project was initiated by a civil servant named Pacha Laphanan, who went to South Korea to observe village development, a form of rural development with the participation of the people. The process started with a phase of mental indoctrination, and then the minds of the villagers became a foundation for effective economic development. Pacha Laphanan introduced the concept by combining it with Buddhist principles. In 1983 villages in this project had the status of “Dharma Land, Golden Land Villages,” signifying both mental and economic progress. Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda made it a government project and established the Committee to Promote and Coordinate the Dissemination of the Dharma Land, Golden Land Ideology with the responsibility of encouraging the people to have virtues according to Buddhist principles. Another of the project’s responsibilities was to help the weak with four “factors” of living (food, shelter, clothing, and medicine), to increase individuals’ income, and to create national economic stability while conserving natural resources (Anek 1987, 17–35). A dhamma lecture by Phra Vikrommuni on Dharma Land, Golden Land reflected the idea of preventing people from turning back to Communism or losing hope in “the Age of Maitreya” by strengthening the “Thai mind” to make “the era of His Majesty the King now the era of ‘Dharma Land, Golden Land.’ . . . The three institutions—nation, religions, and monarchy—must progress at the same time” (Chao Khun Phra Vikrommuni n.d.).

Later came the concept of a “volunteer spirit (*jit asa*),” similar to the “Dharma Land, Golden Land” project, focusing on the development of “hearts” to be virtuous, to be ready to help others, and to work with others to help Thailand escape problems and experience prosperity and calm. “Civil society” came together under the support of the state. The meaning of “volunteer spirit” and “public spirit,” according to the Office of the National Research Council, was

empathy . . . joining in matters of the common good that benefit the nation . . . being conscious of and upholding to a good moral and ethical system, shame of doing what is wrong, an emphasis on order, thrift, and a balance between man and nature. (Thailand, Office of the Civil Service Commission n.d.)

This is consistent with the meaning of “Thainess” in the moral or ethical sense as recognized by the Thai middle class. The agency established by the government in 2011 to implement this is the Moral Promotion Center. It encourages people to uphold the national virtues of “sufficiency, discipline, honesty, volunteerism, and gratitude” in order to create “good people, good society” (Moral Promotion Center [Public Organization] 2021), which is the “Dharma Land, Golden Land,” focusing only on the good heart of people (disregarding the issue of economic prosperity).

The economic goals—the prosperity of both the people and the nation—that were once important in the “Dharma Land, Golden Land” project were erased by those who created and disseminated the concepts of “volunteer spirit” and “moral society.” The change came as the government and the Thai elite wanted to lessen people’s desire for rapid economic prosperity and overconsumption of goods, which could lead to opposition to the government and the elite. Therefore, they wanted people to have “sufficiency,” which was an attempt to reduce the tide of the “new politics of desire,” namely, politics to achieve success and happiness through capitalism (Thanasak 2014) and prevent calls for a democratic liberal government that emphasized civil rights and political equality, as was the case with the political movement of the Red Shirt masses.

One part of the implementation of the “volunteer spirit” of the middle class was in the form of “civil society,” which became “civil society” Thai style. The concept of “civil society” gained influence among Thai intellectuals after the decline of Marxist-Maoist ideas, which emphasized revolution to radically change society. “Civil society,” which emphasized gradual social change through social forces or non-state forces by the “middle path,” wielded great influence among Thai intellectuals, e.g., academics, the mass media, social activists, and NGO workers. Later, the concept of “civil society” was incorporated into the idea of “community culture” and the Buddhist value system, giving “civil society” a meaning in line with conservative ideology, as has been shown in many writings and social activities since the 1990s—for example, the idea that “the integration

of diverse civil society groups needs to be built on the basis of love, kindness, mutual assistance, harmony, and conformity as a nexus creating powerful cooperation” (Nathapong and Adisorn 2000, 39–41).

Many middle-class intellectuals in recent times, especially since the early 2000s, have not viewed “civil society” as nongovernmental organizations with their own goals or choices, or as organizations that can direct, monitor, and balance state power. Instead, there is an emphasis on cooperation between “civil society” and the state. For example, Prawase Wasi pushed for “quinquepartite” collaboration among villagers, government officials, NGOs, the media, and academics, which he called “*prachakhom* [community]” or “people-state collaboration [*pracharat*]” (Prawase 1997), until it became an approach upheld by many in “civil society.” This opened a convenient opportunity for the state to take control and dominate civil society by issuing laws, providing budgets, and instilling the form of morality or ethics wanted by the state and elite.

The dominance of the state and elite was seen in the ideas of political reform among middle-class intellectuals during the 2000s–2010s, which were weak compared to the political movement for the 1997 constitution. The ideas that intellectuals presented to society in the 1990s were clearly liberal and democratic, such as prioritizing rights and freedoms, prioritizing the free market system, and creating mechanisms to monitor the use of power in accordance with the law, emphasizing public participation on the basis of equality. The establishment of independent organizations was tied to elected political institutions. However, during the 2000s–2010s the state and the elite instead established organizations that had power over elected political institutions, implementing reforms that focused on liberalism but not democracy, or were increasingly hostile to democracy (Somchai 2017). Thus, the state and the elite used conservative ideology to maintain the power structure. Middle-class intellectuals made efforts to establish a political system in which each party participated appropriately. For example, villagers participated with “Thai virtues” (such as sacrifice) or as part of a “community with the virtues of self-sufficiency”; they did not engage through greed or desire or capitalist selfishness, which in the past caused problems of “vote-buying” and “exercising excessive freedom” in demanding rights and equality.

It can be seen that the concept of “community culture” has changed a lot and has also been taken over and controlled by the state and the elite. This is evident from the bringing in of nongovernmental development workers (or NGOs) and academics who work for villagers in community organizations or civil society via development institutions established by the state and the elite, such as the Community Organizations Development Institute (Public Organization). From 2007 the state introduced several laws to regulate community organizations and civil society.

One intellectual who played an important part in creating the concept of “community culture” was Chatthip Nartsupha. His aim was to create a kind of cultural nationalism that valued the “villager community.” But when this concept became widely known, it instead gave more power to the value system contained in “Thainess” because it advocated a “community with Thai virtues”: charity, generosity, harmony in managing resources and solving problems, and a negative view of capitalism-globalization. These characteristics are evident in the 24 volumes of the *Khrongkan Withithat* (Vision project) published in the 2000s. Many volumes note that accepting Western culture destroys “Thainess.” It is necessary to restore “community culture” to make “strong communities” (Reynolds 2022, 204–212). Some volumes emphasize the peacefulness of the Thai and Buddhist ways of solving national crises (Pitthaya 1998), while others demonstrate the benefits of a return to studying and living in a traditional way along with a sufficiency economy following royal thinking, which makes strong communities self-reliant through sufficiency (Suthitham 2006).

Prawase Wasi was one person who changed the idea of “community culture” with an emphasis on the Buddhist mind, including the concepts of “good people” and “good life,” in which a “good life” meant “free from mental oppression . . . with access to diversity and natural beauty, with peace giving rise to a love for fellow humans and nature, and with a consciousness and concentration free from the oppression of selfishness.” And a “good society” is a “dhammic society or a society that creates love and kindness, has the capacity and wisdom to solve problems, knows how to manage conflicts through peace and has harmonious strength and knowledge” (Yos 1996, 30).

It can be said that there has been a convergence of “rule by righteousness,” “community culture,” “volunteer spirit,” and “civil society,” where these concepts have points of ideological agreement and consistency with each other and have also been influenced by each other. They have been shaped by a Thai value system derived from Buddhism, thus greatly strengthening conservative ideology to become a “neo-conservative ideology.” There are many intellectuals and general members of the middle class who practice a political culture under these concepts, such as by writing academic texts and literature, producing movies and TV series, doing rural development work, implementing community rehabilitation with collaboration among social activists and community members both urban and rural, etc. The mass media plays a large role in conveying these ideas to the public. For example, the public broadcaster Thai PBS has programs aimed at telling stories of the peaceful way of life and culture of communities persuaded to turn to organic crops or sufficiency agriculture (Samchai 2020, 192–193). These artistic and cultural practices have led the middle class to believe that Thai life and society in the past were good, and that there were hopes and dreams of

being able to restore these good attributes both in the countryside and in the cities. This tied the middle class more closely to conservative ideology, and by the early 2000s the middle class had joined together to oppose the “evil capital” that destroyed their hopes and dreams.

By the early 2010s, the state and the elite, ruling by authoritarianism, applied the concepts of “community culture” and “virtues of community members” to help control and govern people more effectively by reducing the power and rights of the people to negotiate with the state and capitalists. This meant the people were subjected to moral disciplinary rules without demanding rights out of greed or selfishness. The method the state and the elite tried to use was to make “communities” and “civil society” nationwide conform to Thai virtues or the value system that existed in “community culture.” The Moral Promotion Center was set up with different activities to make the people conform to a value system of “sufficiency, discipline, honesty, volunteerism, and gratitude” (Moral Promotion Center [Public Organization] 2021). A large number of “communities” and “civil society organizations” joined the network (Thanyalak 2021). The aim was to

create a moral society in which everyone in the organization is virtuous, loyal to the institutions of nation, religions, and monarchy, conforms, upholds religious principles, and embraces the philosophy of the sufficiency economy and Thai cultural ways in making a living. (Thailand, Office of the Cane and Sugar Board 2020)

The Moral Promotion Center and network organizations continue to hold activities to enable conservative ideology to remain a force in Thai society.

III-1 *Changing the Meaning of “Democratic Form of Government with the King as Head of State”*

Middle-class intellectuals offer varying meanings of a “democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state.” Some scholars emphasize that sovereignty belongs to the king or to the king and the people, but the monarch exercises constitutional sovereignty. The clearest explanation of this idea is given by Bowornsak Uwanno (2008), who notes the legitimacy of the monarch in exercising sovereignty on behalf of the people as he has the ten royal virtues. Thirayuth Boonmee offered his views on the monarchy and the “democratic form of government with the king as head of state,” emphasizing the importance of the monarchy in many aspects. For example, in the late 1980s, when royal hegemony was in the ascendant (Asa 2021), Thirayuth Boonmee implied that politicians and liberal business groups should “rely on royal prestige” to establish leverage with the military leadership. He saw that the era of “semi-democracy” was coming to an end. The people should therefore join in replacing it with a “democratic

form of government with the king as head of state.” This would have the effect of reducing the importance of the military and political parties, while the “system” or political totality would have greater importance until no side had power over the others. He emphasized:

[T]he political worldview of a democratic system with the king as head of state is therefore the linking of the monarchy to the people as the bastion of the democratic system through the institutions of parliamentary political parties, which is considered to be a great step forward in the principles of democracy in Thailand. (Thirayuth 1993, 39–43, cited in Thikan 2012, 535–536)

When there were calls for the use of Article 7 by the PAD in 2006, Thirayuth Boonmee explained “democratic form of government with the king as head of state” as meaning that the monarch was above politics and politically neutral, thus being “the one who decides and ultimately resolves conflict, or who ultimately resolves crises, which academically are states of dysfunction of the country’s various institutional mechanisms.” However, he also stressed that “in today’s world, it is even more necessary for the monarch to be a symbol of democracy, in the sense that he is the defender of the constitution, not the one who abolishes the constitution” (Thirayuth 2006, 273–274).

In 2012, when King Rama IX was very ill, Thirayuth Boonmee said:

I disagree with some ultra-conservative academics who are trying to revert to admiring the monarchy as a supposed god with greater political power. This would be a regression. For the monarchy to be able to have a sustainable existence in a free, democratic society and an information-era world, it must be an institution with the status of being truly symbolic of the country. In addition to having responsibilities for tasks according to a democratic constitution, there are also tasks based on tradition, religion, culture, and social expectations, such as being the spiritual center, the source of honor, ethics, morality, rituals. (*Komchadluek* 2012)

Thirayuth Boonmee warned against

the emphasis on the monarchy as the heart of this center in every aspect, which is an attempt to rely on one person as the center of political stability, as the center of economic development, as the center of virtue. This is excessively risky, because the current monarch is respected by the people at an unprecedented level. The continuation of the institution of many more future monarchs should be taken into consideration. (*Komchadluek* 2012)

In 2006 Nakharin Mektrairat devised a clear definition for the “democratic form of government with the king as head of state” by portraying the monarch as the “protector of democracy,” allowing the evolution of democracy in a way unique to Thai society. The king’s resolution of important political conflicts turned him into a “pure force” at the center of the highest power of Thai political society that various power groups relied on.

If consideration is given to the idea of consolidating democracy, it is evident that the monarch plays a role in creating a state of political stability and adopts a neutral position. The wave of calls for a “royal prerogative” from different political groups, which led the Thai elite and middle class to accept the recommendations made by the monarch in his speeches in 2005–6, shows that the monarch has royal hegemony to lead and set a pattern for the monarchy under the constitution as head of state in the Thai democratic system. Citizens rely on him, and therefore he is a pillar of the country’s nationhood and democracy (Nakharin 2006).

The meaning of the “democratic form of government with the king as head of state” was modified to emphasize a “reliance on royal prestige” to resolve political crises and counterbalance the power of various power groups. As a result, the middle class continued to maintain a conservative ideology. This was especially true after the success of the middle class in pushing for the 1997 constitution and supporting the Thai Rak Thai Party in the 2001 elections. However, the 1997 constitution and the 2001 elections led to the emergence of the “Thaksin regime,” which ended up disappointing the middle class despite the good constitution. The middle class were also disappointed with electoral democracy and the existence of independent organizations tied to parliament, whose members were elected by the Thai people. This intense frustration led the middle class to join the PAD and the PDRC, which used a conservative ideology mixed with democracy to stoke emotions, particularly the ideology of a “democratic form of government with the king as head of state,” which integrated the meanings of “democracy,” “monarch,” and “Thai virtues.” This ideology’s emphasis on certain ideas and use of language with intensely emotional overtones led the middle-class masses to oppose the “Thaksin regime,” as will be explained below.

Amidst the disappointment with the independent organizations set up according to the 1997 constitution and electoral democracy in the 2000s, conservative ideology dominated the minds of the middle class. This was due to the artistic and cultural practices of conservative middle-class intellectuals that continued to exert an influence along with the creation or modification of concepts such as a “democratic form of government with the king as head of state,” “community culture,” “civil society,” etc. The concepts were given a Thai context and thus made conservative ideology a powerful presence in the minds of the middle class. They helped to give hope to the middle class that there would be “rule by righteousness,” a “strongly harmonious society,” and a revival of “community culture” and “Thai virtues.” But while hope is not yet reality, the middle class must live in a society that they themselves perceive as deteriorating in several ways, in both the natural environment and the mental state of people as a result of the expansion of industry and urban society. This gives the middle class a strong feeling of nostalgia for the

past, which serves to strengthen conservative ideology.

The feeling that Thai society is deteriorating, which makes the middle class yearn for and wish to revive the past, appears in various artistic and cultural practices. For example, several short stories from the 1990s portray villagers falling victim to an economic and political system in which capitalists and power holders collaborate to exploit the masses, resulting in the destruction of communities and villagers' way of life, dehumanization, the turning of life into a commodity, and the creation of environmental problems. According to one short story, "The business of buying and selling seaside land is so intense that blood floods the sand" (Phacharawan 2019, 412–416). Such problems bring into question the legitimacy of development policy. Short stories from 1995 to 1999 are also filled with desperation over social issues such as family problems, violence against children, loss of freedom, people becoming slave to material objects that entered the community in the name of prosperity, capitalists grabbing local resources, an inefficient government bureaucracy, etc. Urban life is portrayed as being fraught with difficulties, haste, materialism, and the risk of unemployment. Some short stories satirize the rich and the destruction of the environment. These short stories reflect the psychological oppression of people in society, often ending in the defeat of the characters. This defeat represents the defeat of mankind's common sense and virtue—in interpersonal relationships, relationships between mankind and fate, and relationships between mankind and the social environment (Attapol 2002).

The middle class's perception that capitalism destroys "Thainess" and degrades Thai society (Reynolds 2022, 200) creates a strong sense of nostalgia. Public intellectuals such as Sulak Sivaraksa and Prawase Wasi, academics of the Withithat group, and many other leading scholars have also highlighted the problem of deterioration in Thai society due to the state and capitalist groups working together to grab resources from the villagers. However, the perception of a beautiful countryside where there is still "community culture" or a legacy of "Thainess" from the past is greatly exaggerated. The perception leads to encroachment into the countryside by the state and capitalists being seen as the worst situation. However, the emergence of new concepts and new meanings for old concepts, such as the "democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state," "rule by righteousness," "civil society," etc., has given the middle class the dream of "restoring the beautiful past" both in the countryside and in the cities.

A review of the S.E.A. Write book *Banana Tree Horse*¹⁾ reflects the feelings of

1) *Banana Tree Horse* by Paiwarin Khao-Ngam won the S.E.A. Write Award in 1995. It is outside reading for lower secondary school. (Translator's note: *Banana Tree Horse* is the official English translation of the literary work. It refers to a form of hobbyhorse made from the stalk of a banana leaf.)

nostalgia and “hope” of restoring the countryside and towns to their former “beauty”:

Paiwarin Khao-Ngam . . . rushes into a world of natural beauty in a rural way . . . admires beauty at a spiritual level. . . . The love of traditional cultural values is being irretrievably lost . . . but mourns and yearns for the past when Isaan was still a beautiful countryside . . .

. . . The depiction of life . . . and the oppressive problems of urban society . . . and the profound melancholy of realizing that the past cannot return . . . until we are brave enough to hope for a beautiful future . . . (*Ma kankluai* n.d.)

Implementation of the Livable City project took place in a context where the middle class had a nostalgia for the past and a desire to revitalize cities to make them livable once again. For example, the Bangkok Forum, which was the template for urban regeneration across the country, placed importance on the Thai value system of restoring each city as a warm and vibrant community, a city of art that helped the mind to be sensitive and charitable, where people gathered for social activities, a “civil society” bound with “local wisdom,” with historical roots and a strong “community culture” (Attama 2003, 57–66).

After the economic crisis in the late 1990s, shortly before the “Thaksin regime” came to power, the nostalgia of the middle class rooted in conservative ideology was greatly intensified. For example, in late 1999 the Banglamphu community held cultural alms-giving activities from time to time. People dressed in Thai clothes listened to sermons and played soothing traditional music. People in the community had a feeling of pride that Banglamphu was once the site of a palace (the palace of Prince Krom Muen Mahesuan Siwawilas, a son of King Rama IV, which burned down in 1869). Chinese, Mon, and Muslim communities came there to “rely on royal protection and lived happily for generations,” and it was also “home to the traditional Thai music community.” Groups involved in the Livable City project in the provinces, such as the Songkhla Lovers Group, saw society as degenerating because it was permeated with social problems, competition, and alienation. This led to the dissemination of the Buddhism of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu to revive morality and strengthen the will of local people (Attama 2003, 63–77).

In their nostalgia and belief that a beautiful past could be successfully restored, the middle class often gave importance to the “virtues” of the community. For example:

[T]ruth, mutual assistance, generosity, charity, mutual trust . . . and an optimistic view of people . . . are an important basis for a democratic society . . . with respect for human dignity . . . leading to a peaceful life . . . in the spirit . . . of cherishing resources and the land for farming/traditions of the village community/peasantry . . . and with pride in the community and a willingness to protect the community. (Surawut 2002)

The creation of nostalgic television series, contemporary plays, and films reflects the nostalgia of the middle class and their hopes that the power of “community culture” and

Buddhism, which overcomes human desire, will restore peace to rural areas and Thai society in general. For example, high-grossing Thai films from 1997 to 2003, after the economic crisis, responded to the nostalgia for the past by showing images that “Thailand was good”: rural areas with beautiful scenes of nature and peace. They showed that when the nation was attacked, there was unity and mutual help in fighting the enemy through the use of violence, and often fighting that relied on monarchs or monks. Many films implicitly opposed Western nations or the capitalist system (Ittidech 2018, 171–219).

An anti-capitalist form of nostalgia resulted from the influence of Buddhist ideas and the concepts of “community culture” and “Thai-style civil society.” It also resulted from the ideologies of conservatism, humanism, and Marxism. Those who subscribed to the concepts of “community culture” and “Thai-style civil society” may have been influenced by all three of these ideologies. Although the three ideologies have very different conceptual bases, they all hold a negative view of capitalism. For example, humanists see capitalism as destroying human values or goodness and making humans selfish. They also see it as destroying the freedoms that human beings naturally enjoy because it sets time frames. Marxist thinkers view the capitalist class as oppressing and exploiting workers. Conservative ideologues see capitalism as destroying “Thainess,” especially Thai virtues such as sufficiency, kindness, charity, and mutual assistance. Intellectuals who are influenced by these ideologies have anti-capitalist artistic and cultural practices, since all three ideologies are opposed to capitalism. The artistic and cultural practices of such intellectuals affect the sentiments of the middle class, who have come to hate and oppose “evil capital.”

IV New Ideas, Value Systems, Emotions, and Contradictions in the Minds of the Middle Class

Under the power of conservative ideology, the middle class have experienced economic changes affecting social relations. In the 1990s there was an influx of capital from Japan and other countries, coupled with Gen. Chatichai Choonhavan’s policy of turning Indochina from a battlefield into a marketplace. The promotion of tourism, etc., led to an increase in investment. The middle class then expanded rapidly, and social relations changed. Leaving home to study, working in a big city, and finding new forms of entertainment heightened the sense of individualism. There was a desire for independence and freedom in lifestyles. Although there remained a psychological attachment to a system of Thai-style values, even those with a strong nostalgia for the past wanted freedom. For example, the author of the S.E.A. Write Award for *Banana Tree*

Horse used

the words “spirit” and “free” . . . which have implications of the ideological values of bourgeois liberalism . . . which are that the countryside is a land of freedom. . . . Using birds as a symbol of freedom . . . is the ideal image which city people construct. (Chusak 2004, 202–203)

Travel books placed great importance on freedom. Individual tourism expanded rapidly. Individual tourists were middle class, some of them women over the age of 60, traveling alone, projecting a sense of self-confidence, able to successfully reach their intended destination with patience, strength, wisdom, courage, and planning. Traveling solo was all about creating a sense of confidence, independence, and high self-esteem (Tuangtong and Sukanya 2017, 50). Many prominent intellectuals and columnists called for democracy or criticized the problems caused by decades of continuous undemocratic regimes and unbalanced national development policies that led to family and community breakdown.

When the middle class entered the neoliberal economic system, commercial relations focused on profit and loss increased in their daily lives. There was also a heightened sense of individualism, with a view of “the good life” incorporating a sense of comfort, independence, freedom, and the authority and right to make one’s own decisions without meeting anyone else’s criteria and standards. There did not have to be any commitment to family, relatives, or community according to the old values, and one had to be prepared to meet fluctuations in life.

In self-help books, the saying “life is a journey” is the most common, followed by “life is a struggle/war.” Such books often offer advice such as the following: “we must have hope based on the real world . . . live with things that are always changing, live through it and live one’s life like no one else to know one’s own worth . . . and enjoy the satisfaction of that worth” (Phuwanat 2008, 104, cited in Surachet 2010, 78).

Self-help books also teach that “When it’s time to break the rules, don’t think about it much. . . . Break them. It’s about finding ourselves and being how we are” (Surachet 2010, 63–65). Statements like these reflect the importance of having independence and freedom and accepting change in life and society rather than adhering to traditions and old value systems.

The new ideas, value systems, and emotions of the middle class are evident also in literature. For example, short stories by many female writers from the period 1977–97 show that the fundamental principles of the democratic system—equality, freedom, and human dignity—exist in Thai society. Even though there have been no real changes of power relations in the lives of the middle class, this literature illustrates the problem of unequal power relations between women and men and calls on women to fight for their

rights, freedoms, and equality (Areeya 2014, 68–95). Simultaneously, the novels by many famous female writers value “Thainess,” they encourage women to be conscious of gender equality and to be ready to fight for it. They question the moral framework that unfairly defines women’s lives and emphasize the rights and freedoms of women to exercise discretion in determining their own lives (Porntada 2007, 100–101).

The middle class, however, still yearn for a past that was good. They are committed to “Thainess,” or conservative ideology, and want a liberal capitalist economy, but they also view the effects of capitalism negatively and want to maintain a “community culture.” They want democracy but are suspicious of politicians and want to be ruled by “good people,” with the monarchy as “something to rely on,” etc. This makes the ideology of the middle class contradictory, unsystematic, overlapped, and adulterated with an emphasis and meaning that shifts according to the context. It is evident that when the middle class resisted the power of elected politicians in 2005–14, the old ideology of conservatism was powerfully revived, while the democratic ideology was used to show the protesting middle-class masses that elected governments violated the principles of democracy. The leadership of the masses defined “democracy” in terms of giving the middle class hope for a “democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state.” This was portrayed as “true democracy,” “fitted to the peculiarities of Thai society and culture,” while the electoral democracy that was used to legitimize the government was portrayed as a false democracy.

The middle class recognize “democracy” as having many elements, such as elections, balance of power, checks on the use of power, and the importance of a “democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state” in order to “rely on royal prestige” in controlling and monitoring governments of military leaders and politicians. But from the early 2000s until the 2014 coup, many in the middle class were aroused by sentiments opposing elections and elected governments, giving special importance to the monarchy’s role in overseeing the political system. A meaning of “democratic form of government” was created that Thai society should achieve in the future. This proposed “political reforms” to achieve a participatory form of democracy and decentralization to citizens, communities, and civil society that had Thai virtues to combat “electoral democracy,” which had resulted in governments with excessive powers and no effective monitoring by either parliament or independent organizations. The middle class had to turn to relying on the idea of rule by “good people” and “relying on royal prestige” to control rulers, because they saw politicians as bad and there were no effective political institutions to use as tools; also, elections did not have much effect on the country’s policies or direction. However, elections were “more meaningful” even under the 2017 constitution (Nidhi 2021a). The middle class therefore face a psychological paradox between the need

for democracy and suspicions about democracy, and they cannot find “good people” according to the principle of “rule by righteousness” to be the rulers that they want. At the same time, they worry that people lack morality and may sell their votes to politicians. The need for democracy and the concern that democracy will bring politicians who are bad people back to power is a contradiction that remains in the minds of the middle class to the present day.

Both the need for democracy and suspicions about democracy led one middle-class intellectual, Chai-Anan Samudavanija, to propose the concept of “sufficiency democracy” to “prevent capitalism from destroying communities” (Chai-Anan 2011). The solution is to “create citizens in a democratic society” by giving people Thai-style virtues such as “seeing only the common good . . . mutual help . . . compromise . . . an emphasis on harmony . . . sympathy, an emphasis on sufficiency” (Chai-Anan 2010b). “In this sense, real decentralization is not the distribution of power from the center to local government, but it must be down to the people, allowing the people to organize their own activities” (Chai-Anan 2011). Although the middle class saw villagers as “stupid-poor-sick,” they also admired “community culture” as well as “villager wisdom,” and so they valued “community culture” and the Thai virtues in village communities, such as kindness, charity, sharing, support, sacrifice, etc. Even if the middle class wanted to succeed in the capitalist system, which was contradictory to Thai virtues, they appreciated the “community culture.” This reflects a contradiction between the real life of the middle class in the capitalist economic system and their ideology, especially Thai virtues. This appreciation of “community culture” has become one of the important emotions leading the middle class to oppose “evil capital,” which they believe will destroy “community culture” in rural areas.

Conservative ideology, including the above dimensions of thought, value systems, and emotions that are distilled, compounded, and self-contradictory, brought the middle class out in political movements against the “Thaksin regime” between 2005 and 2014. Middle-class intellectuals and leaders chose both conservative and democratic ideologies to instill feelings in the masses in order to explain problems, create a feeling of pride, and build hope (this will be analyzed below). Some ideas from democratic ideology were used to point out the political problem that elections were based on a popular vote-buying policy so were not true democratic elections. Governments that emerged from the elections did not have democratic legitimacy. Rule by evil capital gaining power from vote-buying would lead to severe corruption, and this government would rule by disobeying the advice of the king and violating the morality of Buddhism, which taught the importance of good deeds without selfish power or personal gain. Such conservative ideological explanations made the middle class proud to feel that they were fighting

against nefarious capital that would destroy nations, religions, and monarchs. They were proud to protect the nation, religion, and king. The middle class also hoped that the battle would end in victory that would make Thai democracy a real democracy, not a democracy in name only. And it would be a democratic system that was suitable for the characteristics of Thai society, that is, a democracy with the king as head of state.

V Conservative and Democratic Ideologies of the Middle Class and the Political Movements of 2005–14

While the middle class constructed and modified various concepts that became part of a “neo-conservative ideology”—such as “rule by righteousness,” “Dharma Land, Golden Land,” “community culture,” “Thai-style civil society,” etc.—“democratic” ideology was also blended into the ideas and emotions of the middle class. This is evident in the definition of a “democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state.” Although the definition gives great importance to the role of the monarch in the Thai political system, it is important for the middle class to rely on the monarch in solving Thailand’s political crises and sustaining the security of the Thai democratic system, as well as balancing and monitoring the military’s use of dictatorial power and parliamentary dictatorship. The definition does not refer to the direct use of royal powers in the executive, legislative, and judicial spheres in normal situations. In addition, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the middle class played an important role in pushing the “People’s Constitution,” which was characterized as being very democratic, from its drafting to its content (iLaw 2019). The middle class strongly supported the 1997 constitution because it sought to build strong political institutions. Elections were to be held under the supervision of an impartial Election Commission. There were good systems for balancing power and for monitoring the use of power. However, the middle class ended up being greatly disappointed with the constitution because it led to the accession to power of “evil capital,” which the middle class deemed capable of dominating the government, parliament, and independent bodies. Even the courts could not establish guilt in the “evil capital’s” false declaration of assets and debts. The “evil capital” also behaved in a way that would destroy the “democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state.”

This adulteration of ideas, value systems, and emotions deriving from conservative and democratic ideologies led the middle class to describe the “Thaksin regime” not as a true democracy but as a “parliamentary dictatorship” that used populist policies to buy votes in order to “stay long” and take Thai politics “into a dead end.” This anxiety drove

the middle class to participate in political movements. The middle class hoped for “judicialization,” which emerged in the early 2000s. They realized that the political power of courts had emerged around the world to counterbalance the power of politicians who were derived from capitalists; in Thailand’s case this power emerged also with the support of the monarch, who the middle class believed was a “pure force” because he had the ten virtues of a king and had long performed royal activities for the security and development of the nation (Saichol 2021, 187–216). However, the middle class were still not sure whether the political role of the courts would help overturn the “Thaksin regime,” which claimed legitimacy from the majority of votes in elections. Large political demonstrations took place to eliminate the “Thaksin regime,” where leaders and middle-class intellectuals used both conservative and democratic ideologies to arouse the emotions of the masses. They pointed out that the crisis caused by the “Thaksin regime” had brought “Thai politics to a dead end.” It was necessary to use “informal politics,” or undemocratic methods that were not provided for in the constitution, to resolve the national crisis.

Due to the influence of conservative ideology, the middle class began to believe that Thai society was degenerating and that the “Thaksin regime” made it worse by, for example, implementing populist policies that made villagers more money minded. They believed villagers were becoming selfish, wanting to get rich quickly, and forgetting traditional values such as generosity, all of which would lead to the destruction of village communities. The middle class therefore accepted the use of violence if the violence was used to prevent corrupt political parties from returning to power or to bring down corrupt governments and/or eliminate people trying to destroy the nation, religion, and kings (Wanwiphang and Apichat 2017, 39–51). The concept of a “mat and pillow under royal protection” also gave the middle class a sense of self and an identity as “patriotic Chinese descendants” (Sittitthep 2015, 112–155) who offered deep loyalty and gratitude to the Thai nation, religions, and monarchy. Middle-class intellectuals encouraged these “patriotic Chinese descendants” to feel the arrogance and pride of sacrifice and unity in fighting to protect “Thainess.”

It may be said that conservative ideology is fundamental to explaining and creating meanings that evoke intense emotions among the masses and prepare them to fight politically. For example, the meaning created for the “Thaksin regime” was that it was a “frightening regime” that wanted to be the “leader of the masses” and compete for prestige against the king. The regime was also portrayed as wanting to change the country into a republic, as being “evil capital” that would accelerate the ruin of “community culture” or the communities of villagers through capitalism. Middle-class leaders believed that due to capitalism’s rapid expansion to the countryside, villagers’ debts had

increased. The masses were used as a tool to maintain power along with former Communists and foreigners like Burmese and Cambodians, who were viewed as enemies of Thailand. The various methods used by the “Thaksin regime” to maintain power would lead to uncontrollable violence in society. Thai politics had therefore “reached a dead end,” and conventional democratic mechanisms and methods may not be able to solve the problem. Therefore, “Western-style democracy is not suitable for Thai society,” which had to rely on politics outside the parliamentary system, such as the judicialization process, coups, and joining the People’s Alliance for Democracy and the PDRC, which were considered “direct democracy” and “participatory democracy” (Saichol 2018).

The concept of “rule by righteousness” and the system of conservative ideals derived from Buddhism, with values such as generosity, selflessness, and honesty. Great emphasis was placed on the problem of corruption, which had long been a concern in the minds of the middle class, in order to make the middle class recognize that elected governments had lost legitimacy, to create anger and hatred toward “evil capital,” and to support authoritarianism and violence in the management of problems. For example, Thirayuth Boonmee explained:

[T]he roots of capital power have supplemented political power for the last two decades . . . causing an economic crisis and creating a capital group whose wealth has grown more than in the past. . . . This has become evil capital that hopes for a long-standing total dominance. . . . Corruption in the country is at its highest level in history . . . and is shameless. (Thirayuth 2008)

The use of power for corruption has been attacked in harsh language for being contrary to “rule by righteousness” and having serious consequences for the nation. For example:

[C]orruption has developed in all forms . . . people in all groups have given up their interest in virtue and duty to the country. There is a conspiracy to tear the nation apart. . . . As the ancient saying has it, “flocks of vultures copulating with flocks of vultures.” This causes Thai society to fragment into interest groups . . . and it will fragment increasingly by region, locality, class, occupation, etc. This will doom the country to its worst fate ever. (Thirayuth 2013a)

Although democracy is mixed into the ideology of the middle class, those who join political movements are driven by conservative ideology more than democracy. Interviews with a middle-class woman in Udon Thani revealed the way she had been shaped culturally from her youth:

Seeing grandfather, father, mother paying homage to the king since childhood, lighting votive candles, offering blessings, accepting fanaticism, not being a colony of anyone because of King Rama V . . . being a country because of the kings . . . But there must be Section 112 . . . there must be no infringement of the institution. . . . See that the PAD protects the institution. . . . Thaksin

threatens to overthrow the institution . . . cheating. (cited in Kanokrat 2020, 150–151)

One Udon Thani man said, “the number one priority from young to old is ‘nation, religion, king’ . . . when there is an attack on the institution, we can’t just stay at home” (cited in Kanokrat 2020, 150–151).

A Nakhon Si Thammarat woman said, “I’m angry at Thaksin, cheating on the nation, cheating on the country, but what I can’t bear concerns the king” (cited in Kanokrat 2020, 150–151).

Kanokrat Lertchoosakul’s middle-class interviewees had ideas, value systems, and emotions that clearly derived from conservative ideology and corresponded to the concepts and value systems advocated by leaders of the protests and middle-class intellectuals. For example, many of those who supported the Palang Dharma Party gave identical reasons for their support: the party had the image of “good people” and did not suffer from corruption; “It supports good people, people with morals, honesty, and the sacrifices of Chamlong and members of the Palang Dharma Party”; “We like Chamlong’s observance of the precepts, and he does not do anything for himself”; “We like Chamlong a lot . . . his honesty and sacrifice”; “We like his approach of seclusion, being a plain man, helping society.” One middle-class man from Bangkok said, “Thaksin is a greedy man.” Another interviewee said:

Thaksin was ambitious, wanted to change the form of government, wanted to be president. . . . What Thaksin did was for his cronies, grabbing benefits. . . . I must admit that he is smarter than Banharn and Chavalit. It makes it scary, and he even had academics in his group to give him the opportunity of being very successful, and it makes the people in the country quarrel to the point where they kill each other. (cited in Kanokrat 2020, 148)

A woman from Bangkok said, “It’s a special protest . . . everyone has the same feeling, love of the country, love of the king. We believe that everyone who comes thinks like this” (cited in Kanokrat 2020, 182).

Meanwhile, another person said, “I don’t know if we win or not, because if we don’t fight, the country will be completely gone. . . . You should not . . . set up a movement to overthrow the king” (cited in Kanokrat 2020, 149).

The *Manager Daily* newspaper and other affiliated media outlets played a big role in the use of conservative ideology. One columnist wrote:

[P]eople who rob the nation or sell the nation are called thieves or mega-thieves . . . and the misfortune of Thailand and the Thai people. Despite the settlement of the IMF debt, Thailand cannot end the sale of the nation. The nation has been brazenly plundered and sold in an unprecedented way. (Suthipong 2014b)

The columnist Suthipong Prachayapruit (2014a, cited in Kanokrat 2020, 191) also criticized “evil capital” as using an extreme and aggressive new liberal policy that destroyed businesses, local community ways, and natural resources in an unprecedentedly severe way.

Democratic ideology plays a less active role than conservative ideology in pushing the middle class to protest, because the middle class is disappointed with the democratic form of government and is fighting governments that claim legitimacy from elections. Democratic ideology, however, has been used to arouse the feelings of the middle class.

After 1997, many in the middle class hoped that the existence of independent constitutional organizations and guarantees of community rights to manage natural resources and arts and culture would help improve the democratic form of government and Thai society. Middle-class intellectuals like Chai-Anan Samudavanija believed, like many academics, that the Thai political structure or system was good in the 1997 constitution. So the real problem with Thai democracy was unethical politicians: “The behavior of leaders is directly contrary to the values of democracy. Leaders rely on formal rules to intervene in independent organizations and use the Election Commission for political advantage” (Chai-Anan 2006h). This rendered the key mechanisms of the democratic system inefficient, so people needed to rely on the “last refuge” of the monarchy or the judiciary (Chai-Anan 2006a) and “deal with dishonest, corrupt politicians decisively” (Chai-Anan 2006f).

The influence of liberal or democratic ideologies is evident from those in the middle class who participated in or supported the PAD and PDRC protests. Many appeared to have experience of and exposure to the basic ideas of liberal politics (Kanokrat 2020, 194). Some disagreed with the call for Article 7 to be used but attended the protests for other reasons, such as one Udon Thani Rajabhat University lecturer who believed Thaksin was creating “a very serious problem. . . . At that time, I was very dissatisfied with Thaksin. . . . I began to form a core organization of twenty people” (cited in Kanokrat 2020, 195).

A male teacher in Bangkok said in an interview that part of his reason for joining the protests to chase out Thaksin was due to the Phra Wihan case: “I agreed with the PAD . . . on the watershed boundary. I think that the International Court did not provide justice.” But another reason was “dissatisfaction with Thaksin’s use of violence, especially in regards to the Krue Se incident . . . which caused many deaths” (cited in Kanokrat 2020, 190–191).

An NGO worker from Udon Thani, apart from being dissatisfied with the government cooperating with capitalists who destroyed the environment and violated human rights, was also dissatisfied with interference in the media, which went against liberal democracy (Kanokrat 2020, 190–191).

It can therefore be said that the feelings of the middle class were aroused by analyzing and explaining problems using not just conservative ideology but also, in part, democratic ideology. Middle-class intellectuals tried to point out that the political system “was not yet a true democracy.” They defined the middle-class mass movement as “extra-parliamentary politics,” which followed democratic principles because it was “direct democracy” and “participatory democracy.” It was a struggle to achieve “true democracy” and a “peaceful people’s revolution” (Chai-Anan 2006b) or opposition to the “Thaksin regime” rather than opposition to democracy (Chai-Anan 2006d). The article “Democratic State” by Chai-Anan Samudavanija emphasizes that the PAD are the defenders of the democratic system and “prevent the democratic system from being taken over by a single interest group” (Chai-Anan 2008a). The PAD is considered a form of “citizen politics,” which is “a solution and an alternative to prevent a single-party system and a dictatorship” (Chai-Anan 2008a).

The early phase of the PAD political movement was driven by a wide range of ideologies since it was a coalition of several groups (Kanokrat 2020, 22), and throughout the period of the movement, democratic ideology played a large part in driving it. However, extremist conservative ideology played the most important role because the core leaders and some middle-class intellectuals relied on this ideology to constantly arouse the feelings of the masses who came to the demonstrations.

Thirayuth Boonmee praised the PAD masses as adherents of “goodness” who were fighting “bad people” through “peaceful means” “for the right to live in good moral conditions where cheating is dealt with really strictly, to live in a society that separates good from bad” (Thirayuth 2014). He also said, “If this force is maintained, we may be able to make allies in strong anti-corruption procedures to make the political sector accountable in the future” (Thirayuth 2013a).

The middle-class intellectual most clearly inclined toward using extremist conservative ideology was Chai-Anan Samudavanija. He convinced the middle class that “a coup will happen soon because . . . the government has blocked the possibility of changing (the government) in accordance with the rules (in a democratic regime)” (Chai-Anan 2008b). He proposed that the Thai people should offer a petition asking His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej to exercise his royal power under Section 7 (Chai-Anan 2006c). He also introduced the idea that *rachaprachasamasai* (monarch-people collaboration) be reinstated, arguing:

[I]f this lasts for another three to four years, Thailand will have a presidential democracy with the monarchy as head of state. . . . *Rachaprachasamasai* gives people the opportunity to participate in relying on the prestige of the monarchy in case irregularities occur without the possibility of being able to rely on constitutional mechanisms and processes. (Chai-Anan 2006g)

On July 16, 2006, Chai-Anan Samudavanija (2006e) affirmed the legitimacy of the monarchy's use of "royal prerogative" because "the role of the monarchy is focused on stabilizing the democratic system." He said, "at present, the monarchy is the refuge of the people. In an era when politics has decisive power, the clear role of the monarchy is to be an institution that prevents political power that is a totalitarian dictatorship" (Chai-Anan 2013). Before that, in mid-2011, Chai-Anan Samudavanija proposed a "sufficiency democracy," which made "democracy" similar to the concept of "civil society" in terms that were integrated into the concept of "community culture," the "sufficiency economy," and "Buddhist virtues" to make "liberal democracy" less important.

Chai-Anan Samudavanija also created an image of the "enemy of the nation." He spoke of the "Red Shirt masses" that clashed with state officials, calling them "crazy crowds." He stated that there had been many "enemies of the nation" in the past who gathered to "riot," such as "foreign workers, especially Burmese workers, and some Khmer workers from the border" and "people who formerly joined in developing the Thai nation from Nan and Southern Isaan who specialized in using weapons" and "armed units joined by foreign forces, i.e., Burmese and Khmer" (Chai-Anan 2010c). He used violent language such as "kleptocracy" and "terrorism." Chai-Anan Samudavanija (2010a) stated that "in the wake of the last bloodshed . . . the black-shirted armed forces are Khmer soldiers. . . . They have been turning the state into a 'failed state' for some time." Talking about the long-term ill effects, he said: "the hope of giving our society the same peace as it has had is at an end, because the wounds and infections of hatred have spread widely everywhere. . . . The feeling of resentment and the need for violence will persist" (Chai-Anan 2010c).

In addition to middle-class intellectuals, there were leaders who spoke on the PAD platform using conservative ideology in live broadcasts and many forms of media. For example, Asia Satellite Television had—and still has—live broadcasts and many websites with links to a network of websites. It also uses the *Manager Daily* newspaper, cartoons, stickers, books, community radio, etc. (Wichan 2011, 150–166). Those who were influenced by these forms of media included the urban middle class: intellectuals, academics, NGO networks, lawyers, politicians, state enterprise groups, the Santi Asoke network, artists, the mass media, etc. (Wichan 2011, 70–86, 166–173). In speeches, the criteria of democratic ideology were used to show that the government was undemocratic, by, for example, referring to interference in the judicial process and the media. One of the issues highlighted in speeches, newspapers, and statements was the attempt to amend Section 237 of the constitution: "This amendment to the constitution by the government overthrows the constitution that was passed by a referendum of the people and is being made to wipe out the wrongs of Pol. Lt. Col. Thaksin Shinawatra and his cronies" ("Guard

Column,” May 23, 2008, cited in Wichan 2011, 88).

According to a statement:

The People’s Alliance for Democracy has never refused to allow constitutional amendments as long as . . . they are based on the public interest, are not contrary to the rule of law and equal enforcement of the law . . . are not contrary to the principles of good governance and do not undermine the balance of power between legislature, the executive and the judiciary, . . . have no conflict of interest for those who will amend the constitution. (“Statement No. 6” [April 9, 2008], cited in Wichan 2011, 265)

One can clearly see the use of values deriving from democratic ideology. Similarly, the next statement goes on to say:

We invite all brothers and sisters who love the nation and who love democracy to join in the sacred mission of defending this constitution and opposing those who would wipe out the constitution that was passed in a referendum of a majority of the public with more than 14 million votes to the end. (“Statement No. 7” [April 22, 2008], cited in Wichan 2011, 270)

Issues based on conservative ideology, such as corruption, defamation of or inappropriate infringement on the monarch, the use of violence at rallies, and the Phra Wihan case, can be seen in certain speeches. For instance:

The People’s Alliance for Democracy must condemn the Thai government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for being the lackeys of the puppets selling out the nation, who allowed the Kingdom of Thailand to lose territory to Cambodia by fraudulently plundering the land. (16 People’s Alliance for Democracy 2008, cited in Wichan 2011, 81)

Statement No. 26/2008 states that the PAD must “oppose the amendment to the 2007 constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand” and

expel the . . . tyrannical government, which acts as puppets for a criminal fugitive from the realm . . . which supports the destruction of the system of justice, which spends the national budget with no transparency so that the nation is on the verge of collapse . . . (*Thairath*, October 8, 2008, cited in Wichan 2011, 93–94)

These are deemed to be “ethical offenses, and so destroy their legitimacy and bring an end to them administering the country” (*Thairath*, October 8, 2008, cited in Wichan 2011, 93–94).

The issue of the constitutional amendment highlighted in the statement was as follows:

[T]he political parties have shown the power of parliamentary dictatorship that will be able to change the democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state at any time. . . . The

puppet government is focused only on finding a way to overthrow the constitution to whitewash its own faults and those of its cronies by ignoring the crisis that has occurred. (Statement No. 9, cited in Wichan 2011, 275)

The statement also says that the government's offenses are "dangerous to the people." It adds:

[T]he puppet government has gone back to overthrowing the basic policies of the state that will help to create the people's self-reliance, has erased the philosophy of the sufficiency economy from the constitution, and has reduced the people's power to monitor political parties and the crisis facing the institutions of nation, religions, and monarchy and the people. (Statement No. 9, cited in Wichan 2011, 275)

Another statement called on groups to "prepare movements in all forms to build a good governance society" in order to solve the problem of corruption (*Manager Daily*, February 26, 2008, cited in Wichan 2011, 126).

In speeches, expressions such as "last war" and "army of the people" were used to ready the masses to devote all their power to the struggle for the nation, religions, and monarchy, such as: "It will really be the last war. . . . Death is dead, and was never feared. If we do it for what is right, for the throne, for the king, for the Chakri Dynasty . . . we must fight to the end" (*Manager Daily*, September 1, 2008, cited in Wichan 2011, 131–132).

Statement No. 11/2008 points out: "the nation is on the verge of collapse. . . . Now the people's army . . . is ready to carry out the supreme sacred mission to save the country . . . and at the same time oust those who have stolen the country" (*Manager Daily*, August 26, 2008, cited in Wichan 2011, 132).

The Buddhist idea of "karmic retribution" was also used, such as calling on some politicians to "prove . . . allegations of corruption . . . and be subject to the judicial process and their own karmic retribution" (Statement No. 19, cited in Wichan 2011, 142). Superstition and astrology were used to create a sense of faith in the leader of the PAD and build confidence that the fight would achieve success. This contributed to strengthening extremist conservative ideology. For example, Suvinaï Pornavalai discussed the ritual of creating Jatukham Rammathep amulets:

The Jatukham Rammathep organization allowed Sondhi Limthongkul to create a national guardian version of Jatukham Rammathep amulets (2007). . . . His historical role . . . that dared to rise up against Pol. Lt. Col. Thaksin Shinawatra . . . gathered people who were "brave" throughout the land . . . in the eyes of the great gods. . . . Sondhi Limthongkul was in the position of a true national savior. (Suvinaï 2008b)

Suvinaï Pornavalai further stated that the Thailand Watch Foundation of Sondhi Limthongkul emerged in order to continue the sacred mission of protecting the Thai

nation: “It is a people’s movement that has sacred objects or sacred thoughts behind it” to help solve problems of the nation in a situation where “Saturn . . . and the moon align in the zodiac of the nation (*duang muang*). . . . The country will fall into very serious misfortune in 2007” (Suvinaï 2008b).

The emotions of the middle-class masses were provoked also through songs and music at rallies. The songs used at PAD protests often showed love, unity, gratitude to the nation, loyalty to the king, and opposition to corruption. The songs at PDRC protests focused on the struggle of the people to achieve democracy and the protection of the nation. Some songs emphasized that the masses were on the righteous side (fighting the unrighteous), such as the “Candle of Dharma” song, which likens each person to a little candle, but when these come together they become a “candle of righteousness” that protects the nation, religion, and beloved monarch and helps light the way to love, harmony, and prosperity (Pume 2016, 92–103). Listening to conservative music that created a feeling of appreciation or aroused a feeling of arrogance in the fight for the “nation, religion, and king” intensified the conservative ideology in the hearts and minds of the middle class throughout the protests, especially when there were speeches and statements by the leaders, and explanations and guidance from middle-class intellectuals who had already aroused basic emotions.

Having their feelings aroused by conservative ideology both before and during demonstrations eventually prepared the middle class to support the use of violent methods to bring down corrupt governments. These methods included occupying important locations and removing group of people and the regime that were seen as attempting to overthrow and destroy the nation, religion, and monarchy or debasing morality and making society worse. In the end, the middle class felt “glad that there was a coup” because “at that time, I thought that these people would come to make the country peaceful and then move on” (Khaosod 2021). After the 2014 coup, conservative ideology—both moderate and extremist—continued to play a role in Thai society.

VI Artistic and Cultural Activities Using Extremist and Moderate Conservative Ideologies from the 2014 Coup until the Present

After the 2014 coup, conservative ideology was used to sustain the power structure, weaken “politicization” among the people, and bring Thai capitalism under the control of the state and capital. The Thai state after the 2014 coup was different from the Thai state in the aftermath of the 2006 coup because high-ranking military officers took control of all major organizations, including state-owned enterprises and large capital as close

allies of the state (Prajak and Veerayooth 2018). Large capital relied on capital and networks not only to give them a competitive advantage in the market system and enable them to monopolize major businesses, but also to collaborate with the state through projects including the “Pracharat Rak Sammakkee Project,” which aimed to bring villagers under the auspices of the state and capitalist groups and reduce the political strength of communities and civil society; this would stop communities and civil society throughout the country from opposing the state and capitalist groups that were grabbing resources or monopolizing businesses. To reach this goal, conservative ideology was intensively used.

There were many phenomena demonstrating the role of conservative ideology after the 2014 coup, such as the erasure of commemorations of the People’s Party and the 1932 revolution, the use of violence and laws such as Section 112 and Section 116 to suppress the “new generation” who called for the drafting of a new constitution and reform of the monarchy, written attacks on individuals viewed as enemies of the “nation, religions, and monarchy,” etc. Other artistic and cultural activities dominated by conservative ideology continued.

One section of middle-class intellectuals continue to reproduce extremist conservative ideology. For example, Naowarat Pongpaiboon’s article “Constitutional Authority” declared that “demo + cracy means that the authority of the people is supreme” and not that “the people are supreme.” According to Buddhism it was not the people who were supreme, because if the people were thieves the country would experience catastrophe (ruin). According to him, democracy must mean “the happiness and welfare of the people is supreme,” emphasizing that democracy was a government “for the people,” not “of the people and by the people.” He cited three works of literature—*Traibhumikatha* from the Sukhothai era, *Mahachat Khamluang* from the Ayutthaya period, and *Ramakien* (Ramayana) of the Rattanakosin (Bangkok) period—to assert that the Sukhothai period “aimed at people doing good, not doing evil”; the Ayutthaya period “aimed at people sacrificing, not thinking only of themselves”; and the Rattanakosin period, which continues until the modern era, aims to “suppress the devil by using the power of god” (Naowarat 2021, 51). It is evident that this is an attempt to emphasize that the use of violence to suppress “bad” or “devil” people is a correct and legitimate act, and that the use of violence is also an ordinary method of the Rattanakosin period (Naowarat 2021).

Movements under extremist conservative ideology in 2014 appeared in many circles and often focused on protecting the monarchy,²⁾ such as saying “there are groups that

2) For more on these groups, of which there are many—such as 33 Vocational Student Groups Defending the Institution (Monarchy); Black Warriors, Two Peninsulas; THCVC (Thailand Help Center for Victims of Cyberbullying) (Minion Army Defending the Institution); Thai Raksa Group; etc.—see “Know the ‘New Right’ People’s Groups” (October 20, 2021), <https://voicetv.co.th/read/5Vn4LDAO1> (in Thai).

have tried to disseminate inaccurate information and ideas in order to incite infringements on the institution of the monarchy. . . . As days go by, there will be more and more that will affect national security” (Voice Online 2021b). One columnist attacked Western academics who criticized the monarchy as

Western gangsters . . . who come to “engineer the overthrow of the nation.” . . . they’re in luck, these days, they’re just expelled! If it was the time of “King Narai the Great” . . . there was a chance of being put on display . . . stomach cut open, head chopped, arms and legs “dismembered” and the pieces thrown for the vultures and crows to eat, as was done to Constantine Phaulkon. (Pleo Si-ngoen [pseudonym] 2021)

Fortune-telling is also part of the use of extremist conservatism to fight progressives. For example, one fortune-teller predicted:

[T]he Rahu planets and stars that are the enemies of the fate of the city have resulted in omens, . . . the enemies of the country, . . . ‘Free Youth’ and ‘People’s Party’ groups, people’s groups which hope to bring down the government, bring down the monarchy . . . in 2021, which will cause Thais throughout the land to fall into hardship because of the activities of this group. . . . But the strength of the country and the secure fate of the king ensure that the agitators, however they fight, do not win. (*Daily News* 2020)

There are also many groups in the middle-class movement that use extremist conservative ideology, such as Vocational Students Defending the Institution, which exalts the motto “Live Faithfully, Die Loyally”; Black Warriors, Two Peninsulas; Minion Army Defending the Institution; the Thai Raksa Group; etc. (Voice Online 2021b). Some groups have played a continuous role, such as the group of Maj. Gen. Dr. Rienthong Nanna, who founded the Rubbish Collection Organization 2020 (MGR Online 2020), and the Thai Phakdee Group, which was set up as a political party in 2020. The Thai Phakdee Group declared, “We will fight the Move Forward Party, the Progressive Movement, the Three-Fingered Mobs,” calling them the “movement to overthrow the monarchy” (BBC News Thai 2021). The Thai Move Institute declared:

The true direction of Thainess is therefore within the country and in us. Lessons are not outside the country or derived from the study of the achievements of other nations, especially Western nations that have never wished us well. . . . Thais who hate Thainess and admire the world outside are those who see a rowel as a lotus. Our true self is the glory of the past that we have left behind. So we should turn around and go back and find inspiration from the prosperity of the Thai nation before democracy, under the leadership of 53 monarchs . . . over the past 770 years. (Isara 2020)

After the 2014 coup the elite continued to use conservative ideology as a tool, although the 2017 constitution was promulgated and elections were held. In the political context of the 2010s, the elite were unable to rely on “royal hegemony” to create political

stability by counterbalancing and sharing power and benefits to the satisfaction of all elite parties as they had done in the 1980s and 1990s (Asa 2021). The elite were forced to choose moderate and extremist conservative ideologies to continue to maintain power while minimizing “democratization” and “politicization” among the people and civil society.

The use of moderate conservative ideology can be seen from government policies and projects. A clear example is “Asa Pracharat” (public-state volunteerism), which comes from a mix of the concepts of Thai-style “community culture” and “civil society” and was created by middle-class intellectuals. The concept of “civil society” in other countries is focused on nongovernmental organizations with goals and roles that are independent of the state. But in Thai society it appears instead that the concept of “civil society” has been integrated into the concept of “community culture” and Buddhist ideas. This significantly alters conservative ideology. The state and the elite have adopted the concept of civil society as a major state policy and project, where the state has expanded its authority to control and promote “civil society” in various forms since the 1997 constitution. In addition to being written into the 1997 constitution, the concept of Thai-style civil society appeared in the Eighth National Economic and Social Development Plan (1997–2001) and in several laws defining the roles and responsibilities of representatives from the civil society sector, such as the 2007 National Health Act, the 2008 Political Development Council Act, and the 2008 Community Organization Council Act (Choochai and Yuwadee 1998).

One project that has been widely implemented since the 2014 coup to control and co-opt “civil society” nationwide while giving “civil society” “Thai virtues” is “Asa Pracharat: Operation Drive Thailand 4.0,” with the issuance of the 2015 Regulation of the Office of the Prime Minister on the Promotion and Development of Civil Society Organizations and the Project to Develop Mechanisms to Support Provincial-Level Asa Pracharat Networks and to Enhance Social Well-being, 2017–19. The 2015 regulation and the 2017–19 project anticipate

the best concrete features of volunteer work in linking development policies and strategies to Thailand 4.0, because they can reflect the characteristics of a society whose members do not neglect each other, a society that is strong, and a society that is virtuous at the same time. (Thailand, Office of the Asa Pracharat Fund for Social Well-being 2017)

It appears that in two months of 2017, 2,305 middle-class provincial leaders nationwide joined “Provincial Asa Pracharat Working Groups”—43 percent from civil society, 27 percent from the state sector, 16 percent from the business sector, and 14 percent from the academic sector (Thailand, Office of the Asa Pracharat Fund for Social Well-being

2017). These “leaders” were tasked with driving the project by broadly expanding networks and encouraging members of “communities” and “civil society” to have “virtues” such as sufficiency, honesty, gratitude, and a “volunteer spirit,” for instance by sacrificing to help others without seeking personal gain.

Many artistic and cultural activities took place under the central conservative ideology, for example, the publication of books such as *Asa Pracharat Project: Drive to Thailand 4.0* (Thailand, Office of the Asa Pracharat Fund for Social Well-being 2017), *Volunteer Civilians: A Force to Treat the World* (Sineeporn 2019), *Asa Pracharat Good Stories of Local Workers* (Thailand, Office of the Asa Pracharat Fund for Social Well-being 2019), etc. In addition, events were arranged such as “Oun I Rak” (warm heart with love) “to reflect the beauty of Thai traditions, culture and art,” first held in 2018 (Prachachat Business 2018), and the exhibition “Music of the MHESI in Honour of the King in the Hearts of Thais Forever.” The television and online media channels of True Corporation were used to broadcast the program *Novices Cultivate Righteous Wisdom* over 24 hours to present stories of the moral communities of nice, charming, and impressive little novices, etc.

The use of extremist conservative ideology by the elite can be clearly seen in the use of provisions of Section 112 to suppress those seeking to change the power structure, and even the Constitutional Court turned back to using the meaning of “democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state,” stressing the authority of the monarch passed down from earlier forms of government since the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Rattanakosin periods. The Constitutional Court banned similar movements by others in the future. Worachet Pakeerut commented: “This ruling is confirmation of a change in the authority of the monarchy after the 2014 coup. As a result, the democratic space has narrowed, while that of the king as head of state has expanded” (Prachatai 2020).

Delays in the adaptation of the courts and other organizations in the judicial system to a liberal democratic system, while still being conceptually committed to conservative ideology, can be seen by the interpretation of the law and actions against defendants by the police, prosecutors, and courts in cases such as flag throwing, spray painting, fiction writing, not standing up in cinemas during the royal anthem, translating foreign books, selling foreign documentary CDs. The court also imposed punishment on one man for “slandering and insulting King Rama IV, a former monarch, by comparing his era to slavery, with no freedom and a bad administration . . . with the intention of causing the people to lose faith and not revere him” (Prachatai 2013). In addition, the courts did not grant bail to many of those accused of *lèse-majesté*. This situation was the result of government personnel in the judicial process becoming used to using power “freely” without adhering to the principle of the sovereignty of the people, while the Thai judiciary had always been identified with “good, talented, loyal, and diligent people” (Kitpatchara

2019). This gave the judiciary the legitimate authority to judge in the name of the monarch.

VII Conservative Ideology and the Middle Class Now and in the Future

In the midst of the use of moderate and extremist conservative ideologies by many parties to achieve their political goals, such as preserving a power structure from which they benefit, climbing to power or serving the power of the elite, and controlling or governing people through “communities” or “civil society” Thai style (by means of putting people in “communities” or “civil society” under a regime of rule by righteousness through exercising the right to vote like a person who is virtuous, satisfied with a life that is “sufficient” and “peaceful,” and ready to sacrifice for the common good with “volunteerism”), some members of the middle class remain committed to conservative ideology. However, there are also many in the middle class who are starting to back away from conservative ideology because they are no longer benefiting from it as they did in the past.

Those in the middle class who are committed to conservative ideology are mostly people who are in institutions of power—the judiciary, the military, the police—Ministry of Interior officials, teachers, etc. They have often been indoctrinated with conservative ideals by state educational institutions. Once they enter the government service system, with authority over the people, their lives become firmly bound to state power—whether through income, obligations, privileges, prestige, identity, or social status. These things remain important in their lives and those of their families even after they have retired, because they still have a pension and social prestige. They therefore remain firmly committed to conservative ideals. In the case of teachers, it is also worth noting that they have been indoctrinated by the Rajabhat Institutes (Rajabhat Universities) and faculties of education which aim to charge teachers with the duty to reproduce and instill “Thainess” as well as Thai virtues and the concept of the “sufficiency economy” among young people, and not to give young people knowledge and understanding of issues important to adapting to the system of social relationships in a changing world. Teachers therefore continue to have a strong psychological and emotional attachment to “Thainess.”

However, for the middle class in general, after the 2014 coup and the passing of King Rama IX, all that was left was the need to prevent the return of the “Thaksin regime” and the psychological and emotional commitment that they had to the value systems of conservative ideology. But these members of the middle class did not benefit from conservative ideology as they had during the previous reign.

At present, problems of ethnicity in the case of both the Chinese and the Lao have not affected the status, rights, and benefits of the middle class, because the middle class of Chinese and Lao descent have become “Thais,” and both the state and Thai society accept ethnic diversity. The politically active middle class have even declared themselves “patriotic Chinese descendants.” “Relying on royal hegemony” to counterbalance the power of the military and capital groups may be impractical for the middle class, and the government in the period after the 2014 coup, which created legitimacy using conservative ideology, did not meet the needs of the middle class in terms of either political power or economic interest. According to one prominent columnist’s analysis:

The state . . . wants to keep the country calm by using government parties, using patronage politics in a “big house” regime, holding power, managing benefits for big capital, and feeding populism to lower-class people. But they destroy the bargaining power of the middle class economically and politically. . . . The conservative network has a complete hold on power: the military, the police, the judicial system, the independent organizations, firmly unified under extreme ideas. . . . But what’s different from the periods after the coups of 2006 or May 2010 is the transformation of the urban middle class, which . . . has economic, social, and ideological power.

Extremist state powers do not realize that the middle class is moving away. (Baitongheang 2021)

Today’s middle class generally have ideas that are more in line with the “younger generation.” Research by the Bank of Thailand found that although the middle class is different from the “younger generation” because “the younger generation has significantly more liberal values than older generations,” differences in thought are often seen as greater than they actually are. “In fact, the two groups of people have the same opinions on a number of policies, such as that the state should collect more taxes to improve basic services of high quality, everyone’s vote should have equal value in elections, etc.” (Prachachat Business 2021). Even Prawase Wasi accepted the “younger generation” for the following reasons:

The protests by students are a good tendency toward BBD, or Broad-Based Democracy. . . . The younger generation will replace the older generation, and are the future of the country. . . . The more expert they are, the better, and the better the future of Thailand. . . . When children don’t believe their parents, it’s not that they’re worse people. . . . Currently, information comes in several ways. So if you want them to believe only their parents and teachers like before, that goes against reason. . . . They want to move forward. But the older generation may be living in the past, so they can learn from the younger generation by learning together. (*Matichon* 2020a)

At present the middle class outside the bureaucracy, which wants to increase its competitiveness in different markets, also has a desire to reform the country to a more liberal democracy. Even high-ranking businesspeople have expressed the need for constitutional amendment or a redrafting of the constitution. Newspapers have reported inter-

views with several businessmen. For example, Sarath Ratanavandi said: “The global economy is becoming more complicated . . . so I agree with amending the constitution to make the country stronger” (Prachachat Business 2020).

Srettha Thavisin said:

I agree . . . with constitutional amendments. . . . Having as many as one third of parliamentarians in the senate . . . is the cause of conflict. . . . We must really try not to cause clashes that end in bloodshed . . . and lead to disaster for the nation. . . . Live with equality. Equality should bring about lasting happiness. (Prachachat Business 2020)

Veerathai Santiprabhob said, “Young people aged 35 to 45 should be given the opportunity to change the state sector . . . to meet new challenges, not focus on the past” (Lom Plianhit [pseudonym] 2021).

Supanutt Sasiwuttawat, a TDRI academic, said, “The traditional Thai civil service state can no longer go on. It cannot solve the problem in matters that need a new kind of response. . . . It should build cooperation with the private sector and society” (Lom Plianhit [pseudonym] 2021).

NGOs and development activists also began to oppose the government. For example, a network of 1,867 not-for-profit organizations issued a joint statement opposing the Draft Act on the Operations of Not-for-Profit Organizations, saying that it was inconsistent with freedom of association and “used an authoritarian government service system of a military dictatorship to control the people, which is completely opposed to and undermines participatory democracy and contravenes key principles of the 2017 constitution and international human rights law” (Prachatai 2022).

One of the changes in the middle class in general today that will affect the rejection of or retreat from conservative ideals is the modern way of life in an expanding neoliberalism—i.e., the “enterprising self,” focusing on the freedom of the free market and reduced state intervention. This causes people to start thinking intensively about themselves, taking responsibility for all dimensions of their own lives, being aware of independence and freedom of choice, and trying to surmount limitations to reach happiness by training themselves (Krittapak 2021, 253–275).

However, the Thai Cultural Revolution, or the overthrow of “Thainess” in order to change social relations at all levels, is something that the middle class in general is not ready to accept because they still have some conservative ideology deep in their hearts and minds (Nidhi 2021b). Although they desire independence and freedom, many in the middle class still feel “nostalgia,” wanting people in Thai society to help each other, be kind to each other, and see that the social order of “knowing one’s place” (or acceptance of the hierarchical structure of society) is a good thing.

One of the political viewpoints of the middle class is that “good governance should be achieved without any need for a democracy complete with elections.” As Chai-Anan Samudavanija said, “China’s experience and Singapore’s show that even with little democracy, if it focuses on good governance, people will accept it . . . leading the country to prosperity and progress” (Chai-Anan 2010e). What the middle class want is “good people” who can “establish good governance in the political and bureaucratic system” (Chai-Anan 2010d). If the leaders of the country, both the current and future elites, cannot create “good governance,” the middle class will no longer support them, especially in cases where the middle class suspect or find excessive corruption.

The middle class have not fully supported democracy, but middle-class intellectuals accept that becoming a democracy may be inevitable. Thirayuth Boonmee in his October 14, 2013 speech indicated that eventually democracy in the sense that the “Red Shirts” wanted would win over democracy in the sense that the central conservative power wanted (Thirayuth 2013b). He also pointed out:

[C]onservative ideas are limited to issues of the nation and monarchy. . . . The Red Shirts are justified in terms of democracy from elections, which is the universal legitimacy of today’s world, while the legitimacy of the conservatives is historically a tradition which is old and worn out. . . . In the long run, the chances of grassroots power are greater. (*Komchadluek* 2012)

Chai-Anan Samudavanija (2009) said: “In the future, no matter who is in power, the creation of power in dictatorial regimes must be avoided because it runs opposite to global trends and the feelings of the majority of the people, who now have broader and deeper information.”

The elite’s maintenance of power using both moderate and extremist conservative ideologies has not brought economic or political benefits to the middle class. The Thai state after the 2014 coup devoted a large budget to the countryside to determine the direction of change in the villages and to control the mindset affecting the political behavior of the new middle class. The elites, who use conservative ideology, do not have the capacity to spur economic development and liberate Thailand from the trap of being a middle-income country. Therefore, they have not given the middle class a sense that their own lives and those of their families are secure or that they can expect to experience greater success. It is easy for the middle class to see that a government that fails to build economic growth is a government with no legitimacy, especially when the middle class value both security and development. In addition to “national security” in terms of preserving Thai virtues, the state and the elite also need to prove to the middle class their potential for economic development; but at present Thailand’s economic growth rate has gone down a lot, and public and household debt have increased greatly. The difference

in income and assets between the richest and middle classes has widened (Apichat 2019), and the middle class feel that they have to bear much of the burden of income taxes for the state. The government and the elite in their network are instead more focused on controlling the people psychologically or morally than on providing effective services and creating efficient economic growth.

A major problem that the middle class have always encountered in the media is the inefficiency of educational management to promote intellectual development, innovation, and competitiveness in the global market. As a result, the middle class worry about the future of their children and the long-term economic security of the nation. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) from 2000 to 2015 found that the scores of Thai youth in language, science, and math were steadily declining and were lower than in other Asian countries, many of which ranked among the top ten (Thailand, Ministry of Education, Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology [IPST] n.d.). The 2018 evaluation appeared to show a decrease in reading ability of Thai students, while science and mathematics remained at the same level, and Thailand lost to Vietnam in all three areas of evaluation (BBC News Thai 2019). Such inefficiencies on the part of the state inevitably increase middle-class dissatisfaction with the government and the ruling elite.

Efforts by the state and the elite to instill “Thainess” in order to make the youth and general public accept the social structures that divide people into hierarchies and power structures, and accept that a life of “sufficiency” is a good life, have given Thailand’s education system and major media no role in increasing the capacity to analyze and explain the diverse and complex changes in the world around them, or the capacity to modify their perspectives on different matters in an intelligent way. They have instead instilled ways of thinking that explain the problems of life and society in terms of morality. Conservative ideology can retain its power if there are intellectuals who can adapt its focus and meaning to changing situations or problems faced by the middle class. However, it appears that today’s middle class does not have intellectuals capable of performing this task effectively. Given the dynamic economic and social context of today’s digital world, the conservative ideology that was formulated in the past cannot help to explain new problems or provide suitable alternatives for the middle class to adapt in today’s fast-changing world. Conservative ideology has therefore not adapted, and the middle class are unable to capitalize on conservative ideals in new contexts, especially in a digital world where information from new ways of thinking and perspectives is in constant competition. Thus, it is difficult for conservative ideology to maintain its power to explain the problems of life and society or to provide the best alternatives to the current and future middle classes.

As for the ideology of the patronage system, which is one part of that conservative ideology, its importance to the middle class who are outside the bureaucracy is beginning to decline. As a result of socioeconomic changes, such as the proliferation of new forms of credit, the ideology of the patronage system has become less influential. In the past, when the middle class had to invest money, do business, or buy expensive things such as houses or cars, they often had to borrow money from people who were better off, such as rich relatives or employers, whom they repaid with feelings of loyalty. But now that there are new forms of credit, such as from financial institutions, the middle class have become less dependent on borrowing from people in return for their gratitude. Freelancing or working on digital platforms means not having to please a supervisor or company owner. The average person can criticize services provided by government agencies through social media. These changes have all led the middle class to reduce their reliance on the patronage system in everyday life. Even though the patronage system remains, it manifests more as commercial relationships. The conservative ideological dimension of the patronage system is quickly disintegrating.

The great changes of economic system, such as the expansion of tourism, selling products through the online system, etc., make the local middle class less dependent on the patronage of their local patrons. Their customers are mostly people from all over the country and foreigners. What they need more is to reform the Thai state in every aspect, including making good national policies that reduce the costs and increase the customers. They also realize that patronage in the bureaucracy and between officials at all levels and capital groups increases their costs and adversely affects market competition. Free market and competitive equality are increasingly preferred among the middle class.

During the reign of King Rama IX, the middle class relied on the king, who had great cultural powers, to oversee the use of power by politicians and political parties. Since the death of King Rama IX the middle class are no longer able to scrutinize politicians and political parties by relying on “royal hegemony.” The middle class also recognize that investment by both domestic and foreign capitalists depends on confidence in Thailand’s economic and political stability. The use by the Thai elite of conservative ideology is inevitably opposed by the “new middle class” and the “younger generation,” which can lead to protests at any moment. The more the government uses violence to suppress the young, the children of the middle class, the more tension there is in the hearts of the middle class—both from attacks on their children and from the political turmoil that breaks out from time to time. There has even been international condemnation of the Thai state for human rights violations. In the midst of these tensions and frustrations, the conservative ideology cited by the elite to maintain power is likely

to lose much of its force in the minds and emotions of the middle class.

When conservative ideology has less influence on the minds of the middle class, the political regime that the middle class desire is likely to be the one that Anand Panyarachun calls “democratic governance”:

Democratic governance is a true democracy based on legitimacy. . . . The fact that we listen to many opinions from a broad group of people will allow the government to give weight to more well-rounded and sustainable development. . . .

We need a revolution in thinking. . . . The paradigm of society and the people as a whole should be more open and accept a diversity of ideas, including cultivating shared values that lead to change in society. (Isranews Agency 2015)

The use of both moderate and extreme conservative ideals to continue in power, without a government made up of “good people” of virtue and wisdom, does not therefore meet the needs of today’s middle class. The political system under the 2017 constitution has not created any new hope for the middle class. There has been no national reform in political and bureaucratic areas, as the PDRC masses demanded. Corruption has not decreased. Transparency International published its 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index scores from 180 countries around the world. Denmark and New Zealand again ranked jointly in first place, while Thailand ranked the same as in 2019: 104th in the world and fifth in ASEAN (Voice Online 2021a).

As for attitudes toward the countryside, after the emergence of the political movement of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, or the “Red Shirts”—the “new middle class” from the countryside of Northern and Northeastern Thailand—many in the middle class realized that the countryside had changed a lot. It could no longer be expected to restore “community culture” and “Thai virtues” under the conservative ideology. With the demise of the “Father of the Nation” in 2016, not only the royal hegemony has ended but the middle class no longer had the “Father” in the center of their hearts. Conservative ideology therefore held less meaning for them. This became especially true during the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a serious and widespread impact: the middle class now had no “refuge” to investigate the use of state power by the government, high-ranking government officials, parliament, politicians, the courts, and even large capital groups. Against this background, the abandonment of both moderate and extreme conservatism and questioning of the legitimacy of the elites’ power based on conservative ideology is likely to become more evident in the near future.

Conclusion

In recent decades, the middle class—especially Thais of Chinese and Lao descent, who make up a large part of the Thai middle class—have benefited greatly from conservative ideology. Middle-class intellectuals have played an active role in reproducing conservative ideology through artistic and cultural practices. In addition to the reproduction of conservative ideology, new concepts or new meanings for old concepts have been created, such as “rule by righteousness,” “the democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state,” “community culture,” and “civil society,” with a strong emphasis on “Thai virtues.” Finally, when elections became more important, middle-class intellectuals changed the meaning of “rule by righteousness,” which once emphasized the virtues of rulers, to an emphasis on the importance of citizens being “virtuous good citizens” so that people could make the correct decisions in elections without being deceived by populist policies. In addition, the core virtues have been greatly modified. The concept of “Dharma Land, Golden Land,” which focused on the development of minds or virtues that would lead to economic success, emphasized the specific virtues of “sufficiency, harmony, sacrifice, honesty, and peace” of “good citizens” throughout the country. Even a new meaning of “civil society” was created, with an emphasis on a “virtuous civil society” that would cooperate with the state sector, the private sector, and the general public in pushing Thai society toward a “moral society,” reducing people’s “desire for success in the capitalist system” that was caused by the “Thaksin regime.”

The artistic and cultural practices of middle-class intellectuals committed the middle class to a deep psychological and emotional attachment to “Thainess” in various dimensions, such as their bond with the king as “Father of the Nation” and the “beloved king” who performed an important duty in the “democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state,” with constant middle-class “reliance on the royal prestige.” For them, the governing of Thais, in addition to being a “democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state,” should also be “rule by righteousness” and should also make Thailand a “Dharma Land, Golden Land” through the Buddhist teachings and the “sufficiency economy.” It should revive “community culture” to create “strong communities” or to unite as a “civil society” Thai style to push people to be satisfied with a life of “sufficiency” and adhere to morals such as conformity, charity, etc. As virtuous citizens, every time there is an election, people will decide to choose “good people” rather than politicians who use populist policies to buy votes and turn villagers into a consumerist group until debt increases and they forget about their own good community culture.

Although the modern socioeconomic context gives the middle class new ideas,

social values, and emotions, these do not replace the former conservative ideology. The middle-class thinking instead contains an ideological contradiction until it can be said that the middle class want a “conservative democracy” regime. This requires elections and controls and checks on the use of state power, along with success in capitalism as well as independence and freedom in personal life, but at the same time a nostalgia for the past. There is a desire to preserve good “Thainess.” The middle class are anxious that “Thainess,” both nationally and at the village level, will be corrupted by capitalism and globalization, until the morals of the villagers deteriorate and Thai society degenerates, even though they themselves live in a capitalist system and desire greatly to succeed within this system.

The adulteration of the ideologies of conservatism and democracy had the effect of explaining the national crisis in an era when the “Thaksin regime” had great power and influence. Middle-class intellectuals legitimized their opposition to the “Thaksin regime” on the grounds that it was “evil capital,” where greed and desire led politicians, who belonged to a group of large capitalists, to use their power for shameless corruption and turn Thai politics into “parliamentary dictatorships,” not “real democracies.” Also, the hubris of political leaders on various issues was likely to destroy national unity and security, even bringing in foreigners, such as Burmese and Khmer, to riot, leading the country to a dead end. The masses needed to fight to overthrow them using “extra-parliamentary” politics, both “participatory democracy” and “direct democracy,” or even supporting the military to carry out a coup to open the way to a “sufficiency democratic system” or a moral democracy, without the need to give importance to elections.

It is evident that the meaning of a “democratic form of government with the monarch as head of state” in which the middle class “rely on royal prestige” under the concepts of “rule by righteousness,” “Dharma Land, Golden Land,” “community culture,” “civil society” Thai style, and “volunteer spirit”—all of which increase the psychological and emotional bonds with “Thainess,” especially the bonds with various value systems—has led to the view that capitalism-globalization is bad for Thai society, and that the “Thaksin regime” rapidly shifted Thai society, especially rural society and community culture, along a bad path. When this was accompanied by emotions aroused by the explanations of intellectuals and leaders of the PAD and PDRC political movements between 2005 and 2014, the middle class felt violently angry; they believed that they needed to sacrifice their own happiness to preserve “Thainess” in its various dimensions; they felt the need to fight and resist “evil capitalist” politicians who destroyed “Thainess” for personal gain, whether through “judicialization,” “direct democracy,” or a “coup,” along with the use of violence in various forms.

The need to inspire the middle-class masses to participate in a broad movement led mass leaders and middle-class intellectuals to use conservative ideology to arouse feelings through artistic and cultural media, as well as superstition and astrology. Conservative ideology had an ongoing influence, while democratic ideology was used to attack the government and political system of the “Thaksin regime,” saying that it was not a “true democracy.” The middle class expected that a “true democracy suitable for Thai society and culture” would emerge after “political reform” or “national reform.” Such explanations and raising of hopes resulted in the middle class accepting authoritarian regimes at the time of the 2006 and 2014 coups. The middle class were hopeful that Thailand would achieve a form of “democratization” suited to Thai society and culture in the days to come.

The extremist and moderate conservative ideologies that gained power from the times of the PAD and PDRC political movements between 2005 and 2014 became the ideological basis for an elite network after the 2014 coup. They were chosen to maintain power and block the ideological power of the “Red Shirts,” who called for equality and opposed the *ammāt* (privileged) and subsequently sought to restrain the power of the “new generation” who called for the drafting of a democratic constitution and reform of the monarchy. The factors that made radical and moderate ideology more powerful included the fact that the government and elite had changed the goals of “Dharma Land, Golden Land,” “community culture,” and “civil society,” which originally focused on the economic aspect, to stress instead virtues such as “sufficiency,” “harmony,” etc. The elite network after the 2014 coup also tried to govern through “communities” and “civil society,” by controlling “civil society” across the country through cultural activities, legislation, and funding.

Conservative ideology has been used to weaken “politicization” and bring capitalism under the control of the state and big capital—a new kind of state in which the military expands its authority to control all major organizations, including state enterprises, and where big capital is a close ally of the state. Big capitalist groups not only rely on funds and networks that give them a competitive advantage in the market system and enable them to monopolize many businesses, but also cooperate with the state through projects such as the “Pracharat Rak Sammakkee Project,” which allow villagers to fall under the auspices of the state and capitalist groups and reduce the political strength of communities and civil society to the point where they can no longer join with the people in opposing the state and capitalist groups that are scrambling for resources or monopolizing businesses.

At present, although the middle class still places importance on virtues or Thai-style value systems, it has not benefited from conservative ideology as it did before the 2014

coup. While extremist conservative ideology intensified conflict and violence, moderate conservative ideology has not created the unity and mutual help that the middle class expected: conflict and violence still occur. The middle class, who have entered an economic liberalism and have new values such as freedom and equality, are likely to distance themselves from conservative ideology, even though many minds and emotions are still bound to the old value system.

Also, in a neoliberal era that is highly competitive and requires personal responsibility, individualism is growing among the middle class. But the middle class lack a sense of stability, due to the death of King Rama IX, the military coup, the network that has held power for nearly ten years, youth movements, and violent suppression. The progress toward an aging society, problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and inequalities in income and wealth that create social tensions have combined to impact the emotions of the middle class. The paradoxical situation in terms of concepts, value systems, and emotions of the middle class may therefore be moving to a conceptual dead end, confusion over value systems, and emotional despair until the middle class fall into a state of “not longing for the past and fearing future changes” at the same time.

However, a portion of the middle class has changed their thinking, value system, and emotions to the point that they are much more inclined towards liberal democratic ideals. Therefore, it may be hoped that the middle class will join in artistic and cultural practices to push for a new regime in which the sovereignty belongs to the people and the social relations based on equality, fairness, and justice.

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