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Perceptions of Democracy among Thai Adolescents

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Abstract

The ideal of democracy has been adopted in various cultures around the world and the perception of democracy varies among different cultures and generations. Learning about how today's young generation in a non-Western country like Thailand perceives democracy would be a good start for the academia and the Thai policy makers to better understand democracy's future directions. Thus, this research aims at answering the following research questions: 1) What are Thai adolescents' cognitive associations and perceptions towards democracy?, 2) How do adolescents view Thai democracy to be different?, and 3) How do Thai adolescents want democracy to be taught? Data were gathered through eighty-seven interviews with Thai male and female adolescents, aged 15-23, who attended high school or were enrolled in the Political Science Faculty at university level in Bangkok. Through extensive free-listing and in-depth interviews, the research was able to gain insights corresponding to the aforementioned research objectives.

Key words

Democracy, Thailand, Politics, Perception, Adolescents, Youth

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Introduction

Since the 1997 economic crisis in Thailand, democratic practice and concepts of democratization have changed radically. As these transformative changes continue to develop, it becomes critical to examine them from a wide range of academic perspectives and research methodologies. Thai adolescents' belief systems offer a unique vantage point from which to examine these practical and perceptual changes due to their social and structural position as key agents in which these changes manifest. Theories of democratic practice vary nationally and regionally, prompting a diverse, but nascent academic effort exploring modern adolescents' democratic perceptions in developing countries. Thailand is here no exception. Notably, there has been a lack of understanding of how Southeast Asians, especially adolescents, perceive democracy. With these considerations in mind, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: First, how do Thai adolescents perceive and define democracy? Second, what distinguishes the democracy perceptions of Thai adolescents' from the practice of other countries? And, third, what do these democratic conceptualizations suggest for improving "democracy education?"

This research article is organized in three steps. I begin by laying out the theoretical underpinnings of my approach followed by a methodological explication of the target group that I surveyed. The following empirical sections closely follow the research questions outlined earlier. Specifically, I discuss Thai adolescents' cognitive associations and perceptions towards democracy, their views of the uniqueness of Thai democracy, and how it should be taught to the young generation. In a third and last step, I conclude by highlighting the main findings of each section in comparison to the existing literature before referencing some notable variations in age and socio-economic differences among Thai adolescents.

Theoretical Approach

Adolescence is a critical period in the socialization of humans. Political socialization is an important part of this process which has repercussions on political attitude, opinions, and behavior in later years (Easton & Hess 1942; Alwin & Cohen 1991; Pacheco 2008). Democratic ideology and responsibility are often formed in early adolescence years (Beck & Jennings 1982; Pongpaew & Sukhantipun 1983; Pacheco 2008). New studies suggest that adolescents who live in a politically more competitive location, mainly urban agglomerations, are likely to be politically more active and show stronger political attitudes and beliefs than their rural counterparts (Campbell 2006; Pacheco 2008). Not only do democratic attitudes and activities vary from urban to rural areas, they also vary from culture to culture.

Democratic practices are shaped by national history, social structure, and political traditions (Beetham 2009). While definitions of Western liberal democracy emphasize

freedom of expression, fair electoral competition, and separation of powers as key norms (Dahl 1970; Sen 1999; Beetham 2009) and the literature on democracy and democratization in Third Wave countries is extensive, little attention has been paid to analyzing the perceptions of the younger generations to reveal their understanding of what it means to be democratic. Democracy does not only vary by world region, but also from each political generation to the next.

Studying *youths and politics* can shed light into the question of how each political generation thinks of their country's polity (Easton & Dennic 1969). Politically conscious youths usually devote their time to the issues that they feel were most interesting and relevant to their life and needs (Clarke 2010). These issues may differ markedly as they are linked to the differing circumstances under which each generation grows up. For example, during the 1980s Thai youths had only limited access to political information due to the existence of only a few channels of communication (Pornsak Pongpaew & Saithip Sukhantipun 1983). Today's youths are more exposed to political information through wider media channels including a greater variety of television news programs, virtual communities, and social networks such as facebook. Thus, a survey of youths can help us to understand the type of democracy that is being developed in Thailand.

During the past two decades, theorists have identified many sources of political socialization. For example, the influence of family and parenting, schools and teaching style, curriculum and Political Science education, religious practice, civic education, exposure to news, discussion and information, the role of mass media, political environment, and exposure to online virtual politics all contribute to the child's political attitudes and are likely to foster democratic disposition and civic engagement in later years.[1] Specifically, the memories, traumas, and experiences of children and adolescents of that particular generation regarding the political situation during their coming of age period will correlate directly to their political perception and concerns.[2]

Current research has shown that there are generational differences with respect to attitudes towards democracy in three aspects—trust in state politics, the ideal leader, and social equality (Hahn & Logvinenko 2008). Moreover, in countries where there is a greater gap between generations including the number of adolescents, adults, and elderly people, the formation of democratic transitions becomes more difficult (Cincotta 2008). Thailand is such a country in transition. It is therefore interesting to see how the new generation has developed and will soon shape the country's democratic philosophy.

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[1] See Jennings & Niemi (1974); Pongpaew & Sukhantipun (1983); Dalhouse & Frideres (1996); Andolina, Jenkins & Zukin (2003); Dudley & Gitelson (2003); Flanagan (2003); Gimpel et. al. (2003); Whyte & Schermbrucher (2004); Klousis, McDevitt, Wu (2005); Nan (2006); Claes, Hooghe & Stolle (2009); Landreville, Holbert & LaMarre (2010); and Sloam (2010).

[2] See also Finchilescu & Dawes (1998); Tessler, Konold & Reif (2004); Perez-Sales & Pau (2010); and Torney-Purta & Amadeo (2011).

Target Population and Research Methodology

The target informants were eighty-seven Thai male and female adolescents, aged 15-23 years old, recruited from seven public high schools and the faculties of Political Science at five universities in Bangkok. The idea of interviewing these adolescents was to focus not only on adolescents in general, but to narrow down the sample to those who are interested in politics, have been exposed to both direct and indirect political learning, and are able to independently explore and express their political ideology thoroughly. Moreover, the intention is to focus on adolescents who are enthusiastic about politics and/or live in areas with a high level of political competition such as Bangkok and major provincial centers. This will shed some light on this young generation's political values, beliefs and attitudes.

The data for this paper were collected through selective sampling of high school students who attended a three-day annual event, namely, the Chulalongkorn University[3] Political Science Fair. For years, this fair has attracted many high school students from both local and regional high schools. These students attended the fair to learn more about current politics. They are likely to be those who choose to take the entrance exam into the Faculty of Political Science. As a faculty member, I tried to identify and observe students who paid attention to the exhibition and/or who discussed with their peers what they have seen while walking around the fair. I then introduced myself, explained the objective of the interview and requested the respondents to grant me a separate 50 minute interview on an individual basis. In this first phase of data collection, twenty-two high school students actively volunteered to serve as key interviewees. These high school students came from twelve different public and private schools, six of which were regional schools[4].

In the second phase of data collection, I recruited college students as respondents from five well-known public universities in Bangkok.[5] The purpose was to access respondents from a greater variety of economic backgrounds and age groups. I began by visiting places which where frequented by many college students including the Faculty of Political Science at each university. The Thai adolescents referred to in this study are not to be generalized as the whole or the majority of Thai adolescents in the country. They are confined to students with a lower-middle to upper class social background who can afford to study in these schools. Furthermore, this respondent population was specifically selected due to their physical proximity to politically-based activities and

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[3]Chulalongkorn University is one of the oldest and most well-known universities located in Central Bangkok.

[4]Students came from regional schools in six of these main provinces: Nontaburi, Nakhon Pathom, Lopburi, Samut Prakan, Khonkaen, and Nonthaburi.

[5]The five well-known public universities in Bangkok, considering the reputation of the long Political Science faculty/department establishment and students political involvement, were Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University, Kasetsart University, Srinakharinwirot University, and Ramkhamhaeng University. In Bangkok, these public universities were among the first five academic institutions that hosted Political Science faculty/departments offering Bachelor's degrees. Moreover, these five institutions are listed among the top institutions nation-wide as to where Thai adolescents who want to further their academic study focusing on Political Science would compete to be admitted.

frequent encounters with political activism. Additionally, these adolescents are more likely to assume leadership roles and become politically engaged. Through a 3-week snowball sampling, I was able to identify respondents who were keen and willing to share their opinions, ideas, and creative thoughts about democracy and the future of Thai politics.

In order to gather insightful data, I employed two research techniques. The first was free listing to learn more about what this group of Bangkok adolescents thought about democracy. As they responded, these domains served as a mind map[6] to understand the adolescents' perceptions of what democracy means to them. At the beginning of the interview, each student was asked to write down as much as s/he could in 2 minutes on what comes to his or her mind on hearing the term "democracy."

After the free-listing exercise was completed, I conducted an in-depth interview with each of the informants. The in-depth interview was based on three sections of open-ended guided questions. The first section involved basic questions of how they define the term "Prachathippatai" (democracy) and what they associate with it. The second section covered questions related to the characteristics of Thai democracy and which of these characteristics they feel to be most suitable for Thai society. The last section included questions related to how Thai society can improve and find more effective ways to teach the future generation about democracy.

The data gathering process was completed over 6 months followed by the analysis of the data received from the application of free-listing techniques. This analytical step centered heavily on tallying the frequency and grouping the domains into categories, with a moderate consideration of domain ranking. A computer program called "FreeMind"[7] was used to lay out the concepts associated with the term democracy to allow us to better visualize the domain network[8] Thai adolescents mentioned in the free-listing technique. However, for the purposes of this paper, the FreeMind chart was converted back through the use of the Microsoft word drawing program according to the frequency of each domain's calculation distance. Content analysis was used for the in-depth interview data analysis

Cognitive Associations and Perceptions of Democracy

Research findings from the free listing technique highlighted how Thai adolescents understand and what they associate with the term "democracy." The data can be classified into two groups: One, abstract concepts and, two, tangible objects. The

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[6] In this study, mind maps refer to cognitive cartographies of the student's conceptualizations and perceptions of democracy according to each theme.

[7] FreeMind is a computer program that helps create mind maps. The researcher used this program that is provided by the Thailand National Electronics and Computer Technology Center for educational purposes only.

[8] Domain networks refer to the cognitive cartographies surrounding their thematic conceptualizations.

following is a diagram that shows the distance of each concept in relation to the term "democracy" as a result of the free listing data. The diagram will be followed by detailed descriptions of the domains highlighted by the adolescents, listed according to the frequency of the domains. The description represents Thai adolescents' understanding and association of democracy concepts through the data gained and compiled as summaries and frequently repeated quotations from the Thai adolescents' in-depth interviews.

Thai Adolescents' View of Abstract Democratic Concepts

1. Elections (karn luak tang)

Thai adolescents are taught from elementary school onward that elections are a key mechanism of democracy. Only through elections people's voices will be heard and only if elections rest on the "one-man-one-vote" principle they are fair in the sense that they provide equal rights to everybody. Students were taught directly through textbooks and indirectly through the words of the teachers:

> "Let's vote! Let's be democratic and raise your hand, vote for who you think should be the class president."

From then on the cognitive association equating elections as being an integral part of democracy was formed. As they grew older, they perceived how others regarded democracy by observing their participation in national elections, and learned that voting allowed for the participation of everyone in Thai society regardless of party affiliation and differing points of view. Election (campaigns) provided an open forum for everyone to come together and exchange thoughts on the state of political affairs in Thailand, thus providing an opportunity for everyone to be heard through the casting of their vote. The interviewees felt that it was important to learn and understand how the majority thinks, which is reflected in the outcome of a national election. The election process allows people to vote for the politicians that they think are good men and women, through which the people can then participate and influence policy making in parliament. These adolescents explained that they want to encourage as many voters to support the same political party as they do. This will help to support their preferred party whose leader could then become the next prime minister. While the majority of respondents share this positive perception of political processes, other interviewees were more skeptical, believing that elections serve only as a political tool allowing self-interested politicians to rise to a position of power. This finding was based on their observation of politicians after they had been elected into parliament.

2. Rights (sitthi) and Liberty (seriparp)

Thai adolescents think of rights and liberty in association with democracy for various reasons. First, through democracy, they have the right to express their opinions, to be heard, and make changes happen. Second, rights give everyone, no matter whether rich or poor, an equal opportunity in stating and expressing his or her opinions. Third, liberty allows everyone to live as they choose as long as it does not violate other people's rights.

In sum, rights and liberty go hand in hand with one another. As we can see, one conditions the other. To these adolescents both rights and liberty are what a democracy grants to its people. For example, one of the male college students succinctly stated in an interview:

> *"When we are governed by a democratic system, it is expected that democracy will grant its people rights and liberty."*

Seventy-one out of the eighty-seven interviewees used the term "liberty" (*seriparp*) rather than "freedom" (*issaraparp*). "Freedom" was mentioned in association with democracy as to how it allowed them to express themselves and show their identity to others. The meaning of "liberty" as stated by the majority of the interviewees, reflects what they learned from textbooks and what has been stated or implied in the Thai constitution — that is the liberty of thinking and conduct within the limit of "*not violating other people's rights.*" Moreover, Thai adolescents also mentioned how Thai people naturally know the limits of their rights in terms of what is appropriate and what is not tolerated in Thai society. For example, although a democratic society along the lines of a Western liberal democracy encourages the right to openly debate and criticize politicians and policies with which one may disagree, this runs contrary to what is regarded as etiquette in traditional Thai society where open criticism of others is regarded as inappropriate and inconsiderate. Those who are openly critical of others are considered to be rude as a female college student pointed out:

> *"Rights that each individual has and how one can exercise it, should be kept within the boundary and not harm the collectivism and harmony of our society."*

Rights and liberty thus need to be understood in the context of Thai society and norms. The boundary is tied closely according to what is permitted by law in the Thai constitution and by norms that have been passed on from generation to generation in the form of folklore and social etiquette with a particular emphasis on the collective unity of all Thais over that of the individual.

3. Equality (khwam samoephak) and Justice (khwam yuttitham)

The concept of equality associated with democracy branches into many sorts of conduct and forms. For example, equality can equate to the mechanism of voting, that is, choosing a representative, owning/using citizenship rights and being allowed to go on with everyday life as freely as each of us wants and decides to do. It can also mean being heard, being able to express oneself and speaking for others. Equality also relates to the notion of justice. As an eleventh grade female shared with me in the interview:

"When I think of democracy, from a very young age, I learned about equality for and the importance of the justice system. Justice means that everyone gets equal rights to choose whichever seat we want in the classroom...in the cafeteria and no one is allowed to reserve his or her personal seating. Everyone gets an equal chance and this is fair!"

Other interviewees further commented that equality can be exercised to a certain extent in Thai society. For them this means that we all get the right to vote, but only through a voting system can people from different socio-economic backgrounds express their voices. Another male university student said:

"Equality does not always come with democracy. For instance, like me, I am a Political Science student. The knowledge that I have acquired has given me so much advantage over the others who are not in school or even those who attended other types of schools than me. My friends who are in other faculties wouldn't know or have a diverse political view like I do. So even though everyone has equal rights to vote, not everyone has equal knowledge to make informed decisions when it comes to politics. To me, this is inequality."

Therefore, democracy according to four of the interviewees did not deliver equality. Interestingly, the concepts of equality and justice were mentioned in association with other concepts throughout the interviews. Nearly all of the Thai adolescents interviewed believe that democratic practice inherently promotes greater equality.

4. People Power (amnart prachachon)

"Democracy is all about the people and everything related to the people."

People power is another aspect of what Thai adolescents think is an inherent element of democracy. To them, being democratic is supporting the idea of the importance of people's voices being heard. Moreover, the concept of people power was related to two different opinions. First, some would argue that democracy is linked to the majority concept. Those representing the majority should have the power to lead the nation. Everyone should accept what the majority of the people wants. The other opinion is to accept the majority voice, while not neglecting the minority. Thai adolescents referred to concepts of people's power, civic rights, responsible citizenship, government protection, and voting practices, while unanimously describing the routine practices of political power. In each interview, Thai adolescents emphasized the concept of people's power, people's rights, civic rights and citizenship, suggesting that if people's rights are protected by the government, and if majority vote is exercised, this is an indication that "the people's" voice is being heard. Without democracy, the power of the people would not be so powerful or as authoritative. To some extent, some even say that people are the creators of a system that would protect and benefit their own rights and that is democracy.

5. Participation (karn mee suanruam)

I found all the interviewees to be very enthusiastic and engaged when discussing Thai politics using active and evocative words to describe a variety of activities related to

political participation. For example, they would associate the term participation with the following activities:

Participation...is how people come together and unite to demand something.

Participation...is a channel that provides us an opportunity to express ourselves.

Participation...is when we go to vote as is our right to do so.

Participation...is how we express our thinking and action and learning about what the majority wants and needs.

Participation...is when we consider the majority voice and respect the minority voice.

Participation...is like a door that is open for the people to have liberty in terms of thinking and action; however it has to be within what the law permits and should not hurt others.

The data showed that the Thais I interviewed perceived democracy as the most suitable and participative form of government (Uwanno & Bureekul 2005). As we can see, participation relates back to the ideology of voting, elections, people's power, rights, liberty, expressing voices/thinking/action within the limits that would not violate others' rights, and majority and minority voice/vote. Therefore, in later interviews, when these adolescents were asked what they would consider as political participation, most of them were likely to return to the aforementioned activities.

6. Governing Power (rabob karnpokkrong)

Some adolescent interviewees associated the longstanding history of Thai democracy with its unique adaptation of Western-style regimes. To them, Thai society has only adopted certain parts of democratic philosophy and practices that are suitable for it, and that is different from the democracy of the Americans, the British, and the French. In their view, Thai democracy started from an elite group of Thai people who studied abroad and brought back the notion of this foreign governing system. With the desire to be modernized and as civilized as the West, they brought to an end the absolute monarchy in 1932 and established democracy as the new political system. This brings us back to the time when Siam (Thailand's former name) successfully attempted to escape from being colonized by changing the country's governing style and people's lifestyle. However, this temporal adaptation led to the installation of a new regime that incrementally modernized Siamese society while simultaneously buttressing the legitimacy of urban intellectuals to lead Siam (Winichakul 2000). Thai Democracy was thought of as a regime that creates the government of the people, by the people, for the people. Moreover, most Thai adolescents emphasized during the interviews that the feature that made democracy different from (absolute) monarchy is how people can fully participate in politics. For example, a third year Political Science female college student stated:

> *"When I think of democracy, I totally think of a type of governing power that gives rights and opportunity for the people to participate in politics. No matter if this is done through elections, directing social policies through elected representatives."*

However, some adolescents also mentioned how the type of democracy that Thai society practices does either not coincide with what they have learned or not accord to the letter of the law. They pointed out that not every person in Thai society can equally influence politics or social conditions. Moreover, although democracy provides them with the opportunity to participate, rarely have they seen the changes that they aspired to. Most of the adolescents that support the Red Shirts[9] or are neutral would say that the government has failed to live up to their expectations and promises. The policies that are implemented are still being controlled by a small group of elites who own the political power. These politicians are the group of people who made changes that Thai adolescents see today and therefore most of the changes are not made by the people themselves. In high school, these students are taught how to be a good citizen and how they should value democracy with the King as the head of state; while at the university level, they are taught more thoroughly in different types of political systems, to be more critical and to express their academic ideas.

7. Majority Vote and Majority Rules (seang khang mak)

Some Thai adolescents advocated a majority rule system where a majority vote dictates national decision-making. So when the majority vote resulted in whichever way, the minority should relent and accept the decision. One of the female college students explained:

> *Justice in decision-making should be made for the majority of the people which is justified as democratic because it impacts most of our lives.*

For these adolescents, it is acceptable to pursue policies which are in accordance with the vote of the majority. However, the minority vote is also important to them in a sense that it allows them to learn and hear what others think.

8. Instability (khwam wunwai/khwan mai mankhong)

As Thai adolescents come of age, they continue to witness multiple forms of political instability. The political tensions in the years surrounding the September 2006 military coup against former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra are pivotal in this respect. Some examples of their experiences included security-based curfews, school closings due to political shootings or riots, news reports about violent political conflict, and photos of protest groups in daily newspapers. Through their experiences as users of the media,

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[9]The recent Thai political riot between the Red shirts and the Yellow shirts started in 2005 during Thaksin Shinawatra's term as prime minister. During that time, there was a group of people called "the People's Alliance for Democracy" also known as the Yellow Shirts' people who broadcasted on one of the television shows and commented on Thaksin's behavior. The Yellow shirts are people that are opposed to the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, most of whom are Bangkokians and the Red shirts are the supporters of Thaksin, most of whom come from the North, Northeast and East of Thailand. One of the most unforgettable riots was in 2010 when the Red Shirts burnt down the Central World and there was a report that people were killed in the incident. This riot is at the center of political controversies, which led to many riots and protests. However, most of the adolescents interviewed Yellow Shirts or neutral; only a minority is pro Red Shirts.

they witnessed a continual rise of conflict and disagreement. Importantly, by associating democracy with instability, the Thai mass media continues to influence democratic conceptualizations of Thai adolescents. A few respondents said that the media should be neutral, and should not take sides or over-report politically-related situations. Nevertheless, political instability also fomented a general lack of interest in politics and created a frequently expressed feeling of political boredom. During the interviews, several adolescents mentioned a possible loss of faith in Thai democracy in their perceived future. If the instability does not stop, they felt a need to change their belief that democracy is the most suitable system of Thai government.

9. Open-Mindedness (karn rup fang khwam khithen)

Open-mindedness involved hearing each others' opinions irrespective of whether it was the majority or the minority viewpoint. From time to time during the interviews, these adolescents emphasized that it is important to listen to one another. The democratic mechanism of elections and voting has made them to feel that being open-minded is what they have learned from being a member of a democratic society. Nineteen adolescents mentioned that being open-minded is a way to unite people in the nation and thereby create a sense of togetherness, which may enable us to overcome any type of political disagreements.

> *"When people stop and hear what others want to say, it is the start of being open-minded, especially when they know that the person met is heading in a different direction from theirs. When people with different opinions share the same stage, it is truly conveying democracy."*

10. Social Stability (khwam mankhong thang sangkhom)

A reoccurring theme of social stability was suggested by adolescents who demonstrated that the concept of social stability relates to an overall acceptance of the ideology of elections. Thai adolescents felt that social stability and peacefulness in society can be established through the mechanism of election. In their view, in any type of election it is linked with acceptance of majority vote, which means that the majority vote will determine the final decision-making for the whole Thai population. Complication and tension regarding different political viewpoints will then be reduced by the mechanism of democracy. Therefore, to them democracy is a way of creating national social stability and security.

11. Non-Existence of Thai Democracy (sing thee mai mee u jing)

Interestingly, in contrast to the previously discussed concepts, two Thai adolescents who participated in this research think that democracy does not exist. If democracy would exist, Thai society would be equal, fair and tolerant. To these respondents, democracy is a political ideal. It is hard for any society to truly reach this ideal. As one of the fourth-year female university students said in an interview:

"It doesn't exist! We never see it in practice. You can see even in a small company that those who are recruited into the system are all there through connections. It's whom you know."

"How can one agree with one another, if we have different mind-sets, different interests, and want different benefits. Democracy is good, but do we really practice it? I don't think so or else we would not see people fighting with one another like this."

There are many factors that contribute to why this group of adolescents thinks that Thai democracy does not work or does not exist, for example, through the obstacles of political injustice, narrow-mindedness, and a historically-based patronage system.

Tangible Objects Associated with Democracy

From an anthropological perspective, it also makes sense to learn more about what types of objects or symbols these Thai adolescents associate with democracy. By identifying the cultural and material lives of these symbols, we can explore their meaningful association with democracy leading to further domains of symbolic meaning. My findings suggest that Thai adolescents associate the Thai constitution, the Democracy Monument, and elected politicians as symbols representing democracy. They internalized these symbols when they were young, actively learning through pictures in textbooks, or less directly through consumption of mass media. The following are examples these adolescents named:

"As I have learned, the <u>Thai constitution</u> symbolizes rights, liberty, and duty of the people."

"We learned that <u>the constitution</u> is the supreme law of our nation, which makes us all equal and everyone has to abide by it."

"I think of <u>the Thai democracy monument</u> because there are many political incidents and riots that have taken place there. People like to make statements asking for their rights and stage protests for fairness there."

"The picture of <u>the Thai democracy monument</u> pops up clearly in my mind. Since we were very young, when we learned about democracy in our textbooks, there is a picture of the monument. Although under the picture it didn't say anything like when it was constructed, the picture still stuck in my mind."

"I see <u>politicians</u> fighting or having arguments in the parliament to justify and convince others (the television viewers) that they are right. Just like what is broadcasted on television. Adults like to listen to it, but I don't."

"I think of <u>politicians,</u> because politicians are people who are directly involved with the democratic system. We don't have as much role in it as they do."

In summary, not only do Thai adolescents perceive and define democracy through concepts mentioned in the free-listing exercise and the description they gave in in-depth interviews, but we also see that these concepts are interrelated. The whole network of

conceptual domain can then be utilized to improve our understanding of their perceptions. Moreover, this knowledge can be used to shape, change, or educate Thai adolescents in playing a role in the future of Thai democracy.

How Adolescents View Thai Democracy to be Different

Utilizing the free-listing as well as in-depth interview techniques, it was possible to define how Thai adolescents perceive Thai democracy to be different from that of other democratic countries. The following paragraphs present the major findings.

1. Patronage System (rabob uppatham)

The patronage system and Thai democracy can never be dissociated. This is due to the fact that patronage is deeply embedded in Thai culture. The Thai patronage system is being defined as a type of relationship between two or more parties that are connected through beneficial gains (Pongsapich & Kuwinpun 2005). The Thai patronage system can be divided into two types. First, the direct patronage system can be dated back and seen in terms of how a lord protects and helps his laborers. Second, the indirect patronage system emerged during the reign of King Rama III when the capital city of Siam extended its empire and decentralized its regime. This latter interrelationship developed and is continually apparent in contemporary Thai politics including awarding concessions of public services to the person they know in exchange of kick backs, such as in the form of merit system, giving promotions to those who are more favored, to neglecting to punish the favored when they do wrong (Khunsit 2006). In other words, it is pursuing personal interest to the detriment of public interests (Ockey 1993).

Not surprisingly, the interviewed adolescents named this characteristic as one of the unique features of Thai democracy. Some of these Thai adolescents argued that the patronage system can be beneficial because we know the descendants of the person, their family background, and their heritage. Most importantly, as long as the political patrons are capable of giving back to society and as long as there is a way to keep them in check, it is alright. Moreover, for this group of adolescents, the patronage system is acceptable as long as there is tight legal control that does not allow the misuse of the patronage system. On the other hand, a few adolescents view the patronage system negatively. For them the patronage system is the source of inequality which impeded the development of Thai democracy. However, the two groups of adolescents agreed that patronage is inseparable from Thai politics.

2. Rejecting Military Interference

Most of the adolescents interviewed strongly disapproved of the perceived inevitability of military intervention justified by political tensions. They believe that Thai people should solve the problem through the democratic process. By allowing the military to interfere in the nation's politics, it is a sign that Thailand is not truly a democratic society.

3. Shifting Value of Personal Interest versus Public Interests

Thais are known to be very flexible and indecisive when it comes to making a decision that relates to public issues, which affects their personal interests. Due to their familiarity with public hearings and referendums, many of the interviewed youths suggested that even though it may be culturally acceptable if personal interests may take precedence over public interest, political decisions should be made on the basis of public benefit. They suggest that self-devotion and empathy will lead to sustainable public interests. Nevertheless, some expressed the view that middle class and upper class Thais are not concerned with issues affecting the poor, and that they do not bother to vote, change public policies, or act on behalf of public interest.

4. Reducing Social Inequalities

For this generation, one of the most incurable social problems in Thai society is the gap between rich and poor. Although every political party stresses its resolution to find measures to reduce poverty, very little has been achieved. Thus, for this generation, this is the core of how democracy is a means to reduce social inequality since it is often the mechanism used to bring societal equality and social justice. For example, democracy can help reduce corruption and discrimination against employing and promoting people from the Thai minority ethnic groups to manager's level.

5. Educating the Under-Educated on Democracy

Thai adolescents see the need of educating the under-educated about democracy. They view the way in which democracy is being taught as very formal, unrealistic, and impractical. This is because in Thailand it is taught primarily by academic institutions. Therefore, those who have little education or did not attend school could not learn about democracy. They unanimously expressed their support of a nationwide access to democratic knowledge for those with minimal education as well as for people with better education. They suggested that this access could be accomplished through a greater variety of methods such as news sources, public posters, television dramas, online media and face-to-face contact with village leaders.

6. Flexibility of Rules and Regulations

Being a *sabai sabai* society (easy going society), the Thais do not like to be governed strictly. During the interview, some of the adolescents' conversation highlighted how an easy going type of democracy would best suit the Thais. Although things should be regulated and people should follow the law, government officials should be kind-hearted, show empathy, and deal with matters in a compromising way. This would make Thais feel secure and satisfied with having rules. Their participation in politics might even increase as a consequence.

7. Demonstrating Rights, Liberty, and Participation

Rights, liberty, and participation of the interviewed adolescents might differ from the older generation. This group of adolescents believes that people should have rights to vote and liberty to express what they think, but that these political decisions should be exercised by the educated. Therefore, rights concerning voting and political participation should be limited to educated citizens. They also suggest how their generation's practice of democracy could differ from the past. As practiced by past administrations, a common suggestion was that there should be a new "layer" in the Thai political system to allow experts from different walks of life to independently advise the government. This would prevent professional politicians from monopolizing the policy-making process. This new group of people serves as a mechanism which is different from those who are elected into parliament.

8. Having a Moral Leader that is Capable of Creating a Constructive Thai Society

Adolescents in this study stated that according to the Thai understanding, a good leader must not only possess charisma, knowledge, and capability in overcoming challenges, but must also show that he/she can conduct himself/herself within Thai social norms of morality. Buddhism has a lot to do with this sense of ideology of what and how a good leader should be. One who lives his life according to Thai moral ideals is likely to be one who has positive and good thinking, speaking, and acting, which the Thais believe to be the essential characteristics of ones who can lead and improve Thai society.

9. Honoring the Monarchy

Although the Thai political system changed in 1932 from absolute monarchy to democracy, today Thai adolescents view the King as the center of the nation's peace and respect. To them, the Thai monarchy has little to no role in Thai politics, but in reality major political crises can be overcome due to the respect Thai people have for the King.

In conclusion, the interviewed adolescents believe that the aforementioned traits represent the uniqueness of Thai democracy. It is what they witnessed and experienced during their adolescence. This information can teach us a lot about Thai democracy as well as point out how this new generation thinks about the future course of Thai politics. However, many interviewees believed that some of these characteristics should be preserved, such as reducing social inequalities; increasing democratic knowledge among the under-educated; emphasizing the flexibility of regulations; demonstrating citizens' rights and political participation; constructing society through moral leadership; and honoring the monarchy. By contrast, Thai youths also argued against the misuse of the patronage system and military interference in politics.

How Thai Adolescents Want Democracy to Be Taught

In addition to their perspectives on democracy, it is also relevant to hear their ideas on how democracy should be taught. The following research results highlight four approaches that can provide effective ways of teaching democracy for this generation and the next.

First, almost all of the Thai adolescents in this study mentioned how direct and indirect learning from actual practice and nurturing at home and in schools is the most powerful source to deepen the value of democracy.

> *"Family has a profound impact on people. When parents ask their children's opinion and vote on family decisions it is actually the beginning of absorbing democratic practices."*
>
> *(A male high school student)*

> *"Every child has to go to school and therefore it is like forcing them already to learn about democracy from school textbooks. They can't escape by not knowing what it is. But each school does practice democracy differently. Some often include it in school activities, but some (schools) still limit its practice. Like schools where the teachers are so strict that they don't listen to students and students' voice become less legitimate than theirs. There go equal rights!"*
>
> *(Second year female university student)*

> *"At the college level, we learn about democracy differently from when we were young and in high school. Here (at the university), we have more freedom to think and discuss…even to make arguments and learn from others about their ideas and opinions. I think university advances our democratic knowledge."*
>
> *(Third year male university student)*

> *"If only school could hold an interesting event or exhibition just like the ones we see at TK Park (Thailand Knowledge Park) or TCDC (Thailand Creative & Design Center) it would be super, it is more exciting to learn that way."*
>
> *(An active student president male university student)*

> *"I would say school. Because teenagers spend a lot of time in schools. Learning things that they will use in later years."*
>
> *(Freshman female university student)*

> *"Hosting an interesting book fair or event in school libraries is another good channel of grasping students' attention."*
>
> *(A female high school student)*

Second, adolescents said that the school curriculum, textbooks, and teaching styles need to be changed to teach the students in their early years and presented in a stimulating way. They stress that this could be done easily by changing teaching techniques and utilizing different types of teaching media.

"I think democracy should be taught earlier in life and in the textbooks. Better if you can start with the 1ˢᵗ grader. Today's schools start teaching about democracy when we are in our 10th-11th grade, it's too late. Children could learn about democracy in a simple and easy way right away when they are young. Why wait?"

(Forth year female university student)

"Students should be able to learn about democracy through English-language books not through only Thai textbooks so we can see how Westerners think about democracy instead of reading Thai textbooks that have been constructed through censorship and guidance of Thai government and the Ministry of Education. That is how one can truly learn about what is out there and how democracy is being practiced in other societies."

(Male university student)

"There should be multimedia like movies or introductory films that show a preview to students and lure them to learning more of what it is in the textbooks."

(A high school student)

"Textbooks are one thing, but the most important instrument of democratic teaching is the teacher."

(A senior university student)

Third, Thai adolescents also mentioned how mass media outside of school--such as posters, celebrities, movie series, radio programs, and games can also create enthusiasm to learn more about democracy.

"Of course, newspapers and cartoon books! We love to read them. Why not incorporate it (democracy)."

(A 10ᵗʰ grade male high school student)

"Television is a great source of learning. Because it is so real to us and way more exciting to learn than just reading a textbook. It (television programs/dramas) can be up-to-date and incorporate current incidents for teens to learn more about politics."

(A 12ᵗʰ grade female high school student)

"There should be a movie series made for teenagers to indirectly absorb and understand more about it (democracy). One can use presenters that are popular among teens in the movies. This is new and fresh! I am sure it will be a hit."

(A senior university student)

"Television or radio stations can help a lot. Lots of teenagers listen to them all the time. The VJs and DJs really make it fun to follow the news."

(A second year female university student)

"Using television, radio, and games to teach about democracy would be fun, less stressful than learning in school. It is edutainment, which all of the teenagers love."

(A third year male university student)

Fourth, internet and social networking (i.e. facebook, YouTube) should be utilized, because these media are predominant in their daily life.

"The internet because we often read news through it. News travels fast and is more up-to-date. We can even research more about it on the net when we want to. It becomes our habit."

(A second year male university student)

"The internet because most of the Thai teenagers are addicted to computers. You can insert the knowledge through popular websites such as Dek Dee Website or social news columns. We (the teens) will read them."

(A freshman university student)

"Whatever that is on the net and has a button of 'share' can be easily spread to others through facebook. Then the word of wisdom gets spread in the social network of teenagers. As you can see, we even do this type of thing when we love some of the famous monk's sermons. We tag and share it with each other through facebook."

(A senior female university student)

In summary, Thai adolescents are enthusiastic to include democratic knowledge in their everyday lives. As we can see from the four aforementioned approaches they suggested how democratic teaching can be improved, they want the teaching to be more up to date, more open to new ideas, enhance by media usage, and can be independently studied outside of the classroom. This demonstrates Thai adolescents' eagerness to incorporate democracy in both institutionalized and self-education.

Conclusion

This paper has contributed to a better understanding of how the young Thai generation views Thai democracy. According to the literature review, we found that Thai adolescents incorporate and highlight the three Western democratic ideas, namely freedom of expression, electoral procedure, and majority rule. When taking a closer look, we can see three dimensions of how this generation of adolescents has adopted and applied Western democracy to Thai culture.

First, interviewees felt that Thai society adapted Western democratic philosophy and is practicing it through political concepts of political knowledge, elections, rights, liberty, equality, and justice. Secondly, Thai adolescents of this generation strongly distinguish and often make a comparison of their democracy and other types of political regimes (i.e. absolute monarchy, communism). This helps them appreciating the advantages associated with people's power, political participatory rights, and respect in majority rules and voting. Thirdly, this cohort group is emotionally affected by current political events in Thai society and, thus, felt that Thai democracy is unstable because it failed to resolve its problems. Consequently, the current generation of Thai adolescents emphasizes and places their interest on the importance of public opinion, open-mindedness, and social stability.
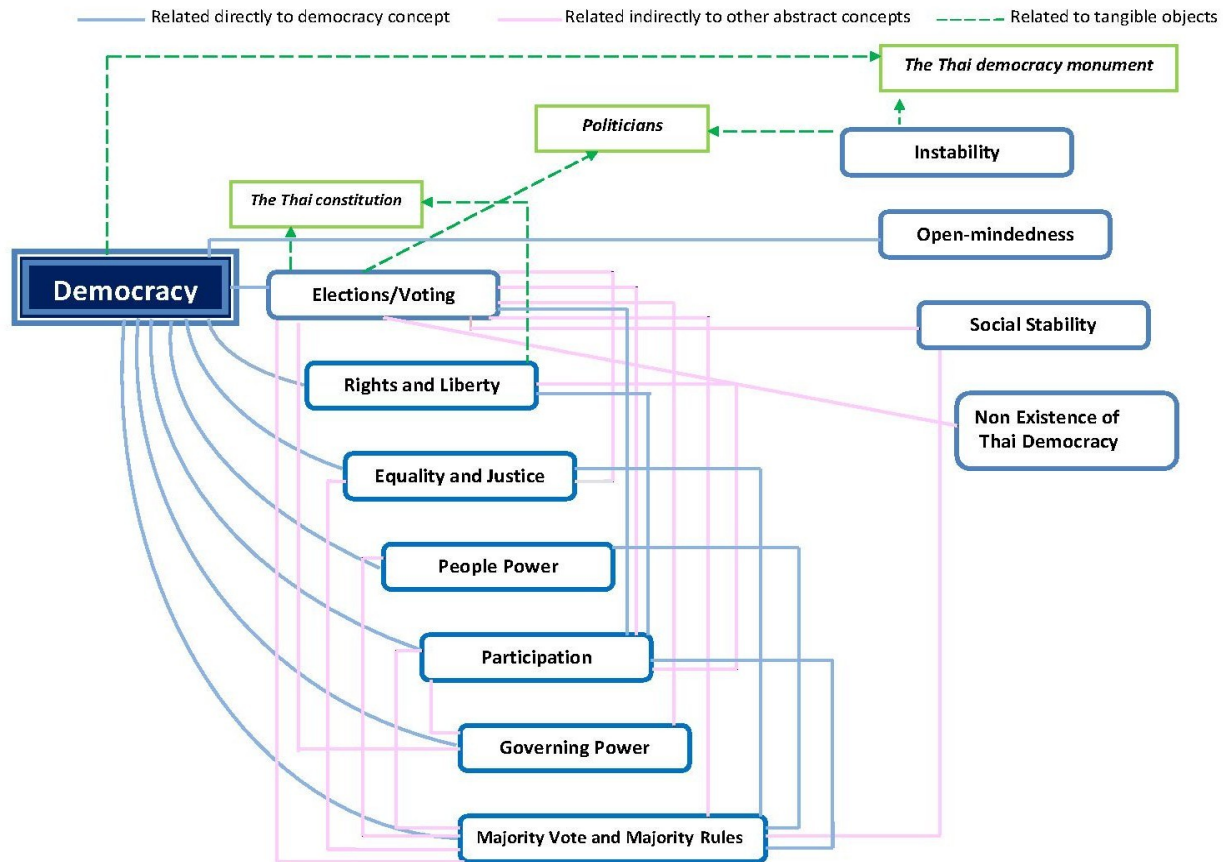
In addition, this research also pointed out how Thai adolescents perceive Thailand's democracy to be unique. Thai democracy is uniquely rooted in a heritage of deeply-held cultural values including the patronage system, flexible rules and regulations, preference for a moral and capable leader, and a reverence for the monarchy. Moreover, a more up-to-date concern can be seen in how Thai adolescents feared for the expansion of the military's involvement in their political life, social inequalities, and the limited translation of private interests into public benefits. This research data certainly showed how Thai youths of this generation placed their concerns on these aforementioned aspects that might be different from the former generation due to what they felt is most interesting and relevant to their life and needs.

In addition to these changing political perceptions, age differences also effect adolescent conceptions of how democracy can be taught. First, during free-listing interviews, university students are more likely than high school students to mention certain democracy-related concepts, namely elections and voting, equality and justice, rights and liberty, and governing power. Most likely this is because, with the right to vote, university students are more accustomed to electoral mechanisms than high school students. Accordingly, in the in-depth interviews, university students routinely conceptualized their perceptions of democracy as a holistic process linking all of the aforementioned concepts together. Second, they often employed text-based terms gleaned from their Political Science background to elaborate concepts of governing power, equality and justice, rights and liberty more thoroughly. Conversely, high school students often employed fragmented nonacademic key terms to describe democracy, which are often based on popular understanding. Moreover, some of their democratic

descriptions are linked to local life experiences. For example, they would mention names of the places where elections are located. Third, university students are more likely to point out the complexity and inequality in the Thai democratic system than high school students. Fourth, as youths get older, they are exposed to and become involved in a larger variety of mass media and online social network channels. Likewise, the answer they provided regarding how democracy should be taught for this generation as an effective political socialization process is to a certain extent different from other cultures. Deviating from the findings of other studies (e.g., Andolina, Jenkins & Zukin 2003; Torney-Purta & Amadeo 2011), these Thai adolescents picked family, school, teaching style, curriculum and Political Science education, political environment, mass media exposure, virtual politics, and a variety of print forms and presentation to be most influential over parental style, level of home politics, and religious practice. Lastly, this research demonstrates that there are perceptual variations among Thai adolescents according to social class. Namely, middle to upper class adolescents are more articulate and descriptive in their conceptualizations of democracy based on their access to a variety of media. In particular, they benefit from greater access to the internet and television news and/or have gained direct experience traveling to other democratic societies.

With these insights, we can implement improved policies by opening up new areas of study on the cultural-bound perception on democracy variation and use more media related to the lifestyles and interests of the new generation. Therefore, this data serves as a platform in adding on to the knowledge we have of democracy in Asian society as well as charting the future way of democracy for the next generation.

Appendix

Legend:
— Related directly to democracy concept
— Related indirectly to other abstract concepts
---- Related to tangible objects

The Thai democracy monument

Politicians

Instability

The Thai constitution

Open-mindedness

Democracy

Elections/Voting

Social Stability

Rights and Liberty

Non Existence of Thai Democracy

Equality and Justice

People Power

Participation

Governing Power

Majority Vote and Majority Rules

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