

Sinxay: The Application of Cultural Capital for Community Development of Thai and Lao in Globalization

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Abstract: This thesis examines Mekong literary classic Sinxay shistorical origins, its value, its qualities as cultural capital and its applications for community development on Thai and Laotian sides of the Mekong in the age of globalization. It chooses two sites for study; namely, Vientiane, PDR Laos and KhonKaen, Thailand. Methods employed for data collection include questionnaires, observations, interviews, focus groups and workshops. I use the concepts of cultural capital, community development and folktale diffusion theory as frameworks for analysis. The study finds that Sinxay is a literary heritage shared by many peoples in Southeast Asia. Its origin is possibly in the ancient Mon Kingdom and then spreads to Ayudhya, Lanna, LanXang and Khmer Kingdoms in tandem with the spread of Buddhism via Mon language and literature. The LanXang version is written by an anonymous court poet, possibly a little before the Golden Age during the reign of SoulinyaVongsa King. It is speculated that the content of the LanXang version of Sinxay comes from multiple sources including: the Buddhist tale of paññasajataka; historical events at the time of writing; local social, cultural and environmental contexts; pre-existing folktales; and other versions of Sinxay. All these sources were borrowed from and adapted to a particular local context. In terms of value, the study finds that the high value of Sinxay consists of the value of Buddhist instruction (buddhadhammain Pali), the value of the truth of life (saccadhamma) and the value of aesthetic enjoyment (sundaradhamma). In terms of cultural capital, the study finds in both KhonKaen and Vientiane that Sinxay is embodied in persons, objects and institutions and is thereby harnessed as cultural capital for human development and community development by the state, the private sector and the community in Vientiane and KhonKaen. On one level, applications of Sinxay have resulted in human development in behavioral, mental and intellectual aspects; on another, they have resulted in community development in economic, social, political and environmental aspects. Creativity, modern technology and mass media are the tools by which the applications have revitalized Sinxay as well as concretely contributed to human development and community development in the age of globalization.

Key words: Sinxay, cultural capital, application, community, development

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to geography, Thailand, especially its Northeastern region has developed close ties to the People's Democratic Republic of Laos (PDR Laos). Thailand's Northeast, commonly referred to as Isan, actually shares the Mekong River with PDR Laos for a stretch of 900 km. Historically, the lands and peoples on both sides of the Mekong shared cultural traits and kinship ties, especially the Tai-Lao ethnic group which continually straddled both sides of the River. From this continual contact and exchange, all cultural aspects were cross-pollinated, including language, clothing, daily routine, belief, religion, tradition among others. Key here is literature which, exemplary of the ways of life of peoples living on both sides of the River has been created and passed on from generation to generation. Many folk tales

and legends have been shared among the peoples in these lands. The more popular a story was the more it was taken up, reproduced and spread to other places. Sinxay is one such story.

Sinxay or Sang Sinchai, is a story of one of Buddha's past lives. The eponymous character is a hero of exemplary knowledge, bravery and virtue. As its researcher wanted the audience to become pious Buddhists as well as appreciate literature, they identified that this piece of literature belonged to one of the fifty past lives of the Buddha (corresponding to pannaajatakain Pali). As such, Sinxay became a staple story told by monks to villagers during key festivals such as Buddhist Lent. Laypeople who could read also brought the story to read out loud for the community's entertainment in important occasions like funerals (nganhuean di) and birthing rituals (ngankaokam). Local

artisans also represented Sinxay in various artistic forms such as painting (huptaemin Lao), sculpture, textile, live performance (molam), shadow play (nangpramotaiin Thai) dance and music. Even the Siamese court adapted the story for various kinds of theater (lakhonnokand lakhonduekdambanin Thai) and puppet shows. This shows that the influence of Sinxay was widespread across class lines. Furthermore, ancient documents containing versions of the story have been found in many places: they appear as klonraiin Northeastern Thailand, as klonsuatin Central Thailand, as khawthamin Northern Thailand and the story takes the name of Sang Khatain a Mon version found in Myanmar. The question of this story's origin, therefore, is of significant interest.

Now a days, the story of Sinxayor Sang Sinchaiis being conserved and revitalized as "cultural heritage of the nation and local cultural heritage" both in PDR Laos and in Northeastern Thailand also known as Isan. The revitalization process in Laos began as a serious endeavor around 1934 when SilaViravongse transliterated the story from ancient handwritten manuscripts and he published Sinxayby mimeograph for the first time in 1951, followed by several reprints. In Northeastern Thailand, likewise, there were several attempts at transliterating and printing Sinxay, starting with Thongdam Mun-ammatt's 1950 edition published in Amphoe Ban Phai, Khon Kaen province. This was followed by Preecha Pinthong's 1981 edition in the occasion of bicentennial celebrations of the founding of Ubon Ratchathani a highly regarded version only second in reputation to Sila (1969, 1996a, b).

Significantly, in 1983 Sinxaywas elevated into a national slogan in PDR Laos by Chairman Kaysone Phomvihane. There, Sinxay became a symbol of Laos' Youth Organization (ongkonxaonum)and part and parcel of "national and local identity" in political and popular spheres. Then, in 2003 the Laotian government passed a legislation that recognized Sinxayas part of the nation's cultural heritage and a beloved treasure valued by all Laotian citizens. The law led to various policies. The Ministry of Education included Sinxayin all levels of education, including Buddhist monastic education. The Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism established the "Sinxay Cultural Club" in 1994 under the administration of a literary journal in commemoration of Chairman Kaysone Phomvihane who recognized the importance of this work of literature. The "Sinxay Award" was also established to encourage literary production by young people.

Furthermore, the story of Sinxayalso reflects a "socialmemory" and through the learning process of mutual exchange, helps cultivate a "collective sense of history" commonly shared by peoples in Isan and PDR

Laos. A case in point is the 2008 Mekong Literature Maintenance Project held in KhonKaen, an initiative that brought writers from Isan and those from PDR Laos together to study Sinxayin its various aspects including aesthetic value, historical origin, revitalization and application. This project resulted in a resurgence of interest in Sinxay among contemporary literary circles. But the most historic of all revitalizing applications, one which went beyond national confines has to be the selection of the hero Sinxay to be Laos' national mascot who shot a fire arrow lighting the torch at the Opening Ceremony of the 25th Southeast Asian Games (S.E.A. Games) in Vientiane in 2009, the first time in history that Laos was the host of a major international sports competition. This adaptation of classical literature for use in a globalizing world exemplifies Sunet (2006)'s argument that Sinxayis "the cultural fortress of the times" which is capable of withstanding the cultural currents of globalization, as well as applicable to fostering sustainable community development. This insight led the KhonKaen City Municipality to establish a development strategy titled "Sinxay and Urban Development" which began in 2006.

Sinxay has become the work of literature that received the most mentions on both the Thai and Laotian sides of the Mekong, especially since 2006. Adapted for educational, cultural applications by the state and political sphere, Sinxayas cultural capital now has a political dimension. It is being harnessed to encourage participation of citizens and used as a tool to construct local identities in the context of the encroachment of predominant concepts and values of globalization. Indeed, it is interesting to note the closeness of the points in time at which Northeastern Thailand on one hand and Laos on the other recently attempted to revitalize and connect with this cultural heritage in new ways. This points to a reality in which local culture and society is interacting with increasingly relentless globalizing forces. This turn to cultural heritage may well turn out to be a new method of development where various sectors recognize the opportunities in utilizing Sinxayas cultural capital to form a fortress guarding local and national development.

Focusing on the application of Sinxayas cultural capital in the context of globalization, this study aims to discover forms of community development on the basis of already existing cultural heritage. The study investigates the processes of applying cultural capital of Sinxayin different groups and locales in Vientiane, Laos and Khon Kaen, Thailand. The knowledge gained will be a contribution to community development at the local level on both sides of the Mekong, in accordance with each locale's economic, social, cultural, political and environmental contexts.

Objectives:

- To study Sinxay's historical origins and its value
- To study Sinxay's qualities as cultural capital in the age of globalization
- To study applications of Sinxay as cultural capital for community development

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this study, there are three groups of informants: key informants, casual informants and general informants. The sites of study are Vientiane, PDR Laos and Khon Kaen province, Thailand. Methods employed for data collection include questionnaire, observation, interviewing, focus groups and workshops. I use the concepts of cultural capital, community development and folktale diffusion theory as frameworks for analysis. The research results are presented in the form of analytical description.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical origin of sinxay: The study finds that this Sinxay epic verse of the Tai-Lao was written by a court poet in the golden age of the Kingdom of LanXang, during the reign of Soulinya Vongsa King or a little before. The story itself does not identify the name of the author. As for the general content of Sinxay, it is possible that the author was influenced by many factoring including a Buddhist jatakatale, historical events, immediate environmental and socio-cultural contexts, other tales and works of literature and other versions of Sinxay. The author then combined all of those influences in his own style. It is believed that Sinxay originated from the Mon Kingdom (in the lands of present-day Myanmar) and then spread with monks and migrants to other areas, first to the Ayudhya Kingdom, then branched off into three: one to the Haripunchai Kingdom and the Lanna Kingdom to the north, another to the LanXang Kingdom to the east and the other to the Khmer Kingdom to the south-east. Subsequently, the LanXang version of Sinxay then spread into other areas along the Mekong River, following the migration patterns of Lao ethnics on both sides of the River.

Value of sinxay: The study finds that the Lan Xang version of Sinxay has two main categories of value: that of content and that of form. In terms of content, the story reflects a socio-cultural dimension and more prominently a moral-ethical dimension. In terms of form, the story's value lies in plot and poetic form, the art of metaphor, the

use of proverbs (pha-nya) and vocabulary and turns of phrases. All these categories of value can be summarized in three "powers"; namely, the power of Buddhist instruction (buddhad hamma), the power of the truth of life (saccad hamma) and the power of aesthetic enjoyment (sundarad hamma).

Sinxayas cultural capital in the age of globalization:

There are three forms that Sinxay has taken as cultural capital on both sides of the Mekong.

Cultural capital as embodied in people

- Chairman Kaysone Phomvihane, a former leader of the revolution of PDR Laos who brought Sinxay to serve political ideology
- Sila Viravongse, a binational literati who took part in transliterating Sinxay in PDR Laos and printed it for the first time
- Preecha Pinthong, an Isan literati who transliterated Sinxay into Thai script and produced one of the most cited versions of Sinxay in Thailand

Cultural capital as embodied in objects

- Sinxay documents, including both ancient and modern ones, the latter having a better chance of preserving Sinxay
- Fine arts featuring Sinxay, including painting, sculpture, performance (molam), shadow play (nangpramotai), music and dance
- cultural capital as embodied in institutions
- Traditional institutions, i.e., Buddhist temples that preserve knowledge about Sinxay in various ways, such as ancient manuscripts, places and Sinxay-related activities
- Modern institutions, including academic institutions, libraries and museums which collect and showcase Sinxay-related knowledge
- The application of Sinxay for community development

Nowadays in Vientiane, PDR Laos and KhonKaen, Thailand, the state sector, the private sector and the community sector all take part in the process of applying Sinxay for the purposes of human development and community development. In terms of human development, Sinxay has been utilized as a form of cultural capital through education in three ways; namely, formal education, informal education and self-directed education. Such an education applies all three forms of cultural capital (as embodied in persons, in objects and in institutions), resulting in behavioral, mental and

intellectual development. In terms of community development, Sinxay has been utilized in four ways: as an economic stimulus in tourism, souvenir production and identity-forming media production; as a socio-cultural basis for cultural revitalization in communities through a process of collaboration between various groups giving rise to friendly international relations and common heritage on both sides of the Mekong; as a political tool to instil patriotic ideology, teach lessons about governance and democracy and foster political participation from the bottom; as an environmental decoration, by becoming a key part of developing a new urban landscape which consists of streetlight sculptures, bus stops, building and place names which reflect the locale's cultural identity.

The LanXang version of Sinxay is possibly more than 380 years old. It is speculated that the epic verse was written during the reign of King Suriya vongsa thammikaraj or a little before, as it was a period of peace, stability and wealth, when the Kingdom sustained trade with foreign countries, advanced the prospects for education, culture and the arts when it received numerous Buddhist monks who flocked to study Buddhist teachings exhaustively available in Vientiane City. It is therefore believable that such a flourishing could partly catalyze the production of great literature, among them Sinxay. This speculation goes along with the study of Kanya Burirat which states that Sinxay's poetic form and descriptive language are characteristics shared among multiple works of literature produced during the reign of King Suriya bongsa thammikaraj of LanXang. As for the author it is speculated that he was a highly educated court poet who had before had some monastic education as a monk or novice monk. As this epic verse was written to celebrate Buddhism as well as buttress the symbolic power of the king, the name of the author was not mentioned. The reason of such an absence, I speculate, might not be because the author was afraid of the king's mandate as observed by some. On the contrary, it is likely that this story was written at the request of the King, who might have wanted the story of Sinxay to be an ethical example for his subjects. Even though the name of the author was nowhere to be seen in the verse, the poet did refer to himself in the beginning part as "kha," a word which is very likely a first-person pronoun. The following words, "pang kham" may mean something along the lines of "in the age of prosperity," which showcases the poet's ability to use a wide range of vocabulary, as pang concisely indexes a period of time and kham means gold.

The source of Sinxay, the study finds, is actually multiple and here I list five sources. The researcher claims in the beginning of the verse that Sinxay is a jatakatale,

more precisely pannasajataka. This claim is intended to increase the story's popularity and credentials. The story takes from historical events at the time which is a political strategy to use literature as a tool to govern, to manufacture consent among the subjects under their symbolically superior ruler. Therefore, the researcher inserts actual historical events related to kingly powers alongside the magical powers of the hero Sinxay who combines knowledge and virtue. The story comes from Vientiane's socio-cultural and environmental context, through modification of details by the hands of the author so that the story fit with a particular local culture and society. The story comes from other folktales such as Ramayana (Ramakianin Thai), Khun Tueng Khun Tueang, Chaiyadej, Kampra Pi Noi, Nang Sipsong, Taw Sivixay. The reason to believe so is the intertextual links within Sinxay which shares some structural elements with these folktales and also mentions them by name. Such referential practice is a form of writing in the past where the author pays homage to originary works or well-regarded literary masterpieces and uses them as literary guides. The story comes from other versions of Sinxay. Preliminary analysis finds that this Lan Xang version of Sinxay has some details in common with other versions for example, the klonsuatversion and the Lanna version. But in other respects it also diverges from other versions. Therefore, it is likely that some parts are borrowed while other parts are adapted anew so that the story become unique and relatable to the environment and socio-political situation at the time.

As for the earliest origin of the story of Sinxay, the study finds that Sinxay probably first came into existence in the lands of the Mon people, also known as Ramanpradesh, in the South of present-day Myanmar. This speculation is based on the fact that these Mon lands were once the center of Buddhism, itself influenced by Buddhist King Ashoka of India. The Mon also received linguistic and literary influences from India which they proceeded to mix them with indigenous characteristics. This Mon Buddhism then spread to adjacent areas. This account corresponds to the theory of borrowing put forth by Benfey which states that Europeans borrow folktales from India, before adapting them into various versions in local languages. Benfey believes that all folktales were conceived of during the Axial Age in India (around the time of the proclamation of Buddhism) before spreading into other parts of the world. Therefore, it is possible that once the Mon indigenized Indian literature by mixing it with local tales, the eventual result was the story of Sinxay or Sang Khataas known in Mon. Then, this Mon story spread from its origin via the trails of Mon Buddhism in other lands. Once it reached

the Lan Xang Kingdom, court literati then translated and adapted it to become one of the most important literary classics of the Kingdom due to its excellence in content and in literary technique. And of course, this Lan Xang version of *Sinxay* extended its popular reach, especially along both sides of the Mekong.

The value of *Sinxay* can be summed up in three aspects of “powers.” The first aspect is *buddhadhamma* or the power of Buddhist instruction. *Sinxay* cites Buddhist doctrines and principles to give the reader an opportunity to reflect on morality. It also employs the method of personification to link up worldly phenomena with spiritual essence. Overwhelmingly Buddhist themes make *Sinxay* a work of Buddhist literature, even though the story itself does not appear in the *tipitaka* scriptures.

The second aspect of *Sinxay*'s value is *saccadhamma* or the power of the truth of life. This manifests in the flow of the epic itself, in the ways that the author refers to his social and cultural contexts, including for example, the principle of plant-like good governance, the principle of charity and the awareness of ecological integrity and environmental conservation.

The third aspect is *sundaradhamma* or the power of aesthetic enjoyment. *Sinxay*, both in its form and its content, is delicately presented. Scholar of Isan culture praises that *Sinxay* contains as many as nine literary flavors. In the same vein, Laotian poet Othong Khaminxou (interview, 15 May 2012) says: “Not only is *Sinxay* outstanding in its substance, it is also full of aesthetic value that resides in each line of words and that makes it so charming that *Sinxay* has been praised as the archetype of poetic heritage.”

Thanks to its worldly and spiritual powers, *Sinxay* has been popular through time. Such popularity is expressed through persons, objects and institutions which all reproduce the culture of appreciating *Sinxay*. This goes along with what Williams (1973) asserts that cultures are always being reproduced in all places, that without reproduction it could only be short-lived and disappear. The reproduction of *Sinxay*, then, aims to pass on cultural values of a people in the process of reasserting the longevity of local culture and of the Nation which guarantees that this passing on be continual without disruption. Besides, the process of cultural reproduction can also be beneficial to contemporary society through harnessing *Sinxay*'s cultural capital. As such, *Sinxay* mobilizes cultural potential in the triangulated synergy of initiative from the state, the private sector and the community, in both Vientiane, PDR Laos and Khon Kaen, Thailand.

In PDR Laos, *Sinxay* has been integral to Lao society from past to present, from the royal and noble classes to the commoners. Even Chairman Kaysone Phomvihane, the leader of change from absolute monarchy to socialism, recognized the importance of this ancient epic. He applied *Sinxay* politically and galvanized the young with patriotic discourses. This corresponds to Kan Sarika's assessment that “*Sinxay* is a work of literature that all Laotian people know and apply for uses in daily life and work ethic, perhaps even more than Marxism-Leninism.” This means that Laos, unlike other socialist countries has chosen to reproduce and adapt its own traditional culture, embodied in the story and character of *Sinxay*, toward socialism rather than invent a new culture. Therefore, it can be seen that many groups who seek to revitalize *Sinxay* in modernizing PDR Laos have adopted Kaysone Phomvihane's ideology. These groups include the Revolutionary Youth Organization, *Sinxay* Cultural Club, *Sinxay* School and even various temples and communities. All this adoption of Kaysone Phomvihane's patriotic discourses reflects the high level of respect that Laotian people throughout the country hold for him.

There are, on the other hand, groups that emphasize *Sinxay*'s aesthetic value rather than relies on a more politically inflected interpretation. Following Maha Sila Viravongse's idea that culture resides in great literature, the “Passing on the Heritage of Lan Xang” group has initiated the project of reading the epic verse at the Center for Child Development. This group stays close to aesthetic appreciation rather than try to apply the story ideologically or symbolically. This way of interacting with *Sinxay* then brings about mental, behavioral and intellectual development of the reading person as well as conservation and rejuvenation of poetic heritage.

In Khon Kaen, Thailand, there has been effort to revitalize and apply *Sinxay* to create the city's identity against the currents of cultural homogenization in the age of globalization and to recuperate the pride in local identity. It is therefore a cultural innovation to apply *Sinxay* in a quest for cultural roots by a community long suppressed by the centralizing state power internally and by the infiltrating globalizing forces. This corresponds to Seri (1986) who says “cultural capital which is a process capable of recuperating self-confidence, can bring about a community's recognition of its own identity or its own roots, as well as one's ability to direct one's own life. As such, this is a step beyond the boundaries of cultural globalization in which a colonial mode of center-periphery dynamics and dominance pervades.” The revitalization process combines networks both inside and outside the community, triangulating modern wisdom of the city, coordination work of the university and traditional

wisdom of the village. The three parts work together toward human development in education and community development in the economy, society, politics and the environment. The study finds that human development in education has seen the most concrete results, where the political sector has moved to include knowledge about Sinxay in the official curriculum.

Considering the aforementioned applications of Sinxay, I would like to posit that Sinxay is a form of cultural reproduction. This reproduction consists of cultural communication that has an effect on how local and national identity is constructed and changed through technology, people and society. The reproduction of Sinxay so far has been done through verbal means, written means and digital means. Indeed, the forces of globalization have aided in the reproduction process have accelerated the time lapse between revitalizing action and result, making information spread widely and accessibly. The one who applies Sinxay, however, needs to be skilled in cultural communication for this to be effective.

In conclusion, the findings correspond to guidelines for development put forth by Prawase Wasee in all of the ways as follows. Firstly, there has been a process of communication around Sinxay for public awareness and understanding. Secondly, informal cultural networks related to Sinxay have emerged on both sides of the Mekong and these networks lead to activities mobilizing cultural values. Thirdly, there has been a push for establishing community organizations and for harnessing Sinxay as an educational vaccine to strengthen the community, as evident in the Sinxay Model Project at Ban Sawathi. Fourthly, linkages have been made between culture and education through Sinxay and educational sites related to the epic. Fifthly, the state has embraced Sinxay as part of cultural policy and national and local development. This point clearly demonstrates the capacity of the political sector to effectively develop cultural capital into symbolic capital which according to Bourdieu is a high-level political strategy. Sixthly, the mass media sector has played a role in supporting community learning and awareness of the story and its importance. Seventhly, the private sector has started to apply values from Sinxay to boost the economy by producing cultural products and services. Eighthly, the moral and ethical values inherent in Sinxay have led to self-improving practices such as the one in the Institute for Children's Education Development of Vientiane which has been effective.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings and discussion have shown that the applications of Sinxay as cultural capital for community development, on both the Thai and the

Laotian sides of the Mekong River have been reproduced both in terms of revitalization and adaptation. In a way, this phenomenon reflects the particular social and cultural dimensions of the dynamic between globalization and local culture. It may be one of the development alternatives to turn to ancestral wisdom and cultural heritage and turn it into capital, yet the encroachment of globalizing forces as well as insensitive adaptations that are disrespectful of culture, persons or communities in possession of the culture, could lead to rapid disappearance and degeneration. As Douang duen Bounyavong (Songwit, 2014) warns about adaptations of Sinxay, "the adaptation of the story of Sinxay in various forms, under any circumstances or conditions, should proceed with responsibility. Any deviation from the author's intentions as a result of misunderstanding or creative license, for example turning the character of Sinxay on stage into a farce, an immoral, funny, laughable, promiscuous and adulterous man, would only tarnish the aesthetic brilliance of the story." Therefore, in order to appropriately apply Sinxay, the ones doing the work needs not only knowledge and application/adaptation skills but also an ethic of responsibility in such an application/adaptation.

SUGGESTIONS

Researchers offer some policy prescriptions and suggestions for further research, based on the above conclusions of this study.

Policy prescriptions: The state sector and those concerned with education should support and initiate research projects that study Sinxay and other valuable literary works and develop them into local curricula, in order to increase knowledge and understanding in one's own heritage for youth and other people. There should be support for initiatives to turn Sinxay and folk literatures into cultural capital ready for application in various dimensions of development, so as to create value and profit for society and the country. There should be a promotion of a "creative economy" that harnesses the cultural heritage of Sinxay or local legends and folktales as cultural capital to increase surplus value in the economy.

There should be a promotion of and funding for museums or learning spots about Sinxay, consisting of the space for an exhibition on the origin, development and application of Sinxay, as well as various forms of Sinxay performances, a room for research into other local literatures and some space for Sinxay-related souvenirs.

All these aforementioned policies must be endorsed and promoted by all parties, including the state, the private sector and the community. Educational opportunities must be organized in a widespread manner so that people and students of all educational levels have access to learning.

Since, Sinxay exists in many parts of Thailand and in many other Southeast Asian countries including Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, there should be a comparative study for a wider and deeper insight on various issues. Should there be an application-oriented study, I suggest that such a study should first fully delve into the original text of Sinxay to understand its value in an authentic way, as it is a literary work that has many valuable aspects. While this study finds that Sinxay can be harnessed for community development and human development, there are many other dimensions for which it could be useful. Its application so far has mainly been about economic value or ideological tool of the powerful seeking their interest, all without genuine learning for an authentic

understanding. This leads to applications that are superficial, short of potential and ultimately incapable of leading to sustainable community development.

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