

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Research

Cultural heritages are things that we have inherited from our ancestors through generation to generation. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined cultural heritage as “the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations”. They are mostly considered as high culture products that make unique features of a society. Being rich in cultural heritages means a country has a higher standard through history and makes its people proud of their national identity. Mahatama Gandhi (1869- 1948) quoted that, “A nation’s culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people”. Our valuable cultural heritages are needed to be appreciated, preserved and protected so that they will not disappear because of pop culture trends which are spread through capitalism.

There are again two entities of cultural heritages; tangible and intangible cultural heritages. “Tangible heritage includes buildings and historic places, monuments, artifacts, etc., which are considered worthy of preservation for the future. These include objects significant to the archaeology, architecture, science or

technology of a specific culture.” (UNESCO 2017) According to UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, there are five domains of intangible cultural heritages; oral traditions and expressions; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and universe and traditional craftsmanship. (UNESCO 2017) Although we cannot grasp our intangible cultural heritages (ICH), they play a crucial role in our life as they are cultural expressions handed from one generation to another give us a sense of identity.

Due to geopolitics, geo-culture and geo-history, most countries in Southeast Asia have “Indosphere cultures”, which means many cultural heritages in this region have been largely influenced by Indian subcontinent originated cultures. When we look at past ancient civilizations in Southeast Asia, it is found that Hinduism and Buddhism used to play at the main core of life which results similar cultural traits among Southeast Asian countries. One may notice many similarities among local wisdoms, traditional foods, festivals, dances, architecture of ancient buildings and dress codes in local Southeast Asian region. Ramayana, Mahabatra, Enaung or Panji, Thagyan or Songkrang festivals are common cultural heritages that share among different Southeast Asian countries.

In the past time before colonization by the Western, certain cultural traits used to travel from one place to another regardless of borders as there have been many contacts such as wars, diplomatic relations or trades among the local Kingdoms.

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Before the formation of nation states, Southeast Asia region was an open, fluid, and interconnected entity back up with secondary sources about it. However, since the coming of Western colonialization and the formation of nation states, this cultural fluidity has been replaced by so-called authentic national identity.

The notion of authentic cultural heritages that maps certain ethnic groups or cultural affiliations to concrete borders or territories without considering the fluid nature of culture sometimes creates problems over ownership of certain cultures. Conflicts over claiming the originality of cultural heritages according to national borders are one of the flaring issues among different nationalities Southeast Asia region. Clashes over claiming the ownership of Batik, folk music or National language between Malaysian and Indonesian nationals, arguments over the originality of certain cultural heritages as National costumes, performing arts, or architecture of temples between Thai and Cambodian citizens are some examples of conflicts that occurred as a result of the notion of “Nation States”.

Certain kinds of conflicts are no exceptions to occur between Thai and Myanmar nationals being neighbors who share both large bordering landmass and sea areas and who have many complex relations throughout history since pre-colonial periods. In a Facebook group named “ASEAN World- Southeast Asia Network”, I have found some wars between Myanmar and Thai citizens over the ownership or originality of certain cultural heritages during early months of 2018. When Thai members in this group posted about some of their traditional attires as assets of Lanna

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Culture in Northern Thailand as a part of Thai cultural heritages, many Myanmar citizens have shocked and strongly claimed that they are contributions of Myanmar cultural heritages as many Konbaung era's Burmese¹ influences are seen in these costumes. When I investigated this problem more deeply, it was found out that this issue has already been viral online previously and led certain groups of people in Myanmar especially concentrated in Mandalay, the last Konbaung Kingdom's Capital, to form "Association of Kongbaung Cultural Enthusiasts" comprised of historians, fashion designers, generations of Konbaung Royalties and activists in order to restore and preserve ancient traditions and customs from Konbaung age during Myanmar New Year festivals since 2017.

In Myanmar's history school books Kongbaung Era's Burmese Kingdom was portrayed as "the third Myanmar Empire²" which last from 1752 to 1885. It was founded by King Alaung Phaya in 1752 and which was the second largest Burmese Empire after Taungoo or Hantharwaddy Empire. According to Myanmar's history school books, territory of Konbaung Empire expended larger than modern day Myanmar including Ayutthaya, Lanna, Lan Xang, Assam, and Manipur. However, this empire was fallen after three Anglo-Burmese wars at King Thibaw's reign;

¹ Burma, Burmese, and Myanmar belong to the same identity in a broader sense. The name "Burma" was labeled by British colonials according to the Majority Burmese people. However, because Myanmar is home to more than 130 ethnic groups, the country's name was changed into "Myanmar" in 1989 by the Military government. Many Western countries still use this name "Burma" in mentioning the country till now.

² I am going to discuss that pre-modern Southeast Asian Kingdoms were not "empires" but rather "Mandala States" with loosely constructed territory contribution in "previous studies" section of Chapter 2

finally the whole country was occupied by British and annexed into British India Empire in 1885.

Lanna³ was an ancient Tai Kingdom located mainly in Northern Part of modern day Thailand and also covered some areas of today's Shan state of Myanmar, Laos and Yunnan Province of China. Janevala 2015 has described that "Lanna capital moved few times, but eventually Chiang Mai, the New City, was founded in 1269 by King Mengrai." Since Taungoo Empire, Chiang Mai or Zin Mae has been Burmese Kingdoms' tributary state over 200 year.

Because of previous Burmese dominances, many cultural heritages in Northern Thailand such as religious rituals, customs or dresses have obviously past days' Burmese influences. The major hybridity in the dresses where there have Burmese influences are especially of court costumes worn by Konbaung era Burmese Kings, chief queens and officials called "Du Yin Taw" and "Mahalatta Dasar Taw". Again, it can also be seen in traditional attires made from Lunttaya Acheik, the styles of wrapping shawls, Htai Ma Thein jackets, and head dresses. Many Myanmar citizens assume that Thai people are using Myanmar's cultural traits in attracting tourism sectors inside their country. Many Myanmar people are worried that their heritages which are handed through their ancestors would have been registered to UNESCO as intangible heritages of Thailand.

³ The terms Lanna, Northern Thailand and Chiang Mai will alternate throughout this paper.

It can be taken that such arguments over the possessions of intangible cultural heritages are as a result of misunderstanding about the nature of culture which should not be understood as being not attached to a single society. Instead, culture is a rather a fluid term that travels through different political, ethnical or territorial boundaries across different borders which finally leads to form hybrid cultural identities. Especially in intangible cultural heritages, contributions cannot be usually regarded in related to group members in a certain political boundary. They should not be objects to claim over originality or authenticity but to preserve or restore as heritages of the whole humankind. However, the notion of western imposed notion of Nation States serves as a barrier here for fluid culture to cross borders and travel different political entities. When certain cultural heritages have become the representation of National identity, the citizens feel proud that they contribute their own national culture. The issues have become intense when people from other political boardsers consume the similar cultures and name it as their own.

1.2 Statements of the Problem

1. What does the hybridity of some Chiang Mai traditional dresses signify about the notion of Nationalism?
2. In what ways the nation-based model of cultural heritages affect the conflict between Myanmar and Thailand citizens over the authenticity of their national dresses?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Generally, the purpose of the study is to explore how the notion of nation states impacts the fluidity or hybridity of regional cultural heritages in Southeast Asia which was common during pre-modern Southeast Asian Kingdoms. Specifically, it aims

1. to explore how the lack of borders between Thai and Burmese settlement areas during pre-modern periods allowed the ease in flow of cultural heritages which mainly caused hybrid dress styles, patterns of dress designs and materials used in dresses of Lanna

2. to investigate how the consciousness of the existence of modern day's Myanmar and Thailand's political borders can destruct the existence of cultural border in Southeast Asian local region which can be implied from conflicts caused by Lanna dresses with hybrid identity

1.4 Significance of the Study

By studying this issue, many benefits will be gained in advocating Aseaners⁴ especially Myanmar and Thai citizens to appreciate the value of traditional craftsmanship which is included in the list of intangible cultural heritages. Instead of claiming over authenticity, it would be better to collaborate in restoring and preserving them so that they would not disappear over pop culture products

⁴ residents of Southeast Asian countries

distributed by capitalism accompanied with globalization. Especially, it would be very beneficial in whistle blowing Myanmar citizens and Ministry of Cultural Affairs to take good responsibility in restoring and preserving their own cultural heritages. Because the country was colonized by British and suffered a lot from the disasters of World War II, the elder generations in Myanmar could not appreciate traditional handicrafts and some material cultures have been destroyed, ruined, neglected and they finally have disappeared. However, in Thailand, as the country did not suffer from War, such cultural heritages are still thriving. Again, their technological standard in preserving and maintaining old artifacts and creating new dresses by mimicking them in details and by making researches is high, it would be better for Myanmar to gain technological help from Thailand. The resulted outcomes from the research will be able to provide an interesting issue for Southeast Asian studies which is one of seven aims and purposes of ASEAN as set out in ASEAN declaration.