

CONCLUSION

POSSIBLE RELEVANCE TO THE THAI SITUATION

Westernization and modernization are now rapidly penetrating Thai society. Cars, radio, television, machines and products of all kinds have become necessities. The environment is changing everywhere in Thailand: in education, in economics, in politics, in daily living. With modernization problems are inevitable. What John Steinbeck and others have written about in the West: materialism, neurosis, the danger of mechanization and an impersonal world are beginning to take place here. They will only increase.

We have problems of adjustment and they are particularly serious for small people who do not understand the environment of the machine age. Although Thailand is primarily an agricultural country, we have not quite the same problem of migrant workers as the Joad family in The Grapes of Wrath. Our similar problem, however, is that of ^{little}~~small~~ people who cannot adjust to a rapidly changing environment and those who have migrated to Bangkok to look for jobs. The concern for money and things, the conflict between traditional values and those of being successful in contemporary society as Ethan Hawley in The Winter of Our Discontent and Mr. Pritchard in The Wayward Bus are increasingly heard especially among those who are in the civil service.

When John Steinbeck came to Thailand in 1967, he made

a comment about Thai people in "Letters to Alicia." His interpretation of the "wai" in Thai society shows his concern for the importance of the individual.

The Thai people greet one another and us with the wai, pronounced "wy". They place their palms together and raise the fingers to the eyes. In the West it would be a gesture of subservience or a prayer, but here the greeting simply means, 'I respect you, not your position but as a human.' And the reply is the same gesture and it means, 'and I respect you.' It seems a lovely thing to us because we have come from a bitter place where the key word is not respect but suspect. Suspicion of everyone everywhere. That boy maybe a grenade, those covered baskets on a shoulder yoke may contain plastic bombs...175

To Steinbeck, respect of the individual maintains his dignity. Suspect and distrust "...is carefully designed to destroy the dignity and the respect which would permit a man to think, to question and to defend himself. Here in Bangkok, the necks are straight and respect and liking are close together."¹⁷⁶

Steinbeck is depressed of the brutality of the Vietnam war which he observed in Vietnam before coming to Thailand. He is aware that if the same war should spread here, individual respect and human dignity would certainly be diminished. He described the Vietnam war as a "...sneaking murder-terror, torture, secret and nasty, designed to destroy the spirit so that it can be controlled and dominated."¹⁷⁷ Thailand is

¹⁷⁵John Steinbeck, "Letters to Alicia" Newsday, April 1967.

¹⁷⁶Loc.cit.

¹⁷⁷Loc.cit.

seriously threatened by the danger of communist encroachment especially in "... the North East of Thailand where the communist terrorists are slipping in, to try to do to this happy land what they have done to Vietnam."¹⁷⁸

War destroys the respect for the individual and increases the neglect of soul. The danger of the neglect of soul at the same time with material progress has been expressed by a well known Thai priest, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. His idea is that economic development without parallel development of the spirit is almost useless. In his Doromadham, a collection of lectures given to students, he points out that Thailand nowadays does not pay enough attention to the spirit which is the foundation of a healthy society. He gives as an example trends in modern education which refer to education for survival. It means physical survival only, not spiritual survival. In Asia, teachers were once considered spiritual guides responsible for the total personality of the student but nowadays teachers are hired merely to teach. Higher education does not have course concerning man's reason for being. For Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, an education which does not teach students why they are here and where they are going cannot be called "higher" education. In his opinion, the development of the spirit is at least as important as material development. Lack of concern for values can only result in confusion in society. Animosity between students of different schools, selfishness,

¹⁷⁸Loc. cit.

a dominating concern for money rather than the individual are results of the neglect of the soul or inner spirit of man.

The solution implied by John Steinbeck could be applied to Thai society. The feeling for Oneness and the sense of responsibility for one's fellow man must come from the soul. It is impossible to find them in the world of competition, the materialistic world as it exists in modern times. The solution is to awaken within the individual and society a deeper sense of responsibility, to make the people recognize that to help the small, the helpless is not merely the duty of the government but part of the responsibility of every man for his fellow man. Steinbeck points out the illnesses of society and urges society to stop and look at the problems of its individual members. He wrote The Grapes of Wrath out of sympathy and a sense of responsibility. As a result of The Grapes of Wrath, came much legislation to improve the conditions of workers. John Steinbeck could be an inspiration to Thai writers to accept the same social responsibility at a time when danger is all around.

One cannot stop modern development and Thai culture cannot remain static. The influence of the West will continue to penetrate Thai society but at the same time it should not be permitted to enter so rapidly that it destroys the individuality and characteristics of Thai culture. Perhaps the importance of this study of John Steinbeck is not to suggest imitation of the success of the West but to learn from its failure. What must happen if we follow blindly the path of

modernization is clearly shown in the works of John Steinbeck.

In order to satisfactorily handle the problems of change and assimilation, Thailand must know herself first: know where she came from and where she wants to go. With self-identification and a sense of purpose, Thailand will know what direction to follow and what to accept from the West. The writer believes that what Buddhadasa Bhikkhu suggests as a pattern of development and the proper emphasis of Buddhism for Thailand is the guide and the answer. It is really that which has enabled us to remain a free and independent nation throughout our history.



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