

Bangkok: discipline and wisdom of the Thai

January 2013

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“You were in a developing country? Wasn't there dangerous? Aren't there many dirty corners, bad smells, traffic jams, polluted water or contagious diseases?” People from well-developed countries can find bad points every minute in developing countries, even in Bangkok, one of the most developed cities in Southeast Asia. However, it doesn't mean that there is little charm in the city; rather, Bangkok is full of charm. Putting aside boring tourist information such as restaurant guide or temple tour, this essay will try to show discipline and wisdom of the Thai through three episodes during my two-week stay in Bangkok.

The first episode is attitude in a train station. On the first day of the workshop^{*1}, I used the BTS, Bangkok Mass Transit System. As one of rapid transit systems in Bangkok Metropolitan Areas, it was introduced in 1999 and has become an essential transport artery for this capital always crowded with automobiles. What surprised me was not only the cleanness of the train and the fascinated IC commuter pass, but also the Bangkok residents making a neat line on a platform. Even in the most congested rush hour in the morning, they properly form a line. It was just like in Japan and they were apparently much more disciplined than the French or the American^{*2}.

The second episode is conservation of cultural resource. Despite the rapid development since the 1980s, the Thai has conserved some important cultural resource. The most evident example is religious culture. There are still many young persons becoming a priest when they become 20 years old. Temples are closely related to the daily life and has strong political power as well. From a spatial perspective, conservation of shophouses^{*3} especially attracted me. Although many shophouses were already taken down, some of them still survive. The building of the hostel that the University of Tokyo team used was a renovated shophouse. Apparently, the hostel owner purchased four or five shophouses in a row, broke down the walls between the building to connect them and rent the first floor of each building to a restaurant tenant. There are countless renovation examples like this, but this one in Bangkok was especially sophisticated from my aspect. Such cultural conservation practices would have been impossible without good wisdom of the residents.

The third episode is diligent attitude of Thai students. I worked with students of Chulalongkorn University for two weeks. On the day before our interim presentation, my teammates took me to a modern cafe in order to work till late. This unique cafe is made for students, opened 24 hours and provide enormous discussion space with a number of tables. I visited this cafe three times during my stay and it was always crowded with students working with their friends. All the students were, as I saw, working quite earnestly without making too much noise. I surprised the fact so many students are willing to work till late and their etiquette in a public space. Moreover, my teammates always worked additionally than others and often provided extra materials. Even if I take into consideration the fact that most of students in the cafe and my teammates were students of Chulalongkorn University, one of the best universities in Thailand, I am sure that this attitude of Thai people forms the fundamental strongness of this country.

The discipline and wisdom of the Thai are thus sometimes visible in the form of train, temples, houses and cafes and ultimately make the unique charm of the city. I have to add here that these aspects are merely one side of the city of Bangkok because my stay and activity were only limited. However, I strongly believe that the excellent students I met there will lead the Thailand to a good future. Last but not least, I appreciate the Center for Sustainable Urban Regeneration, which gave me this precious opportunity to visit Bangkok.

*1 This essay was elaborated by the author on the occasion of a joint International workshop on urban regeneration hosted by Chulalongkorn University and co-organized by Peking University and the University of Tokyo between 29th August and 9th September 2012. The proposal by the team of the University of Tokyo was published as “International Graduate Student Workshop in Bangkok, Thailand” in: Junko Tamura (ed.) (2012). *D Catalogue: Planning & Design*. Center for Sustainable Urban Regeneration, The University of Tokyo, pp. 240-249.

*2 One thing that I must add here, however, is that the most poor income group does not use the BTS.

*3 Shophouse is vernacular architectural building type that is commonly seen in urban areas in Southeast Asia.