

## **Protest as Fashion Trends: Urban Cultures that Affect**

### **Performance Identity of PDRC Protestors**

PDRC is referred to 'People's Democratic Reform Committee, a group of people, which the majority is a Bangkok middle class aiming to oust Yingluck Shinawatra's elected government. In October 2013, it firstly scored the movement in the middle of Bangkok when the government proposed the amnesty bill that would have not only pardoned Abhisit Vejjajeva and Suthep Thaugsuban over murder charges in 2010 but also would have given a chance to bring back her brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, the ex-prime minister who was self-exiled due to the military coup in 2006 with charges of corruption. The government then rejected this bill as it had been opposed by the mass of people included government supporters itself. However, PDRC still continued their movement. Yingluck, therefore, responded with a house representatives' dissolution triggering a general election scheduled for 2 February 2014. PDRC still rejected and obstructed the election. They rather called for a "People Council" agenda to be done before an election. It aimed to set a group of experts mainly appointed by PDRC itself to run the People Council, demanding to remove 'Thaksinocracy' or Thaksin's corruption politics.

Since 2006, Thai politics have always been in tussles of two main political parties, Democrat Party with middle class supporters and Phue Thai Party with working class supporters. Follow to a political ideology that fabricated each movement, performance identity of each protest performed through props, costumes and protest activities highlighted and distinguished each movement. In 2006, we had "Yellow Shirt" as a royalist middle class group of people who wanted to oust the Prime Minister then, Thaksin Shinawatra, with the charge of corruption. In 2008, we had "Red Shirt", mainly rural working class people who protested against the military coup which had taken Thaksin away and called for a general election (Winichakul 2008). In 2012, we had "White Mask" wearing Guy Fawkes masks. It consisted of a similar group of yellow shirt people without former key leaders (Sapsomboon 2013). They claimed themselves as "Thai Spring" and aimed to oust the PM Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, and all of Thaksin's network from Thai politics. Finally, in the late of 2013, we had PDRC wearing various props and costume in Thai national flag designs, blowing a whistle as a sign of aiming to get rid of corrupt politicians. Although, the latest group of people were similar to protestors in 2006 and 2012 in objective and goals of

rejecting Thaksin Politics, it is undeniable that the character and atmosphere happened in this latest protest is obviously different from others happened before. Not only dressing up with national flags, blowing whistles, they also transformed protest spots into night and weekend markets, music festivals and outdoor clubs with DJs, posted, shared photos and checked-in at the demonstration via Facebook and Instagram. All of these identities performed became conventionally new urban fashion trends of happened in the capital of Thailand. Although, there are various perceptions and layers in term of political, economic, social and cultures conducting this protest, this study ultimately aims to focus on the performance identity of this protest shown as fashion trends even in undemocratic way that had been affected by urban cultures.

The word “place” is normally understood as a solid and physical space and building. However, in this modern times where countries in the world are globally interconnected with cultural, social and economic conditions, Doreen Massey (1998) has insightfully identified and established a meaning of places that:

*‘Instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations’*

He emphasises on the social relation shared among people who do not necessarily and physically exist in the same building, province or country at that moment. This conception leads to theorise this study in term of understanding the “sharing places” among protestors beyond the boundaries of Bangkok where the main protest stages take place. The more important thing was the sharing social relation that connected them together as a place where they “belong to”. As there was an evidence that even PDRC supporters who lived outside Bangkok or Thailand, especially in urban areas such as Paris, London or New York were also willing to put on all of similar props and costumes and blowing the whistles just as the PDRC people in Bangkok were (Democracy for Burma 2014). Therefore, this study suggests that the sharing place among PDRC protestors that should be firstly concerned is not the geographical boundaries but rather a social class. Looking back to the previous protest happened, Yellow Shirt and White Masks were mainly middle class who were the same based supporters with PDRC, these groups of people has been standing for getting rid of Thaksin’s corrupt politics and isolated from the state policies, unlike the working class Redshirt movement who struggle to have a better quality of life that they gained from Thaksin’s policies (Ungpakorn

2010). However, PDRC supporters refused to discuss about the corruption cases made by the Democrat Party, their supporting party which turned to be PDRC protest leaders as the image of the Democrat party has always been identified itself with middle and upper class as well-educated, and moral politicians (Ungpakorn 2009). Most of the Thai middle class relies on paid salary and needs the stability of the economic and social system to be confident that their life will be sheltered. They have no class consciousness (Iaosiwong 2009).

Although, social class was the main element that determined the sharing places among PDRC protestors in Bangkok beyond the sense of boundaries, it is necessary to understand that the physical urban geography where the protest occurred, and the urban cultures that crucially affected PDRC's performance identity.

Thailand is a developing country where the level of development has been really limited in just only large cities. Bangkok is the capital with the most population and the most important business area. It has been a dream for all of the workers in upcountry to desert their poor farms and fields for working and earning money in Bangkok to raise status quo, as more civilized, more working possibilities provided (Thammaboosadee 2011). Moreover, quality of education is another factor that identifies urban cultures as the Thai education system has been unequally developed especially in rural areas, in both systematic and physical ways. Without sufficient welfare state in everyday life, for one to be well educated, parents must be affluent enough to support their children instead of making them quit from school to be a labour to earn more income. Besides, high standard and well known schools and universities are mostly located in Bangkok and urban areas. Therefore, it can be seen that the concept of urban cultures in Thailand could not be separated from the concept of social class. Bangkok is the most civilized consisted of business and shopping centres, clubs and bars, terrible traffic jams and also developed transportation system like underground and sky trains which directly affect citizens' lifestyle. As PDRC protestors were mainly energised by urban middle class people, the identity of middle class people in Bangkok then now is further illustrated.

Most of the Bangkok middle class is office workers depending on salary paid by the company. Working hard, playing hard, they are waiting for happy Friday and weekends to hang out and take a break from office works, then tragically face the blue Monday again as a usual cycle. Thai middle class' idols are celebrities who are looking good, well-educated and wealth as what they want to be. They also enjoy the activities and festivals that emphasises

their existence in many ways, such as donating, being vegetarian in a festival for 7 days a year performing sacrifices and morality, and most importantly, promoting their lifestyle via social media like Facebook or Instagram to stress their self-value and to perform what they want people to perceive themselves. SocialBakers (2013) has shown the statistics of world Facebook usage monitoring that Bangkok has the highest number of Facebook accounts in the world.

Then how has this protest become fashion trends recently? Political movement, street protest is collective performance, which strategic performance is a part of a social movement's representation of itself (Eyerman 2006). Setting, stage and script, performers and audiences are major tools mobilising the movement. Another important factor that connects participants together in the movement is the shared and mutual expectation using symbolic interaction in order to communicate the message, to express and to exemplify their movement to effect changes. Thus, they must try to create the sense of —us, solidarity, belongingness and unitary among the members. With sharing place and urban geography and cultures mentioned above paragraph, they all influenced the performance identity of PDRC as fashion trends which is different from Yellow Shirts and White Mask movement with similar goals. Consider the props and costumes used to express and harmonise their movements, for Yellow Shirts, it visibly presented the movement as an extremely royalist movement (Chachavalpongpun 2011) so relying on the highest institution with intensive Lèse majesté laws conducted in Thailand was difficult and impossible to portray any royal symbols into stylish and playable props and costume. Moreover, many of former leftist activists initially mobilised the movement so there were still an image of social activists (Hewison 2009) which was also too serious to turn the protest into a trendy fashion. Following with White Masks movement without royalist presentation, Guy Fawkes mask worn followed to contemporary world movement like Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street which should have been became popular. However, being anonymous became fashion and harnessed Thai middle class protestors' attention just for only a while. Thai urban middle class cultures that wanting to be 'someone' and 'existed' (Iaosiwong 2009) so being anonymous under the all same designed masks did not make any of them be specially noticed or recognised as an individual. Posting and sharing photos of themselves wearing a mask on Facebook created a sense of 'anyone' rather than 'someone'. As a consequence, for PDRC, using whistles and national flag as significant props were able to play around with designs and patterns that did not to be careful

as much as the royalist symbols employed by Yellow Shirt. Moreover, wearing national flags designed costumes had nothing to do with face covering like wearing Guy Fawkes mask. Thus, there was a great available opportunity for protestors to play and decorate themselves and present their performances via social media space to test their rating and value from the amount of likes. Many of PDRC protestors' photo in portrait, candid and 'selfie' style has been widely posted and shared by themselves. Although the origins of national flag props in the protest were just for the headbands and whistle stripes, the national colours patterns were later rapidly designed in every fashionable material person could imagine such as earrings, bags, necklace, hat, glasses, even ice cream and cake. This kind of national flag usage has never been happened before in Thai history as national flag were officially and respectfully used only for decorating in government organisation and national sport games.

However, to understand how the national flag became fashion is important to not just clarify in terms of production but also consumption. The success of national flag fever has happened not only because there were many designs available, but also the nature of the customers who were willing to pay. It would be crucial to adopt the idea of 'materiality' that connect to the urban context. Materiality is not only represented through visible or solid objects in urban life. Dreams, desires, imaginations and emotions are also what people experienced in daily urban life. Thus, understanding materiality needs to be accumulated as a process which goes further than just a physical stuff (Latham 2009). As a consequence, PDRC's middle class fashionable identity was more than just to physically decorate themselves but also to serve their usual lifestyles and to full-fill what they lacked in the reality. Consequentially, the PDRC protest rally was turned into night market and weekend market. There had never been such an obvious and enormous night and weekend market for friends and family outing like this happened in working class Redshirts protest happened in 2010. Not because that Redshirts were not able to design products in various fashionable styles, but the protestors actually had no economic power to buy any product that could waste their small wages, unlike urban middle class people. Nonetheless, the markets and PDRC protest area itself were only crowded and active only on weekends, lunch time and at the early of the night. Mentioned timing were the free time for middle class office workers to take a break from their routine work. Most of PDRC's main demonstrations were located in the city centre surrounded by business areas so it was possible for middle class workers to drop by during the lunch time. Without social and economic oppression, to leave their office

of absence during working hours to attend the protest would certainly affect their job performance and their occupation future that no one wanted to take a risk. Moreover, there were not only on-site selling but many of online props and costume sellers in social media also have been growing rapidly serving Bangkok middle class lifestyle. Apart from shopping for fashionable props and costumes identifying these urban protestors with the movement, what is also crucial to discuss is that many of wealthy PDRC protestors were willing to pay for overpriced products sold in the demonstration like, coins and postage stamps with leaders face covered, cost at least 500 Thai Baht (10 GBP) each , or 99 limited edition of golden whistles invented by PDRC leaders (Democrat Party network) cost 100,000 THB (2,000 GBP) each (Asian Inter Law 2014). Furthermore, there were also auctions for limited products, for example, Lips, a Thai fashion magazine with a cover of PDRC leader and his signature was at an auction for New York PDRC with the bidding price started at 100 USD (PDRC NY 2014). The paid money would donate to PDRC leaders. Not only buying and bidding, donating was another signature of this protest. It has been a familiar picture seeing PDRC leaders rallied in the street with huge sacks and PDRC supporters passed by would welcome them with food and drinks and donate their money putting in the sacks. This powerful phenomenon has never been this intensively happened in any protest happened before in Thailand, especially, for the working class protest. It has been precisely linked to the relation of materiality and urban life mentioned earlier that with economic power, urban materialistic lifestyle of wanting to be ‘someone’, they all affected their performance identity as a wealthy and honoured protestor. This assumption leads to understand PDRC performance of defending that they were rich, educated and they were not bought or hired to join the protest, unlike working class protest occurred in 2010.

With the ability of spending money alone may not keep the protest last so long, Due to sharing ‘place’ of the urban middle class protestors who are middle class office workers, to abandon the weekend trip and short break to join radical protest chanting and blowing whistle would sound appreciated and respected in one or two weeks. For PDRC, the protest rally that had been taking place for 3 months, thus, instead of just keeping convince people to come and join, changing the rally camp into ‘play’ space itself was able to attract more people to comfortably spend their valuable weekends in the protest as there were numbers of performances with celebrities’ speech, talk shows, concerts and fashion shows. At night, it turned into clubbing spaces with DJs playing music in some protest hub located in nightlife

area. Therefore, turning the protest into a usual middle class lifestyle was able to keep PDRC demonstration as fashion trends.

Finally, this paragraph will implicate the concept of performing “above” of PDRC protestors which crucially made PDRC became fashion trends. While street protest are normally mobilised by voice from ‘below’ to perform oppression (Schechner 1993). In contrast, as mentioned earlier, the protestors were trying to empower and perform themselves with “better economic status” to convince that they were not being dominated by the leaders with bribes. They also referred to higher “level of education” to defend that they were not fooled and manipulated by any power or even the protest leaders like working class protestors. Finally, they ultimately identified the movement with the concept of “good people” or “moral people”, that want to protect the country and enlighten the poor people who believed that they were dominated by corrupt politicians. Therefore, they keenly identified themselves with national flag as a symbol convincing collectivism action rather than just individualism. In addition, blowing whistles was a sign of judge who knew what was right or wrong, when they were blowing whistles, not only that they could not speak but they could not also hear what other people were saying. It depicts the identity of PDRC protestors who seemed to want to be dominators rather than to communicate and take democratic actions as stated in their title. All these performance identities of being above has never been appeared in Redshirt movement, the working class who rather identified their group as plebeian that had been oppressed by the elite power and were struggling to pursue their political goal that depended on the state policy affecting their the matter of life or death. Performing ‘above’ was an important action that turned this political protest into fashion trends and widely admitted as in reality not everyone can be ‘someone’. PDRC protest has provided a chance for anyone who wanted to be respected, to be moral, and to be someone saving the country which they could not have in their real life which was not really connected with democratic ideology.

As a consequence, it can be seen that PDRC’s ultimate goal of getting rid of political corruption and supporting democracy as stated in its official name were barely related to their performance identity shown in the protest. On the other hand, the urban lifestyle, mutual social relation of the middle class and urban cultures were importantly affected PDRC protestors’ performance identity. Urban cultures have directly empowered, highlighted and

distinguish PDRC performance identity from others happened in Thailand. However, it is questioning that will only fashionable, materialistic, moral, and superior performance identities without explicit democratic actions and strategies performed and provided, be able to justifiably reach any political goals, mobilise the society, or to be internationally accepted in this modern times.

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