
Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP): Thailand's Emic Approach to Governance and Development as Evidence of an Asian-value Oriented Inclusive Leadership Management Philosophy

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Abstract: *Thailand has been at the core of the Asian Values debate since the 1992 World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna. Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) is an approach developed by the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej to condense and operationalize his approach to governance and development during the last two decades of his seventy year reign. Integrating values borrowed from Theravada Buddhism such as benevolence, emphasis on the middle way, and an emphasis on the public good, SEP is one of the most highly developed alternative approaches to development and governance in the Asian region. During his seventy-year reign, King Bhumibol Adulyadej saw thirty prime ministers come and go as well as over eighteen revised constitutions. Nevertheless, the country remained relatively peaceful and stable and the core pillars of Nation, Monarchy, and Religion provided continuity for the people throughout the upheavals of the Cold War and the new millennium. SEP has shown resiliency and flexibility to deal with a vast array of challenges both domestic and foreign. The present study explores the development of SEP with a particular focus on the role of values and leadership styles. SEP provides evidence of an actually existing Asian-value oriented inclusive leadership style that is practiced in both the private and the public sectors. A tentative model of SEP as a management style is provided and subjected to critical analysis.*

Keywords: *Self Sufficiency Economy Philosophy, Alternative Development, Management*

1. Introduction

The economic crisis of 2007, also known as the Tom Yam Gun Crisis, was an important wake up call for Asian economies (Kim, Fidler, & Ganguly, 2009; Komori, 2009; Nair, 2008; Suharto, 2009; Trinidad, 2010). Decades of economic growth vanished in less than a year and unemployment increased exponentially in Southeast Asia. The economic crisis led to a very serious socio-political crisis in the region which in turn led to heated debates over the origins of the crisis and on alternative solutions to its negative externalities (Komori, 2009). An emphasis on seeking economic growth and industrialization was suddenly replaced by soul searching over the importance of stability in Southeast Asia (von Feigenblatt, 2012; Nair, 2008; Pitsuwan, 2010; Simon, 2008).

Thailand was at the epicenter of this economic crisis and its leadership had to reckon with the consequences of its development strategy as well as their priorities (Bhaskaran, 2010;

Bhattacharyay, 2010; Dressel, 2009). Nevertheless, many prominent figures in the kingdom had voiced opposition, or at least reservations, regarding the pursuit of an aggressive neo-liberal development agenda (von Feigenblatt, 2009; Joll, 2010; Jones & Smith, 2007; Katanyuu, 2006). One of those early voices was that of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, who was personally involved in hundreds of development projects since the 1950s and who favored a more balanced approach to development (Suttipun & Arwae, 2020; Unger, 2009). Members of the Sangha, the religious hierarchy of Theravada Buddhism, also raised concern about the growing materialism of the working class and in particular about the phenomenon of village girls leaving their homes to work in the red light district of the capital to be able to purchase luxury goods (von Feigenblatt, 2010). There was also a wider reckoning with the environmental consequences of rapid industrialization and an exponential growth in the number of non-governmental organizations dealing with issues of sustainable development and human rights (von Feigenblatt, 2021; von Feigenblatt, Pardo, & Cooper, 2021; Katanyuu, 2006; Rüländ, 2011).

The main challenge was finding a suitable alternative to neo-liberal development approaches that would be able to guide the country out of the crisis. In the 1970s, King Rama IX delivered several speeches in which he introduced the concept of the Self Sufficiency Economy (SEP) in relation to agricultural production (Chetchotiros, 2020; Wyatt, 2003). The concept was based on the approach taken by His Majesty's own Royal development projects, including ideas taken from participatory development, sustainable development, and was guided by the core tenets of Theravada Buddhism. The resulting approach came to be known as the Self Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (Chetchotiros, 2020; "The Philosophy of the Self Sufficiency Economy," 2021). It took many years for the concept to be fully developed into an overarching framework for the government's official development strategy, and even longer for it to be adopted by a vast segment of the private sector (Suttipun & Arwae, 2020).

Thai governments starting in the late 1990s started to promote this concept as the overarching development framework as an attempt to guide development in a direction compatible with official national historiography, which emphasizes the role of Nation, Monarchy, and Religion as the three pillars of the Kingdom (Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2005; Wyatt, 2003). Moreover, the rise of the concept of Self Sufficiency Economy Philosophy coincided with the international debate over the universality of Human Rights and the challenge posed by a few Asian leaders such as the Prime Ministers of Singapore and Malaysia who proposed the alternative "Asian Way," based on the so-called "Asian Values" (Dhillon, 2009; Lee, 2000; Tow, Thakur, & Hyun, 2000).

The Self Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP) is infused with Theravada Buddhist concepts such as "moderation" and the "middle way". Therefore, it is necessary to understand basic Buddhist concepts and in particular how they are interpreted in the Thai context in order to grasp the holistic meaning of the approach. The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of Theravada Buddhist philosophy and its role in Thai society.

Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is considered to be at the core of national identity and its philosophy influences the daily lives of most Thai people (Jackson, 1995; Joll, 2010). This form of Buddhism is a very complex religion based on the idea of following the "middle path" and incorporating certain elements borrowed from Hinduism such as the concept of reincarnation and

the idea that merit influences the cycle of reincarnation. Two important Buddhist concepts are benevolence and moderation (McCargo, 2009; Winfield, 2010). Benevolence refers to striving for one's actions to have a positive effect on the community while moderation is about self-restraint and the avoidance of extremes. The Thai understanding of the concepts of benevolence and moderation is influenced by one's station in life. In other words, ideas of reincarnation, merit, and a cosmivision partly borrowed from Khmer ideas of kingship resulted in a particularly hierarchical understanding of Buddhism which differs sharply from Mahayana Buddhism (Mulder, 2000; Murphy, 2009). This particular version of Buddhism received support from the government and in particular from the monarchy (McCargo, 2009; Poocharoen, 2010; Sorajjakool, 2013). The Sangha, the official body of monks heading Buddhism in Thailand, endorses this hierarchical version of Buddhism and has allowed the incorporation of rituals and practices borrowed from the Brahminic (Hindu) tradition such as the King's blessing of the land (Wyatt, 2003). Thai Theravada Buddhism encourages people to live according to their means and to their station in life. In other words, it teaches that merit is accrued by doing good works limited by the occupation, status, and aptitude of each person. Thus, a farmer should be a good farmer rather than try to emulate the lifestyle of a soldier. Therefore, Theravada Buddhism rejects universal precepts regarding behavior and instead favors moderation and benevolence according to a person's particular social station. Moreover, a wealthy merchant is expected to contribute more to the community in terms of using his or her wealth to help those in need than a peasant. A teacher or monk is held to a higher standard of behavior than a salesperson and so forth (von Feigenblatt, Pardo, & Cooper, 2021). The different expectations in terms of behavior are based on the number of lifetimes a person has reincarnated. Certain occupations are assumed to imply more cycles of reincarnation than others and thus come with higher expectations in terms of behavior and wisdom. The ideas of moderation and the middle way were thus operationalized by His Majesty King Rama IX and by subsequent governments to apply the main tenets of Theravada Buddhism to all sectors of society.

2. Methodology

The present study follows a case study approach as posited by Stake (1995). Techniques taken from applied anthropology are applied to the inductive interpretation of official government texts dealing with the concept of Self Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP). Official government texts were coded in order to identify major categories and concepts ("The Philosophy of Self Sufficiency Economy," 2021). The concepts were then connected through a further round of coding of secondary sources following the constant comparative method as described by Charmaz and a tentative SEP model was developed (Charmaz, 2014). Moreover two hypothetical examples known as Weberian ideal cases were developed to show the application of the approach in practice (Weber, 2004, 2005).

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study follows the tradition of applied anthropology with a particular focus on social anthropology. Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" is applied to the study of SEP in Thailand and the concepts of cultural socialization and acculturation are applied to the integration of SEP in the private sector and in particular in the field of management (Turner, 1969). The overarching framework is constructivist and infused by a systems theory approach (Hoffman, 2009). Rather than aiming at a causal explanation of variables, the aim is rather to provide "thick

description” and an informed interpretation of SEP as it is understood by the Thai government and by prominent members of the private sector (Geertz, 1973, 1993).

The Basics of Self Sufficiency Economy Philosophy

The official definition of SEP includes three main components ("The Philosophy of Self Sufficiency Economy," 2021). The first component is moderation which refers to avoiding excesses and is closely related to the well-known “middle way” of Buddhism. The second component is reasonableness which refers to the evaluation of one’s actions and possible consequences (Suttipun & Arwae, 2020). It is a concept closely related to mindfulness and involves self-reflection. A third component is self-immunity which refers to the ability to deal with unexpected shocks and is linked to the idea of resilience (Arpanatikul et al., 2021). There are two overarching conditions in SEP which are knowledge and morality("The Philosophy of Self Sufficiency Economy," 2021). Both knowledge and morality provide an overarching framework for the three main components of SEP. Knowledge refers to having a working understanding of a particular field of action and morality is related to virtues such as honesty and perseverance (Suttipun & Arwae, 2020). Even though SEP seems very ambiguous to the average reader, the concepts used by SEP are widely understood by Thai people as part of their cultural milieu and also as core tenets of Theravada Buddhism, and thus resonate with deep meaning and a wide array of socio-cultural expectations and references (Chetchotiros, 2020). The official definition of SEP emphasizes the local roots of the approach and stresses its embedded nature in a wide web of symbolic structures connecting the individual to the community and in turn linking the community to the Nation(Arpanatikul et al., 2021).

SEP is imbued with local symbolism and reinforces traditional Thai social structure centered on the fatherly figure of the King and emanating from the center in a web of patronage relations resembling a mandala (Chetchotiros, 2020). It is also important to note that SEP stresses personal responsibility for the transformation of uncertainty into the management of risk (Cooper & Vafadari, 2021). This is particularly important due to the ebbs and flows of the international market and the very dangerous aggregate effects that may result from short term individual selfish actions. The best example of this is the Tom Yam Gun financial crisis of 2008 (Bhaskaran, 2010).

SEP as applied to two hypothetical ideal types

To explore the implications of the SEP approach it is helpful to apply a Weberian exercise and consider two ideal types (Moore, 2005; Perrow, 1972; Weber, 2004, 2005). The first ideal type refers to a working class Thai person in the capital and the second refers to a mid- level manager at a medium sized enterprise. This hypothetical exercise is meant to help illustrate the way in which SEP can be applied to people in different stations in life and it helps elucidate its plasticity.

Paiboon is a twenty five year old with a fifth grade education, a street vendor with a small food stand, he makes a living by selling fruit to passersby in the old area of the city. He is part of Thailand’s large grey area economy with very little regulation but subject to the flows and ebbs of the market. Nevertheless, Paiboon is an entrepreneur and understands the basics of business such as the importance of long-term relationships with regular customers and the need to protect a good

reputation. SEP resonates with many of the values and mores Paiboon has learned in his childhood such as the need for moderation and reasonableness. Paiboon can apply the principles of SEP by avoiding getting into debt to expand his business and by focusing on his area of operations in the capital. SEP would also favor an emphasis on appropriate technology rather than on the acquisition of advanced tools for his business. Thus, using a portable gas stove makes more sense for Paiboon than other alternatives. Moreover, Paiboon would be expected to try to increase his savings and to limit consumption to a level appropriate to his income level. In other words, self-immunity as posited by SEP would include actions such as increasing savings during times of prosperity to be able to survive times of contraction. However self-immunity goes beyond the simple idea of savings and limiting consumption as it also includes strengthening ties to the community to develop a web of relationships of mutual help. Thus, self-immunity is also related to the concept of morality in that moral behavior leads to strong relationships with customers and other stakeholders and therefore results in greater sustainability. Relationships with customers and with other community members are anchored in more than a simple transaction of food in exchange of money which serves as an important component and guarantor of self-immunity during times of economic hardship. The synergy between self-immunity and morality will be further explained in the next ideal type case study.

Achara is a mid-level manager in a midsize insurance company in Bangkok. She holds a bachelor's degree from a Thai public university and an MBA from a university in the United Kingdom. With more than ten years of experience in the industry she was finally promoted to regional manager and put in charge of the auto insurance section of the company. Achara was not in management at the time of the 2008 economic crisis but it looms large in her understanding of the international economy and how the Thai market is affected by global economic trends. Achara is a practicing Buddhist and her company is owned by a traditional Thai family. The SEP can be applied by Achara by focusing on the two main principles of self-immunity and moderation which also take into consideration ethical behavior and knowledge. SEP is apparent in her managerial practice partly due to her emphasis on midterm and long term goals. Moreover, Achara takes into consideration all stakeholders in her decision making. One specific example is hiring practices. Rather than hire based on the firm's current volume sales, Achara prefers to hire based on the slow season level of sales so that during a possible downturn she does not have to lay off workers. Moreover, in cases of severe downturns in the economy, Achara prefers to give a temporary pay cut across the board rather than lay off individual workers. This particular practice is an example of moderation, self-immunity and also applies morality and knowledge. Achara applies the principle of the "middle way" in terms of hiring as it helps her achieve the goal of self-immunity by cushioning the downturns in the business cycle. It also has a moral basis due to the idea that it would be immoral to lay off workers with families to take care of when it can be prevented by sharing the pain of the economic downturn evenly.

These two ideal case studies are based on many real life examples of the application of SEP at the individual level by different socio-economic strata. It should be noted that SEP is a well integrated overall decision making framework as it simplifies the main principles of Theravada Buddhism and the core values of traditional Thai culture, as defined by the government, and provides an easily applicable model (Chetchotiros, 2020).

Advantage of SEP over Western Models of Management in the Thai Context

SEP has many advantages as a general approach to management over better known Western Models. One of the advantages is that it is deeply embedded in the traditional Thai cosmovision (Chetchotiros, 2020). SEP is based on traditional Thai values and therefore it is not a foreign import. Another advantage is that SEP is holistic and flexible to deal with virtually any situation. This approach can be applied to small and large enterprises in all sectors. SEP tends to emphasize midterm and long term goals with a healthy concern for the wider community (Suttipun & Arwae, 2020). The emphasis on assessing one's knowledge regarding a certain topic before making any decisions is also very useful in the Thai context. Many entrepreneurs at both the small and medium level have limited educational backgrounds and therefore are not equipped to assess risk when making certain decisions. Taking steps without the required knowledge can make management akin to gambling, with very serious consequences for the enterprises involved and for the economy as a whole.

Disadvantages of SEP

One of the main criticisms made by foreign pundits regarding SEP is that it is inherently conservative (Ungpakorn, 2007, 2010). One of the main characteristics of neoliberal capitalism is that it favors consumption as a goal in and of itself (Trinidad, 2010; Unger, 2009). SEP rejects consumption as a goal and calls for adjusting consumption to one's station in life ("The Philosophy of Self Sufficiency Economy," 2021). Therefore it is expected that people with a lower socio-economic status will be satisfied with consuming less. Moreover, the middle and long term preference of SEP can slow down radical changes in social stratification because a negative externality of the avoidance of risk is that it can also slow down economic dynamism and the subsequent speed in social mobility associated with it (Unger, 2009). At a macro level perspective the application of SEP can lead to higher savings rates and to higher capitalization rates in small and midsize enterprises, which can also slow down economic growth because the money is sequestered as savings rather than released into the economy for consumption and productive investment. The emphasis on decision making taking into consideration a broad group of stakeholders may also sacrifice individual aspirations as seen in the hypothetical example regarding human resource decisions during an economic downturn. Salaries and wages may stagnate so as to limit layoffs.

Empirical Studies at the Macro Level

One of the challenges of evaluating the SEP model as a management paradigm is the inherent complexity of the concepts involved (Suttipun & Arwae, 2020). Many of the concepts are borrowed from Theravada Buddhism and therefore are imbued with deep meaning and embedded in an ancient and complex philosophy. Nevertheless, many Thai scholars have conducted empirical studies evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of the SEP model in terms of internationally recognized benchmarks (Pongsudhirak, 2008; Suttipun & Arwae, 2020; Unger, 2009). Suttipun & Arwae have conducted the most ambitious quantitative study of SEP focused on small and medium enterprises in Thailand (2020). In this particular study they evaluated important economic indicators for over 600 SMEs. A Likert scale was used and questionnaires were mailed to the

companies. The data that was collected was analyzed through descriptive statistics, correlation matrices, and multiple regression analysis (Suttipun & Arwae, 2020). Their findings show that there is a strong correlation between SEP management practices and that SEP leads to similar results to some alternative management approaches recently developed in the West such as Sustainable Management (Suttipun & Arwae, 2020). Nevertheless, the authors acknowledge the challenges of measuring the impact of SEP through quantitative measures because of the inherent complexity of the approach and the limitations of quantitative methods.

Empirical research with a qualitative approach has also been conducted to evaluate the impact of SEP. One such study was undertaken by Arpanatikul et al. (2021) in Thailand. This particular study focused on health management among midlife women. One of the great strengths of this study is that it applies an applied anthropological approach which combines structured and unstructured interviews to evaluate the *emic* understanding of the application of SEP in terms of health management in a provincial health center (Arpanatikul et al., 2021). The study evaluates an innovative initiative by the Thai Health Ministry which promotes the application of SEP to people's health to promote preventive health measures and by doing so avoid health problems. Another strength is that the subjects of the study are not professional managers but rather women in their midlife years from a vast array of socio-economic backgrounds. This study concludes that the SEP Philosophy is helpful in guiding decision making regarding health prevention measures such as consumption patterns and exercise regimes (Arpanatikul et al., 2021). The most pertinent finding for the purposes of the present study is that SEP was easy to understand and that the learning curve for the application of SEP to decision making was short. Thus, the familiarity of the target audience with the central concepts of SEP and the embedded nature of SEP in Thai traditional culture greatly facilitates the adoption and implementation of the approach among people without formal management experience or training.

4. Conclusions

Management practices are part of the wider field of leadership studies (Ewest & Klieg, 2012; Goldsmith, Greenberg, Robertson, & Hu-Chan, 2003; Hendrickson, Lane, Harris, & Dorman, 2013; Cooper & Vafadari, 2021). Leadership is a socio-cultural phenomenon and thus it is deeply embedded in a web of symbols, mores, and social norms. The literature on leadership supports the assertion that practices embedded in webs of local knowledge are more easily accepted and thus the learning curve is shorter (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). Moreover, the assumption of many Western management paradigms that the main goal of an enterprise is greater profit has been challenged both inside and outside of the region (Gouvea & Kassicieh, 2009; Kantabutra & Saratun, 2013; MacFarlane & Khong, 2006; Unger, 2009).

The Self Sufficiency Economy Philosophy developed in Thailand is a flexible and locally meaningful management paradigm. "Asian Values" include a vast array of belief systems, cosmologies, and mores (Hsin-Huang, Hsiao, & Wan, 2007; Lee, 2000; Shatkin, 2006). Therefore, SEP is only one in many possible solutions to complex issues such as the proper way to manage individual and collective economic decisions. Rather than attempting to find universal solutions to problems which are inherently embedded in a local context of social relationships it is more fruitful to embrace the wealth of alternative solutions to common problems faced by humanity. Asia has a lot to offer the world beyond consumer products and investment opportunities. Learning from the

regional experiences of Asian countries and exploring some of the ways in which they have tackled the challenges and opportunities brought about by globalization is not only a fruitful academic endeavor but a much needed approach to identifying “best practices” in the field of leadership and management.

5. For Further Research

More research interdisciplinary research is needed in the field of management and leadership (Ewest & Klieg, 2012; Kollman, 2008; Mann, Marco, Khalil, & Esola, 2001; Miller, 2009). The field’s focus on quantitative research has narrowed its purview and thus limited the possible range of solutions and questions that have been tackled (Rivero & von Feigenblatt, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Interdisciplinary research and in particular the inclusion of an applied business-anthropological approach can help the field move beyond its ethnocentric Western origins and transcend the parochial universalism which characterizes many of its so-called “best practices”. Further research in alternative paradigms such as SEP can serve as a small step in de-colonizing discourse in the field of business and economics and by doing to empower a vast array of decision makers and stakeholders to voice alternative paradigms and to propose diverse solutions to common problems.

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Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP): Thailand's Emic Approach to Governance and Development as Evidence of an Asian-value Oriented Inclusive Leadership Management Philosophy

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Sufficiency Economy Philosophy (SEP): Thailand's Emic Approach to Governance and Development as Evidence of an Asian-value Oriented Inclusive Leadership Management Philosophy

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