

## Gastronomic Culture and Society in Contemporary Thailand

Yoshihide Sakurai

Graduate School of Letters, Hokkaido University Sociology

Kita10 nishi7, Kita-ku, Sapporo 060-0810, Japan

### Summary

Thai cuisine has become popular throughout the world and recently Thai restaurants in Japan are being patronized by young woman who savour spicy and hot dishes. Tom Yam Kung is typical, with shrimps as one of the many sea foods enjoyed. Thai dishes vary according to region, whether North, Northeast, Central or South. Each of those divisions, corresponding to some extent to variation in language, ethnicity, and religion, has its own an indigenous gastronomic culture.

In contrast to the rich cuisine, the selection of distinctive Thai beers and liquors seems to be rather poor. Thais prefer western-style liquor and have no enthusiasm to protect home-grown rice liquor. Semitropical weather probably prevents excellent sake brewing. Moreover, Thai Theravada Buddhism strongly discourages Thai drinking. Of course, such ascetic practice is limited to monks, but pious ordinary people obey the commandments and regard drinking as a bad habit. Drinking as equals is not used as a communication tool as in Japan. Traditional foods and lifestyle have been rapidly changing in the era of globalization. Therefore, gastronomic culture should not be examined not only as a domestic art from a sociological perspective. This short essay introduces ordinary lives of rural and city Thais, and provides some examples of the encroachment of globalization on daily life.

Since the mid of 1980s, neoliberal policy and capital accumulation have accelerated hierarchization among classes and differentiation between the center and peripheral regions, a process which also happened in the 1990s in Japan. Although the Thai government and citizens groups promote local wisdom and indigenous culture, "Thai-ness" is gradually being replaced by global culture and is under siege by "MacDonaldization." Thai culture, is however being preserved by both local farmers and city residents equally, up to the present, a handful of upper class stakeholders in cities are mainly enjoying creating mass culture in a market oriented society.

Nevertheless, Thai have not lost the famous smiles that welcome foreigners. I strongly recommend that you visit amazing Thailand again and again. You will find many interesting culture facets. The Thai are positive and enjoy their private lives. It is right that Thai are Thais, even if they have MacDonald, Coke, and KFC, and are surrounded by foreign materials.