

An Alternative Youth Movement in Cultural Dimension in Thailand : A Case Study of “Siam Dek Len Network”¹

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1. Introduction

Youths are a part of a society. They are a barometer of the society, reflecting social norms, social illness and social change¹. Youth-related issues such as their cultures and their perceptions towards the society are important and cannot be neglected. This paper is written with a realization of the youth's importance. It will consider a relationship between youths and the society through a criterion of 'social concerns'. The word 'social concern' though not having any particular theoretical significance, is used frequently in Thai society, referring to the relationship between the society and young people. In this article, social concerns will be used in a general term, meaning the way that youths perceive themselves in connecting with the society they live in and play their roles as an active actor in the society rather than a passive one.

Social movement is a concept used to explain social changes. The paper focuses on the social movement of youth-related issues by studying a group of youths who have done something for a change as an owner of the issue. The word 'movement' is usually defined in a mass form. However, I use this word in a similar way as does Kritaya. As she put it, '*...movement does not necessarily need a base of organization. An individual who is aware of a problem and does something about it can also be said to be a part of social movement providing that the problem is significant.*'² I believe that the issue of youth-society relationship is significant and hence worthy of attention like any other movements. In this paper, I will present an attempt of the group of youths in communicating their cultures with other people. It can be said that the paper is reflecting a cultural type of movement other than a traditional social movement, which aims to make a change in terms of policy or legal.

In sum, the paper's purpose is to suggest an alternative way that youths can become an active actor in the society, which has been

dramatically changed due to globalization. Such alternative is diverted from two mainstream ideas towards youths. In writing this paper, I benefit from being a participant of the group since its foundation. Information sources are either derived from the group's published documents or additional interviews. The paper is organized into five parts. The first part is this introduction. The second part is the detail of the above mainstream ideas, the significance and the context under which the issue of youths and society is considered. The third part contributes to a case study called Siam Dek Len Network. The fourth part is an analysis of the case. In particular, it points to four questions: what are the conditions that support the formation of the group?; how does the group function?; how does the group think of themselves, how does it have an impact to the society?; and what are its limitations? The last part is the conclusion.

2. Significance of the study

In many societies, youths are compared to 'future carriers of the society'. Therefore they are frequently mentioned based on a category of concerning about the society or not. In Thailand, there are two types of this division. Firstly, a number of people think of youths as having no social concerns at all. They disapprove of youths' behavior because the latter are luxurious, consumerist, extreme individualist³, and at risk of using drugs and being involved in crime. Sometimes, they are seen as undermining the so-called good Thai culture. This kind of view can be reflected as follows⁴ :

Rock music sounded from two loudspeakers at both side of the stage was alternated with thundering sound of raising a hue and cry. A field was abounding by a numberless young girls and boys who were flouting and flinging following a hot music. Various hair colors, costumes that were just like coming out from a fashion magazine,

¹ This article aims to present the experience and social context of youths in Thailand. It might be similar or different to other country. The exchanges of views about youths in other country situations are welcome.

mobile phone, pager, popular-brand handbag, and so on. These might be the symbol of youths in this century.

Secondly, another view of youths is that there are some youths who have social concerns. This opinion towards youth often mirrors the picture of youth in 1970s when thousands of young people played a considerable role in Thai politics. Hence, today youths are expected to have a liberal spirit and strong intention to build a good society. They are justified by only a few indicators such as working with the poor and rural communities, listening to the life-songs⁵, an interest in social and political problems and devoting themselves to public interests. The success of the previous young people put on the present youths is also shown in some oft-heard conversations for example *'where is the power of the current youths?'*; *'students' social activities are fading'*; *'the current youths can no longer be a leader of the society as before'*; etc.

Being a youth is a period of searching for self-values and locating a position of oneself in the society. I believe that there are still a number of youths who think of themselves not solely falling into each of the two groups above. Unfortunately, the mainstream attitudes of people request a choice between either 'being' or 'not being' concerned about the society. Some classical examples in the Thai society show the similar way of such duality: 'If you are anti-dam, why do you still use an electricity?' or 'If you are against capitalism, don't use mobile phones then'.

The duality of the attitudes towards the youths is problematic since it only offers the young people two routes of relationship with their society. If they are a part of the modern life, they must have no concern about the public interests. In contrast, if they are concerned about the society's well being, they should follow the pattern of the 1970s youths. The either-A-or-B conception discourages any other types of youth-society relationship by restricting youths to only two extreme options. This is especially true to the youths who nowadays are likely to be in highly modernized areas such as shopping mall and internet cyber space which promotes individualism, competition and consumerism. These youths can be called 'youths in a high-globalized area'. Some questions are raised here: Is it possible that these youths would be concerned about their society?; What kind of society would they be interested in?; Is it acceptable for those who work with the poor to eat at MacDonal'd's?

Apart from the above consequence, the duality of the attitudes towards youths also has two further impacts. Firstly, many young people

who do not fall neatly into any of the two categories are under pressure due to lack of 'freedom to choose' what they want to be and the kind of relationship they would have with the society. Secondly, concerning in policy dimension, the society cannot develop these young people to reach their maximum potentiality. These two effects in turn result in weakening the youths and the society.

The following section proposes an alternative route for the youths by exploring in detail the case study of Siam Dek Len Network. What this group offers to the youths is a space that they can convert themselves from a defender or a responder to an active actor who has a freedom to choose their own societal interests and roles according to their conditions. Initiated by a group of Chulalongkorn University students, the network is based at Chulalongkorn University whose area is surrounded by some popular shopping malls and places for the young people in Bangkok. Members of the network have created numerous activities to re-relate their self to the Thai society. At the same time, their activities act as "communicative action" by communicating their own societal interests with the public.

3. Siam Dek Len Network

The Siam Dek Len Network was a development from an original group called Café Forum. Café Forum, born under a context of plans for university privatization, wanted to raise questions about student-university-society relationships. Its target group was the university students who were often mentioned by both those who agreed and disagreed on university privatization but rarely had a voice.

As time passed, the discussion on university privatization had faded. Members of Café Forum then reckoned about a formation of a new group called Siam Dek Len Network whose interests would go beyond the previous issue on student-university-society. Their theme is focused around widening and diversifying the way they can learn about life, society and culture. The new group during this time concentrated their activities within the Chulalongkorn University. Some friends of the student members were invited to join the activities from times to time.

After the group established itself, it started doing some projects that were concerned with non-Chulalongkorn university students. The group gained more reputation and hence were sometimes invited to participate in the other group's activities and some press interviews.

3.1. Café Forum

Two to three years ago, the issue of higher education reform was a very hot issue among Thai universities and Thai society. But the main debates were around the issue of ‘privatizing’ or ‘not privatizing’ the university, without considering the question about *how the university plays the role / have responsibility to the society*. In the atmosphere, a group of students of Chulalongkorn University, named ‘Café Forum’, had set up a series of semi-formal public seminar to argue that the participants of the discussion about university reform were only administrators and lecturers, but it has not yet included students, who were an important part of the university. Also, though there were many students who do not focus only on their grade or good future work but were concerned about the society and questioned many things on which they disagreed. But these students are a minority and have no tangible group to tell the society about their opinion on many issues. Thus, the main purpose of this group was to promote spaces for students to intellectually discuss, and turn their role (from the person who is mostly listening to adults and lecturers) to be the speaker and collectively tell the society what they think about the society, like their slogan “*empty space for creativity*”.

In July 2001, ‘Café Forum’ organized the first forum on the topic of “*Chula-Thoughts-Students-Societies : Roundtable on the Relationship between Chula and Society from Student’s Perspective*”⁶ to brainstorm on student’s thinking about the issue in the university sphere and the issue about the university related to the society. There were many varieties of students—from many areas (science, social science, and humanity), many years, both undergraduate and graduate, from Chulalongkorn University and other university, both alumnae and alumni—participating in this forum. Various issues were enthusiastically raised and discussed in this forum. It can be grouped into 3 topics: 1) educational system; 2) student’s activity system and the participation of student in university’s business or activity; and 3) the identity of Chulalongkorn University student and the identity of Chulalongkorn University.

For educational system, the questions were: How can we link experience outside classroom learning into classroom study? Within the partial educational system of Thailand that students have to study only in their major, can the student study across-faculty about what they are interested for developing the potential to overtake the changing world? In other words, how efficient is the static and solid borderline of academic discipline to encourage the wisdom of

students to creatively interact on the challenges of globalization in the contemporary world? Moreover, there were questions about the ‘great theatricalism and deception’ of some course that instruct student to be ideal graduates, but they feel they were not allowed to be themselves.

Regarding the activity issues, the problem of student’s activity system that are the extension of the bureaucratic system was questioned about its relevancy, because while the student’s activities system focus on the creativity, the bureaucratic system rather emphasized on controllability (without effective accountability). Moreover, the issue about student’s sense of involvement to the society that comes down was re-questioned not fully because of students themselves. But there might be some members of the university, who were still panicked about youth movement in the past, that wouldn’t like students to participate in some business of university or to organize some kind of student activities, especially the activities about public issues.

The third topic is about the question “who are Chulalongkorn University students?” and “How should Chulalongkorn University students play their role?” There were many questions. For example, are Chulalongkorn University students a group of people who think about themselves and many things in similar ways? Do all Chulalongkorn University students have similar backgrounds? How do students who immerse themselves in the library expect to deal with life and society? What is in the mind of students who tend to like doing the activity more than studying in the classroom? Is it similar or different to students who like shopping in the department store? Do students who like shopping have no concern about the society? Is it the problem about students themselves or the viewpoint of the viewer? Finally, there was much doubtfulness about the identity of students, who are the important parts of the university, so how about the identity of Chulalongkorn University?

The ‘Café Forum’ was encouraged by some groups of adults, both lecturers and administrators, who understand the importance of promoting students to be active person and to do the creative activities that reflect student’s thought. The formal supporter was the research project, named “*Chula and Societies*”, conducted by Prof. Surichai Wun’Gaeo and the other lectures under the support of Chulalongkorn University⁷. The research project encouraged ‘Café Forum’ with advice and financial support. After the first forum proved itself, many students joined and could produce many critical questions and remarks on the issues about students, university, and societies, ‘Café Forum’ took

many questions and issues stated in the first forum to generate 3 more forums until the end of year 2001. The second forum was about *uncritical education in university*⁸. The third forum was about *student's activity system*⁹. And the fourth forum was about *the diversity and difference among students in the university*¹⁰

Many more questions were raised in these forums and brought students to exchange their opinions. For instance, the second forum about *uncritical education in university* that is the education without promoting the critical question toward the content of itself—such as the significance of the content, or the efficiency of instruction system—was discussed. Five students from 5 different majors—pure science, applied science, health science, social science, and humanity—were invited to be the main speaker, so the significant issues were variously demonstrated from the different point of view according to the nature of each major. For instance, the question from health science student about the high frequency of examinations which causes students to enthusiastically study, but blocks the opportunity in learning other important things for life, and so medical students, who are going to work about curing human life, have a very narrow understanding about life¹¹. One remark about uncritical education from humanity student was that Thai society understands about humanity as the language school, so it is not necessary to think. But the real humanity is thinking, not by the brain, but the heart¹². Moreover, the fourth forum about *the diversity and difference among students in the university* was set up to argue on the generalized image of students that cause many policies to inappropriately encourage the development of student. Many kinds of students—such as blind students, female students, students who have high environmental consciousness, and students from the rural area—were invited in this forum as the speaker. An interesting remark from the blind student—at that time, there were 5 undergraduate and graduate students in Chulalongkorn University who were blind—was about rights for learning that was forgotten from the society (and people in the university). He asked Thai people to change the Buddhism thinking about “people have disability because of their sins” and recommended (especially the university) to start thinking about the handicapped’s learning and initiate the plan for facilitating them. Finally, if the disabled people can improve themselves to give advantage to the society and not be considered as the society’s burden.

In all 4 forums, ‘Café Forum’ could achieve their purpose moderately well. The

various kinds of student’s voices were addressed. Various kind of participants (both repeatedly and one time participants) were about 100 persons—comprised of students from many years, many majors (science, social science, and humanity) and about 13 faculties (There are totally 18 faculties in Chulalongkorn University.), various degrees of study (bachelor degree, master degree, and Ph.D.), alumni, Chulalongkorn University students and other university students, students from rural and urban area, and administrators and lecturers. The activities and stories about ‘Café Forum’ were distributed within the university by the newsletter of the research project³ and two student magazines¹⁴. Many students, who have never known each other, became friends and jointly applied many recreational activities, such as going to the movies and making a critique. On January 2002, some of these students also formed together and wrote the speech about student’s opinion on university reform and spoke in the public hearing seminar about Chulalongkorn University’s future in the year 2002¹⁵. The opinion was very interesting for the committee for public hearing on an Act of Chulalongkorn University, especially H.E. Anand Panyarachun (the former prime minister) and Mr. Sapon Supapong (Senator)

The most important student activity after the series of panel discussion of ‘Café Forum’ was the series article writing about what they think about themselves, the university, and the society. In the early of year 2002, about a dozen articles were collected from students and published as a booklet titled **“Students? : Who were Seen but not Noticed”**¹⁶. The aim of this booklet was to reflect the thought of Chulalongkorn University students, who were specially stared by the people the complexity and diversity of what students thought about their daily life were mostly ignored. The topics were various such as what the first year student think about the life in university, argument of senior students about the university benefits, criticism of the Chulalongkorn-Thammasat University traditional football game and festival, or criticism about the value of study to graduate in a hurry in an article named **“Sad at What Have Done Better Than Regret at What Have Not Done : How Unworthy Chula Students Spend Their Life”**¹⁷. One of the articles that quite systemically criticized about life and culture of student in Chulalongkorn University is the article that named **“Fatter and the Place for Dream Extinction”**¹⁸. In this article, the student, who was the contributor, explained the atmosphere that resulted in the extinction of the student’s creativeness, imagination, and dreams, for example, by the repeated routine activities, the

lack of student participation in resource management (such as football field or empty space between the building, which always has “Do not play football” tab). The publics were very interested in this book, and the students who were the contributor were interviewed by the newspapers¹⁹. Many people reserved for this book when the book was opened for reservation in Chulalongkorn University Exhibition organized by the university in the end of 2002.

By the second quarter of 2002, the first phase of this group’s activities had formally ended with the completion of the research project. Many ideas, comments, criticisms, and propositions were collectively synthesized and included into the result of research project and proposed to the administrators of Chulalongkorn University²⁰.

3.2. Siam Dek Len Network : Phase I

Some members of ‘Café Forum’ and a few students, who appreciated the activities of ‘Café Forum’ and got more happiness and lesser pressure by the activities that allow them to present their ‘self’, still looked forward to this kind of activities. By the time the “Chula and Society” research not yet finished completely, they had started organizing the activities by themselves²¹. Coincidentally, at the same time, a group of youths who just graduated from Chulalongkorn University got a research project, named “*Chula Youth and Globalization*”²² by the advice of Prof. Surichai Wun’Gaeo, who became to be an adviser of the project. This research was a participatory action research about Chulalongkorn University student’s culture with aim to promote students to have creative thinking, be able to define the meaning of their life and society, and improve their efficiency to take part of changing the society.²³ So the above-mentioned students in cooperation with the research project could start the activities.

Under the encouragement of this research project, during the second quarter of 2002, the students discussed the idea about creative activities that go beyond the routine activities (such as the Chulalongkorn-Thammasat University traditional football game and festival) but promote the fun learning and consistent with what students like to know and do. There were some activities, that reflect what they think about the contemporary society: The Kita-Kaweenipont (Music-Poetry) project²⁴ that aim to study about how the new approach of poem, like short message in mobile phone or the forward mail²⁵, challenge and interact to the classic poem like Naowarat Pongpaiboon²⁶, and how the modern music, like Modern Dog²⁷, tell us about the

contemporary society? The sustainable consuming project²⁸ aim to ask about the question, such as, surroundings by the strong consumerism, what is Chula student’s well-being? How does student’s well-being relate to the society’s well-being and world’s well-being? How do the huge consumption patterns of humans affect nature and people who live closely to the nature?

After a number of ideas about new approach of activities had been discussed, they started the pilot activities for testing about how did their idea work. They, then, set a small group for critiquing the movies. The participants expressed their opinions and took a funny discussion. Thus, they produced 3 groups to apply the activities related to what they were interested. The first group was “*Education Creatively Criticizing group*” who asked for transdisciplinary learning and questioned about how what they have studied could apply to their real and daily life. The second group was “*Alternative Health Study group*” with the aim about looking for the collaboration between alternative medicine and modern medicine. The third group was “*Art Consuming and Creating group*” with purpose about promoting the criticism of culture of art through reading, listening, and watching.

After all 3 groups discussed clearly about the concept of each group, they then named the big umbrella of all groups as “Siam Dek Len Network”. The meaning of this umbrella name reflected what they think about their position to the society. ‘Siam’ means both Thailand, and Siam Square which is the place for youth to liberate their ‘self’. ‘Dek’ means children or youths who are the young generation. The primary meaning of ‘Len’ is funny and exiting activities and the secondary meaning (Thai slang) of ‘Len’ is the serious or preoccupied activities, such as play a political role. To sum up, ‘Siam’ is the place; there are ‘Dek’ (youth) as the active actor; the verb is ‘Len’ (play); that is : now youths have also turned to become active actors (not just adults who often instruct youth about doing) and Siam is the liberal place for youths to at learn about the interaction between themselves and the society of globalization, and in the same time, youths can play an active role in changing Thai society too.

On July 2002, they organized the opening forum “*Leap Frogging: from platitudinous activities to creative liberty*” to announce the existence of “Siam Dek Len Network” and introduce the group to the people in university and society. The main topic of this forum was about the young person’s dream, learning life through the various kind of experience, under

regress, lifelessness, platitudinous, and routine atmosphere of extra-curricular activities. In this forum, the different aspects of student were still mentioned²⁹. A medical student, who had dropped his course for 1 year to pursue his dream—by teaching the hill tribe children, visiting Himalayas, turning to Suan Mokkh temple³⁰, and finally joining the full moon party—was invited to tell his outside the classroom experiences. The experience after he turned back to the faculty was to be interviewed by ten psychologists, who wondered about his case because it never happened in medical educational culture. The psychologists finally concluded that he had new kind of mental disorder which never seen before. Another aspect was an activist student from other university who had optic nerve deterioration when he graduated from high school. He talked about his passive life before his eyes were invalid, and life realization after he could not see. He mentioned (like the blind student speaker of the forth forum of ‘Café Forum’) that he would not like to be the other people’s load, so he would spend life to fully help the people. Moreover, the adult participant had mentioned new information about the special case of Chulalongkorn University student in about 35 years ago, that probably not quite different to the present student. There was Tai-Yai student, who was the son of the king of Shan-state’s son and studied at Chulalongkorn University. He was the chair of a student activity club. He studied here for two years, and then he had to go back to his homeland because his father was arrested in Burma. The question was what did he think about studying in Chulalongkorn University, and how did Chulalongkorn University think about encouraging his dream. Finally, the “Art Consuming and Creating Group” showed what they think about the value of many kinds of art for keeping and healing the value and inspiration of youths by the unusual presentation (for Chulalongkorn University student) that was singing song in ‘hip hop style’. This opening forum could make “Siam Dek Len Network” moderately known in the university and society. “Siam Dek Len Network” was also interviewed by a columnist who joined this forum and the group’s activities appeared on the newspaper³¹.

On September 2002, “Siam Dek Len Network” ran 2 more panels about criticizing the article and musical discussion. Regarding the former, the article that was criticized was a lecture of the minister of Ministry of the Interior on “National Identity and Social Ordering”. It was about the conceptual idea of the policy of the government about bringing the ‘good’ national identity for socially ordering the modern youth’s

way of living in the complicated and confusing society, especially youth who participated in the night life. There were a number of questions and remarks in this panel³². For example, the question about “Has Thai society ever had a national identity (or identity which define by the state), and if so, is it really good like what the minister described?”

The final activity before the “Chula Youth and Globalization” research project finished was panel discussion about music to understand the thought of each student through the style of music which they listen to.³³ In this panel, students who listen to different kind of music—classic, indy (independence), country, and song life—enthusiastically expressed their different thoughts and feeling about the life and societies through the music. The remark from country song listener was that ‘music always reflects what the current society is like’. He remarked that the content of the song that changed from countryside story to urban story was because of migration of the rural people to seek work in urban area. The classic song listener gave comment on image of classic songs that look like the music of the high class who spend the life contentedly. He raised a case of one composer who used the feeling of great sorrow in the downfall period after being in jail to compose the song and make listener to feel the extreme sorrowfulness. And the question from indy music listener was “can we regard indy song as the new generation’s life song that presents about their life in modern society?”

The period during running the Café Forum (under the “Chula and Society” research project) and the “Chula Youth and Globalization” research project might be regarded as the forming period of this group. After this project was finished, Siam Dek Len Network had more skill of running the project and felt more confident in finding the way to get financial support. It could be said that they had formed the group tangibly after these periods.

3.3. Siam Dek Len Network : Phase II

By the time “Siam Dek Len Network” tangibly formed their group, they had started thinking about networking with the other groups of active youth outside Chulalongkorn University. At that time, they heard news from Prof. Surichai, who had become the adviser of this group, about the International Symposium on “*Challenges to Human Security in a Borderless World*”³⁴ which organized in collaboration by the Commission on Human Security (CHS)³⁵ and Chulalongkorn University on December 11, 2002. This was a public hearing about human security situation in

Thailand and the region, which was the first conference with full participation of the Commissioners in a developing country. They, then, started conduct the network to other youths.

Siam Dek Len Network cooperatively with the Student Council of Chulalongkorn University organized a conference on “*Grassroots-Globalization: Human Security from the Youth’s Perspective in Thailand*”³⁶. The purpose of this conference was to compile the views about human security in youth’s perspective and presented to CHS. In this conference, the various views of young people from different backgrounds of birthplace, education, occupation and so on, were promoted, like what they addressed on December 11, 2002 that “*we, a group of youth in Thailand, come from various backgrounds ranging from the top of the sky to the grassroots, from the periphery of the forests to Bangkok’s Siam Square*”³⁷. The young people who participated, around 80 persons, were youth who were negatively affected by massive development projects, those who had work-related illnesses, the minority groups born in Thailand, the young refugees from neighboring countries, the handicapped, magazine editors, pilots and others. Moreover, they set the real-time conversation through Internet to chat with the Japanese students, who participated in 2002 World Students’ Summit³⁸ too. Even the real-time conversation did not work fully well due to the technical problem, but it could be regarded as an attempt to promote the positive aspects of globalization which is a principle of this group.

In this conference, there were many topics and panels set for discussion. The topic of what they discussed included *consumerism and inner-life, the negative affect from the unbalancing and not sustained development, insecurity of youth under the fragile economy in the borderless world, from the politics of representation to the politic of ‘us’ (and ‘others’), and the labeling and moral panics of youths*. An issue about *immature of adults* in the society was also raised as a major agenda of the conference.³⁹ An obvious result from this activity was “Siam Square Declaration 2002” that the participating youths conducted. The declaration voices the participants’ views on the insecure and unsettled social condition of the society, which they did not create, but presently affect them. The declaration was presented in the International Symposium on “*Challenges to Human Security in a Borderless World*” before the eyes of CHS and the participants’ very eyes. The declaration and the writings of each group of participant⁴⁰ were included as White Paper of the International Symposium too.

In the global atmosphere of ongoing Iraq war, FOCUS (Focus on the Global South) asked

Siam Dek Len Network, as an active youth group participation, to join the *anti-war campaign* that held on February 15, 2003. They then invited a lecturer from the major of international relation to give a lecture about the world under USA’s aggressively leading for understanding about the world politics and preparing for the campaign. On that day, they ran a peace campaign activity, and again, they addressed a declaration about passing the generosity and compassion from youth to prevent the wars.⁴¹ They also presented a different style of social concern by singing a Peace Encouragement Song in Rap Style. This was from their question of “Why is there only life-song⁴² that supports the people’s concern about the society?”

Recently, there are 2 ongoing projects of this group. The first one is the research project on studying the *relationship between science (and technology) and society* by an initiative from youth.⁴³ The issues of this research are, for example, *science and the development project, modern medicine and the meaning of happiness and death, the holistic health, science and risk society*⁴⁴, *ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and society*, and so on. The second one is the youth network project about youth’s *rethinking the meaning of democratization, public consciousness, and the politics* in the period of the Thirtieth Anniversary of the 14 October 1973 events.

4. Analysis

4.1. Objective

As illustrated above, the main activities of the Siam Dek Len are characterized as thinking activities or intellectual activities. How do these activities reflect the group’s purposes? Even if there is no clear writing about its objectives, it can be addressed, from my experiences with the group and interviews with the members, that the group has two key objectives. One is an internal objective that is to promote each participant the learning skills and self-confidence to locate their values in the society. The other one is an external objective that is to change the society’s traditional views on youths. The group believes that youths can be active as much as other actors in the society. And their actions do not need to be a copy of others’ but have an uniqueness of their own. As a core member of the group mentioned about what he would like to tell students in the university, “*we can break out any old frameworks if we want to.*”⁴⁵ Another core member suggested that that the group aims to “*create more room for youth’s diverse identities which are related to the society not as an object,*

but a subject; and make the society to understand them."⁴⁶ This section is an analysis of the Siam Dek Len Network under the questions: What are the contextual conditions for the group formation?; How does Siam Dek Len Network function?; How does it impact the member and the society?; And what are their limitations and future prospects?

4.2. Contextual condition

There are at least three conditions that help forming the Siam Dek Len Network. The first one is learning environment in universities. Both educational system and student activities at the university provide youths no opportunities to locate their "social positions" and express their 'selfness' - "*The educational system makes youths passive and treats youth as an object due to they only listening and listening*"⁴⁷ Similarly, the student activities at the university become formal, routine, and bureaucratic. There are some invisible traditions in these activities that hinder the youths to think differently. For example, rap and pop music are not allowed to sing in the rural development voluntary camp club. Some kinds of activities such as film watching and criticizing are not considered as a part of 'activities for the society'. The Siam Dek Len Network criticizes this situation as followed⁴⁸:

"...[E]very person loves freedom. We would like to play and do the activities, which are different from what we have done in the university. We would like to be free from the pattern of coming to the university just for studying and repeating the same activities...We do not want to throw away our identities and generalize all students as having a blueprint pattern of lifestyle. We think every person should grow up in his/her own way"

Apart from above, life in the university can become threatening. The students' identities are threatened by some rules and traditions, such as a student uniform is requirement⁴⁹ and football prohibition in the football playground. These examples have a great effect on the student's learning abilities and capacity development to be an active actor. Unfortunately, this problem is completely neglected even during the period of the university reform when the word "student" was widely mentioned.

The second condition is about social spaces that these youths spend their lives on, that are, for example, shopping malls, theatres, pubs, concert halls, internets, TVs, mobile phones, chat rooms, on-line games, magazines, and so on. These spaces are mainly caused by the advancement of communication, which leads to a globalization of

cultures. On one hand, these two phenomena bring about a higher level of consumption among people. On the other hand, they extend youth's perception of the world. Their perception is no longer limited only in physical areas. Besides the social spaces outside the university, the university itself contains students with various backgrounds. This fact enables the youths to link themselves to different kinds of social issues, rather than limiting themselves to issues of the poor, the rural, or slum communities problem (even it's sometimes unavoidable to do that). As what a core member of Siam Dek Len Network express that he relates himself to the society through languages, cultures, meanings, values, and so on. To sum up, the diversity of the social spaces help the Siam Dek Len Network not consider the 'social concerns' as only 'out there' like any other youths, but 'in here' like what Anthony Giddens remarked about the effect of globalization that⁵⁰:

Globalization is not something that is simply 'out there', operating on a distant plane and not intersecting with individual affairs. Globalization is an 'in here' phenomenon that is affecting our intimate and personal lives in many diverse way. Inevitably, our personal lives have been altered as globalizing forces enter into our local context, our homes and our communities through impersonal sources – such as the media, the internet and popular culture – as well as through personal contact with individuals from other countries and cultures.

Under the above environment, some youths found their options in interacting with the society limited. They then formed the group so that they were able to meet the like-minded people and support one another. Like one member of the Siam Dek Len Network said, '*...this group sees something that frames our lives and makes it a conversation*'⁵¹.

The youths are not solely responsible for the establishment of the Siam Dek Len Network. During the period of the controversial university reform when a discussion on duties of the university towards the society was abandoned had added to the university atmosphere which the students were likely to be passive towards the society, there were a group of lecturers and university administrators questioning such situation. They want to encourage creativity of the students and promote their relationship with the society in their own ways. Many university staff particularly, Prof. Surichai Wan'gao of the Faculty of the Political Sciences who later became the Siam Dek Len Network's advisor, have contributed both directly and indirectly to the development of the group.

4.3. Function

Considering goals of the group, the Siam Dek Len Network has two main strategies. The first one is to deal with the insiders or participants. The group promotes discussion activities because it encouraged the participants to think critically and speak out. Frequently, the activities begin with critically questioning things that are instituted in the society. For example, is the movement necessary to be mass or great? The group discussions are also supportive to having various opinions from people with different backgrounds and experiences. Topics of the discussions include films, music, medicines, disability and so on. Those participate in the discussion do not only include its members but also some other youths who do not involve directly to the group but are interested in the topics. The Siam Dek Len Network pays a considerable attention on the strategy towards this group of young people.

The second strategy of the group is used towards the outsiders or the public. The Siam Dek Len Network does not put an emphasis on publicizing a new way of looking at youths. It instead wants to generate the space for self-construction through various kinds of activities to reflect what the youths think and feel about their society. The group in addition tries to present new ideas, which are very often neglected. Put it simply, the group achieves what it wants not from asking from other people but by starts doing and hence fulfilling its need. This method can be called as a “communicative action”. The communicative activities comprise of doing a presentation, holding a conference or a discussion, writing an article or a paper and communicating through other means such as Rap songs and poems.

4.4. Impact and response

There are two consequences of the group’s operation as far as the objectives are concerned. The first consequence is concerned with the group’s participants. It is found that the participants have realized their own values in looking at the society from their eye views. They have learnt that they can be an active actor in the society in their own styles. These are as what the members said that they *‘...get new friends, have a discussion, exchange ideas which make me feel worthy’*⁵². Another one is *‘...I am given opportunities to think. When I think, there would be responses. Unlike talking with friends. They always don’t get what I have said’*⁵³. Also, some young participants agree that *‘their idealistic worldviews have been challenged and they realized that there are many sensible persons*

*whom we do not often meet’*⁵⁴. These youths moreover are found that they have gotten more maturity, not just an angry young man who criticize and give complaints to every thing⁵⁵. This could be reflected from the topics they concern which move from student-university issues toward more public issues.

The second consequence is related to the responses of non-participants towards the group. Interested in the group’s activities, several organizations have invited the Siam Dek Len Network to participate in “the Thirtieth Anniversary of the 14 October 1973 event”, the discussion on the present university students’ roles in promoting democracy, the presentation on how Rap music was used to send a message to the public like the traditional country songs, and the brainstorming meeting on student’s moral encouragement project, to name just a few.

In particular, on “the Thirtieth Anniversary of the 14 October 1973 events” some people expressed their concerned about the present young people who seemed to have little care of the society. These adults in their 50s-60s called for encouraging more social consciousness and liberal mind in youths. The Siam Dek Len Network and other youth groups argued such ideas⁵⁶ because the context surrounding youths today and 30 years ago were not the same. They also questioned the saying that ‘youths are the future carriers of the society’ that youths were not mentioned as the present persons but the futures persons. To some extent, such discussions on youths had changed the atmosphere of the talk.

Some people criticized the Siam Dek Len Network for not being serious enough on any particular issues and keep changing the topics. In spite of this criticism, in general people have a positive response towards the group but partly because of the unconventional characters of the group. The group therefore needs to listen to the criticism so that it develops in the way that suits needs of the society.

4.5. Limitation and future prospects

The group has many limitations. The first problem is concerned with the unity within the organization. The Siam Dek Len Network can be regarded as either open organization or non-organization. On one hand, it does not ask for an absolute membership but only for a participation of those who are interested. On the other hand, each participant has far more diverse interests even though they share some common interests. Also, each person has his/her individual interest and will only attend the activities that are

matched with his/her interest. However, this limitation might be considered as an advantage of the group because the group promotes the diversity of individual's experiences and only ask for what its members are willing to offer. The group put emphasis on fulfilling individual's desires rather than the survival of the group. This results in a lively, flexible, member-oriented and learning-supportive environment.

However, the Siam Dek Len Network does need a certain level of being an organization. Within the group itself, some people reckon of having new members to run the activities of the group since there are only a few key members who do this job. The purpose and character of the group makes it more suitable for those still studying in the university rather than those already graduated. At the moment, only a small number of new members exist and they have little skills in managing debates and discussions, which are the main activities of the group.

Secondly, some young people in the group suggest that only the members of the group would understand what they are talking about. In other words, there is a problem of communication with outsiders. Even if the group is open to all young people, new participants are limited because they found themselves not understanding and not having fun in the discussions. Moreover, posters publicizing the group seem serious and are not interesting compared with other university activities such as the Chulalongkorn-Thammasat University traditional football game and festival.

Thirdly, the group increasingly attracts and to some extent seems to monopolize youth-

related tasks, allocated by other organizations. This would not benefit either the group or other active youth organizations. Fourthly, a key member of the group put that there is insufficient evaluation of the group, which hinders an improvement of its operation.

In conclusion, during over the last two years, the Siam Dek Len Network has developed its ideas and gained reputation among activists. The group has three future missions. Firstly, it would encourage questioning and taking actions among youths. Secondly, it would promote more networks with other youth groups. Lastly, it would enhance more communication with the public about its goals. The Siam Dek Len Network has to lie out its strategies in order to balance these three missions. At the same time, it needs to answer a question of what direction the group will take in the future.

5. Conclusion: An Alternative Youth Movement in Cultural Dimension

This paper aims to study the youth's movement from a new angle that allows youths to be an agent of the movement. Its case study on Siam Dek Len Network displays an initiative to create a self-building space through various kinds of collective activities, mainly verbal discussions. Such space encourages the young participants who started questioning about the relationship between themselves and the society to speak out. Moreover, it promotes the realization of ones' ability to bring about a good thing for the society.

Table 1 : Models of "youth-society relationship"

Current model	Alternative model
Society and youths are separated	Social sphere is both situated inside and outside youths' lives.
Its main focus is a direct participation with structural social problem.	It gives an importance to a link between an individual's experience and feelings; and social structure.
It put an expectation on the youths in having a social concern with likely to imitate the 1970s-ideal youth pattern.	It encourages a variety of social learning, which the youths are able to pin down their values in relation to the society without any blueprint.
As a result, only two kinds of youth occur: 1) Passive youth, 2) 1970s-styled active youth.	As a result, active youths are diversified.

Youths especially those in universities and colleges have long been viewed to have a more social opportunity than others in the society and hence it is necessary for them to use their knowledge and advantages in serving the society. Implicitly, this way of thinking is to divide the

society and the youths into two separated parts (See left column of table 1). A youth is not seen as an independent person in oneself. Rather he/she is seen as a conditional person who is required to fulfill his/her social duty by jumping into the social problem directly and take action

with the structural problems. Consequently, the society seems to be something ‘out there’ for the youths to touch. It does not go far from a once popular slogan ‘the answer is at the village’. The youths’ interests on the society are limited to those concerning with political issues, development projects and international organizations such as World Banks, WTO, ADB and IMF. Such phenomenon is similar to what Prof. Surichai suggested that globalization is likely to overemphasize the big issues in the global level while ignore the small ones because it overlooks the ability of those small issues and small people in changing the world. As a result, globalization has a great capacity to erode energy and value of human’s learning. When the above two discourses--on the relationship between the youths and the society, and on globalization--interacted with each other, it has an effect in pushing the youths to be passive because they are made to believe that the society is too large and too far away from them that it is useless and unnecessary to start a relationship with the society. Other youths, in contrast if not become passive, are likely to be anti modernization and globalization. It seems that the latter one in particular is copied from the youth movement during 1970s. And such imitation is sometimes regarded as a blueprint for the contemporary movement⁵⁷. Such imitation / blueprint frequently refer only to 1970s-era youth’s political thinking toward the social structure, while their thinking about cultural issues in daily life which connect to the political issues are neglected⁵⁸. Some scholar called such blueprint as ‘ghost’ and he proposed to drive out the old ghost of the youth movement so that the capacity of the present youths will be realized⁵⁹.

From many points of view on the society and the youths above, it can be said that the main message the Siam Dek Len Network attempts to tell the society is a necessity to change the traditional ideas on the society and the youths (See right column of the above table). The social sphere in the present is much larger than that in the past. The youths are not separate from the society. But the social sphere at the same time is both within and without the youths’ living contexts. Many social problems occur in the broader and complicated area and they are sometimes not attached directly with the social structure and not concentrated solely around the political issues. Such problems instead are located within the cultural sphere and daily lives of people. Hence, the definition of the ‘social concerns’ that someone has should be broaden to cover two types of societies that is the society ‘out there’ and the society ‘in here’. Rather than focusing wholeheartedly on problematic areas that are considered obvious or urgent, we should promote

the understanding of every corner or area of the society. To understand the issue of the youths, it is important not to underestimate the small people like them. Their feeling, dreams, experiences, background of lives and daily-life contexts should not be neglected as they all influence the youths’ values towards the society. Therefore, patterns of social learning in turning an individual to be an active actor in fact can be various and diversified based on his/her conditions and factors. As one leading youth of the Siam Dek Len Network put it, the group is trying to drive **“diverse pattern of the youths’ social learning cultures”**⁶⁰ and that is what I call it as an alternative youth movement in cultural dimension.

Even if the Siam Dek Len Network only has a few numbers of participants and its operation does not deal with any hot or big issues, I agree with Kritiya (already mentioned in the introduction part) that the movement is not necessarily large and even one person can make a change. The Siam Dek Len Network provides the youths a chance to grow and develop their mental capacity as they wish in related to the society. By offering an alternative way of movement, the group’s operation can be called “a cultural movement on social learning”. This kind of movement is hardly seen in Thailand. But saying that does not mean it does not exist at all. There are a number of youths whose work seeks to achieve a similar aim to that of the Siam Dek Len Network; however, they are not perceived as a youth movement simply because their missions are not the same as those in the past. Therefore, when considering the issue of the youths and the society, it is essential to go beyond the old framework, which is immune to changes, in order to see any new possibilities that occur. The case study on the Siam Dek Len Network is merely one possibility among many kinds of movement that can emerge.

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⁴ Somsak Prissanantakul (First Deputy President of the Lower House of Parliament), *“Where are youths?”*, from www.14tula.in.th/future/whereisstudents.htm (in Thai)

⁵ ‘Life-song’ is a kind of song of which story tries to communicate about something such as the beauty of countryside, the suffering of the poor and farmers, and promoting economic nationalism.

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- ⁹ Forum on “*University is going to Privatization...How about the System of Student Activities?*” on 20 November 2001 at Saranitesh Meeting Room, Main Auditorium, Chulalongkorn University
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- ¹⁴ “Voice” and “Jul-Sarn” Student Magazine (in Thai). The former was produced by the Student Council of Chulalongkorn University. The latter was produced by an activist student who later was a core member of Siam Dek Len.
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- ¹⁷ Jorn Soponsiri, op.cit., pp.26-30.
- ¹⁸ Pakorn Lertsatianchai, op.cit, pp.34-43..
- ¹⁹ “*An internal assessment of Chulalongkorn*” in *The Nation*, Feb. 18, 2003
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- ²⁵ Recently, there are a lot of SMS and forwarded mails about good stories.
- ²⁶ Thailand’s SEA Write poet, and Thai national artist (Literary Arts)
- ²⁷ The very popular band in the recent decade.
- ²⁸ Chanchai Chaisukkosol and Pakorn Lertsatianchai, *ibid* : 7.
- ²⁹ Tape script of the Forum on “*Leap Frogging: from platitudinous activities to creative liberty*” on Tuesday 9 July 2002 at Marai-Huwanan Meeting Room Kasem-Uddayanin bldg. Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University. (in Thai)
- ³⁰ The temple built by a famous monk in Thailand named Venerable Bhuddhadasa Bhikku. The place was called “The Garden of Liberation”
- ³¹ *Matichon*, October 2, 2002. p.19; (in Thai) and *Chula-Sumpan* (a Chulalongkorn University’s weekly newsletter) year 45, vol 15, *September 9, 2002*, p.9 (in Thai)
- ³² Book Criticism Forum on “*Open Floor Tease the Book...Uncle Pu*” on 3 September 2002 at Meeting Room 12, Kasem-Uddayanin bldg. Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University.
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³⁵ The CHS is chaired by Sadako Ogata, former UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and Amartya Sen, a Nobel Laureate, and supported by the United Nations Secretary General

³⁶ The conference was held on November 23-24, 2002, under the support of the Center for Social Development Studies (CSDS) of the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University and ActionAid Asia

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⁴⁰ "Education Crisis in Burma" from the young refugee (All Burma Federation of Student Unions, Foreign Affairs Committee), "Suan Phueng : A Simple Story of Ordinary People" by the youth from minority group (Suan Phueng), and 3 writing from youth who were negatively affected by development projects : 1) "Sustainable Security and the Indigenous Way of life" by the River Youth Network; 2) "Dams Means Development?" by the Takon Yom Youth Group of Phrae's Song and Phayao's Chiang Muan Districts; 3) "Globalization : Development for whom?" by Mae Moon Youth Group, Assembly of the Poor at Mae Moon Village.

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⁴⁵ Interview Phanuwat Apiwattanachai, a core member of Siam Dek Len Network, 28 September 2003.

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⁴⁷ Interview Pakorn, *ibid*.

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⁵³ Interview Narisara, *ibid*.

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⁵⁵ Siam Dek Len Network meeting, in July 2003.

⁵⁶ Tape script from the Seminar on "Universalistic significance of the event of October 14, 1973 and challenges for democratization", on 6 August 2003, at Parliament House, Thailand.

⁵⁷ Another interesting study on an analysis of causes of passive youth and active youth with 1970s-ideal, see Prajak Kongkirati, "The wars of memory and political action: Thai youth movements after 6th October – present time," in *Thai Studies Journal*, no date of publication. pp. 15 – 37. The study is an analysis of the struggling between 'positive memory' and 'negative memory' of the student movement after "6-October-1976-massacre" event.

⁵⁸ An example of this topic is mentioned in Theerayuth Boonmee's writing before the 14-October-1973 event occurred about his feeling. He mentioned that the values of hanging a portrait of a powerful person in the photo shops or public areas at that time "is a representation of daily practice, showing a surrender to the power". Also, it "places the power at every corners and widen the scope of it to its most extent. (see Theerayuth Boonmee (1994), *A part of the memory : 20-year the 14-October event*, WinyuChon printing, (in Thai) cite in Siroj, *ibid*, pp.183-184

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⁶⁰ Interview Alisa Hasamoh, 29 September 2003.