
Local community's leader: role and authority of sub-district and village headman in the changing structure and context in Chiang Mai, Thailand

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Abstract The results showed that the sub-district and village headman had the role and authority in a community, including governing and maintaining order, development and career promotion, conservation of natural resources and environment, justice, and service, at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.07$). The result from a multiple regression model also showed there were two variables that significantly positive influenced on role and authority of sub-district and village headman, including education and leadership ($p \leq .05$). Although the structure of local communities is changed by modernization and decentralization of the local government organization, the research finding found that the roles and authorities of the sub-district and village headman are still highly important to the local community.

Keywords: Role and authority, Sub-district and village headman, Local community's leader, Modernization, Decentralization

Introduction

"Structures" are the objective complexes of social institutions within which people live and act. "Agents" are human deliberators and choosers who navigate their life plans in an environment of constraints. Structures are determinative of social outcomes, with agents merely playing their roles within these structures (Giddens, 1984). Generally, on the one hand, structures are reducible or explicable in terms of the actions and characteristics of individuals. On the other hand, the behavioral characteristics of individuals are merely the consequence of the social structures they inhabit (Little, 2017). It is believed that the social structure of a country reflects its economic condition (Nitungkorn, 2000). One important structure which was built by socio-economic development is modernization which is the term used for the transition from the traditional society of the past to modern society (Bonvillain, 2001). The social structure of modernization in Thailand explicitly starts from

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the beginning of the mid 19th century. Besides Bangkok, many big cities in Thailand, including Chiang Mai, are under the process of modernization. Chiang Mai province is regarded as a dynamic city that has been continuously socio-economic changed by modernization and urban development. The continuous growth of Chiang Mai causes enormously transitions in the social and environmental dimensions. Combination with an environment suitable for living draws many people of different statuses from various societies migrate to Chiang Mai. This significantly has created a modern city through urban development. After the economic crisis occurred in the year 1997, the government started to change policy and create a variety of impulses to stimulate economy such as focusing on Chiang Mai as the center of logistics and tourism causing the population and tourists began to migrate into the area more and more (Shummadtayar and Ongsavangchai, 2018).

Concurrent with modernization, decentralization in Thailand gradually occurs. It is generally known that decentralization reforms have been among the most important aspects of state modernization in developing countries (Faust *et al.*, 2008). In Thailand, it is widely accepted that decentralization of governments has explicitly taken place since 1997, when the 1997 constitution was promulgated (Chardchawarn, 2010). The major result was the lifting of sanitation status to be a sub-district municipality, with plans and procedures for decentralization to transfer works and responsibilities to the municipality and the sub-district administration organization, and also expanding the roles and responsibilities of the provincial administrative organization. The structure reform of the new bureaucratic system and the government organization management placed emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness, and new criteria for performance evaluation. It caused many changes in the agency roles and authorities in the local community level, especially, the sub-district and village headmen (Mektrairat, 2003).

The sub-district and village headmen have been considered as a part of the institute of politics and governance. They are representatives of the state who work closely with local people and play the important roles in co-operation with local governments and local authorities. Therefore, they have the status of being both a people's representative and leader of the community. The village headmen play two roles simultaneously: semi-civil servant and semi-political officer at the local level. They are an important mechanism of local government and representative of the Ministry of Interior who is playing roles of leaders of the village. The important roles concerned a government assistant in treating suffering, nourishing happiness for people in the village, coordinating the people in the area, implementing government policies, and representing the people in the sub-districts in dealing with different sectors, including coordination with local government organizations

or the private business sector join together to develop localities for villagers' well-being and the community peacefulness (Wiriyasawat, 2009). Their roles also included to arrange village meeting, communicate government news to the residents, help and supervise villagers, and monitoring local agencies to comply with the law and policies.

However, the administration of the country has undergone tremendous changes and an inevitable impact on the roles of the village headman, due to the decentralization which is a process of gradual evolution or transfer of functions, resources and decision-making powers to the lower level democratically elected bodies (Kumer, 2006). The enactment of the Sub-district Council and the Sub-district Administration Organization Act, 2537 B.E., requires the establishment of a new local government which includes Sub-district Administration Organizations (SAO) throughout the country. Administrative decentralization means the transfer of resources, responsibilities, and decision-making authority for the delivery of a number of public services from the central government to other levels of government, including agencies and field offices of central government agencies. It is also a process of transfer of authorities and responsibilities from one level of accountability from the local units to the central government ministry or agency (Chardchawarn, 2010). The changing structure affected the village headman, who was not a full-time civil servant and not an employee of a local government organization, to be in an unclear state.

The research examined social structure change, especially the modernization and decentralization that affected the role and authority of the sub-district and village headman as the key actors or agencies. The role and authority of the village headman, after 1997, has many changed in terms of legal status and role as a state representative and community leader. After the modernization in many local areas, and decentralization of power to the local government organization, the role of the village headman tends to decrease while local administrative organizations have the power to fully manage the areas instead of the sub-district and the village headman. However, there are some roles that the local administrative organization is unable to perform, while the village headman's roles are still necessary to help the people in the village in many matters. In order to clearly understand role and authority of the sub-district and village headman under the changing social and political conditions in Chiang Mai Province. The objectives aimed to explore the role and authority, the factors affecting the role and authority, and problems and obstacles in performing their roles. The insights gained from research finding could help the sub-district and village headman to perform roles and maintain their authority under the context of change.

Materials and methods

This research used mixed methodology (both quantitative and qualitative research methods) by collecting data from questionnaire, interview, in-depth interview, and from related documents to get a view on role and authority analysis towards sub-district and village headman, the local leaders of communities in Chiang Mai.

For quantitative study, this research applied a survey research to help collect data by using close-ended and open-ended questionnaires to gain information from each sub-district and village headman in the corresponding community of responsibility. The study used a convenience sampling technique to obtain a sample of forty village headmen, from rural, sub-urban, and urban communities, as the respondents. In addition to descriptive analysis statistics, multiple linear regression analysis was used to calculate the factors affecting roles and authorities of the sub-district and village headman. A model for multiple regression analysis was specified as follows:

$$Y = a_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + \dots + b_kX_k + e$$

The variables in the model were: role and authority = constant + b_1 position + b_2 age + b_3 education + b_4 income + b_5 decentralization + b_6 modernization + e

In terms of qualitative research, this study applied documentary research to search for a collection of information from various academic documents, books, articles, both theoretical concepts and research related to roles and authorities of the local community leader, including leadership, in the changing socio-economic development, modernization, and political reform of decentralization. Moreover, forty sub-district and village headmen were interviewed to obtain deep information about their changing roles, authorities, and the leadership status, as a result of modernization and political decentralization, from the promulgation of the current constitution 1997, to local administrative organizations. In addition, this study did the in-depth interview of ten sub-district and village headmen as key informants to gain necessary information in order to provide recommendations for performing role and authority of the sub-district and village headman in the context of change.

Results

Result showed that the role and authority of the sub-district and village headman, according to Local Administration Act 1914 and other laws could be

identified and divided into 5 aspects: 1)governing and maintaining order, 2)development and career promotion, 3)conservation of natural resources and the environment, 4)justice and 5)service. The results showed that the sub-district and village headman had the role and authority at the highest level in two aspects, namely governing and maintaining public order, and conservation of natural resources and the environment. For the development and career promotion, justice, and service, the sub-district and village headman had a high level of roles and authorities (Table 1).

Table 1.Role and authority of the sub-district and village headman in thechanging structure and context

Role and Authority of the Sub-district and Village headman		
	Mean(\bar{x})	Level
1.Governing and maintaining order	4.25	Highest
2.Development and career promotion	4.15	High
3.Conservation of natural resources and environment	4.29	Highest
4.Justice	4.12	High
5.Service	3.53	High
Total	4.07	High

In addition, the interview results of the research were summarized by considering the details of each role and authority, and showed that the sub-district and village headman had important roles and responsibilities in various matters as follows:

Governing and maintaining order: They had roles and authorities in communicating government official information to the local people, alerting and educating the public about disaster prevention, assisting and alleviating the people suffering from various disasters, and to notify the government officers when there has been faced a law violation or suspicion that it occurred in the village; for example, drug use and sale in the area of responsibility.

Development and career promotion: They had roles related to the inspection and maintenance of public interest in the sub-district and village to make sure that no one encroaches or possesses public and forest lands for personal benefit. They also invited villagers to participate in public development activities. Moreover, the other important role was promoted agricultural, commercial, and industrial careers for local people.

Conservation of natural resources and environment: They helped to preserve the environment and nature by promoting and educating people about the conservation of natural resources and forest areas. They must report to the sheriff and cooperate to solve the problem of forest encroachment through various projects. They also had role and authority in prevention and suppression of illegal logging and the offense in the area.

Justice: They promoted a unity in a village. As a conflict mediator, they resolved to dispute by trying to compromise the benefit of those who conflicted. If the conflict affected the public interest, they will send the case to the village committee to justify.

Service: They acted as a registrar for receiving notification of birth, death, and relocation. They had a duty to notify a person to be enlisted on the military, to submit a request for an ID card, and to certify the evidence and the conduct of the applicant.

The dynamics of social conditions and many factors had the effect on the role and authority of the sub-district and the village headman who played an important role in driving governance at the community level. To analyze the factors affecting roles and authority of the sub-district and village headman, multiple linear regression analysis is applied by using enter method to include 7 independent variables into the model: position, age, education, income, leadership, decentralization, and modernization, as follows:

Role and Authority = $\text{Role and Authority} = \text{constant} + -.201\text{position} + -.035\text{age} + .083\text{education} + .118\text{income} + .957\text{leadership} + .090\text{decentralization} + .025\text{modernization} + e$

The result of the F-test showed that a multiple linear regression model test was significant ($p \leq .001$) meaning that F-statistic was higher than the F-critical value. It is considered that the model is acceptable when predict the Y value.

The result of R^2 ($R^2 = .758$) indicated that these independent variables collectively explained the role and authority of sub-district and village headman at 76%. The result also showed that there were two variables that had significantly positive influenced on role and authority of sub-district and village headman, including education ($b = .083$, $p \leq .05$) and leadership ($b = .957$, $p \leq .001$). Meaning that while other variables had no significant impact on role and authority, education and leadership variables had the significant impact. The interpretation was the more educated and to be leadership, the higher the role and authority of sub-district and village headman (Table 2).

Table 2. Factors affecting role and authority of the sub-district and village headman

Factors	B	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	-934		-1.213	.235
position	-.201	-.126	-1.194	.242
age	-.035	-.038	-.359	.722
education	.083	.199	2.021	.050*
income	.118	.192	1.711	.098
leadership	.957	.803	8.619	.000**
decentralization	.090	.109	.678	.834
modernization	.025	.035	.212	.503
F = 12.987	df = 7	**p ≤ .001		
R = .871	R ² = .785	*p ≤ .05		

There were encountered the problems and obstacles to perform role and maintain authority of sub-district and village headman in the context of change of Chiang Mai. From analyzing the information from the interviewing with the sub-district and village headmen, the results could be grouped into main issues as following:

First, the structure of local communities had changed in a social context of rapid growth of Chiang Mai. There was invaded the new forms of modern community such as housing estates, housing groups, industrial zone, community mall etc. The spread of these new communities was not only come with the new population migrating into the village or sub-district but also the penetration of modern communities into professional groups, new social group production system, and market system of Capitalism. These changes affected the role and authority of the sub-district and village headman and their acceptance from the new communities. More and more local villages were under conditions of modernization and urbanization; therefore, many of them had characteristics of modern men. Growth and expansion of new career groups who had knowledge and can be self-reliant such as civil servant groups, private company employees, various professional groups which originally were concentrated only in urban areas began to expand into local communities. In the new communities, the roles, authority and responsibility of the village headman were no longer directly benefiting these groups of people.

Second, political change, especially the process of decentralization of local government in accordance with self-governing principles, new management styles, and changes at the community level affected the sub-district and village headman's authorities and roles. The Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO) had come to play a role and the duty to develop the locality. It is considered to reduce the role and work of the village headman. According to the interview with the sub-district and village headmen agreed

that the local administrative organization had an important role in the local community, the sub-district and village headman still had many functions to assist and work with the SAO. They promoted, supported and coordinated the operations of local organization with the needs of the village people.

Third, there was concerned the emergence and expansion of civil society organizations within the local villages such as the villager organization groups, environmental protection groups, career groups, savings groups, village fund groups, cooperatives etc. There were also the emergences of many other new organizations within communities, some of them established by non-government organizations that supported villagers. The result revealed that local communities in Chiang Mai Thailand had more pluralistic structures which unavoidably affect the role and authority of the sub-district and village headman. However, in many villages, the sub-district and village headman still played an important role in the groups.

Forth, according to the Ministry of Interior, there were announces to upgrade the status of the local administration to a municipality. Because of the municipality act, the positions of the sub-district and village headman were cancelled in many areas. Along with the positions of the sub-district and village headman, assistant village headman, assistant sub-district headmen, and sub-district medical practitioner are eliminated. This situation weakened the community security and solidarity because these positions, which actually had some power in the local community that can check, inspect and balance a power of the provincial government agencies. In the case of changing to the municipality, people in local community may lack of closely agent to help connect with the government. There will not be concerned persons who take care of the peace in a village. The municipality will have more power while the village solidarity is decreased.

Notwithstanding, information from in-depth interview of this research suggested that although the sub-district and village headman still had some roles and authorities in a village, they must prepare themselves to the changes at all times, especially the announcements to promote the status of the local administration to a municipality due to the municipality act. The position of the sub-district and village headman in urban or sub-urban areas can be cancelled any times. Thus, there must be some preparation for the sub-district and village headman. On the one hand, the government must provide legal training, knowledge, and to understand the working methods to keep up with changes. On the other hand, the sub-district and village headmen should be improved the

working style by applying technology and social media to communicate or coordinate with people in the responsibility area.

Discussion

According to the documentary research, there were social and political changes under the process of decentralization and modernization in Chiang Mai province. The decentralization to local administrative organizations due to the promulgation of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand BE 2540 is considered a "transitional period" in the local government system of Thailand. According to the principle called "Local self-government principles", with the establishment of a new local government unit, the Sub-district Administration Organization and the elevation of sanitation throughout the country to be a municipality that had a significant impact on the roles and responsibilities of the village headman in many dimensions as also reported by Mektrairat (2003). Moreover, emphasizing on economic development, modernization and urbanization in Chiang Mai, there were many transitional situations that had changed primary local communities to be more modern communities, with housing estate and high-rise building, as well as agricultural areas turned into industrial areas. There were a large number of migrants that moved in to be a new group of residents, and many of them were latent population in the local community. These urban people were less depended on the local leaders. Moreover, with the social media, online resources, and digital networks, people had less contact with sub-district and village headman within the community. Furthermore, the administrative reform in the government sector was an important factor affecting the roles and powers of the village headman in various areas. An adjustment of state services to modernization such as paper work, registration, and various licensing, especially the mission that emphasized professionalism which is regarded as reducing the role of village headman to the local government organization. Together with political decentralization and social change, these situations were expected to abolish or decline some roles and authorities of the sub-district and village headman. Local people begin to accept the importance of local government organizations. This is similar to the research study of Sukhothai *et al.* (2019) who found that the overlapping of role and authority of the village headman and government organization results in a reduction of role and authority of sub-district and village headman, including various registrations (birth certificate, residence certificate, and death certificate) and tax collection.

However, the information from both questionnaires and in-depth interviews of this research showed that the dynamic social and political change are expected to alter the role and authority of the sub-district and the village headman. They still played highly important roles and had authorities in 5 issues: 1) to govern and maintain public order, 2) conservation of natural resources and the environment, 3) development and career promotion, 4) justice, and 5) service. This is similar to the study of Supajaronwong (2020) who reported that the roles of the village headman consisted of 1) govern and maintain peace, 2) supervise, protect the safety of life and property of the people in terms of career development and promotion and 3) conserve natural resources and the environment by taking care of the forest area in responsibility, promote and support people in the community to look after the river, canal, natural resources and forests. The implication of the result is also in agreement with Chawan's research (2003) revealing that the roles and powers of the village headman can be classified into 4 main operations: 1) role as a leader, 2) role as an operators, 3) role as a supporter, and 4) role as a village administrator.

The multiple regression analysis indicates that considering factors affecting on role and authority of sub-district and village headman. The factors of modernization and decentralization had no significant effect on their role and authority. However, leader's characteristics as education and leadership are significantly affected. Similar to Srikul *et al.* (2020) who found that a higher level of leadership increases the performance of roles and authority of the sub-district and village headman in Ban Dung district, Udon Thani province. Therefore, they must always develop their own leadership. Mala (2016a) also stated that regardless of modernization and urbanization in the area of responsibility, the sub-district and village headmen were local leaders that worked closely to the people in the community. They were taken the important roles and responsibilities for their people. Many of them were leaders with natural, spiritual, and charismatic leaderships. Thus, they were accepted, trusted, and respected by the locals.

Information from the interview also in agreement with Mala's research (2016b) that the village headman had two roles, namely the legal and social roles. Despite the decentralization of power and laws for village headman, it did not really lessen their roles and authority, especially in the social role. As a community leader, they had missions in public relations, consultation, conflict resolution or advice on basic legal issues, and notification of violations or suspicions that have occurred in the village. Related to social events, they played the central roles in the various rituals in the community such as being a

president of ceremonies, a head of merit events, and a leader of traditional events from birth to death, marriage, divorce, ordination etc. It can be said that the village headman had a duty other than those specified in many laws relating to the daily lives of all peoples. On the other hand, in legal aspect, there had been decentralization to the locals, they still played the important roles and worked as a linked position between government and the people. They worked as the coordinator in co-operation with local governments and local authorities, helping and supervising villagers, and monitoring local agencies to comply with the law and policies. They also had other legal duties such as natural resources and environment management, community management, and health promotion.

The result of this study is also consistent with other researches. Hanphakdeeniym (2013) and Rungwarin (2018) pointed out that the sub-district and village headman had missions to manage the happiness of the villagers and solved the problems arising from within the community. But if any matter is beyond the ability and authority, the village headman would be an intermediary in bringing problems of the residents to inform government agencies. They also had a duty to bring the policy statement to the residents, provide various government assistances, coordinate with the government officers, contact local residents to obtain essential information; such as, the population census, the Basic Minimum Need information survey, tax collection, government news notifications, and military selection, etc. In addition, people are often unaware of government regulations, therefore, they are often encountered with problems. In this case, the village headman must help the people to contact government agencies. This saves much time and money for the people. Thus, the sub-district and village headman emphasized the role of working with the local government organization, both in terms of promoting, supporting, and monitoring the operations of local agencies. They also worked as a coordinator of local agencies with the needs of the people. They bridged gap between government and people, and provided information from the central office to explain to the public and make it convenient to the people in dealing with various government agencies, especially, the people in rural community or in remote areas. The result was the efficiency of the village and sub-district development. The sub-district and village headman are an important organ in the state's mechanisms and being the part of the chain of command of the government who work closely with local people. They can be notified of trouble and solve problems in the local area. Moreover, they are taken part in socio-economic development and environmental conservation in a local

community. The decentralization permits a local government to take roles on economics and social development of the community instead of the sub-district and village headman.

Nevertheless, the results from in-depth interview with ten sub-district and village headman indicated that because of a change in the structure and economic conditions of rural communities to urbanization and modern society where people had less reliance on community leaders, the sub-district and village headman must adapt and seek more roles, authority, and righteousness for their existence. Thus, under the changing structure and context in nowadays, the sub-district and village headman who are agencies being social position or status, as a community leader, they play role as the coordinator in bringing government policies into action as well as reflecting people's problems to the government with efficiency and effectiveness. This is in accordance with Sangonpong *et al.* (2016) who found that the sub-district and village headman act as a voice on behalf of the local people in various matters. They are coordinated with government agencies by proposing the needs of the community to the authorities, as well as reporting various issues in order to respond to the needs of the public. More importantly, they were an important mechanism to treat the suffering, nourishing and resolving the problems of the people in a local community. Therefore, the government should promote the current role of the sub-district and village headman to carry out the duties in accordance with the law and regulations. Scope of duties of the sub-district and village headman and the Sub-district Administrative Organization (SAO) must be clearly determined by taking into account that the sub-district and village headman still plays an important role as a link between government policies and public needs. Moreover, many of their roles such as drugs use, disease prevention, local community development, etc. are necessary in the village. So, they are able to perform duties efficiently and appropriately. In addition, the government should offer education and training courses in various matters, so the sub-district and village headman can be suitabled to perform the assigned task efficiently and further benefit community development. In the case of transferring to the municipality, the government should find a way to support the compensation for the diminishing of the sub-district and village headman positions.

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