

The Remaking of Southeast Asian Men - For Their Own Sake

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Abstract

The region's men, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, have shorter lives than women. This article presents a masculinity explanation to this demographic phenomenon, highlighting in particular the role of the society's prescription for men to be non-emotional, and therefore invulnerable. While the report underscores the attendant difficulties in generating funds for men's projects that would help them become emotional, it stresses the immense value that such a transformation can bring to individual men and to their relationships, and recommends specific courses of action that could bring it to reality.

Keywords: Emotional expression, masculinity, men, social victims, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Southeast Asian men, like other men in the rest of the world, die earlier than women (Japan: 79 versus 86; Philippines: 66 versus 72; Singapore: 78 versus 83; Thailand: 68 versus 75) (Population Reference Bureau, 2008). Biological, psychological, social, political and economic factors have been mentioned in the research literature as the "causes" of this patterned demographic phenomenon. The region's men have a shorter life expectancy because they do not know how and do not, in actuality, take good care of themselves. Men, such as the older males in Thailand (Tori and Siripanich, 1994), take alcohol and smoke in far greater frequencies and longer durations than their female counterparts. Moreover, they get drenched by rainwater for refusing to use an umbrella in public places; and unless compelled by law, men also forego wearing protective gears in certain high-risk occupations, sports, and leisure activities. When they are reminded of the risks and adverse consequences of their actions, men tend to nix the advice and/or fall into complete silence. Do men get the message right? Are they dumb to not recognize the risks, their vulnerability and their mortality? Or are they plainly suicidal? Research underscores that men do get the message right. Also, they know the risks of their actions based on internationally published empirical evidence. However, given that they still pursue their risky activities despite their knowledge of attendant risks, men must indeed be suicidal. What explains men's tendency to be risk takers, and to be harsh on and deprive themselves of self-care?

Masculinity Connection

The published theoretical and empirical evidence points to masculinity as the impetus. Societies in Southeast Asia have established and perpetuated a set of cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural standards on which to measure and impose manhood (and womanhood) (McCammon, Knox and Schacht, 1993). At the heart of being masculine is for men to embrace invulnerability - a deeply entrenched ideology of normative masculinity internalized and exacted upon Southeast Asian men (and upon almost all men elsewhere). To be invulnerable is to be firm, hard and strong for which the society has ably constructed corresponding measures or indicators. One prescription is that men, in pursuit and fulfillment of their masculinity, must not be emotional, being that this is an attribute socially assigned to women who the society considers the "weaker" gender (Lee, David and Naraval, 2000). Throughout their developmental years, men - steered by the said expectation - are, therefore, socialized to suppress their emotions, and to form a stoic self. Agents of socialization - at the individual, social, institutional and societal level - work effectively to produce the desired impact. Some of the agents' commonly articulated but powerful statements become the norms against which men are judged:

"Don't cry! Don't be a sissy. It is only a love life."

"You see? You are not a real man. You can't even jump from the top floor!"

"Son, why don't you be like your elder brother? He faces life's challenges squarely and he does not cry! You ought to be like him!"

Men are utterly deprived of countless opportunities in which they can form, enhance, experience, and enjoy their emotions. Their lack of or restricted emotional expression prevents them from caring for their own selves. How can men - who are uncared for at the emotional level and who possess a limited grasp and experience of being emotional - be able to know how to and more importantly, to actually care for themselves? In the first place, being "men" - indeed being invulnerable - are they socially licensed to clothe their lives with emotions and be emotional? Granted that there is a social approval and entitlement, don't men run the risk of being labeled "weak," "less manly" or "women?" Men are hard pressed to be emotionally numb therefore, leaving them ill equipped to know the real and experiential meaning of self-caring. Not knowing and not experiencing it results in their utter lack of capacity to care for themselves (and certainly for others, including women). Consequently, the dearth of self-care leads to their unnecessary risk exposures, then to their ill-health, and finally to their mortality.

Men as Social Victims

The society's systematic socialization of invulnerability as a masculinity measure and its dire consequences on individuals is in itself a form of social violence and abuse on Southeast Asian men. Some studies in the purview of gender, sexuality and reproductive health (GSRH) have begun recognizing men's social victimization. However, the published empirical literature dwelling on men as victims - in the purview posited here - is very sparse relative to that dealing with the victimization of women as oppressed individuals. Furthermore, GSRH interventions are broadly disinterested in doing work for men. Indeed, why would men who are presumably strong and impenetrable be regarded as social victims, and why should they be given attention as much, or much more than that bestowed on their weaker (female) counterparts? Fortunately, some Southeast Asians - inspired by their colleagues from the industrialized world - had started working to address the invulnerability aspect of their

fellow Asians' masculinity. Men's resolve to pursue this effort stems from the fact that no other sector is better suited to confront the issue other than the men themselves. Women activists are saddled with their own women's concerns and even if they take interest in this men's issue, they would find it difficult understanding and "accepting" men (in the same way that men would be if they were to work for women concerns). The assumption of some men to work for this men's self-care issue also relates with their own personal goal: they aspire to be liberated from the bondage of their own emotional numbness (and from that "I am strong and tough" aspect of their masculinity). Doing so and succeeding is going to be extremely satisfying - not only that they would reap the beautiful experience of being able to express their emotions (for themselves and with others, especially women), but that they would also be acquainted with their genuine selves. (For those Southeast Asian men who tend to be "lost" and "drifting" - always in search of that missing piece in life's puzzles - go and probe into that repressed emotions within you. It is one of the keys towards forming an internally-directed happiness).

Working for the Sake of Southeast Asian Men

At present, funding bodies for GSRH studies and interventions offer a very tiny portion of their resources for men-related matters. Typically, these agencies argue that any movement pursuing masculinity issues - regardless of how beautiful and meaningful its goal and purpose - is bound to compete against the pool of funds meant for women's efforts. Such argument is well founded and valid. The advancement of women's causes has only barely scratched the walls of rampant discrimination and abuses against women (their enactment and perpetuation lie mostly in the hands of men) (Lee, David and Naraval, 2000) and by no means should the modest gains be sacrificed in favor of men's efforts. The agencies further debate that if men's rights workers were to rectify the victimization of men, they should generate their own funds.

Generating funds for men's projects is excruciatingly difficult. Even business organizations headed by men seem reluctant to grant resources for men's liberation from invulnerability. Normally, they would ask: Why should our corporate funds, even in the context of corporate social responsibility, be allocated for men who are superior and strong - is there really a need? The absence of recognition among business leaders with the emotional problematique is hardly surprising. Having come from the same deprivation, they do not and cannot see the point. Even if they do, however, they tend to snub it - "We have been hurt before. So, why should we help you be freed from victimization? We went through it and we succeeded; we do not see why you cannot."

Men's right workers posit that helping men to be liberated from emotional numbness should be regarded beyond one's own wounded self. That is, business leaders, including men's right workers, must see the liberation as a movement meant to aiding others, especially the young generation, who - to be better off - must be given freedom to cultivate and manifest their emotional expression. These workers argue that it is time to stop the inter-generational wounding of boys and men.

While generating funding for men's projects, men's rights workers in the region are accomplishing some groundwork in their own small ways. First, they have transformed themselves into tolerant or accepting beings holding the view, among others, that it is alright for boys and men to be emotional. Second, these workers have translated their perspectives into specific and socially shared experiences. This means that these workers create or use opportunities in which they share life-changing statements, such as "It is perfectly okay to be afraid or to cry", to others like teachers, students, health workers, parents and more importantly, the mass media professionals. It is hoped that these groups would do something to help advance the cause. For instance, teachers

and health workers may develop a course module on the matter; students may pass on similar messages to fellow students; parents may teach their sons to be emotional; and mass media professionals may integrate in their print and broadcast productions messages or situations portraying men as emotional beings. The crucial role of the mass media has to be highlighted in this regard because of its far-reaching and enduring effects on public opinion and behavior in Southeast Asia (McDaniel, 2002).

While en route from Cebu to Manila in the Philippines, our plane suddenly plunged several feet. A young Filipino action star, along with us, cried out in fear. Minutes later, the actor apologized for being scared, and we communicated to him that there is nothing to apologize for - men, like women, have the right to be emotional. There are numerous circumstances in which men's workers, and ordinary men throughout Southeast Asia can help other men contend with emotional numbness. It is hoped that this groundwork - albeit small scale - would go a long way to reverse men's emotional emptiness. There is nothing to fear that the reversal would diminish men's masculinity. In fact, it would help men become better persons, like women who with their fully-enhanced emotions, are masters of the social world.

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