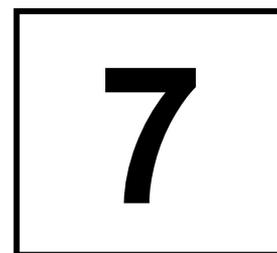


HIGHER EDUCATION IN THAILAND; AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVENicholls P.H.*

ABSTRACT

Thailand is currently undergoing a process of review and reform of its tertiary education sector as the effects of the globalization of education, reflected in part in the global ranking of universities, challenge established educational ideologies and highlight the shortcomings of long established, well funded, and highly respected institutions.

Archival research indicates that “Westernization” of education in Thailand has a long history that can be traced back to the 16th century when Jesuit and Dominican missionaries were allowed to open schools in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. Yet the Burmese invasion of 1767 and the fears that Western ideas were a threat to Buddhism led to xenophobic responses and Christian missionaries were banished. One hundred and forty years later formalized Western education regained acceptance as foreign traders and missionaries were granted access to the Kingdom. Significant individuals stand out as champions of the societal and educational reforms in Thailand which laid the foundations for the present. Academics have formulated a number of models relating to the iteration of educational reform in Thailand.

This paper proposes a new historical model and concludes that the development of modern education in Thailand, characterized as “Westernized” education, has grown on its legacies from the past. The paper identifies a paradox inherent to this process of “reform”; a plethora of bureaucratic interventions limiting academic autonomy that may be retarding Thailand’s entry into the ranks of the global educational elite.

Keywords: Education Thailand; History; King Mongkut IV; National Education Acts Thailand; Rama V; Tertiary education;

INTRODUCTION

Whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. – Machiavelli

The Westernization of education in Thailand has a history that can be traced back to the 16th century when Jesuit and Dominican missionaries were permitted to open schools in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, yet the impetus that came with nearly two hundred years of Western influence was lost with the fall of Ayutthaya to the Burmese in 1767.

* Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University

Thereafter, for the next 140 years, there was very little Western influence in Thailand as Christian missionaries of whatever denomination were seen as a threat to Buddhism and this remained so until early in the 19th century. Although the remnants of buildings remain to this day the continuity of the educational legacy of the first Christian missionaries, Portuguese and French Jesuits and Dominican's, was broken and the benefits they brought during the Ayutthayan Period put on hold. The resurgence of interest in Western education came as Thailand became more exposed to increased levels of foreign influences due largely to increased trade with Europe and America and the admission of Christian missionaries. However, it was not until the reign of King Mongkut, Rama IV, (1804–1868) that the seeds of what is now a rich commitment to Westernized education were sown and have flourished ever since (Encyclopedia Britannica n.d.) (Nicholls 2014).

The history of higher education in Thailand discloses an iterative process, punctuated by review and reform reflecting changing educational ideologies, often influenced by national imperatives. The globalization of education, linked to the world-wide ranking of universities is now an accepted part of the educational landscape and in this context the tertiary education sector in Thailand's, although modeled on a Western template, now appears to be out of step in many respects with much of the rest of the world. This paper seeks to give an overview of the history of higher education in Thailand from the mid-19th century through to the present and seeks to explain this paradox as, to paraphrase the words of Adlai Stevenson, insights to the past invariably assist in gaining an understanding of the present.

EARLY HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The earliest history of formalized education in Thailand can be traced to the times of Ram Khamhaeng the Great, the king of Sukhothai, who introduced a standardized Thai alphabet in around 1283, and with it opened the door to the dissemination of knowledge in the Thai language. In the centuries that followed, education was largely confined to Royal Courts and within the socio-religious context of Buddhism that permeated the whole of Thai society (History of Thailand n.d.).

The historical record indicates that despite the presence of Jesuit and Dominican missionaries in Ayutthaya from the 16th century, Westernization did not proceed along a smooth path. The preaching of missionaries was seen by many as a threat to Buddhism and this in turn led to a resistance to missionaries and consequently Western educational influences for a period of 140 years. However, during the 16th and 17th centuries Thailand experienced what might be termed a "nascent" form of globalization as foreign traders, the proselytes of Western pedagogy, values and beliefs, began to infiltrate the Kingdom of Siam. It was not until the late 18th century that king Taksin allowed French missionaries to re-enter the kingdom and then, during the reign of Rama II (1809–1824), Christian missionaries returned bringing with them schools and hospitals. In 1840 the first Thai language printing press was set up by American missionaries. (Religious History of Thailand n.d.).

History records that Prince Mongkut had grown up in a Royal Court accepting of Western influences and was taught English from an early age. King Monkut's ability to read and write English inevitably influenced many events in

the decades that followed, including closer dialogue with Britain, the adoption of Western medical practices and the promotion of Western education (*ibid*). It was King Mongkut's contemporary, Somdet Chaopraya Si Suriyawongse (Chuang Boonnag), born in 1808, also fluent in English, who played an important role in later life as Regent and mentor to Prince Chulalongkorn, later to become Rama V (*History of Thailand n.d.*).

So it was that by the beginning of the 19th century, with the sanction of the Palace, a number of schools and hospitals had been established by foreigners most of whom were Christian missionaries. A pragmatic statement attributed to King Mongkut offers a candid insight to his acceptance of missionaries; "What you teach people to do is admirable, but what you teach them to believe is foolish" (Bruce, 1969) (*Religious History of Thailand n.d.*).

Looking forward into the middle of the 19th century Prince Chulalongkorn (1853–1910), later to become King Rama V, was born to an elderly King Mongkut and the youthful Princess Debsirindra. King Mongkut died in 1867 and it was the influential courtier, Chuang Boonnag (*ibid*), who became guardian to the fifteen year old prince. While King Rama V is credited as the father of modern tertiary education in Thailand, it is apparent that the influences, not only of his father but also of Chuang Boonnag, were significant factors which pre-figured the educational reform of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (*History of Thailand ibid.*).

Chuang Boonnag stands out as a highly influential pro-British adviser (สมุหกลาโหม) to King Mongkut and apart from his role in negotiating the Bowring Treaty his diplomatic skills were applied in navigating a delicate middle-path between preserving Thai identity and sovereignty on the one hand and fending off Anglo-French colonial designs on the other. This influential courtier worked tirelessly in promoting initiatives necessary to keep Thailand abreast of changes in the West (Bruce, *supra*).

It is most likely that in many respects Chuang Boonnag was instrumental in ensuring that the young prince in his charge was educated in both the Thai and European educational traditions. Hence it can be seen that while the role of Buddhism remained the paramount focus of Thai culture and traditions, Western cultural influences were gradually being adopted by the ruling elite, thereby permeating the whole fabric of governance towards the end of the 19th century.

THE EPOCHS OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN THAILAND

The history of higher education in Thailand has been defined, and redefined in differing terms at different times; all history by its nature is a retrospective view of events past. Major turning points, milestones and watersheds are identified and these then become the markers in the ever-changing historical discourse. This is both conventional and convenient, yet it involves successive subjective judgements as to what are the significant events that have moulded present experience.

As discussed by Sae-Lao (2013) the relations between the government and higher education have been constantly changing. The Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) has suggested that the development of higher education in Thailand, and by this may be implied Western-style education, falls into three neat categories:-

1889–1931	the Early Modernization
1932–1949	the Post Revolution Period
1950– to the present	the Development Planning Period.

Professor Gerald Fry suggests in his paper, *The Evolution of Educational Reform in Thailand* (Fry cited in Sae–Lao, *ibid*), that the contemporary political context is often ignored in considering the issue of educational reform in Thailand. Fry’s analysis does not postulate a continuum but rather identifies “phases” of educational reform referenced to political events, as follows:–

1868–1910	The Fifth Reign, the visionary reforms of King Chulalongkorn
Educational Reform Phase I	(Rama V)
Educational Reform Phase II	The Student Revolution and its aftermath
1973–1980	
Educational Reform Phase III	The challenges of globalization and internationalization
1990– 1995	
Educational Reform Phase IV	Crisis as opportunity.
1997– to the present; published 2002	

Fry characterizes King Chulalongkorn as a great and visionary reformer whose policies transformed traditional Siamese education into a modern secular system at a time when the acknowledged challenge was modernization by Westernization, yet at the same time ensuring the preservation of Thai culture.

Wyatt (1969: 379 cited in Fry. *ibid*) identifies the rationale underpinning King Chulalongkorn’s reform initiatives was his belief that if Thais did not reform and innovate they stood little chance of maintaining their independence and their identity. Westernized education was seen as important in training individuals to staff the various ministries associated with the creation of Siam’s modern administrative system.

In a more recent analysis entitled “The Logic of the Thai State and Higher Education Reforms”, Sae–Lao (*ibid*), has put forward a more detailed four part historical framework:–

	1917: Chulalongkorn University established
The Modernization Period	1930s: Four specialized universities founded
	1950s: The College of Education
Educational Expansion and Equity	1960s: Regional Expansion
(1970’s onwards)	1969s : Private College Act
	1970s : Two Open universities established
	1990: First Long Range Plan on Higher Education. (funded by USAID)
Globalization and	1996: Conference on Thai Education in the

Internationalization (1990 – 1996)	Era of Globalization 1997: The Asian Economic Crisis (IMF and ADB loans) 1999: National Education Reform of 1999
The National Education Act (1999 to the present)	deregulation 2000: Office of National Educational Standards and Quality Assessment 2003: Autonomous University Act 2005: Second Long Range Plan on Higher Education

These models are instructive as collectively they highlight ranges of events, both social and political which heralded educational reforms. It is evident, moving beyond the early influences of Westernization in Thailand from the 16th to the 18th centuries, that the factors which formed the foundations of the current education edifice in Thailand only crystallized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In establishing the first high school in 1896, King Rama V borrowed a Western model yet management was externalized and assigned to civil servants, palace officials; a bureaucratic model was introduced at this point in history and remains to this day.

It is suggested however, that the principle drivers of change in pedagogic policy over the past one hundred years have been the invisible hands of the bureaucrats who have formulated policies which have then been promoted by “transient” politicians under their direction. In political terms the instruments of change were the successive Education Acts of 1932, 1973 and 1999, each of which had several revisions, each of which promoted significant reforms to higher education. From an historical perspective, these successive acts of Parliament, formulated and driven by bureaucratic ideologies, serve as historical markers. A revised model, which reflects the proposition that political and bureaucratic forces have played, and continue to play, the dominant role in regulating, and to some extent, even micro-managing the entire educational edifice in Thailand emerges.

Hence a new model predicated on the political dimensions of educational reform, driven by the subtleties of successive bureaucratic interventions, is proposed:–

	16 th C.– 18 th C
Pre–modernization Period	Nascent globalization period
The Early Modernization Period from 1896 to the establishment of the Constitutional Monarchy	19 th C through to 1931; The first Western High School and Chulalongkorn University established
The Post Revolution Period	1932 – 1972; Education Act 1932; The “democratisation” of higher education. The Private College Act and Establishment of two “Open Universities”

	1973 – 1989;
The Development Planning Period	The Education Act 1973 and expansion of Universities and greater access to education.
	1990–2014;
The Internationalization and Globalization Period	Education Act of 1999, deregulation policies and internal and external QA, the creation of ONESQA, TQF and the proposal for U-NET testing.

Source: the author

THE EARLY MODERNIZATION PERIOD

Perhaps the most significant event in the introduction of Westernized education in Thailand can be identified as the opening of the Bansomdejchaopraya High School (BHS) in 1896 at the initiative of Rama V; a prelude to the establishment of a Western style university. It is of interest to note that this first step involved locating the high school, as reflected in its name, in the former residence of his late mentor Chuang Boonnag who had died in 1883.

BHS, not unsurprisingly, was based on the model of an English public school, quite possibly Eton, which was attended by many of the sons born to the consorts of Rama V. Later, Thailand's first university became a reality seven years after the death of Rama V when King Rama VI honoured his father's memory with the opening of Chulalongkorn University in 1917.

"Chula", as it is now affectionately known, was modelled on a Western 'template' and was the amalgamation of the Civil Service College, an Engineering School and the Royal Medical School, with the later addition of the Faculty of Arts, Science and Public Administration (Rabgyal, 2013). The noted Thai historian Prince Damrong Rajanubhab (Rachanuphat) (1862–1943), (Britannica, supra), who served as Director of Public Instruction from 1880 to 1892 and later as Minister of Interior, characterizes reforms of the period as reflective of a selective "pick and choose" approach as successive administrations promoted only those aspects of Western culture which did not conflict with Thai culture, and rejected those which did. It is of interest to note that in 1897 Rama V had a total of 54 British, 20 Danish, 18 German, 9 Belgian, and 7 Italian advisers working within his administration. (Peleggi, 2002).

THE POST REVOLUTION PERIOD; 1932 –1971

The second step in the OHEC model, the Post Revolution Period, was witness to dramatic changes which began following the establishment of a constitutional monarchy which gave more power to the people via a civil government. The new administration responded to the call for greater access to all levels of education. The first National Education Scheme was introduced in 1932 and provided free access to basic education to all regardless of social background or gender.

Up until this time educational opportunity was centred in Bangkok and was only available to an elite class; birth and wealth granting automatic rights of entry. Again, with astonishing speed university education was given a

boost in 1933 with the opening of Thammasat University. Successive governments maintained the momentum as Mahidol, Kasetsart and Silpakorn Universities were established in the 1940s. Regionalization of tertiary education was also promoted and by the 1970s Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen and Prince of Songkla universities were also established.

THE DEVELOPMENT PLANNING PERIOD; 1973 – 1993

The significant changes which characterise this epoch were catalysed, once again, by an upheaval in government which occurred in 1972; the overthrow of a military dictatorship. The new government brought with it a mandate for greater access to education, particularly at tertiary levels. This was initiated in 1973 with a new National Education Act which heralded an exponential growth of universities, and significantly, the establishment of two open universities, Rakhkhamhaeng and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University and colleges of higher education. The cumulative outcome of these changes is that Thailand is now well served, and perhaps some may suggest, even over-served, in terms of tertiary educational infrastructure. With the growth of universities came the continuing growth of the centralized educational bureaucracy (Nicholls 2014)

GLOBALIZATION AND INTERNATIONALIZATION 1990 – 2014

The events leading to the National Education Act of 1999 began in 1990 with the realization by the Council of University Presidents of Thailand (CUPT), in consultation with the Office of the National Education Commission (ONEC), that a reform of higher education was urgently needed. Working in consultation the CUPT the First Long Range Plan for Higher Education (FLRP) was published. This paper focused on tailoring the reform of the administration of education to meet the needs of civil society and industry for the next fifteen years. It comprised two parts, the first of which was composed of seven elements addressing contemporary issues in Thai society including demographic change, globalization, labour market trends, conflict resolution and the sufficiency economy. Sae-Lao (ibid) suggests that this was recognition of the risk that if change was not made the country would suffer a “human resource bottleneck”. In other words, the country’s future economic well-being was linked to the need for a more efficient higher education sector.

The second part of the FLRP focussed on the “articulation of university education, the good governance and management of universities, national competitiveness, financing, university staff development and related issues”, (Thanosawan, 2012). What then followed, once the new constitution of 1997 had been enacted, was the National Education Act BE 2542, (NEA 1999) which on the one hand sought to promote greater autonomy for tertiary institutions, yet on the other hand mandated strict external and internal quality assurance (QA) measures. QA sought to ensure uniformity of academic standards across Thailand and transformative change in terms of levels of teaching and academic performance. The introductory sections to the NEA 1999 read as an educational handbook:–

Section 6.

Education shall aim at the full development of the Thai people in all aspects: physical and mental health; intellect; knowledge; morality; integrity; and desirable way of life so as to be able to live in harmony with other people.

Section 7

The learning process shall aim at inculcating sound awareness of politics and democratic system of government under a constitutional monarchy; ability to protect and promote their rights, responsibilities, freedom, respect of the rule of law, equality, and human dignity; pride in Thai identity; ability to protect public and national interests; promotion of religion, art, national culture, sports, local wisdom, Thai wisdom and universal knowledge; inculcating ability to preserve natural resources and the environment; ability to earn a living; self-reliance; creativity; and acquiring thirst for knowledge and capability of self-learning on a continuous basis.

This act was followed by amendments contained in the Second National Education Act B.E. 2545 (2002) which included a revised definition of “education”:-

“Education” means the learning process for personal and social development through imparting of knowledge; practice; training; transmission of culture; enhancement of academic progress; building a body of knowledge by creating a learning environment and society with factors available conducive to continuous lifelong learning.

In terms of the overall administration of the Act the Minister was empowered under Section 45 to be authorized to formulate “Ministerial rules regulations and announcements”. An extremely wide range of discretions were thereby reposed in the Minister who would act at the direction and advice of the bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education and at the same time take into account prevailing political imperatives.

Following changes to the of the NEA 1999 the Ministry of Education, the MUA, and the Office of the National Educational Council (ONEC) merged to form the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) under the terms of the Ministry of Education Regulatory Act 2003 (About Us n.d.).

OHEC became responsible for promoting higher education policies and standards and what then followed were numerous other legislative changes and policy documents including the Roadmap for Higher Education (2005–2008) and the Second 15 Year Long Range Plan (SLRP) (2008 – 2022). These policy documents incorporated a wide range of objectives which included producing graduates and researchers to meet the objectives of the National Economic and Social Development Plan 2012–2016 (Thanosawan, p16, *ibid*).

THE CURRENT OPERATION OF TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN THAILAND

As appears the NEA 1999 set in motion significant changes which have directed the course the administration of higher education to the present time. There are now 171 Higher Education Institutions falling into three basic categories:-

- Public Universities (80)
Autonomous Universities (15)
Universities (65)
- Private Higher Education Institutions (71)
Universities (40)
Institutions (9)
Colleges (22)
- Community Colleges (20)

Professor Gerald Fry (Conversation, 2010 cited in Sae-Lao, supra) has emphasized that, in the sphere of higher education, bureaucrats continue to be the driving force of policy change in Thailand. In fact all levels of education anuban to prathom to matthayom, and all levels of tertiary education have been formalized through successive bureaucratic reforms which have created a state-centered perspective by promoting a highly structured, rigid, higher education model. Not surprisingly, given the centralized administrative regime, the educational bureaucracy has continued to grow and to absorb a large proportion of the overall educational budget which represents approximately 20% of Thailand's national budget. Fry (2000) suggests that too much of the Thai educational budget is spent on this highly centralized bureaucracy. The administration in Bangkok is significantly larger than the Monbusho in Tokyo or China's central education agency, even though it is serving far fewer students. It is currently estimated that administrative staff needed to oversee the financial, curriculum, and assurance processes exceed 30,000, of whom an estimated 400 have PhD's (Fry, 2000 in Sae-Lao, supra).

DISCUSSION

Having briefly traced out the path that has led us to the present we might then ask what this tells us if we wish, "to foresee the future" (Machiavelli supra). The first observation is that it appears that the once efficient, small in scale, bureaucratic model driven by Royal Decree, adopted in 1896, was effective and efficient up to the point of the democratization of education which began in 1932. Post 1932, as the number of universities increased and higher education was decentralized a bureaucratic Leviathan began to grow in size and strength and is now the dominant factor regulating both the finances and curricula of universities.

This gives rise to the question; is what was once efficient still efficient? Secondly, has a "tipping-point" of over-regulation been reached? Thirdly, is there an inherent conflict between maintaining academic independence and autonomy on the one hand, and increasingly higher levels of external regulation on the other, which may inhibit

autonomy and as a consequence, innovation. Fourthly, what would a cost-benefit analysis of the mechanisms now in place to monitor, assess, and review internal and external institutional performance tell us? Finally, is it not time to look to the higher education systems in the region, for example, Singapore, Japan, Hong Kong and Australia, to observe how the balance between fiscal accountability, autonomy and academic independence are managed?

CONCLUSIONS

Over the past one hundred years the reforms of higher education in Thailand have attempted to reflect prevailing pedagogic ideologies yet it has been suggested that the search for knowledge has given way to a focus on national economic efficiency. As discussed by Richard Watson Todd (2014) this approach “short-changes students by ignoring the goal of fostering their intellectual growth”. It may be argued that the sheer size and power of the educational bureaucracy brings with it limitations to the autonomy of universities by promoting uniformity which tends to hamper, or suppress, innovation. Academics run the risk of being marginalized within academia. The emphasis in curricula on national rather than global perspectives tends to overlook the realities of globalization and global knowledge systems in a world fast becoming borderless. For higher education to progress academics may need to regain their territorial rights over Academia leaving bureaucrats to manage what bureaucrats manage best. Finally, as discussed by (Fry cited in Sae-Lao, supra) the future of all levels of educational reform in Thailand will require a genuine sense of commitment and a true spirit of collaboration among concerned parties.

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