

Admittedly Bencharong with Kinnari motif is very rare. In over fifteen years of monitoring the Bencharong scene, we have seen only two pieces. One was a piece of a Kinnari shard in the personal collection of Phraya Boran Rachathanin. The small shard was mentioned in Prince Damrong's book as a rare find, even in those days, at Vihara Somdet in the compound of the Royal Palace of Ayutthaya. The shard was put on display in 2016/17 at Phraya Boran's Exhibition organized by his daughter at the Chan Kasem National Museum in Ayutthaya. Another beautiful Kinnari motif Bencharong *toh* jar is in the Lek Viriyaphant collection.

Our disappointment is only that with a slightly better photo editing effort this book would be not only an outstanding academic treatise but also an excellent, faultlessly executed book on the subject. Dawn Rooney deserves three cheers for writing the most definitive and up-to-date book on the subject of Bencharong. Buy it!

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A Critical Study of Thailand's Higher Education Reforms by Rattana Lao. Oxford: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 9781138575868 (paperback), £36.99; ISBN: 9781138022683 (hardback), £110; ISBN: 9781315776927 (eBook), £33.29.



A Critical Study of Thailand's Higher Education Reforms analyses the complex relationship between globalisation and education policymaking, with a critical evaluation of the influence exercised by Western models of higher education in the past 100 years, their implications for the present status of tertiary education in the kingdom and the numerous obstacles associated with their implementation.

Comprising ten chapters, the first four provide the theoretical foundation, setting out the case for Thailand within the globalisation of higher education policy, the adoption of Western education models through selective borrowings, and the changing role of the Thai state in the administration of higher education, with the Asian economic crisis as a window of opportunity towards the transition of public institutions to autonomous universities. Chapter

Five discusses the development of the interrelated phenomenon of the internationalisation of higher education and its attendant challenges, i.e. quantity vs. quality. Chapters Six-Nine deal with the politics of international ranking and Thailand's research landscape, the emergence of, and rationale for, quality policies, the global-local nexus of quality

policies (the case of the Office of National Education Standards and Quality Assessment, or ONESQA), the intended and unintended consequences of quality policies, including an analysis of the roles played by quality assessment (QA) in terms of higher education policy at the national and the institutional level. Chapter Ten concludes the book with an analysis of the culture of borrowing and Thailand's reform fatigue, with a discussion of how the philosophical concept of utilitarianism has guided the kingdom's higher education, the quantitative challenges in the context of limited financial resources and uneven distribution of resources, and the implications inherent in the country's higher education foundations being rooted in teaching rather than research.

Over two decades ago, Thailand's reform fatigue within the culture of borrowing may have been foreseen in a report on the country's education in the era of globalization, which concluded that: "Education reform in Thailand will require a genuine sense of commitment and a true spirit of collaboration among concerned parties".¹ The commission's report recommended reforming the entire educational system in Thailand, as a way of taking up the challenges of the globalisation movement, for its bearing on almost all aspects of national development. This was reiterated in January 2018, with the announcement that applications for a four-year 'Smart' visa would be accepted, beginning in February 2018, from highly skilled foreign professionals,² to work or invest in ten targeted industries, to accelerate knowledge transfer, stimulate the growth of specialised fields and ultimately increase Thailand's competitiveness and promote its long-term economic development. The economic model of 'Thailand 4.0', within the digital era, has been brought under the spotlight in relation to the country's overall quality of education and the growing inequality in the system. Historically, skilled foreign professionals have been viewed as a threat to job security, prompting the government to allay public fears by reiterating that the protection of thirty-nine other professions is still enshrined in Thai labour law when the four-year 'Smart' visa programme is implemented.

The book employs the theoretical and critical lens of the "politics, economics and culture" of borrowing, to rationalise the different forms of external forces. The author's doctoral dissertation³ forms the backbone of the majority of data in this book, by triangulating the three methods of document analysis, semi-structured interviews and a three-month observation at the ONESQA offices. However, the book reaches beyond the author's doctoral dissertation, by delving into issues connected with other Thai higher education systems, including deregulation, privatisation, autonomous university policy, the phenomenon of internalisation and the rise of international league tables, supplemented by an additional eleven interviews with key policymakers and academics. This considerable bank of data has been rationalised through the medium of thematic analysis, to identify patterns or themes within the data.

One overarching theme is the historical conundrum of Thailand deftly escaping

¹ *Thai Education in the Era of Globalization* 1996: 36. The commission's report contains the recommendations for the reform of the entire educational system in Thailand as a way to take up the challenges of the globalisation movement, for its bearing on almost all aspects of national development (p. 3).

² Sullivan 2018.

³ Lao 2013.

Western colonisation (unlike her neighbours from Myanmar to Brunei), only to experience “occupation” through the borrowing and adoption of Western ideas. Selective borrowings were brought to the kingdom by discerning elites, who employed them to further the cause of modernity of the education system, thus promoting a vision of Bangkok elites as more advanced than the rest of the country. Late in the 19th century, the royal court tended to associate itself with Europe as the source of power and knowledge, with King Chulalongkorn famously declaring that: “... to employ foreigners is like having ready-made textbooks. It means that we have in hand men whose qualifications have already been proven and guaranteed”.⁴

Borrowings were encouraged and pursued, provided they did not conflict with aspects of Thai society, affording elites relative freedom to select ideas and concepts from the West. Challenges and dilemmas characterise these select borrowings, chiefly the predicament of quantity vs. quality and student-teacher relationships based on Thai traditional hierarchy and seniority. In the Thai tradition, teachers are respected members of the community, a principle enshrined in the work of a committee appointed to define “the teachers’ etiquette and discipline in compliance with the Teachers [*sic*] Act 1945 [B.E. 2488].⁵

Chulalongkorn University was established in 1917 with the purpose of training Thai elites to serve in the modern bureaucracy and nation building, influenced by the French *grandes écoles* and the German School of Science concept. The translation of the British, French and German ideas and concepts into models fit for Thailand was limited by the lack of resources (financial and academic) and the urgent needs of the kingdom to have trained civil servants. The European models that dominated the earlier days of nation building have since been largely supplanted by post-Second World War American models whose influence can be felt in the development of Asian universities.

Fragmented policymaking and lack of policy dialogues continue to affect education policymaking in general and higher education in particular, and have resulted in noticeable regional disparities. The provision of higher education institutions in provincial areas served to mitigate the spread of communism, particularly in the north-east, which was becoming receptive to the one-party ideology and where “poverty and its proximity to Indochina”⁶ prompted renewed efforts to recruit villagers into the monkhood.

“Living paradoxes”⁷ is the term used by Herzfeld to define dependency and independence, not colonised but colonised, a convenient route for the Thai state to paint itself as being “civilised/siwilai” – an equal partner to the West. Another paradox is the search for balance in the need to maintain Thai-ness and the mission for modernisation.

⁴ Numnonda 1974: 122, quoting King Rama V to Phya Visutsuriyasak, 3 February 1899, p. 306, from ‘Correspondence between King Rama V and Chao Phraya Phrasadet Surentharathibodi 1894-1899’, Bangkok, 1961.

⁵ *Education in 1961 Thailand*, p. 65. The Teachers’ Act, B.E. 2488 (1945) was repealed by The Teachers and Educational Personnel Council Act, B.E. 2546 (2003), which received royal assent on 24 May 2003.

⁶ Baker and Phongpaichit 2005: 172.

⁷ Herzfeld, M. 2002. ‘The absent presence: Discourses of crypto-colonialism’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101(4), pp. 899-926, quoted in R. Lao, *A Critical Study of Thailand’s Higher Education Reforms*, p. 24.

Other writers have discussed the incongruence of the Thai educational paradox, despite large educational expenditures as a percentage of the national budget “and the presence of much impressive educational leadership talent”.⁸ Thailand invests close to a fifth of its overall government expenditure on education, which for 2013 the World Bank has calculated at 18.9 percent of total government expenditure, compared to 20.0 percent for Singapore, 19.5 percent for Malaysia and 9.6 percent for Japan.⁹ In parallel with other countries, improvements in Thailand’s quality of education stem from a shift in focus towards institutions and efficient education spending, not just additional resources.

The author’s description of educational development recalls the work of Watson and his discussion of the borrowings and subsequent adoption/adaptation in Thailand, mainly from a perspective of Western influence and contact. Watson argued that, all too often, borrowings were grafted onto the existing monastic system, without first establishing whether the new system’s stated objectives were consistent with the needs.¹⁰

The evolution from original elitist imprint brought about *massification* - the process of taking higher education to the mass market. Massification, and its consequences, looms large in this book, in its evolution from original elitist to wide availability. Statistical data reports that just over two million students¹¹ were enrolled in tertiary education in 2012, against the approximately 124,000 undergraduates registered in all government universities at 1975. Moreover, 2013 World Bank data for tertiary enrolment totalled a respectable 51.4 percent for Thailand, compared to Germany’s 61.1 percent and Japan’s 62.4 percent.¹² These data, however, do not provide information on the quality of education in higher education institutions.

Crucial in the massification process has been the creation of two open universities in the 1970s, with significant ramifications for the expansion of overall access to higher education in Thailand as a way of accommodating students not enabled by competitive entrance exams. The simplified admission process has entailed some unintended consequences, involving students unable to graduate within five years and a significant dropout rate, combined with a general lack of faculty chair holders, which potentially threatens the quality of higher education provided by the institutions. High dropout rates and grade repetition have been documented in other countries, including Brazil, where a World Bank study found that “higher cognitive skills in primary school lead to lower repetition rates”.¹³

Concerns about Thai quality assessment were first expressed in the 1980s. Between 1990 and 2000, Thailand joined the group of QA-concerned countries engaged in higher

⁸ Fry 2013.

⁹ ‘Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure (%)’, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GB.ZS?locations=TH> (accessed 18 January 2018).

¹⁰ Watson 1980.

¹¹ Data include graduates from diploma courses, as well as undergraduates, graduate certificates, Master’s degree graduates, PhD awards and other degree types.

¹² ‘Gross enrolment ratio, tertiary, both sexes (%)’, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR?locations=TH> (accessed 16 January 2018).

¹³ Hanushek and Wößmann 2007: 2.

education massification drives. A study by the World Bank illustrates the implications of quality of education not just for personal earnings in the job market but also for economic growth and income distribution, with the effect of educational quality being more sharply felt “in low-income countries than in high-income countries”¹⁴ when a sample of countries was separated based on whether a country was below or above the median of GDP per capita in 1960. Other studies have lamented the low employability of graduates from some Thai universities and that, for all types of Thai universities, “English language skills are noted as one of the major weaknesses”.¹⁵

The most contentious Thai policy in the higher education sector is the autonomous university policy, underpinned by the conviction that “the market can induce more efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness than state actors”. Privatisation of higher education in Thailand refers to the transfer in ownership from public control to private management, but it can also refer to the “adoption” and “introduction” of market principles to public institutions without a change in ownership. Several piecemeal changes have been introduced since 1964, aimed at increasing efficiency and productivity of higher education management. However, privatisation has brought in its wake practical and logistical challenges which require universities to submit annual budgets to the Ministry of University Affairs (MUA) a full twelve months prior to the fiscal spending, with each budget detailed and itemised. Surplus funds from the previous fiscal year must be returned to the central coffers of the Budget Bureau.

The transformation of public universities into autonomous institutions is the long-term vision of the Thai state. Public universities are painted as ossified, outmoded and “hurdles and bottlenecks for the development of Thai higher education”. By contrast, autonomous institutions are portrayed as better managed and more efficient. Despite pockets of resistance from groups fearing loss of benefits and job stability, the process of converting public universities into autonomous institutions has met with a measure of success, since the policy “attempts to lessen the heavy burden of the government financial subsidy for public universities and to resolve the rigid structure of Thai bureaucracy within the university”.¹⁶

Rattana Lao does not shy away from discussing cultural aspects like patronage in higher education, a system built on personal ties and personal connections which “has crept in at every level”. The lack of objectivity and transparency inherent in the patronage system hampers the development of junior staff, while consolidating the position, and perpetuating the benefits, of those established in their respective fields.

The strength of *A Critical Study of Thailand's Higher Education Reforms* is in the use of primary sources, in both Thai and English, to build a comprehensive case for Thailand's higher education through the decades. Its in-depth analysis and discussion of historical events makes a significant contribution to the knowledge of higher education in Thailand.

Lia Genovese

¹⁴ Hanushek and Wößmann 2007: 8.

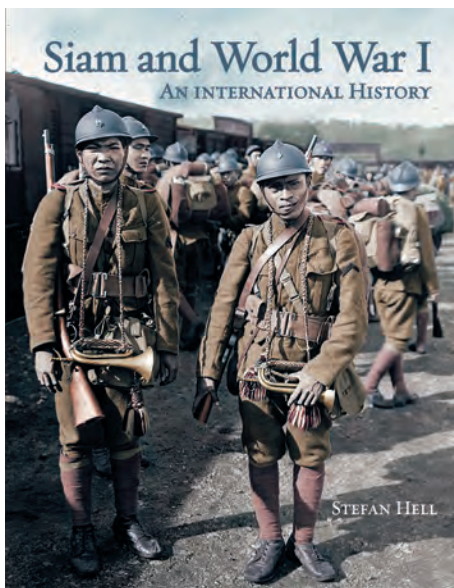
¹⁵ Herberholz and Sukontamarn 2014: 27.

¹⁶ Rungfamai 2013: 109.

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Siam and World War I: An International History by Stefan Hell. Bangkok: River Books, 2017. ISBN: 9786167339924. 1,200 Baht.



In July 1917, Prince Charoon (Charoonsakdi Kritakara), head of the Siamese legation in Paris, was thrilled to learn that Siam had abandoned the neutrality it had maintained for the first three years of the Great War. He rejoiced in the decision to join Britain and France against Germany and the other Central Powers. The prince declared that there was “no doubt that this is our real opportunity of raising the Status of our beloved country” (140). The opportunity he envisioned was diplomatic and strategic. He saw in this move a chance for Siam to show its civilization as the equal to that of the Western European powers. The prince believed, as did many Siamese leaders of his generation, that such arguments about Siam’s exhibition