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## **Spiritual Education: Thailand's Delinking of Learning and Knowledge from the Economy<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores an approach to education that de-emphasises material progress in favour of spiritual or religious virtue. While elites attempted to reconcile the desire to use the formal schooling system to inculcate national values for hegemony with the need to engage in economic planning and meet the human capital requirements of higher value-added industrialisation, the emphasis was always on the former, expressed as spirituality or anti-materialism. The article surveys Thai educational elite ideas and attitudes towards the overarching aims of state-provided education during the 1970s and 1980s. In doing so, it seeks to elucidate the relationship between Thailand's material base and official Theravada Buddhist superstructure as expressed in philosophies of education.

### **Keywords**

Education, Economy, Thailand, Theravada Buddhism

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## **Introduction**

It has been widely remarked that Thailand's education system has been characterised by various deficiencies and failures to reform in both the popular press and academic research circles (Fry & Hui, 2013; Hallinger & Lee 2011; Mounier & Phasina 2010; Sangnapaboworn 2007). Among these failures include uneven quality and a large gap in the quality of urban over rural schools; a skilled labour shortage that is hampering efforts to increase the country's competitiveness; over-centralisation and a lack of accountability in the educational bureaucracy; and a curriculum that places more emphasis on producing "moral" citizens rather than critical thinking and analysis.

Each of these phenomena should not be viewed in isolation. Political economy approaches to education, particularly those of historical institutionalism, attempt to integrate disciplinary insights to examine causal factors such as external vulnerabilities and policy coalitional pressures with greater depth and breadth. Meanwhile, studies of political economy and social conflict theory in Thailand have had a difficult, convoluted history (Tejapira, 2001; Reynolds & Hong, 1983; Thanet, 2015). Studies of hegemony and post-structural analyses of Thai social formation have been plentiful but do not address the critical problem of education. Within Thai education studies specifically, the absence of clarity and the bifurcation of Thai education into sociology and cultural studies on the one hand, and labour economics on the other, are due to piecemeal assumptions and continuing debates on the primary purposes or objectives of formal schooling.

The 'politics of education' is most associated with political socialisation, or education as an agent of indoctrination. Such studies lend themselves most readily to ethnographic and post-structural lenses, dissecting the sources and nature of Thai nationalism and identity. This line of inquiry has been pursued by scholars such as Mulder (1997) in his study of social studies textbooks, as well as Bowie (1997), Connors (2005), Jackson (2010), and Winichakul (2001) in their study of discursive practices, representation, and the sources of Thai modernity. At base, after all, is the fact that the greater the problem of loyalty to central government, the more likely is the educational system to become a 'propaganda instrument' (Rowley, 1971, p. 36). Moreover, formal education, as Umaporn et al. (2005, p. 565), borrowing from Bourdieu and Kingston, cited, is a form of elite cultural capital and plays a role perpetuating inequality.

Political economy approaches focus on the role of state-funded education in human resource development and industrial upgrading, where education is a necessary but insufficient condition for economic growth. As Dixon summarises, "Thailand is now confronting a major contradiction: wage levels are becoming too high for the labour-intensive sector, while the lack of skilled labour is limiting the move into higher labour cost activities" (Dixon, 1999, p. 248). In Warr's prognosis for economic recovery, reiterates, 'the most

urgent reform issue is education' (2002, p. 341). Tentative conclusions drawn by scholars such as Ritchie (2001) attribute the failure of education reform or the relative lag in technical intellectual capital formation on the lack of broad elite coalitions. One of Ritchie's conclusions is that in the Thai case, "institutional complexity and opacity, heightened by bureaucratic fragmentation, has caused education and training policy to be mired in corruption, patronage, and cronyism" (Ritchie, 2001, p. 236). The education system continues to fail to supply the professionals needed for industrial upgrading and national innovation, and the delay in improving education in Thailand has had a long-lasting effect on growth (Jetin, 2010, p. 116).

For some analysts, Thailand's material base was the underlying causal factor behind the failure to promote quality mass education. As Douangngeune et al. argue, Thai elites chose to educate only fellow elites for the bureaucracy in the late 19th century due to its land abundance (2005, p. 189). Such abundance made the adoption of modern agricultural and industrial technologies less pressing. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Thai government was not able and willing to mobilise resource rent for investment in physical and institutional infrastructure, including education, in support of agricultural intensification and industrialisation (ibid, p.200).

For others, however, the material or the resource approach is itself insufficient without a consideration of competing claims on resources from popular coalitional pressures and external security threats (Doner, 2009, p. 52). Thailand's failure to undergo industrial strengthening has been due to the limited nature of threats facing Thai political elites (ibid: 140). In addition, the lack of anti-colonial resource mobilisation and the royalist revival that began with the ascendancy of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat in 1957 led to an institutional framework that neglected to move people out of agriculture and into industry (Kuhonta, p.2011).

What these institutional approaches fail to elucidate, however, are the workings of Gramscian hegemony in the Thai context. If we take Girling's seminal 1984 article, 'Thailand in Gramscian Perspective,' as the starting point, the relationship between base and superstructure in relation to Thai education becomes more apparent. The material base of resource abundance supported an ideological superstructure in which official state-sponsored Buddhism and the apparatuses of royal nationalism stifled the growth of autonomous democratic movements or a kind of levelling that would have opened up the education system and made it more responsive to local and popular needs and pressures. While elites attempted to reconcile the desire to use the formal schooling system to inculcate national values for hegemony with the need to engage in economic planning and meet the human capital requirements of higher value-added industrialisation, the emphasis was always on the former, expressed as spirituality or anti-materialism.

I contend that rather than intentional disregard for or neglect of education, Thai elites have found difficulty reconciling the dual aims of individual moral development and human capital or skills for economic development. Education and the economy have rarely been linked or related explicitly or precisely. In particular, I examine the period after the 14 October 1973 and 6 October 1976 events, a period following the first mass mobilisation against military dictatorship. It ushered the first popularly-led modern reform efforts, and the generations that were in primary school during the post-1976 era form the majority of the working age population post-1997 financial crisis. The trajectory of the argument follows a broad chronological sweep from the 1932 revolt against the absolute monarchy to the failure of the first educational reform effort of the mid-to-late 1970s, but focusing primarily on the ideas of influential elites involved in educational planning and direction. The methodology involved a qualitative analysis of key documents on philosophies of education and educational planning from the 1970s to the end of the Prem administrations. I analyse whether the period in question constitutes a critical juncture in the development of the Thai education system. Ultimately, this article aims to elucidate the underpinnings of education for a kind of hegemony based on Thai Buddhist constructions of knowledge and autonomy. It is an attempt to trace the roots of 'spiritual education'.

### **Intentional inequality**

Siam's semi-coloniality is key to understanding the foundations of the modern Thai state and educational administration (Harrison & Jackson, 2010; Mead, 2004; Loos, 2006). As Loos (2006, p. 13-18) coherently argues, semi-coloniality implied that while Siam was never directly colonised by a foreign power, much of the control over its economy was placed in the central absolutist state, whose seat of power lay in the capital, Bangkok. Siam's peripheral regions were made, in effect, colonies of the centre. Udom Sisuwat's seminal 1950 text *Thai keung meuang kheun (Thailand, a Semi-colony)* presented an overt materialist orientation that painted Siamese blue bloods and (predominantly Chinese) foreign-born capitalists as allying with foreign imperialists to exploit the labour of the agricultural class.

'Modernisation' as carried out by King Rama V (1853-1910) established the formal education bureaucracy as one key part in colonising the population located in the periphery, extending the reach of the state to every village. In 1921, the Compulsory Primary Education Act was enacted. It required all children 8–14 years of age to be enrolled in school until they completed Grade 5, but more importantly, established the central bureaucracy's control over local schools and allowed the government to impose educational fees on parents (Pongpaiboon, 1989, p. 4). The King himself determined national education policy by determining the types of schools to be established as well as prescribing the administrative procedures to be implemented (Swat, 1966, p.436). The 1921 Act established the system in

which schools were formally separated from temples, but critically, it was to mark the formal (but not de facto) separation between 'academics' and 'morality' (Sangnapaboworn, 2007, p. 262).<sup>2</sup>

During the military regime of Sarit Thanarat (1957-1963), economic policy was guided by conservative 'technocrats' who followed the economic orthodoxy of conservative finance-balancing the budget and rejecting investments in development projects as fiscally irresponsible (Stifel, 1976, pp. 1186-1188). Nonetheless, influenced by the American push for economic modernisation, budgets for education did increase (Thak, 1979, pp. 437-8). General Thanom Kittikachorn succeeded Sarit after the latter's death, with his second-in-command General Prapat Charusatien as Minister of Interior (Morell & Chai-anan, 1981, pp. 272). Critically, the Department of Primary Education, along with other ministries including agriculture and health, was transferred to the Ministry of Interior in 1966. Rural government (public) schools were known as 'schools that the commoners looked after' (*rongrian prachaban*). This transfer led to further stratification of the educational structure, as the Interior Ministry was in charge of primary, the Education Ministry secondary, and Office of the Prime Minister tertiary education. Government expenditure on education was stratified as well-in 1972, spending per student at the primary level was less than 500 baht per year, while at the university level, it was over 13,000 baht (ONEC Planning Division 1974, as cited in Sangnapaboworn, 1986, p. 90). As Anderson and London (1985, p. 792) remark:

It appears that decentralisation of the distribution of secondary school and high quality government educational resources by the central government would be necessary to increase opportunities for those in the peripheral provinces. As of 1970, however, such decentralisation of resources to the populace in general was precluded by the apparent ability of elites to concentrate or direct the distribution of resources in a manner that suited their needs.

At the same time, the main impetus for the expansion of primary education in the 1960s was the government's need for increased control over the villages due to a fear of the expansion of a communist insurgency that would threaten central control (Jansen, 2001, p. 360). The 'technocrats' served the aims of extending the state's reach and regulation over the population, deriving rents from central administration in the process, rather than supporting economic modernisation *per se*.

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of secularity in the Thai context is problematic and too complicated to go into any detail here (see Ladwig, 2011; Jackson, 1989, pp. 4.5, 14-15). Suffice it to say that the 1921 Act created a village school system that nominally secular in that it served the needs of Bangkok's drive to centralise the periphery and institute tighter control over the population.

## The Secondary Gap

Fundamentally, the separation of primary from secondary education reflected the intentional perpetuation of inequality in enrolments and educational quality. Secondary education was considered the preserve of those children privileged enough to seek university qualifications. The Department of General Education was allowed to remain under the Ministry of Education (in Thai, '*saman suksa*' สามัญศึกษา) had elite or bourgeois connotations. Thailand's unique 'lopsided anvil' shaped distribution of educational enrolments is partly a result of these decisions to create two classes of students: university-educated ranks to fill the elite bureaucracy and professions, and primary education for the predominantly farming masses.

Most member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and many East Asian countries emphasised universal primary education, followed by secondary education expansion, before then finally increasing tertiary access (de Ferranti, et al., 2003, p. 13-15). 'Thailand took a different path' (Benveniste, 2008, p. 223). In the 1980s, the focus of the system shifted toward tertiary education, bypassing the expansion of secondary education (ibid). There were virtually no secondary schools outside Bangkok and few large provincial towns until the 1960s (Booth, 2003, p.180). As a result, Thailand's enrolment distribution has been 'squeezed in the middle', with the majority of the population having only primary education or less, but more individuals with tertiary education than secondary education.

In contrast, South Korea focused on secondary education in the 1970s, followed by the tertiary level in the 1980s, incorporating equality and equity considerations in its expansion strategies (Benveniste, 2008, p. 241; Seth, 2002, pp. 69-71, 75). Korea's policy of sequential development began in 1948. Not only was emphasis placed on making access to education sequential and universal, uniformity in standards and content meant that the opportunity for advancement to higher levels of education was fairly open to all children (Seth, 2002, p. 75). When rapid economic growth led to marked gaps in regional development in South Korea by the late 1960s, public attitudes were driven by a strong belief that 'a small group of industrialists and bureaucrats was amassing great wealth while the poor were falling behind' (Seth, 2002, p. 148). Therefore, in South Korea, efforts at equalising schools were given a new urgency, contrary to Thailand where fears of class divisions were never allowed to surface or eventually influence the direction of the education system.

## Primary goal of education: morality or skills?

Not only was education viewed as a prerequisite for democracy in Thailand, but economic problems could be solved by producing 'good' or moral subjects. For arch-royalist

and minor aristocrat-politician M.R. Kukrit Pramote, the fundamental dilemma of the Thai economy was that it was never in the hands of Thais but under the control of foreigners like the British or Sino-Thai capitalists. Writing in 1949, he states, "...the way to solve this is that we must train good people to come up. Bad people who cannot be fixed must be driven out" (Kukrit, 1962, p. 64). In 1970, at a seminar titled, 'Youth and the Economy,' Kukrit is more concerned about the population growth rate rather than dispersing educational opportunities or improving human capital, as the title of the seminar would suggest. His plea is rather to reinforce ethics and karma:

The problem is how to we govern or control students all over the country to act according to moral principles? This is to instil order and discipline. We have to do everything to make students believe that our society is one with hope. We must have all the children understand that the various evils that children witness nowadays are evils that occur temporarily. Henceforth we will drive out these evils, and goodness will arise or at least evil will be avoided. We will have kids understand karma and evil...In the end, everyone meets their fate (accepts their karma). We must make children believe this.

(Kukrit, 1977, p. 101)

This is not to say that in the late 1960s and early 1970s there was no cognisance of the impact economic growth on society and the need to reorient the economy for further, equitable development. In a 1967 secondary education planning meeting, economist Puey Ungpakorn, honoured as the premier technocrat of his era, admits that he is not an expert on primary education in the public or government schools and that most of his knowledge comes from newspapers (Ungphakorn, 1967, p. 71). Puey reports from a 1966 international conference on education attended by American president Lyndon Johnson where they discussed the idea of education as an economic investment. Puey tries to relate education to economic planning, stating that "education should be seen as an investment, not only as 'education for education's sake' but it is a driver of economic and social development as well" (Ungphakorn, 1967, p. 64). He only raises the problem of bribes that have become necessary for admission to elite private schools in the capital (ibid, p. 71-72). His speech ends without any practical policy prescriptions, however. During the 1970 'Youth and the Economy' seminar, Puey is the most progressive of the speakers. He discusses the 'hippie' movement of the period and does not reject their values completely (Ungphakorn, 1970, p. 70). Yet there is still a moral undertone to his admonitions that adults must set good examples for the next generation, and that economic growth has led to increased corruption (Ungphakorn, 1970, p.72).

Earlier in 1967, as part of the aforementioned series on secondary education planning, M.R. Seni Pramote, Kukrit's brother and also a former Prime Minister, pontificates on the provision of education in general, conceding that as a lawyer he had never been

trained in education or pedagogy. “I have to say this is from an ordinary person’s perspective; if not, it would be like a person who does not know how to swim trying to teach a crocodile how to swim” he states at the outset (1967, p. 49). His speech meanders through tangential reflections, ending with a personal anecdote about the strict regimen of running he followed as student at Trent School in the United Kingdom. Seni concludes that the Thai education system lacks methods of instilling good character and self-discipline (ibid, p. 57).

There was never a tension between economic development and socialisation as the purposes of education: schooling viewed in moral terms dominated the discourse. Those responsible for setting the tone and overall direction of the education system were aristocratic or Sino-Thai merchant elites who never upgraded the education system because the incentive structures were never aligned due to the political nature of the comprador capitalism pursued. In his prescient 1971 study, *Modernisation without Development: Thailand as an Asian case study*, Norman Jacobs identified the impact of the patrimonial, two-class systems’ impact on education. The source of the two classes lay in the religious values that held that the acquisition of virtue was not in practice open to all: “some are not (as yet) as capable of learning virtue as others” (1971, p. 282). This created a ‘division of labour’ that created a tradition that formal education beyond the most elemental levels primarily served the bureaucrat or those who worked with their minds (ibid: 284). Education to Thais is a “moral experience, it is viewed as something to accept and absorb and not necessarily something to critically evaluate” (ibid, p. 283). Hence, educational goals are subordinated to (i.e. serve) intellectual-moral considerations and goals. The educational system’s capacity to serve as a ‘catalytic agent for Thai social development’ was therefore limited (ibid, p. 296).

### **Materialism (*wat-thu*) versus spirituality (*chit chai*)**

At root, the Thai educational establishment’s scepticism of economic development lies in Thai Buddhism’s dichotomisation of the material (*wat-thu* วัตถุ) and spiritual (*chit chai* จิตใจ, also translated as ‘soul’, or ‘heart-mind’). Official Theravada Buddhism’s soteriological orientation is towards release from the suffering caused by attachment to worldly or material desires. Yet in its economic modernisation, contemporary Thai culture has tried to reconcile what may be perceived as a material-spiritual contradiction through a variety of alternative sects or cults, as well as the erosion of a belief that one’s status and well-being are a result of karma or the accumulated merit of past lives (Vorng, 2010).

The well-known abbot Panyanantha Bhikkhu, in the seminar on youth and the economy, holds that the economy is directly and explicitly linked to spirituality (Phikkhu, 1977, pp. 152, 178). “When our soul suffers, the economy worsens,” he remarks (ibid: 152). For him, there is a duality and direct causation between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’



economies (ibid, p. 178). However, whether there exists an ontological separation between the two spheres is unclear. In 1975, a document published on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the National Education Association of Thailand demonstrates more clearly the lack of a distinction between academics and Buddhist teachings, or tensions between secular knowledge and the dharma. The author (unnamed) states at the outset that the principal social philosophy of Thailand is Buddhism. It is the paradigm (วาทะ) of Thai society and can be used to improve Thai education (National Education Association, 1975, p.6). Educational philosophy is to be underpinned by the dharma. The meaning of the word, 'education' is offered as:

Education means to develop the aspects constituting the sentient being. When these are developed, the three roots of evil can be decreased (in the case of the Buddha, he developed these until he extinguished the three roots of evil completely and was released from the cycle of re-birth). In humans, we will decrease our roots of evil until human society is peaceful and happy.

(ibid, p.6)

That Thai education was to be based on Buddhist philosophy is also evident in the writings of Saroj Buasri, president of the college of education that was to become Srinakharinwirot University. Education is defined as development so that an individual's life may be as free as possible from human suffering (Buasri, 1970, p. 57). He relates the distinction between the mundane and supra mundane to education; education for the former minimises misery and suffering, while the latter leads to a complete freedom from suffering and is achieved through meditation. For Saroj, it is important not to confuse the two planes on which the practical application of the mundane and super-mundane exist. 'Economic efficiency' is a basic aim of education in a modern world, whereas saleable skills are 'specific objectives' (ibid, p. 53). While this may not clarify the role of dharma in skills development, Saroj does argue that because Buddhism stresses 'ethics rather than metaphysics and epistemology' it is quite possible that the cultivation of moral and ethical values is given a prominent place in a Buddhist philosophy of education' (ibid, p. 72). The method of reconciling Buddhist philosophy and 'Western' knowledge for him is to point out similarities between the Kalama Sutta (the spirit of free inquiry) and the problem-solving method of the Western world; the Saraniya-Dharma (cooperation) with the 'democratic philosophy of education in the United States'; and the Suppuris-Dharma (respect for others) with the 'respect for individuals in the Western world' (ibid, p. 72). Similarly, Buddhist ethical values are not an obstacle to economic development, as Buddhism is based on 'reason and a genuine understanding of the facts of life' in the view of prominent economist Sanoh Unakul (1984, p. 332, as cited in Chuachan & Sman 1992, p. 393).

For others, however, there are no dichotomies of mundane/supra-mundane or internal/external economies, but only one spiritual superstructure. Former Kasetsart University Chancellor Rapee Sagarik (1975-1979) contends that science and technology cannot be separated from their cultural base (Sagarik, 1983, p. 12). 'Aren't we separating out the roots of the mango tree from the trunk and branches?' he asks (ibid). Worldly things (*lokatham*) and abstract things (*namatham*) are one and the same. Focusing only on the material aspect of development therefore cannot accomplish its fullest aims or definition. Even for innovative re-interpreters of Buddhist doctrine such as the famed monk Buddhadasa Bhikku, the primary danger of education is that it would make people selfish. Education may simply become a servant to individual lust and desire (*kilet* กิเลส) (Soree, 1988:7-8). Prominent education reformers of the 1970s and 1980s, Sumon Amornwiwat, Ekawit Na Thalang, and Paitoon Sinlarat, concur with Buddhadasa on the need to produce not only smart but ethical people and to implement the dharma in the educational system (ibid, p. 54). Fundamentally, the primary aim of the secondary education curriculum was spiritual training and behaviour or habits (*nisai* นิสัย) (Ekawit, 1967, p. 109). The instilling of these desired behaviours and attitudes are more important than anything else. "They should not be any less important than the ability to read and write..." he states (ibid, p. 112).

Thai Theravada Buddhist epistemology would continue to seek the resolve the apparent contradictions of the Kalama Sutta and free inquiry with scepticism of the material world and its associated selfish desires.

### **Reform or revolution: The education debate of the 1970s**

The first major attempt to reform the education system began as a result of the 14 October 1973 university student-led mass public demonstration that led to the collapse of the Thanom-Prapat regime and the appointment by King Bhumipol Adulyadej (Rama IX) of Thammasat University rector Sanya Thammasak as Prime Minister. This marked the beginning of a number of outwardly liberal movements, including the 1974 education reform and calls for the decentralisation of bureaucratic authority. For influential sociologist Pattaya Saihu, the problem of education was whether and how to adapt education to future conditions, or how the trend of changing conditions itself could be controlled (1974, p. 107). The consensus was that the effort to reform education was underpinned by the desire to reconcile the worldly and the spiritual through a synthesis of the twin aims of skill building and moral inculcation.

In 1974, Prime Minister Sanya appointed a new education minister, Kriang Kiratikorn, and deputy minister, Kaw Sawasdiapanit. One month after the installation of the new minister, the Cabinet appointed the Committee to Lay the Foundation for the Education

Reform (CLFER) to make recommendations to reform the education system, with Sippanondha Ketudat and Ekawit na Thalang as chairperson and deputy, respectively. The proposal, submitted in December 1974, was entitled, 'Education for Life and Society'. In 1975, Kukrit Pramote was elected Prime Minister, and his education minister Nipon Sarithorn displayed a lack of interest in the CLFER plan. Regional disparities continued to grow, and by that year, Bangkok had ten per cent of the nation's population but 60 per cent of upper secondary and 85 percent of higher education enrolments (World Bank Operations Evaluation Department, 1989, pp. 4.20). Reform interest waned not only due to lack of interest on the part of Kukrit but crises that diverted his attention such as the increased polarisation between 'leftists, generally identified as university students, and the rightists, represented by vocational college students' (Sangnapaboworn, 1986, p. 231). From April 1975 to October 1976, four different ministers led the Ministry of Education; frequent shifts in government meant that each new minister had to study the education reform plans anew.

On 6 October 1976, a violent crackdown on university students and protestors demonstrating against the return from exile of General Thanom Kittikachorn led to the King appointing vehemently anti-communist Thanin Kraivixien as Prime Minister, who in turn named Pinyo Sathorn as the new Minister of Education. Pinyo was a Chulalongkorn University education professor and colleague of Thanin in Dusit Siriwan's ultra-royalist 'Democracy Talk' television programme. Pinyo denounced the CLFER education reform plan draft as 'socialist' or 'communist'. He refused to endorse it because it was 'a result of students' and leftists' pressure' and even categorically rejected the use of the term 'reform' (Sangnapaboworn, 1986, pp. 274-75).

Moreover, Pinyo re-mastered the 1977 plan for royalist hegemony. Silaporn summarises the differences between the two versions in this regard:

The 1977 Education Plan, on the other hand, subdued this encouragement of full freedom of beliefs. Instead, the first and foremost concern of the 1977 Plan was to inculcate democratic values on what democracy meant in that context as the only desirable political belief. The nationalistic attitude was also prominent in the Plan: education should produce law-abiding citizens who were committed to maintaining the national security, democracy, and the trinity (the nation, the religion, and the monarchy)..Much less emphasis was given to sections about physically, mentally, and morally healthy people; creativeness and problem-solving ability; and the enhancement of social equality.

(1986, p. 251)

Pinyo successfully transformed the terms 'liberal' into 'communist', and 'royalist' into 'democratic'. This doctrinal thrust came at the expense of the reformers' intentions to steer education for human resource development, as Kaw Sawasdiapanit observed:

The [1974] reform thrust aimed at using education as a tool to improve the country's human resources through enhancing their intellectual growth and vocational skills. The 1977 Education Plan, on the other hand, tried to use education for the purpose of indoctrinating democratic values, principles, and behaviours.

(Sangnapaboworn, 1986, p. 263)

Boonsanong Punyodyana, a talented scholar and activist who was Secretary General of the Socialist Party at the time of his assassination in 1976, would be prescient on the failure of education reform. He argued that reform would only serve the power elite, while a revolution could only come from below (1974, pp. 114-115). In his Marxist critique of the Thai education system, there would be no fundamental change unless a professional or occupation group that represented an autonomous skilled labour or merchant class was able to take power from the centre, as in Japan (*ibid*, pp. 110-111). Thailand's emerging middle classes lacked autonomy and were easily persuaded to join the rightist forces stirred the insecurities driven by the oil crisis and American withdrawal (Anderson, 1977).

### **Constructing 'good' people: education to serve religion and national identity**

Moral inculcation prevailed in the end. The curriculum was refocused on moral character building and loyalty to the central state. Demographer Nipon Debayalya expresses scepticism for the value of competition, asking, 'Our educational system has still failed to teach and train our children to have quality in spirituality (*chit chai*) – is it possible because our educational system emphasises competitiveness to be "smart children" (*dek keng* เด็กดี) more than 'good children' (*dek di* เด็กเก่ง)?' (Department of General Education, 1985:43). Similarly, Sitthichai Thadaniti (1981:68), a teachers' college professor, expresses his reservations towards development that "...education in developed countries has advanced a lot in trades and technology. But there is a serious defect, which is the erosion of human virtues (*kunatham manut* คุณธรรมมนุษย์)." The goal is not to further the agricultural-industrial transition but to teach farmers, through the formal education system, that their occupation is important (*ibid*: 89).

In contrast, Confucianism in Korea stressed academic merit ('smart children'), rather than spiritual or moral character as the sole valid criterion for judging individuals (Seth, 2002, p. 145). This emphasis on merit arose from the evolution of the notion of the *yangban* class, the traditional ruling class or gentry composed of civil servants and military officers. The modern South Korean middle class had acquired the traditional concepts of elite status once held by the *yangban*, except that hereditary privilege was no longer relevant (Lett, 1998, p. 227).

The expansion of Thailand's middle classes did not lead to an erosion of the two-class structure described above. This was due in part to the role the education system played

in perpetuating it. Skills for careers 'appropriate' or 'in accordance with local needs' became code words for the kind of training to be conducted in rural schools. Meanwhile, the predominantly Sino-Thai Bangkok middle class gained social mobility and assimilated into the bureaucracy through entry into elite schools and universities. The gap is apparent in a guidebook on the teachers' role in rural villages that states that teachers should urge villagers to take up occupations that are (morally) right "the villagers should not become gamblers, engage in cock fights, etc." (Chulalongkorn University, 1982, pp. 54-55). In addition, teachers should assist in community development by helping to keep the village clean, maintain sanitation, and urge villagers to build toilets (ibid). They should instil in villagers a love for their locality. Teachers' roles in administering the country were no less important:

Some villages are in Communist Party of Thailand areas, which is opposite of the system of democracy. They break the laws and do not respect the monarchy. Teachers have several duties with regard to beliefs and attitudes. Teachers must change the beliefs and attitudes and make the villagers know by demonstrating and organising trainings. In this way, the villagers may know the King's charitable works (*prarachakoroneeyakit* พระราชกรณียกิจ) and the importance and goodness of the democratic (sic) system, and integrate it into book learning. For the villagers that have good attitudes already, teachers can make their attitudes even better. (ibid, p. 56)

There is no mention of teachers' role in preparing Thailand for an agricultural-industrial transition or equipping students with analytical and problem-solving skills. If anything, the emphasis of this period is on education to impart self-reliance. Ultimately, Thai cultural elites could not reconcile material pressures with the desire to preserve traditional Thai Buddhist values. This is most evident in the writings of conservative monk P. A. Payutto. He views development in terms of education in science and various technical fields as leading to environmental destruction, wars and conflicts, and increased competition among humans for resources (P. A. Payutto, 1989, p. 12). Science and technology lead to bad development, causing more damage than benefits ultimately (ibid, p. 20). Development on the whole becomes associated with harms to spiritual health and psychological problems (ibid, p. 12).

### **Not appropriate to be a tiger**

In 1980 Army Commander-in-Chief General Prem Tinsulanond became Prime Minister, ruling until 1988. Under Prem's watch the economy experienced export-driven double-digit growth, but socio-economic disparities widened, and the government failed to capitalise on opportunities to expand secondary education enrolments (Knodel & Malinee, 1989). Secondary education quality was poor (ibid; Chalongsob, 1988, pp. 24-31;

Department of General Education, 1985). Furthermore, the pattern of urban middle and upper-class bias continued “the school system and patterns of educational expenditure by government was reinforcing, not serving to counter the disadvantage faced by lower-income households” (Tan & Mingat, 1992, pp. 84, 100-101).

Leading intellectuals seemed to give up on the idea of education as agent of social mobility. The conclusion of Saneh Chamarik was that the gap was not being bridged:

Even within the education circle, the high administrators themselves said: We used to believe that education led to increased social justice. It led to everyone, regardless of social station, to have equal opportunity and eventually eroded the gap between the social classes. But from current experience, it appears that education helps reinforce social class division.

(1983, p.10)

There was an acknowledgement that the primary obstacle to secondary education was that most rural parents could not afford to send their children to study further (Department of General Education, 1985). Primary enrolments expanded without improving quality, leading to increased wastage. Teachers simply ‘lacked adequate pedagogical skills and sufficient content knowledge’ (Wheeler et al., 1992, p. 130). The 1980s can be considered the ‘lost decade’ for secondary education with the failure to extend the compulsory period during this juncture (Jetin, 2010, p. 85).

In 1973, when per capita GDP in South Korea was on par with Thailand in 1978, ROK government education expenditures as a percentage of GDP were ‘considerably higher, as were secondary enrolment ratios’ (Booth, 1999, p. 303). In Thailand’s case, there was a reluctance to devote additional public resources to secondary education and training, preferring instead to rely on private tuition fees or private sector involvement (Education Association of Thailand, 1981, pp. 63, 80).

Even while cognisant of the need to prepare the education system to adapt to the needs of the labour market, there was scepticism that educational planning could be effective (Education Association of Thailand, 1981, pp. 67, 79). During a 1981 seminar on ‘Human Resource Development and Planning for the Development of Education,’ Nipon Sasithorn, who had been Minister of Education under M.R. Kukrit, remarked that “educational planners ignored the human factor. We failed to see that humans have lust and desires, get angry, greedy, are ambitious, have intellects, become jealous, etc. We treated people as units of productive factors only” (ibid, pp. 46-47). To engage in planning for economic development would violate human dignity by refusing to see humans as not capable of evolution, thought, or change (ibid, p. 47). This perhaps is reflective of Thai Buddhist emphasis on individual than social outcomes, as well as a fundamental rejection of planning for human resource development.

During his tenure as Prime Minister from 1980 to 1988, Prem appointed four different ministers of education: Boonsom Martin, a medical doctor and career ministry bureaucrat who is considered the father of physical education in Thailand; Sippanondha Ketudat, leader of the reform movement described above and a nuclear physicist who later became Minister of Industry; Kasem Sirisamphan, professor of journalism and constitution drafter; and Chuan Leekpai, a Southern lawyer who was to become Prime Minister in 1992. Dr. Sippanondha, perhaps the most 'technocratic' of the ministers, is most indicative of those who believed they could reconcile the desire for economic and technological development with traditional values. Writing in *Knowledge for the Future*, he states:

Culture and morality is something on which we should focus. Advances in technology and in economy do not necessarily have to be compatible with culture and morality. However, development must be. Development must be compatible with culture and morality in order for the people to have a good life. Even if in that quest for modernisation we must compromise and adjust in order to be compatible with the values and morality that are the standards for that culture.

(1992, p. 292)

Moreover, he believes that Buddhism should be the standard to measure progress in genuine development (ibid). Ultimately, this religious and cultural orientation means that newly industrialised or NIC status is *not* appropriate for the Thai economy. The Asian tiger economies, he asserts, have achieved their levels of growth because they relied on 'governmental power that is far more authoritarian than that which would be appropriate to Thai culture' (Sippanondha, 1990, pp. 56-57). This represents an articulation of spiritual education: that knowledge, particularly in the fields of science and technology, should only serve the middle path between greed and asceticism. Ultimately, technocrat Sippanondha echoed ideologue Pinyo Sathorn. The later, writing in 1987, affirms, "the development of society in only economic terms, by not developing education, has lead unsurprisingly to a social crisis because a good economy does not mean that society is happy and peaceful (*santisuk* สันติสุข)" (Sathorn, 1987, p. 275).

## Conclusion

The desire to reconcile both economics and ethics on the part of Thai elites was not something new. In his writings, Chaopraya Thammasakmontri, an influential official in the new Ministry of Education that had been transformed from the Department of Religion during the reign of King Rama V (1868-1910), wrote that before an individual could contribute to economic progress, he or she needed to develop both spiritual and technical qualities (Kullada, 2004, pp. 86-87). In this sense, the critical juncture for the modern Thai economy was not the 1932 coup formally overthrowing the absolute monarchy nor the 1970s reform

movement, but the rise of the absolutist state that consolidated under the Fifth Reign. It was during this reign that too much emphasis was placed on tertiary education at the expense of secondary education (Ekawit, 1967, p. 126). The contemporary Ministry of Education functions as a continuation of the type of modernisation undertaken during the late 19th century. It was the modernisation of semi-coloniality, which entailed a nationalism that would later evolve into official royalist nationalism (Thongchai, 2001) and merchant or middle class co-optation and subordination. During the mid-20th century, Thailand became a victim of the Cold War as American policies reinforced the superstructure that arose from semi-coloniality. The conclusion on the Thai education system during the 1970s was that revolution, not reform, was needed (Aphichai, 1975). Yet even economist Aphichai, in one of the first efforts to link education to the economy, proposes reform measures that fall short of 'revolution'.

Forty years hence, there are debates on whether the Thai economy has reached a middle-income trap, where a skills deficit is stymieing higher value-added production. Roughly forty per cent of the population is still engaged in the agricultural sector, or a combination of agricultural and informal sectors (World Bank, 2012). These material conditions supported an institutional framework that privileged spiritual development over economic upgrading. In South Korea the state sought to match the supply of skilled workers to the changing demands of the *chaebol* and the smaller enterprises in the economy (Ashton et al., 1999, p. 56). If the ROK's emphasis on industry is an indirect result of its resource endowment (relative land scarcity and weak agricultural base), then Thailand's emphasis on spiritual development for its rural population is a result—albeit indirect and convoluted—of its relative land abundance. Both Thailand and Korea faced external threats at various junctures of their histories. Both countries experienced rule by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian military regimes. Education systems have mediated the relationship between their respective resource bases and superstructures of Buddhist and Confucian cultural orientations; it is this mediation that merits investigation.

The discourse of morality and education still dominates in the 2000s. The 'yellow shirt' movement that arose in opposition to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his network in 2005 criticised elections as easily manipulated by politicians. The root cause of this, according to many of the movement's supporters, is that voters lack the requisite education in order to be able to properly make choices at the polling station. Education in this sense does not mean informed reasoning over policy options but the moral fortitude to reject selling one's vote to a canvasser. The outside world, with its idealistic notions of equal rights and free elections, fails to comprehend Thai culture, in this rhetoric. The National Education Plan for 2002-16 reflects the on-going debate that pits globalisation against cultural preservation (Benveniste, 2008, p. 221). In 2014, following the twelfth successful military coup since the end of the absolute monarchy, the Ministry of Education announced



plans to implement junta leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha's 12 Thai Values – emphasising discipline, morality, and patriotism – into the education reform roadmap for the years 2015-2021.

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