

## Culture corruption in Thai society: The case of Thai journalists

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*Although the lack of awareness of the public of corruption among the media, compared to politics, we cannot deny its importance, especially since the media has started playing a large role in Thai political and economical society. Understanding the practice of corruption by Thai journalists through the methodical analysis of its cultural cause would definitely help comprehension toward fighting against it.*

*This article examined the causes of corrupt behavior in Thai society based on historical and cultural explanations. The considerations were illustrated from Sukhothai era up to contemporary Thai society. Then, we introduced some culturally related causes of corrupt practices among Thai journalists. The Patron-client social relationship established in Thailand since the birth of the nation is considered as a significant cause of corruption. Thai journalists, as Thais, are inevitably affected by patron-client relationship with respect to corruption. The professional relationship, a new tradition introduced to Thai journalists in 1932 was taken for granted at first. The patronage interaction between news sources and Thai journalists was constantly practiced. "Small corruption" was given and taken at any time. But, apparently, as contemporary Thai journalists could draw the line of corruption more clearly, the importance of the patronage link is decreasing while the consciousness of professional interaction is gradually increasing. However, still, the abolishment of corrupted practices would take some more time according to the compromising character of Thai journalists.*

### Introduction

*"ao sin sa gang sod chang kaeng dang lek ngeun ngang on dai dang chai"* (one, though, as firm as iron, still could be bent by money, bribe), a famous quote from *Lilit pra law*, a traditional Thai novel written in Ayuthaya era, 500 years ago. The quote indicates

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that there was corruption in Thai society at least half a millenium ago. At the same time the quote express the concern about corruption problems from this era [Supatra and Puangpech 1975: 11].

Such concern applies to present Thai society as well. Corruption is still considered as one severe social issue. It is even regarded as a submission of Thai society. [Anand 2001: 27]

Corruption is an unacceptable practice for Thai society at any time, nevertheless its numbers are on the increase. This conflict brought about some questions that are also the core inquiries of this article. What caused corrupted practices in Thailand? And why are they still being practiced?

The answers to the above questions will be illustrated and their effect on the behavior of Thai journalists, the new comers on the stage of social power in Thai society will be showed.

The first group who could grasp power in Thai society were nobles and officials. These people had been working for the kings since the birth of the nation. Therefore, they are considered as the oldest powerful group.

Afterwards, democracy was introduced to Thai society by the bloodless revolution in 1932 and brought about new kinds of state's administration, and at the same time, cleared the way for a new group of people to come into power: politicians were the second wave to come to share power in Thai society with the first one, the officials. [Sangsit and Pasuk 1994: 8-11]

Today, mass media have become an important part of Thai society, since they transmit most information and social movements, clearly seen from the works of radio and newspapers during the time of Black May 1994. The influence of information from mass media was one of the important tools for people all over the country not to be brain washed by the dictate's propaganda. This led to a peaceful solution to the crisis [Chaiyawat 1998: 16]. Therefore, mass media seemed to be gradually stepping into and sharing power in Thai society with officials and politicians.

Currently, Thai people are very aware of examining corrup-

tion in the two oldest groups of power, officials and politicians. According to the political reform in 1999, the new constitution of Thailand was written to establish several independent ad hoc committees to examine the wrongdoings of politicians and officials: for instance, the election commission [The election commission 2000: 7] and the National Counter Corruption Commission [Kavi 2001: 13]. But it seems that examining corrupted behavior among media people was not practiced as much as it should have been.

In this article, besides answering the main inquiry based on the historical and cultural contexts, it shall also answer the same questions, but applied to media people, especially on newspapermen or journalists. Then, this article will describe several methods of corruption among newspapermen. At the same time, it may clarify one of the most arguable parts: how corrupte and non-corrupt behaviors are distinguished based on the opinions of Thai journalists.

## **Culture corruption in Thai society: the backgrounds**

### **Why is there corruption in Thai society?: historical and cultural explanations**

The causes of corrupted behaviors among Thai people could be derived from these following factors: firstly, the early regime of the nation; secondly, the religion: Buddhism and lastly, the vertical social relationship or Sakdina system.

The early regime of the Thai nation established in Sukhothai era was called paternal government or widely known as *por pok krong loog*. It is a kind of administrative pattern where the ruler has a very close contact with his people as if they are members of the same family [Chanwit 1997: 80].

The way kings of Sukhothai ruled their people was similar to the way fathers take care of their children. Such paternal governance brought about a special kind of relationship, the basic social interaction of Thai society called the “patron-client relationship”,

*rabob uppata*m in the traditional term. Later, such interaction is believed to be the main cause of corruption in Thai society [The Counter Corruption Commission 1998: 93].

The patron-client relationship is a pattern of creating and keeping relationships between two people; it is a dyadic relationship based on intensified vertical ties among specific individuals. It is exclusively a hierarchical power relationship with one party in superior and the other in subordinate status. The superior is called “patron” while the subordinator is named “client” [Cole 1971: 196]. (this type of relationship may apply to oyabun-kobun relationship in Japanese society [Nakane 1997: 44])

Further, the way in which Thai kings in the past ruled their subordinators, Thai officials, is also concerned with the cause of corrupt behaviors in later generations. An official who worked for the kings in the Sukhothai kingdom held a lot of power, particularly the power to collect tax from traders. But there was a special point of administration at that time that the officials did not get paid systematically. They might get some tips or nice presents from the king now and then. Simply put, Thai officials in Sukhothai worked without getting any salary but power and prestige. However, the king allowed officials to keep 10 % of the tax (whether money or goods) as tips. This implies that the main income of Thai officials was from keeping 10% of the tax they collected [Sanit 1991: 21].

Such patterns of tax and wages management opened a wide opportunity for an official to ask for money or products as tax and keep them in his own pocket. Whereas, Thai people who were affected by the influence of patron-client concept became submissive to the way their goods were overtaken by the official. Here, traders could play a patron role by giving valuables to the official whilst the official could become a client of the traders and also a patron as a person who is holding a trading permission. They apparently built an interdependent relationship, exchanging private benefits on behalf of formal duty along with personal favor.

Secondly, the Buddhist’s concepts of “bun khun”: the

concept of doing another a good favor so that another would be grateful and do a good turn, tightened patronage links among Thai people as well. The social relationship of Thai people based on the bun khun system could go very well with the patron relationship that once taking appeared, there would be giving in return [Omduen 1998: 12]

Lastly, the vertical social relationship or Sakdina system that categorized Thai people into two levels, the upper class and the lower one [Kueg-rit 1973: 54] brought about a permissive character of Thai people and a strong gift giving practice which appeared in the Ayutthaya era. The practice of gift giving to a superior at that time had nothing to do with corruption, instead, a necessarily custom. This practice was so obvious that a member of the royal French embassy to the kingdom of Siam in 1685 took notes about the tradition of listing things from foreign traders or ambassadors in order to take them as gifts for the king of Siam that:

For sure the presents to the king are magnificent and are constantly added to the list (of gifts). I think I already told you: I am ashamed of it and I said more than four times to Mr. Constance<sup>1</sup> “basta” (stop), but he kept on adding more. [De Choisy (1685)1995: 236]

Though the above concepts were established since 800 years ago, they are still believed to be very influential in Thai society especially as significant causes of corruption. Let us see how they have affected corrupt behavior among Thai people so far.

## **Corrupted behaviors in contemporary Thai society**

Thai society in at the present time has dramatically changed in the aspect of administration but the core of culture and traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Mr. Constance is Constatin Phaulkon (1647?- 1688), the Grecian unofficial prime minister of Siam in the period of Somdejpranarai the great.

practices are still the same as those practiced in ancient Thai society. The professional relationships from western society were applied to Thai society in order to replace the patron-client relationship. However, such modern relations could not immediately replace the traditional practices. But, this has caused many conflicts in Thai society including the conflict about how to draw the line of corruption or how to distinguish gifts from bribes [Sangsit and Pasuk 1996: 5]

In 1932, after the bloodless revolution, the absolute monarchy was abolished and democratic administration was established in Thailand. Sakdina system was also eliminated [Sangsit and Pasuk 1996: 8]. At the same time, there was the establishment of a university aimed at giving an opportunity to common people who have no relations with the royal family or nobles to get higher education. Also, the recruitment of civil servants was opened to every one, not limited merely to upper class people. And the formal officials' promotional evaluation system was created [Chantwit 1997: 137-139].

However, in practice, Thai people still conserve the patron-client relations, obviously seen from the recruitment of the state enterprises where extremely high salary, annual bonus and other welfare are provided: the electricity's state enterprise for instance. It is widely known that "nepotism" has a deep root there. The priority to be admitted as a new employee is given to the descendents of former employees. Though, in the principles of the organizations there is no such rule written.

The son of the former director of the electricity's state enterprise of the North-Eastern region admitted that if there was not such traditional rule he would not get the job at the former office of his father. Also, he said that it is impossible for the outsiders to get a job in this organization because there is a long waiting list of relatives of both former and current employees [interview, December 23, 2000].

There are traditional terms to call a person who could get a



job thanks to some influential people: “*dek sen*” (literally means a man with a line) or “*dek fak*” (an entrusted man). Usually, “*dek fak* or *dek den*” is a client of a patron and definitely, “*dek sen*” become indebted or a person who “*pen nee bun kun*” from the patron.

The traditional term *dek sen* excellently demonstrated the existence of nepotism and favoritism, some types of patron-client links in Thai society. The two terms “*sen*” or “*sen sai*” both mean “*line*”, as their Japanese homonym. This line can directly refer to link or connection in English. However, in several contexts “*sen*” itself does not merely mean connection: for instance, to use “*sen*” (*chai sen*) is the term for the client who takes advantages of having intimacy or good connection with an influential person. To have “*sen*” (*mee sen*) is also the term for the client to indicate he has an influential back up. “*Sen*” can be divided into many levels depending on how influential the patron is. “*Sen yai*” (big line) is more powerful and the 1 result of using it is more guaranteed than “*sen lek*” (small line). It is seen that the term “*sen*” for the patron does not mean connection, but power or influence [Nithi 1999: 47].

Formerly, “*sen sai*” probably derived from “*cheur sai*”: descent [Sirichai Wankaew in Ishii and Yoshikawa 1993: 126]. According to patronage practice it is certain that one’s descendant will get patrons from him first: to get hired by the local electricity company, the son used the ‘*sen*’ of his father. And this ‘*sen*’ is more related to nepotism: (“*rabob cruer yat*” or the link among the same descent, “*chuer sai*”) than favoritism found by a good connection. The practice of entrusting one’s children to the king is an obvious practice of favoritism in Thai society.

To abuse one’s power for his followers’ own sake may be considered as one kind of corruption. But, according to research, such a thing is considered by Thai people as just an inappropriate behavior, not as serious as committing corruption [Sangsit and Pasuk 1996: 148]. It indicates that nepotism and favoritism are out of consideration as corruption for Thai people nowadays.

Further, gift giving is widely practiced even though Thai

officials have formal assignments to serve their clients and formally obtain salary. However, according to the same research's result, Thai farmers and Thai businessmen still believe that giving the officials a small amount of money (50 baht) as "*tips*" is not corruption. Instead, it is a symbol of expressing kindness (in the traditional term "*sin nam jai*") [ibids., 137]. These are excellent examples of the influence of traditional practices, a patronage link established 800 years ago that has affected Thai society so far.

As mentioned above, though there are several changes in current Thai society, people are still used to old practices. However, it is still not that desperate when there are some people attempting to adapt themselves to the new social structures. And many found that some patterns of behavior Thai people have been practicing for a long time could probably be considered as corruption. A new way of thinking emerged in this period and brought about the origination of scopes of corruption in Thai society.

## **Scopes of corruption in Thai society**

Before considering the scopes of corruption in the current Thai society, let us first get some concepts of corruption in Thai society since the old periods, that is the absolute monarchy period.

Corruption in Thai society in the absolute monarchy period can be defined into two aspects.

1. Corruption from the point of view of the king is called "*chor rat bung luang*" (literally, cheating citizens and hiding (tax) from the king). To "*chor rat bung luang*" is the corrupt behavior of an official who diverted to large a share into his own pocket.

2. Corruption from the point of view of the people is called "*gin muang*" (literally, eating the state). "*gin muang*" occurred when an official or the king himself was perceived to be enriching himself abnormally by exploiting the powers of his office [ibids.,7].

In the year 1932 absolute monarchy was abolished while democracy was established. In the year 1975, the government under



the democratic administration created the Counter Corruption Commission or CCC, which is popularly known as *po po po*, as watchdog on corruption practices by public servants. According to the commission, there were two kinds of undesirable activities that could be framed as corrupted behaviors.

The first type of behavior is when government officials abuse their position or neglect their duty in ways that result in direct benefits accruing to themselves or others. The second type is the government officials who neglect their duty or bypass official orders with the intention to create misuse of public funds, and can be found guilty whether or not they or a third party can be proved to have benefited. This second type is termed “improper behavior” (*praphuet mi chob*) [ibids.,9].

In the early period of the awareness of corruption in Thai society, define of corruption behaviors mainly focused on corrupt behaviors committed by civil servants. But under the main stream of current Thai society that started to be gradually out of the influence of traditional patronage system, new definitions about corruption concerning other fields were created, apparently seen from the law related with parliamentary election which emphasized on examining corrupt behaviors of politicians [The election commission 2000: 31-32, 55-62].

According to the election law, these following examples are considered as corrupt practices for Thai politicians.

1. To give, to offer property or other benefits to other people.
2. To give, to offer money, property or other benefits whether directly or indirectly to any institution or community.
3. To invite people to party or entertaining events.
4. To treat someone to a meals or offer to treat meals to other people. [ibids., 31-32]

In addition, there is another bill in which gift giving became interpreted as serious as corruption, which manifested the endeavor of Thai society to promote more professional relationships. Citing article 13 of the law, a Thai politician could not accept gifts whose

values exceeded three thousand baht from any people except his own relatives, otherwise the gift would be called a bribe which would lead to an attempt to corrupt [The civil servants law: 1999].

Corruption in Thai society was defined according to the social context of each period but mainly focused on civil servants because they play a significant role in Thai society since the nation was established. Then corruption became examined among Thai politicians who started to play an important role in Thai society since democracy was founded. Also, the point of view of drawing the line of corruption and non-corruption have changed or added more.

For now, we would turn to examine another field that became one of the significant powers in the current Thai society: the media, to consider corrupt behaviors of Thai newspapermen or journalists and to illustrate the way they distinguish gifts from bribe.

## **Historical background of Newspapers in Thailand**

The first newspaper of Thailand was named “Bangkok Recorder” originated by D.B. Bradley, an American missionary. This first newspaper was printed in Thai and was released on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1844. Then, 30 years later, on July 7<sup>th</sup> 1874 (period of King Chulalongkorn), there appeared the first daily newspaper in Thai language run by Thai people called “Darunowat” (the instructions of youngsters). As a matter of fact, “Darunowat” was created and edited by the 18 years old prince Kasemsansopak with the cooperation of other young princes at that time [Kajorn 1983: 70-71]. Thereafter, there have been newspapers released numerous in Thailand. So far it has been more than a century that newspapers were introduced to Thai society.

Since people who gave birth of Thai newspaper were a missionary and pundits of Thai society, the contents of Thai newspapers in the early period mainly focused on administrative news, philosophical concepts or ideas according to the interests of

the writers. It could be assumed that Thai newspapers in the early period were run idealistically, apparently seen from the founders who held their main jobs while running the newspapers. At this time, making newspapers was not yet a profession that newspapermen aimed at earning money from. Thus it was said that corruption among newspapermen had not yet emerged. As one of senior journalists said:

Corruption committed by Thai journalists appeared after World War 2. Before the war, Thai journalists were completely clean [Samnieng in Bunlert 1996: 41].

### ***“song khao nangsupim” = Corruption among Thai journalists***

*“song khao nangsupim”* or “newspapermen’s white envelope” refers to corrupt behaviors among Thai journalists. It is indeed widely known that some news sources may give “tips” money to Thai journalists by submitting it in a white envelope.

However, the original purpose of using “white envelope” in journalists’ field in Thailand was not for giving “tips” money. As a matter of fact, in the year 1957 (2500 in Buddhist era), there was a newspaper called “2500 raai wan”, (2500 dailies) which belonged to the chief of the police department at that time. The business was run by “favorite styling” which both real journalists as well as the policeman under the patron of the chief were hired. The stableness of the company was shaken by patronage practices because there were too many employees in vain. Thus, some employees were sacked. “2500 raai wan” was the first Thai newspapers to enclose the notice of being fired in a white envelope [Lawan 1979: 83-84]. But, the later usage, the notice of being sacked was replaced by “tips” money. It could be said that the term “white envelope” referring to corruption among Thai journalists was created during the 50s-60s.

This article will describe Thai journalists and their “white envelope” during 3 periods: formerly, the beginning period, secondly, the period of dictatorship and lastly the bubble economic period.

## **Corruption practices and their causes in the beginning period (immediately before 1945)**

The very first “white envelope” practice claimed by Lawan happened right before the year 1945. The government’s lottery department started to invite journalists to attend the announcements of the result of the lottery twice a month. After the result was released journalists would get a print out of the announcement as well as some souvenirs like a silver coast or a silver ashtray as a gift for the kindness of the journalists if they would publish the result of the lottery on the following day.

Later, instead of giving souvenirs, the lottery department submits “tips” money in white envelopes. All journalists admitted the “tips” were considered as gifts or the amenities of the lottery department, or “*sin nam jai*” [ibids.,84-86].

According to the practice demonstrated above, it is obvious that Thai people still lacked a sense of “professional relations”. The lottery department did not manage to advertise the announcement of the result of the lottery professionally such as preparing some budget and making a contract with a newspaper officially to publish the announcement twice a month. Rather, they prefer “patron-client contact” which could be expressed in the traditional term “*nam pueng rue sue pueng pa*”, *water seeks a boats’ favor whereas tigers seeks forests’ favor*, shortly said, we are all depend on each other.

Therefore, the lottery department paid less by giving the journalists just some small “tips”. The journalists who also did not try to draw the line between profession and privation, taking “tips”, put it in their own pockets and carried the news back to their offices.

In brief, the very first case of “white envelope” in Thai journalists’ field was caused by people who concentrated too much on their own sake, which is probably a common thing among humankind. The second most important cause was the new concepts of social relationship and professional behavior that could not

overcome the old practice of Thai society yet.

The other case in the early period is more obvious as corruption. A journalist asked for about 100 baht (30,000 yen for the present time) from politicians in exchange for reporting the politicians' story. The journalist became widely known among politicians who would like to promote their activities and lift up their images. However, the affair was discovered afterwards but, unfortunately, there was no clear evidences for the editor to fire him. But still, his prestige as a good journalist was completely finished with respect of social punishments [ibids., 87-89].

### **Corruption practices and their causes in the period of dictatorship (1945-1971)**

The obvious causes of corruption among Thai journalists in this period were firstly: *the patronage link between the journalists and the influential sources like the policemen and high ranking military men:*

The military and the policeman gained authorial power in the Thai political stage, also, they were followed by the citizens according to the fear of communism in Thai society those days. Military men and the policeman obtained much power that that they could expand their influence into the business sector. At that time, there were a large number of newborn newspapers owned by policemen [Lawan 1979: 84].

Such phenomenon increased the patron-client relationship between policemen and journalists, especially in the newspapers not run by the police, because, for a policeman, to have his name published in a newspaper could be one way to have a bigger reputation and promotions. As there were some policemen who owned newspapers and could put their names in the newspapers more frequently, policemen who did not have any, thus, had to pleased journalists by all means.

The patron-client relationship between policemen and the

journalists at that time was, for instance, journalists who could go to ask a policeman to bring them to a restaurant and treat them to a free meal whenever the journalist asked or the policeman was supposed to take the journalists to get free service from any kind of entertainment place where the policeman was influential, in other words, the journalists could use the *çsené* of the policeman.

The journalists who had experienced such profits exchange insisted that it was a common practice among journalists and news sources at that time which, according to him, was far from being considered as a corrupt behavior,

When we asked for things from a policeman, we asked for merely small things, we did not ask in order to gain wealth, just for some drinks or entertainment. Also we did not hide it, in contrast, we told our colleagues in a funny way that we succeeded in extorting a treat from the policeman. After work, we would go out together to get the free service. [Khanchai in Bunlert 1996: 41]

In contrast, other senior journalists stated that Thai journalists in this period had a very strong patron-client relationship with their news sources, which could lead to corruption unintentionally. In those days to have a big birthday party arranged or supported by a high ranking policeman could be another way to manifest how influential a journalist was. Therefore, many journalists at that time intentionally announced the supporters of their birthday's party to the public in order to look powerful [Bunlert 1996: 45].

Such privileges Thai journalists obtained from their sources did not seem to be a “white envelope” thing for them. Though some journalist were aware of the patron relationship between them and their sources as the overthrow of theirs professional ethics, especially with respect to corrupt behaviors. It seemed, for some journalists that to obtain privilege from the sources not to be a “white envelope”, but “*sin nam jai*”, gifts that express one's kindness.



However, not everything Thai journalists obtained was considered as “sin nam jai”. There was a clear case of “white envelope” mentioned. The journalist asked for money from the politician and reported his story in exchange. The journalist who did not announce such an exchange to the public, saying that the money was “sin nam jai” from a politician, and didn’t accept. Whereas, the editor of the newspaper where the journalist, attempted to investigate the affair seriously and indicated that this is an unacceptable thing or corruption [Lawan 1979: 85-89].

*The last cause is the rapid growth of the economy:* the rapid growth of the Thai economy in this period resulted from the aid from the United States government. At that time, the United States attempted to assist Thailand to resist communist influence; thus, a lot of aid from the American government over flowed to Thailand [Chanwit 1997: 171]. Such smooth growth opened more opportunities to policemen to ask for free services from restaurants without any complains from the owners of the restaurants. Additionally, “gift-giving” numerously increased as this following demonstration. There was a group of journalists who were invited by the owner of a factory and they were supposed to write some news about it. After the observation, each journalist got a gold ring from the owner of the plant as a “gift”. The “gift” was given in order to thank journalists for their visit. Additionally, there was no condition from the owner that it is a must for the journalists to report the observation.

One journalist who admitted taking the gold ring said that the ring was not considered as a bribe. Neither to admit it is not a corrupt behavior, because both sides realized that such a practice is a traditional way of giving in Thai society. And especially, journalists happened to get it for free, not by their demands [Wipa in Bunlert 1996: 47]. Such cases manifest clearly that favoritism still plays a significant role in social interactions of Thai people. And it is telling that professional interaction was absent.

After this period, dictatorships of military and the policeman became abolished and less influential because there was no more

fear of communism. Thai society return to democratic again. But, the recession of the economy according to the oil shock decreased the practice of gift giving. Thus, there were no significant corruption cases among journalists to be mentioned in the period after the period of dictatorship. However, when it came to the economics peak period in Thailand, 1997-1998, such affairs became a hot issue again.

### **Corrupted practices in the bubble economic period and their causes (1997-1998)**

Though, on the surface, the mainstream of corrupt behavior among Thai journalists in this period may be caused by the boom of the economic, the deep root of patron-client relationship should be considered as the main cause. The rapid growth of the economy merely widened the degrees and patterns of corrupt behaviors. At the same time, the so called “confrontation avoiding character” of Thai people allowed corrupt behaviors to be constantly practiced.

It is obvious that corrupt behaviors among Thai journalists in this period were still numerous; indeed, the senior editor of Kao sod newspaper admitted that;

There are several famous journalists who were corrupt for that own benefits in the mean time, many new journalists are accepting “white envelope” from the news sources”. [Thakoon Boonpan in David Lamb 1999: 13]

Jirapong Tempium, the head of political news of *Naew na* newspapers said that:

The other journalists and me were invited to go along with a certain company to make an observation about their business projects in Taiwan. After finishing the observation each of us got a white envelope that contained 5,000 baht

(or about 15,000 yen) of cash inside. At that time, everyone accepted it but in the following day 10 out of 20 of journalists including me gave the money back to a staff of the company secretly in order to save the face of the company, while other 10 journalists did not return the money. [interview, February 19, 1998]

A similar case happened to the executive editor of *Phuchatkarn* newspaper:

There are some stock companies that regularly give “tips” money to journalists by making a list of journalists who attended the press conference and ask journalists to call back to the company and take money on the following day. Some journalists called back and took money but some did not call and do not like such practice. [interview, February 26, 1998]

However, “tips” money, whether given directly or enclosed in “white envelope” seems to be less practiced. Pramot Faiupara, the executive editor of *Thairath* commented:

“Tips” giving is decreasing, because the news sources, nowadays, realized that journalists obtains salary, pocket money and travel expense from the journalists’ own company. Thus news source and journalists started to contact each other more professionally. [interview, February 27, 1998]

Among contemporary Thai journalists and news sources, “tips” in white envelopes became less practiced. Nevertheless, other types of ‘white envelope’ emerged.

According to the head of the political news section of *Matichon* newspapers, some famous journalists are taking bribe from the politicians playing golf together with them. Later, the politicians would pretend to lose and as a loser, the politicians would pay

large prize money to the journalists. This is the latest way to transfer a large amount of money so that both sides could avoid being doubted from the public with respect to corruption. [Pakpoom Pongpai, interview, December 8, 1997]

The most arguable corrupt behavior among Thai journalists in this period happened on August 31, 1997. One of the companies of Thai tycoon, Thaksin Shinnawat (now prime minister), celebrated its 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary by inviting a large number of journalists to the party. During the party there were food and beverages provided regularly. In addition, there were numerous gifts for all attendants such as pens, telephone books, ten gold necklaces costing 30,000 yen each, two gold necklaces 200,000 yen each, cameras, beepers and special gifts such as thirty mobile phones costing each 200,000 yen at that time [Bunlert 1996: 132-135]. Small gifts like pens and notebooks were given to every attendant while special gifts (gold necklaces, cameras, beepers and mobile phones) were given by lottery. Some journalists who were lucky admitted to taking the gifts but some did not.

On the following day, the headline news in several Thai newspapers reported that Thai journalists were bribed by the company. According to the strong feedback of the society, some journalists who admitted taking special gifts in the party decided to send them back to the company. Nevertheless, some still keep them by regarding such gifts as a real gift, not bribe [ibids., 135-137].

During this period, corrupt behavior was still practiced but their patterns dramatically changed. It is noteworthy that there was one dropping value, that is, the journalists hang out with the police so that to obtain privilege by using the influence of the police. At the present time, an obvious patronage relationship between journalists and news sources was created selectively with certain groups of people. Because, currently, the number of people under one's patron are not perceived as important as in the past. Also, the main news source of Thai journalists these days are politicians and businessmen who do not pay much attention to man force like

the military and the policeman.

The consciousness of patronage link caused the corrupt behavior while the rapid growth of the economic widened its degree and patterns. The previous party was the only example raised here, there were also many similar ones. A company would perceive that only the professional relationship was probably not sufficient for running their business. Favoritism would help the company to become better well known: to please journalists is one of the ways to achieve the sack. And since, the company earned a lot of profits thus, they could offer several special gifts for the journalists. This is the changing pattern of bribing, having a public party and giving expensive things in order to avoid being questioned about corruption.

Though, such practices were doubted by many journalists, there are still some journalists who insisted on interpreting things they got from the parties as gifts. And it seems that the journalists themselves did not attempt to find the solution for such conflict of interests. They still kept a “confrontational avoiding character”. As seen from the comments of the two senior journalists who were offered “tips” money from the news sources, they eventually sent it back later. Though, they knew that there were some journalists who did not return it back, they did not do anything further.

Similar to the arguable party above, instead of confronting the journalists who admitted special gifts, the Reporters Association of Thailand asked the company and all news sources not to have any party and give the journalists gifts [Bunlert 1996: 144-145]. It seems that, for Thai people and Thai journalists as well, individual practice has nothing to do with the others. Or if one happens to perceive the concern, nonetheless, there was no decisive exercise. Conflicts, therefore, still remained.

However, it is not too desperate to figure this issue out. The very first step to achieve the solution is to draw a clear line of corrupt and non-corrupt behaviors. The basic concepts of these two states may be clarified firstly, by distinguishing “gifts” from “bribes”.

## How do Thai journalists distinguish gifts from bribes

In 1952, there was an endeavor of Supa Sirimanon, one of the outstanding journalists of Thailand, to distinguish gifts from bribes in order to take certain measures to the professional ethics of Thai journalists, especially those related with conflict of interests. Supa categorized corrupt behaviors into two types, the first type is called “corruption” and the second type is called “small corruption”.

*Corrupt behaviors among journalists from the point of view of Supa:*

1. To accept money of other private benefits in order to report or distort news.

*Small corrupt behaviors among journalists from the point of view of Supa:*

1. To accept an extravagant meal (not a cup of coffee and few biscuits) from the news sources.
2. To accept free tickets from the news sources.
3. To attend a party or an entertained event held by the news sources.
4. To accept free travel provided by the news sources.
5. To accept valuable information from the news sources according to the intimacy between the journalists and the news sources.
6. To report news for certain news sources according to the intimacy.

[Supa 1957: 159-185]

However, in practice, it seems that only one case could be considered as corrupt behavior regarding Thai journalists in the same period as Supa, which is, to ask for money in exchange of news reporting. While accepting a gold ring or other souvenirs including “tips” money are considered as accepting “gifts”.



Such views excellently illustrated the influence of traditional practice of Thai people since 800 years ago. The similar practice among Thai people voluntarily gave gifts to the officials in order to gain favor or support.

When it came to the bubble economic period 1997-1998, there were findings about how Thai journalists could distinguish gifts from bribes. According to the 322 Thai journalists who responded the “situational questionnaires” in 1997, the results were that, these following situations were considered as admitting bribes from the news sources:

1. To accept cash from the news sources no matter with or without condition.
2. To accept stocks.
3. To accept gold or any thing made from gold.
4. To accept valuable information such as secret information of a company which only the journalists would gain direct benefits from.
5. To accept the invitation for a free meal from news sources after journalists reported good news about the news sources. [Noisuwan 1998: 126]

In addition, executive journalists added that to accept free tickets from news sources should be considered as being corrupt as well. Further, citing results of the same investigation, it was found that Thai journalists agreed to consider these followings as gifts:

1. Clothes
2. Fruits
3. A non-brand name watch
4. A non-brand name calculator
5. A non-brand name stationary
6. A meal (no matter its cost) [ibids., 127]

In other words, things with a small price, or things with a high price but could not be transferred to be money later and things that are necessary for news writing would be acceptable.

Ideally, Thai journalists could draw quite a clear line between

gifts and bribes. But, practically, some conflicts remained. Some journalists did not take cash or gold but still kept on accepting other things probably as costly and transferable to be money.

The explanation for such conflict may be given that, firstly, Thai journalists tend to draw themselves too much on their own sack. Secondly, Thai journalists are a part of Thai society where patron-client relationship is highly concentrated and gift-giving is widely practiced.

Regarding the explanations above, Thai journalists have left some situations that they could freely admit gifts from the sources. The followings are situations where Thai journalists allowed themselves to accept the “unconditional gifts”, the gifts which the receivers do not need to do anything in return to the giver after receiving.

### **1) The occasions; traditional celebrations:**

Kavi Congkitavorn, the executive editor of *The Nation* said:

To accept a big basket of food or fruits per each news section on new year day could not be interpreted as corruption. Because gift giving on such occasion has been practiced for a long time and it is practiced all over the world. [interview, February 12,1998]

Also the senior reporter of *Bangkok Post* agreed that to accept gifts from the news sources during the new year celebration, the anniversary of the newspaper or in the Thank you party (thank you the press) which is usually held once a year should be acceptable [interview, January 28,1998]. Further, Jintana Panyaawut, the head of political news' section of *The Nation* commented:

The time when everyone is celebrating could be the right time for the news sources to give journalists some gifts such as on new year's day or the newspapers' anniversary and in the

thank you party. [interview, December 11, 1997]

In sum, the occasions that Thai journalists allowed themselves to have a kindness from the news sources without any reluctance are,

- 1.1. New year's celebration
- 1.2. The anniversary of the newspapers
- 1.3. Thank you party held once a year

## **2) The way to obtain gifts:**

According to Thai journalists, things without commitment and things from the lottery that journalists do not demand for are widely considered as gifts, no matter how expensive things are, when attending a party according to the occasions above. The reason is that the things are given on the right occasion. Further and more important is that, those are things they did not demand, but the sources voluntarily gave to them.

Since the things are given and received without any conditions from both sides, therefore, such things could not be considered as bribes and to admit it could not be interpreted as committing corruption neither. The only way Thai journalists could consider these situations is to say that they obtained free things from the sources and free things are gifts. As Pairat Saejeng, a journalist from the entertainment section of *Siam rath* addressed:

To admit things like a television, a refrigerator or an air conditioner, which journalists happened to get from a lottery are not corruption since the news sources voluntarily gave them to us, we never made any commitment with them or requested anything from them. [interview, November 27, 1997]

The concept point of “never request but happened to obtain from a voluntary giving” is noteworthy. This could be the main point of interpreting corrupt or non-corrupt behaviors for Thai

journalists. According to the beginning and the dictatorship period, Thai journalists admitted “white envelope” and did not consider it as a bribe or committing corruption because they all stood on the same point that they did not ask for it, but the news sources voluntarily gave it to them. Such a point of view is still used among Thai journalists today.

To allow gift giving from news sources to journalists as an acceptable practice occasionally manifests the endeavor of Thai journalists to compromise the old and the new practice of social relations. However, such compromises could be obstacles to abolishing corrupt behaviors, especially those Supa Sirimanon considered as “small corruption”.

### **The Attempts of journalists to cope with corruption among Themselves**

The realization of corruption among Thai newspapers journalists, to a certain extent, has been completed. Further, the article will lead to the stage of combating corruption. But, before going straight for to the case of Thai journalists, we would like to introduce some of the attempts operated by newspaper journalists from various countries.

In the United States, in 1993, the American Society of Newspapers Editors has conducted a survey about conflicts of interest. The results showed that, for American journalists, it is acceptable to accept tickets for free admission but any travel expenses from news sources is unacceptable.

American journalists find that such a dilemma would trouble their operations and they also find that it is not easy to distinguish between gifts and bribes. However they have taken efforts for decades to deal with it. The codes of conflict of interests proposed by The Philadelphia Inquirer cover almost all respects of the issue, get into almost every detail in an effort to make such issues the least vague. The codes including,

*Inquirer staff members do not accept, for themselves, their families and their guests, free entertainment offered on the basis of the staff member's position with the Inquirer. This includes tickets to sports events, movies, theatrical productions, circuses, concerts, recitals, museums, exhibits, ice show and other events.*

*Staff members do not accept business-connected gifts, free rooms, sample merchandise, special reduced rates, funds provided by gambling establishments and race tracks, or any other low-pay or no-pay arrangement.*[American Society of Newspaper 2003]

However, the members of The Inquiry are allowed to accept items like a calendar, pencil, key chain or similar items.

Such clear fine lines could be one of the explanations why American journalists are among the world's top five print journalists who relatively hold high resistance to taking bribes.[Transparency International 2003]

Whereas newspaper journalists in Indonesia are also facing the same dilemmas, there is a case that one large textile company spent more than Rp450 million last year on "media-related expenses" which included monthly fees for reporters and senior editors. A large portion of money goes in envelopes that are given out quietly at press conferences. The rest is budgeted for gifts or shares in companies.

The ways Indonesian journalists cope with this problem, at a media organizational level, are raised with the example of Bisnis Indonesia.

Bisnis Indonesia collect the envelopes from the journalists and gives them to charities. Bisnis Indonesia publishes a monthly list of the amounts journalists who have received in envelopes. When journalists' names are conspicuously absent from the list, colleagues can guess they have kept the envelope rather than handing it to the office secretary.

In the larger scale level, The Jakarta-based Alliance of Independent Journalists has run anti-envelope campaigns for nearly two years in form of posters, research and in-house education.

It is about to unleash a campaign in which alliance representatives will meet politicians and business leaders to ask them to stop handing out envelopes.

If the strategies fail, the alliance will begin a shame campaign where the alliance will start circulating lists of money given out by news sources.[Pacific Media Watch 2002]

In the Philippines, several associations of journalists have pushed efforts to fight corruption in the media. In 1999 the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility held a national roundtable meeting “Corruption in Media: A Multi-Sectoral Perspective”. It is believed that the frame work would help instill greater ethics of the press in the country. [Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility 2003]

Corruption among journalists is a collective issue. Therefore, it would not be easy to be demolished immediately. However, the journalists from several countries gradually deal with it and hope to see that the measures taken would work. Next, we will see what sort of measures are taken by Thai journalists to fight against corruption among themselves.

### **How do Thai journalists cope with corruption among themselves?**

There were so many cases of corrupt behavior of journalists during the period of dictatorship that journalists among themselves demanded a construction of codes of conduct specifically applied to journalists.

Eventually, in 1976 the codes of conduct were established. The corruption problem was focused, the second item states that:

Thai journalists should report any news, photographs or opinions politely, honestly without any commitment of private's benefits or bribes [Malee 1994: 162].



However, the codes of conduct are the professional standards that the members of the associations “should” follow but there would be almost no concrete punishment if journalists did not obey the code. Further, a journalist who does not apply for memberships of press associations is excluded from following these codes of conduct.

Additionally, the problem solving strategies of the association were rather weak, that is, the association would not interfere with any matter as long as there is no petition for examination. Thus, the corruption problem among Thai journalists has merely become more noticeable of but it still looks difficult to be eliminated.

During the period of bubble economics, corruption practice was fully extended. However, some journalists started to take some actions. And, they found that old strategies could not eliminate corruption practices among journalists effectively. Thus, according to Manij Suksomjit, the first president of the Press Council of Thailand, in August 4<sup>th</sup> 1997, the former associations were dissolved and gathered together in order to shape a new organization to play the watchdog role on Thai journalists called the Press Council of Thailand. [Manij Suksomjit, interview, March 31, 1998].

The codes of conduct of the Press council of Thailand concerning corrupted behaviors among Thai journalists are as follows:

Journalists must not abuse their profession in exchange for private benefits and must not accept any kind of bribe [The Codes of conduct of the Press council of Thailand 1998: 3]

The Press council of Thailand did not merely replace the terms “must or must not” by the terms “should or should not” in the codes of conduct, but also applied the new strategies of examining professional conflicts called “active operations” [Suwat 2000: 2].

Firstly, to make concrete warnings or punishments to become possible, the journalists employed in a newspaper company which is a member of the council, have to follow the codes of conduct of

the council as their organizations do. Therefore, the comments of the council through the members, (newspaper organizations) would affect the journalists directly via the operation of the newspaper organization which the journalists belong to.

Secondly, the council has become more active, braking the so called “confrontation avoiding character” by searching for the conflicts and examining them by their own committee even without a petition from an accuser. At the same time, the petitions are still one of the main sources to realize the existence of conflicts.

One year after the establishment of the council, there were several conflicts solved. Also, there was an example case of “conflict of interests” in which the council achieved its concrete punishment.

The case was that a journalist who had a conflict with his former business partners assaulted his former partners and revealed weak points of the products sold by the company while he did not report such matters when he was a joint partner. The accuser requested the council to examine the journalist. After the investigation the council delivered the comment of the council to Dailynews, the journalists’ work place. As a result, the journalist was fired for abusing his professional power [The Press Council of Thailand 2000: 15].

The obvious cases of conflict of interests are resolutely copied by the Press Council of Thailand. And there shows some signs that such conflicts would probably be on the decrease in the near future.

However, gifts, free services or some kinds of privileges that Thai journalists get from their news sources, in other words “small corruption” are still numerous. Moreover, the attitudes of Thai journalists towards receiving things from their news sources as “free gifts” reinforced “small corruption” to be more widespread.

The way of thinking of Thai journalists that things from news sources are free is probably improper. If journalists do not hold certain benefits the news sources expected for, there would

never be any giving. This concept has a consensus with a gift in the point of view of Mauss that:

Gift giving is the primitive social contract of human beings. There is no such thing as a pure gift in any society, in fact a gift is never free [Mauss in Parry 1986: 454-457].

Merely the exercise of the press council of Thailand would not be sufficient for the elimination of corrupt behavior among Thai journalists. It is necessary to have contributions from Thai journalists. Firstly, to change the attitudes toward things given by the news sources as gifts. But if one happens to consider them as gifts, secondly, they should realize that a gift is never free.

## Conclusion

There was the awareness of the corruption problem in Thai society at least 500 years ago. As far as this article is concerned, the main cause of corrupt behaviors in Thailand are the typical social relations in Thai society, the patron-client relationships or legitimized as so-called Sakdina system. Further, it seems that Thai people who admitted such social interaction categorized Thai people into two classes, the upper class (patron) and the lower one (client).

The submissive character of Thai people derived from the Buddhists' beliefs especially, the belief about the difference of human beings. The difference of man is believed to be a result of the actions of individual in his previous life. Such characteristics strengthened patron-client and unequal relationship in Thai society at the individual level whereas the legitimacy of Sakdina system standardized this type of relationship as the national norm.

Later, Sakdina system was abolished according to the revolution to make Thailand become a democratic country in the year 1932. That is, the legitimate patron-client system was someone eliminated.

The patron-client relationship was not be a problem regarding the social context of Thai society in the past. But in the democratic atmosphere the patronage system turned out to be one of the causes and reinforcements of corrupt behaviors. When the old current of thought and its practice and the new ones encountered the conflict about interpreting corrupt behaviors emerged inevitably. Such conflict affected Thai society entirely, Thai journalists, for a certainty, were not an exception.

Based on the traditional Thai practices, to admit patron from news sources such as free services or gifts were perceived as the appropriate behaviors among some Thai journalists, whereas some found such practices as corruption, according to the new current of social context that emphasized on professional contacts.

The conflicts mentioned above become more noticeable by Thai journalists that many vague practices were clarified, several cases of patron-client like practices are considered as committing corruption and are no longer practiced. It seems that Thai journalists' consciousness of professional relations is increasing. Nevertheless, to compromise the old practices and the new ones, Thai journalists, still, retained some patronage links between them and their sources. That is, the corruption dilemma, particularly "small corruption", will not be undertaken to its end in the near future.

For the corrupt action that is beyond so-called "small corruption", it is believed to have transformed into a very simple and direct one, but limited to only senior journalists or targeted ones. The pattern of distributing gifts (in other words bribes) at press conferences tends to decrease since it has been heavily focused by the society.

However, it is plausible that, if only journalists would dare to confront the dilemmas decisively, it is never too late for the "watchdogs" to watch and clean themselves.

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