

# Problematizing Identity of the Thai Academic Landscape<sup>1</sup>

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*To what extent can these research practices be considered 'Thai' research? While the notion of 'Thainess' is unproblematic, a discussion of the governing paradigms used in the study of Thai society can perhaps help address the questions raised here.*

## Introduction

One of the remarkable aspects of contemporary Thai scholarship is its lack of debate regarding subjects larger than itself. Even studies in the field of international relations tend to center around the notion of crude national interests.<sup>2</sup> While it seems that Asian academics in general, and Southeast Asian scholars in particular, are engaging in critiques of dominant concepts they consider 'western', such as human rights, in Thailand, there appears to be little or no debate comparable to that taking place, for example, in Indonesia<sup>3</sup> and especially in Malaysia where the debate has recently spilled over elsewhere. The Malaysian case is evident in the exchanges between Muto Ichijo's "Debates on Human Rights Must Remain Free of State Discourse" and Douglas Lummis' "Rethinking Human Rights"<sup>4</sup> on one side and Chandra Muzafer, Director of World Trust, in his "Human Rights, the State and the Secular Challenge" on the other.<sup>5</sup>

This paper is 'not' a rejoinder to the current debate on the subject of human rights. Instead, I would maintain that a lack of scholarly debate on such an important subject is symptomatic of an academic pathology which is plaguing the Thai social science scene. Therefore to understand existing academic problems in Thai society, the contours of its academic landscape, focusing mainly on recent social research, will first be briefly examined, followed by a discussion of dominant social science paradigms governing the studies of Thai society, which in turn influence the existing body of knowledge. Finally, an

<sup>1</sup> A paper prepared for the Japan Foundation Asia Center Advisory Panel on "Intellectual Exchange and the Promotion of Culture in Asian Countries: Present Situation and Issues", Tokyo, Japan, March 25-26, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> See Suchit Bunbongkarn, 1995, p. 127

<sup>3</sup> See Wanadi, 1993

<sup>4</sup> Ichijo, 1995; Lummis, 1995

<sup>5</sup> Muzafer, 1995

attempt to reconnect Thai scholarship with its larger regional identity will be attempted. The contributing role of an organization such as the Japan Foundation's 'Asia Center' will also be suggested.

## **Contemporary Academic Landscape**

One of the most recent surveys of the Thai academic landscape was carried out by Uthai Dulyakasem (1994) under the auspices of the newly established and dynamic Thailand Research Fund, established by the Thai government in 1992 to expand the country's research capabilities. Focusing his attention on educational, social and cultural research conducted mostly in state universities, various government agencies, official commissions and some research institutes, Uthai encountered around 1,000 research works completed during a three-year period from 1991 to 1993.<sup>6</sup>

Approximately 500 of the research projects reviewed by Uthai are on education alone. According to his findings, this research primarily deals with: The demands of various target groups (eg "Learning Demands of Students in the Faculty of Economic Development, National Institute of Development Administration", 1991); problems facing different groups and institutions (eg "Current Situation, Problems, Obstacles and Planning Trends of Khon Khaen University", 1991); attitudes of those involved with the Thai educational system (eg "Political Attitudes of Secondary School Teachers in Buriram", 1993); numerous types of variables influencing educational behaviors or administrations of educational institutions (eg "Factors related to AIDS Preventive Behavior among the Chulachomklao Military Academy Cadets", 1993); evaluative research (eg "An Evaluation of the School Development Fund Project", 1991); and, novel-modelling of educational activities (eg "Environmental Protection Behavior of Grade 9 Students in Songkhla", 1992). Most of this research is descriptive. In addition, no research was found on law and regulation-related issues nor on educational rate of return.<sup>7</sup>

Attempts to build a body of knowledge about Thai society can be arranged into five groups. Uthai found only one major research project which attempts to study structures and structural changes of Thai society as a whole. This project was conducted under the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI) during 1992-1993. The rest in this group are much more restricted in scope (eg "Way of Life of People in the 'Urban Margin': A Study of Trash Scavengers in Garbage Community Outside Bangkok", 1993). The second group studies structure and structural changes of 'rural' Thailand (eg "Chiangmai 700 years", 1993 and "Community Forest in the North", 1993). The third group focuses on minorities in Thai society (eg "A Study of Muslim Folk Tales in Yala", 1991 and "Religious Conversions among Karens in Northern villages, Thailand", 1991). Research on social action groups in Thailand constitutes the fourth category (eg "Non-government Organizations and Protections of Natural Resources and Environment", 1992). The last group covers research carried out on specific groups such as women, children and the elderly (eg "Woman Workforce in the Industrial Sector: A Case Study of Chiangmai", 1992 and "Health and Health Care for Old People in Thai Society", 1991). In Uthai's

<sup>6</sup> Uthai Dulyakasem, 1994, p. 119

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 134

opinion, these research projects do not adequately reflect the holistic structural changes taking place in Thai society. In the studies on minorities, for example, much more needs to be done if specific information on their population size and economic, social, cultural and political aspects is to be sufficiently collected and interpreted. The same can be said about studies on social action groups which could be expanded in the future.<sup>8</sup>

Uthai divides research on religions and cultures into two groups: Thai local wisdom ("Dhamma Doctors and Traditional Medicine", 1991 and "Local Wisdom on Food Preservation [focusing on fish]", 1992); and, religious institutions ("Money System of the Buddhist Monks", 1991 and "Islam and Social Change: Impacts of Urban Growth on Religion in a Muslim Community, South Sai Gong Din, Min Buri", 1992). Considering the importance of religions and the recent attention local wisdom has received, there has been too little research on these subjects and, consequently, the body of knowledge on this topic is weak.<sup>9</sup>

In Uthai's opinion, these 1,000 or so research works contribute little to the process of building up a meaningful body of knowledge for a better understanding of Thai society. Education-related research, which amounts to half of all the works covered, suffers from numerous problems of methodology, notably the utilization of improper methodology for the problems under study and weak conceptual frameworks which generally result in 'specification errors'.<sup>10</sup> While Uthai finds similar problems with society-related research, this is more promising because in a number of cases, field research using participant and non-participant observations is utilized. What is still needed is a more historical approach to social phenomena with an awareness of the "actors' subjective reasoning". On cultural research, although most are descriptive, Uthai considers these studies deeply important for a better understanding of Thai society. They tend to suffer, however, from a lack of financial support since most funding agencies and donors may be more interested in the 'practical utility' of research projects under their patronage.<sup>11</sup>

Uthai's conclusions about the social science research situation in Thailand are not without problems. It is possible to question, for example, his understanding of the differences between descriptive and explanatory research. But here is not the place to engage in a philosophical discussion on different understandings of methodology.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the portrait of Thailand's research landscape may not be as bleak as reflected in Uthai's study. One of the problems with Uthai's work is that his scope of study is limited to those research works by Thai scholars written in 'Thai'. Consequently those written

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp. 135-146

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 149

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 158-159

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 157-161

<sup>12</sup> As an invited critic to Dr Uthai's presentation of his paper at the Thailand Research Fund's first annual conference in Chonburi, November 18-20, 1994, I subsequently offered my critique of his study, influenced by Alfred Schutz's *The Phenomenology of the Social World* and Wittgenstein's *Blue Book*, by problematizing some of Uthai's basic understandings, such as his notions of 'Verstehen', 'explanation' and 'understanding'.

in English or in other foreign languages were not included, such as Patcharee Siroros' study of the Thai auto industry<sup>13</sup> or my recent documentary research on the 'state of knowledge of Muslim minorities' problems in Southern Thailand.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, if one were to expand the scope of research works beyond Uthai's specific perimeter, to include those which appear in conference proceedings, then insightful works which dare to formulate original problems can be found. For example, a researcher from Mahidol University chose to study the changing roles of Thai buffaloes and found that, among other things, the lessening significance of the role of buffaloes for economic, social and cultural development within Thai society reflected the inadequate preparation by this society to face its changing future.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, a sociologist from Thammasat and his colleagues reveal that the nature of 'begging' in a changing Thai society is no longer a question of kindness or charity, but that it has indeed become a business with organizational arrangements befitting capitalist Thailand.<sup>16</sup> Judging by some of these examples, it seems fair to suggest that the Thai social science research landscape is not as hopeless as that depicted by Uthai.

What is important, however, is Uthai's basic contention that a useful body of knowledge depends on the qualities of Thai researchers which, in turn, rest primarily on the educational qualities of Thailand's higher learning institutions. In other words, social science research can be considered a cultural enterprise characterized by four related, though distinguishable, factors: institutions, resources, actors, and practices.

If such is the case, then one way to assess the educational qualities of Thai institutions, especially in terms of the overall emphasis on research, is to examine their access to resources, namely Thailand's research and development budget. It goes without saying that highly developed countries spend a sizeable amount of their annual budget on research and development. In 1988 Japan spent 2.85 per cent of its GDP on research and development, compared to Singapore's 1.10 per cent of its GDP in 1989 and Thailand's 0.17 per cent in the same year. By 1991 the figure for Thailand had risen 0.03 per cent which means the country spent a mere 0.20 per cent of its GDP on research and development.<sup>17</sup> While it can be argued that good research works normally result from a combination of factors including sufficient financial support, the availability of such resources can contribute much to an atmosphere conducive to quality research. When Thailand's low budget figure is combined with the number of working Thai researchers in both natural science and social science (which some claim to be only 10,000 with many not working on their research full time<sup>18</sup>), the portrait of low quality social science research in Thailand as depicted by Uthai can be readily comprehended.

<sup>13</sup> Patcharee Siroros, 1992

<sup>14</sup> Chaiwat Satha-Anand, 1992, pp. 1-38

<sup>15</sup> Eam Thongdee, 1991, pp. 35-45 (Social Economic Section). What appears in the *Proceedings* is an abridged version of Eam's study

<sup>16</sup> Worapol Phrommikabutr & Supachai Srilah, 1991, pp. 201-228 (Social Economic Section)

<sup>17</sup> Nit Chantramonklasri, 1995, p. 26

<sup>18</sup> Vicharn Panich, 1994, p. 6

But is this an accurate portrait of the Thai academic landscape? To what extent can these research practices be considered 'Thai' research? While the notion of 'Thainess' is unproblematic, a discussion of the governing paradigms used in the study of Thai society can perhaps help address the questions raised here.

## Governing Paradigms in the Study of Thai Society

It may surprise some to learn that the systematic study of Thai society and culture was first developed in the United States after the end of World War II.<sup>19</sup> The Cold War age gave rise to North American foreign policy determined to minimize interstate conflict, prevent revolutionary upheaval and contain Soviet expansion.<sup>20</sup> To realize the objectives set by these policies, Third World societies had to be well understood. Consequently area studies gained prominence in North American universities, including Southeast Asian studies, of which Thai studies naturally forms a part. Thai studies officially began in the United States when Professor Lauriston Sharp established the Cornell-Thailand Project in 1947 with the support of the Carnegie Corporation. It should also be noted that Sharp himself was a State Department official in the Southeast Asian Affairs Division from 1946 to 1947.<sup>21</sup> The amazing tale of origin, growth and conflicts of US research and studies on Thailand has been finely recounted by scholars elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> Here the focus will be on governing paradigms of research and studies in Thai society which have grown out of a long association with Western higher education in general, and North American universities in particular.<sup>23</sup>

Anan Ganjanapan has distinguished three main paradigms adopted in relation to Thai studies.<sup>24</sup> They are: the Cornell-led, loosely structured social system paradigm; the structural-functional paradigm; and, the Indiana-led modernization paradigm.

Influenced by Franz Boas' historical particularism, the loosely-structured social system regards the individual as the most basic unit of social analysis. The Thai individual is believed to think very little of rules and regulations and does not pay much attention to social organizations. Under the Buddhist cosmology, with its emphasis on the notion of *karma*, a Thai accepts power and changes in accordance with their individual *karma*. In addition, this major

<sup>19</sup> Anan Ganjanapan, 1995, pp. 307-351

<sup>20</sup> For a concise statement on American core foreign policies during the Cold War era see Samuel P. Huntington's "United States Foreign Policy and the Third World" in *Problems of International Cooperation*, 91, March 1983, pp. 11-17

<sup>21</sup> Skinner, GW & Kirsch, AT (Eds.), 1975, p. 14

<sup>22</sup> For example see Wakin, E. (1992). *Anthropology Goes to War: Professional Ethics and Counterinsurgency in Thailand*. Madison: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin. To my knowledge the most recent and concise statement on the subject in Thai can be found in Anan Ganjanapan, 1995, pp. 310-318

<sup>23</sup> Over the past 15 years there have been close to 100 Thais who have graduated with doctorates from numerous North American universities in the fields of history, political science, anthropology and sociology. See Anan Ganjanapan, 1995, p.334. But while Anan seems to suggest that these 87 Phd graduates will be influential to Thai studies in Thailand, it should be noted that some of these graduates' doctoral dissertations are 'not' research on Thai society with a few being devoted to theoretical / philosophical issues that have little or nothing to do with Thai Studies

<sup>24</sup> Anan, 1995, pp. 319-333

paradigm emphasizes historical study believing that the character of Thai society is by and large determined by the specific Thai historical context. This belief has led many to consider Thai society as highly unique, free from conflicts and oblivious to local cultural differences. Finally, this first major current of Thai studies regards the village as an important unit of analysis. Villages are analyzed in their historical relation to the state. As a result, the notion of 'community' which transcends villages, since the latter is basically an administrative entity, has until recently been ignored.

The structural-functional current, on the other hand, emphasizes the fact that Thai society is not unique. It is characterized by two distinguishing features. First, Thai social structures, regulations, institutions and its economic / ecological system are underscored as effecting social order. Second, historical data is used in the study of Thai society.

The modernization scholars do not really raise questions concerning existing structures of power. Instead, they are more interested in trying to 'modernize' the system through a critique of corrupt bureaucracy and by developing a better electoral democracy. Their methodology leads them to focus on three aspects: Universal characters of Thai society based on the Weberian notion of 'ideal type'; comparative methods; and, an analysis of fragments of the system to understand their functional relationship in the process of maintaining systemic balance.

These governing paradigms are currently being challenged. Examining recent doctoral dissertations, Anan points out that four major changes to methodology are taking place. First, due to neo-Marxist influences more studies now underscore conflicts in Thai society, the influence of capitalism and ideological dominations, among other things. Second, a number of scholars are becoming increasingly interested in local wisdom, perspectives and discourses. Third, the non-monolithic characteristic of Thai society with its complex ethnic cultures and classes is being highlighted. Fourth, the role of women in Thai society and the issues of gender relations can no longer be ignored.<sup>25</sup>

Yet Anan concludes that compared to research on other countries in Southeast Asia, studies on Thai society leave much to be desired. As a result of accepting North American paradigms, Thai 'uniqueness' is normally over-emphasized. Since a holistic perspective based on comprehensive data is rarely the norm, oftentimes fragmented theoretical debates overshadow the holistic Thai social reality.<sup>26</sup>

If dominant paradigms are problems, the effect of domination is not absolute, as evident in the forms of new and solid Phd dissertations in US universities (as Anan himself has indicated). It is therefore possible to surmise that there is indeed space for meaningful research. Most of the suggestions for the enhancement of both originality and creativity, however, are grounded in a

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 335

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 338. See also Somkiat Wantana's and my critiques of Anan's paper when he presented it in Bangkok in August 1994. In *The Role Foreign Countries in Building up Body of Knowledge Related to Thailand*. Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund (in Thai)

conscious effort to return to the ‘roots’ of Thai culture. This basking in the familiar light of local wisdom suggests a resurgence of research identity that effectively challenges the official notion of Thainess and better reflects the complexity of Thai society with its rich and diverse cultural heritage. The question at this point, then, is will the resurgence of Thai identity in social science research contribute to a more solid academic landscape?

## **Reconnecting Thai Society with the Larger Asia**

Those who consider the Thai academic landscape to be suffering from a poor understanding of methodology as a result of a defective educational system, tend to suggest some kind of educational reform or retraining of researchers.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, those who believe that the pathology of the present academic situation is a result of the uncritical acceptance of governing paradigms originating from Thai studies in North American institutions, advocate a return to local cultures and wisdom as an antidote.<sup>28</sup>

But as I have discussed earlier, despite deficiencies in methodology, creative and meaningful research works do exist in Thailand. Although governed by dominant paradigms of Thai studies, this influence is not total and original writings can still be found. If this reading of the present situation is correct, it would mean that the existing pathological conditions are not beyond redemption. It would also mean that Thai researchers’ methodological capabilities can be improved, while a more critical stance towards dominant paradigms of study should be encouraged. This reading of the situation, however, should be considered in a broader context of discovering ‘Asian identity’.

Though the term ‘Asian identity’ is extremely problematic, there exists numerous intellectual endeavors searching for ‘Asian’ alternatives to problems such as governance,<sup>29</sup> ethics,<sup>30</sup> or peace.<sup>31</sup> I would argue that within this larger context, the time has come to reconnect the Thai academic landscape with those elsewhere in the region. The crucial question, however, is: In what ways could this reconnecting process be more academically meaningful than what has so far transpired?

Instead of a direct answer to the question posed here, two very different studies might well serve as guiding examples. In 1986 a Malaysian political scientist from the Universiti Malaya conducted research on Thailand’s general election of the same year (with the support of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore). The work, written in English, was later published in Malaysia.<sup>32</sup> The second research work is a recent study on the great Burmese king, Bayin Naung (1551-1581), by a young Thai Chulalongkorn University historian who conducted his research at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies in Kyoto.<sup>33</sup> While a critique of both studies is beyond the scope of this paper, they are

<sup>27</sup> Uthai, 1994, p. 162

<sup>28</sup> Anan, 1995, p. 339. See also Sulak Sivaraksa, (1987)*New Directions for a University*, Bangkok: Kledthai, pp. 65-74 (in Thai).

<sup>29</sup> Fukuyama, 1995, pp. 20-33

<sup>30</sup> Tu Wei-Ming, 1984

<sup>31</sup> Chaiwat Satha-Anand, 1992, pp. 135-159

<sup>32</sup> Omar Farouk Bajunid, 1989

<sup>33</sup> Sunait Chutintranond, 1995

mentioned here to highlight the fact that a promising reconnecting effort may well be in progress. Both are studies by scholars within the region on societies other than their own. Both scholars are long time students of the cultures they chose to study. Malaysian political scientist Omar Farouk has long been a keen observer of Thai politics and society, and he has studied at Chulalongkorn University. Thai historian Sunait Chutinanond based parts of his solid research on historical evidence written in Burmese. The former is a study of Thai politics by 'the other' from a neighboring country in the South, while the latter is a study of 'the significant other' (that other sharing a long history of war with its neighbor) by a native of Thailand. Can both these intellectual exchanges be considered part of the 'Thai' academic landscape in the process of reconnecting with the larger Asia?

## Conclusion

The portrait of the Thai academic landscape painted in this paper is both pathological and promising. This is in no way contradictory. Rather, it can be considered natural. The challenge, however, is the way in which the promising feature can be strengthened while at the same time trying to weaken the pathological aspect. An attempt to reconnect Thai research works and other scholarly activities with the larger Asian world can be conducive to a better academic atmosphere for a number of reasons. First, it will contribute to the process of questioning dominant paradigms within this academic community. Second, once freed from these dominating influences, Thai scholars will need to look at alternative paradigms, especially those which spring from their own fountain of local cultures. Reconnecting their scholarly efforts with a larger Asian world would enable them to guard against the peril of resurgent identity that could become chauvinistic. Third, the process of reconnecting would be conducive to genuine intellectual exchanges where commonalities and differences within the Asian world can both be appreciated. Meaningful research questions and innovative methodologies informed by the larger Asian civilizations will then have a chance to emerge.

Apart from conscious efforts in the process of reconnecting with the larger Asia by individual academics in the region, agencies such as the Japan Foundation's Asia Center can indeed play a crucial role. Programs where Southeast Asian scholars move around their region teaching as visiting professors could be more strongly encouraged. In fact this type of program was attempted in 1989 and again in 1990 when the Southeast Asian Studies Program at the Universiti Malaya initiated a project where courses such as "Politics and Government of Southeast Asia" were taught by invited scholars from several countries in the region. Forums where Muslim social scientists come together to discuss pertinent issues and review research carried out in different societies in Southeast Asia also serve as a reconnecting entry. *ASEAN Forums for Muslim Social Scientists*, have been organized from Chonburi, Thailand in 1987 to West Lambang, Java in 1991.<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that these activities were funded by the Asia Foundation.

<sup>34</sup> Three separate volumes have been published as a result of these forums. They are published in Chaiwat Satha-Anand (Ed.), 1989; Madale Nagasura (Ed.), 1989; and, Omar Farouk Bajunid (Ed.), 1994. Papers presented at the fourth forum held in 1991 in Indonesia are yet to be published.

Some activities which could help in the process of reconnecting might include: Translations of research works carried out in the region into other languages (not unlike the translation of literary works into languages of neighboring countries); scholarships for students in the region to study in universities in the region; and, the organization of regional social science conferences. These are just some of the steps the Asia Center could consider.

But such considerations need to be formulated within a proper academic perspective where the call for Japan to be 're-Asianized' is now prevalent.<sup>35</sup> While the reconnecting process between scholars in a country such as Thailand with a larger Asia is full of potential for concerned intellectuals, the dawn of the new century also represents a challenge for the Japan Foundation's Asia Center as Japan searches for its place in a new world.

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<sup>35</sup> Takashi Inoguchi suggests that a "re-Asianization of Japan" is an oxymoron and the notion of "reassociation with Asia in the economic, security and socio-cultural spheres" is more appropriate. See his "Japan makes long-awaited return to Asia" in *Bangkok Post*, March 12, 1996.

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