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The Cultural History School  
the next phase of Thai studies

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Since “Thai Studies” began as a project of Thai academics in the nineteenth century there have been various approaches to analyzing Thai society. These studies were never carried out in a vacuum, and in many ways the focus of each stage of Thai studies by Thai scholars reflects the political, social, economic and cultural issues of its time. This essay seeks to critically analyze the history of “Thai Studies”, and point this endeavor in new directions as Thailand enters the global age.

The nature of Thai studies before 1973

Before 1973 there were 2 types of Thai studies: Aristocratic (Sakdina) Thai studies and Thai studies of the structural-functional and developmental type.

Aristocratic Thai studies began in the period of the absolute monarchy in the middle of the nineteenth century, and was restricted to the circle of the royalty, aristocrats and state officials. The study of Thai society was the study of the royal chronicles, palace politics, glorification of state culture, and the state version of Buddhism. The centralization of the Thai state and its emphasis on unity explains the purposeful negligence of the study of provincial localities and the peasantry in favor of the study of the elites. Some of the aristocratic and state
intellectuals were very able scholars, and have written excellent works: for example Prince Damrong Rajanuparb, the Prince Patriarch Vachirayarn and the anonymous writers of the chronicles.

After the Second World War structural-functionalism and modernization theory was introduced from America to Thai studies. Its aim was to foreground what Thailand lacked in comparison to Western society and thus the missing factors--efficient administration, infrastructure, and investment incentives--would be added through aid programs. The disadvantage of this approach is it yields a relatively static and conflict-free picture of society. The historical and cultural context of Thailand is thus relegated to the background.

Another problem with this approach is that it tends to overemphasize the role of the change agent, for example civil servants, while paying little attention to the question of who will receive the benefit from this development. For example, in rural studies the aim was development and security, again considering which factors the village lacks, so the development agent can add them to the village. This rural development has the limited objective of short term modernization and security, and hence does not seek to understand the long term change of a community. It is an analysis of a village floating independently from its history, and an attempt to modernize that floating village in a short interval.

Like the Aristocratic Thai studies, the Development approach was Thai studies from above, and did not reflect the experiences and the standpoint of the majority of the people. Moreover these two approaches idealized the society, and framed Thailand as an ahistorical society.

The changes in Thai studies after 1973

The students' democratic uprising of October 1973 dramatically changed this picture. The military government was overthrown and more liberal governments were installed. But its the longest-lasting impact was in the cultural field. The October 1973 Uprising made people more conscious of their active role in
Thai society, and hence common people became the subject of Thai Studies. They were eager to find out about the true nature of Thai society, their status and class position, and their relationship to other classes of the Thai people. In essence two new elements were added to Thai studies as a result of the 1973 uprising:

1) the political economy school of thought which studies socio-economic history of the country

2) the community culture school of thought which studies various localities, provincial communities and villages, especially as they are independent from the national viewpoint.

The central question in the study of the socio-economic history is why is Thailand still underdeveloped? Why was the pre-capitalist Sakdina system unable to evolve into industrial capitalism? Can we find the root of our underdevelopment in Thai history? The increasing awareness of intellectuals, scholars, and the people has made it imperative to inquire critically into Thai history. This is not the traditional history of kings and wars, but the socio-economic history of modes of production, class relations, and ideologies. The subject of study of the socio-economic history in Thailand has been the nature of the Thai pre-capitalist Sakdina system, its exploitative character, its absorption of the Chinese bourgeoisie, and its accommodation to colonialism. In short, it is a study of the political economic system and its historical transition.

The pioneering works of Jit Phoumisak (1930-1966), the most distinguished Thai Marxist scholar, are exemplary. A number of other scholarly works on the subject followed: Professor Chontira Satayawattana on state ideology, Professor Nidhi Aeusrivongse on bourgeois culture in the pre-capitalist state, and many young scholars who wrote their M.A. theses on economic history topics like the Sakdina state, state expenditure, corvee labour, tax-farming, the 1932 political change, bureaucratic capitalism, temple economy, bank capitalism and provincial capitalism. There is general agreement that the main causes of underdevelopment were the despotic and tradition-oriented Sakdina state, the historical absence of the indigenous and independent bourgeoisie, and the intrusion of the parasitic peripheral capitalism.
The Community Culture School's study of the provincial communities and villages focused on the particular characteristics of each locality, its tributary relationship with the state and capitalism, and the degree to which it retained its autonomy both in the economic and the cultural spheres. The study of provincial communities and villages has led Thai studies to touch the inner core of the Thai society and culture. Through this new focus on the self-sufficient production for livelihood of the village, the communal nature of productive relationship of the village institution, and the non-Buddhist ancestor and nature worship, the crucial essence of the common Thai people has been brought to the center of Thai studies for the first time. Besides presenting the inner core of the society and culture, local studies highlight the standpoint of the peasantry and its local knowledge.

The historical relationship of the state and the village community is being reformulated in Thailand. Jit Phoumisak again provides seminal works in his study of the Thai tribe and Thai society in the Chao Phraya valley before the Kingdom of Ayutthaya. However the field has developed much further through archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and study of legends and folk heroes, oral literature and oral history. Leaders in this field of local studies are Professor Srisak Vallibhotama, Professor Kingkaew Attor, Professor Dhida Saraya, Professor Suthiwong Pongpibul, Professor Chalardchai Ramitanond, Professor Anan Ganjanapun, and Professor Chayan Vattanaputi. Also important to this project are non-governmental organization workers, particularly Mr. Bamrung Boonpanya and Mr. Apichart Tongyu, and many local scholars and intellectuals, especially those working at the various provincial teacher's colleges and secondary schools.

Another significant dimension of these local studies in that they begin to provide a preliminary answer to the questions posed by socio-economic history. Developed right after the 1973 political change, the political economic approach concluded that the obstacle on the country's development was the Sakdina state and its relation to external capitalism. The question then was where Thailand should concentrate her future development effort.

Recently scholars and non-governmental organization workers proposed that the "culture of the community" could be the guiding spirit of Thai
development. This indigenous culture of the common Thai people possesses many positive aspects like goodheartedness, mutual aid, frugality, non-violence, honesty and sharing. It was preserved inside the village community in the pre-capitalist Sakdina period, and its continued existence is a characteristic of Thai society and culture. The intellectuals, scholars, and volunteer workers have rediscovered this inner core of the Thai culture. They are reviving and utilizing it to be a rallying point of local and national development which would be well-balanced, because of the participation of the majority of the people. Leading thinkers like Professor Saneh Chamarik, Professor Prawet Wasi, Dr. Vichitvongse Na Pombhejara and Sulak Sivaraksa have expressed their support to this road to development. While socio-economic history challenges the traditional authoritarian state, the local studies provide justification for the democratizing and decentralizing process which is an important issue in Thailand. A study of environment destruction and the depletion of resources is a recent addition to this school of study.

In the 1980s this developed into three major schools of thought, the Asiatic mode of production school, the Dependency school, and the Nidhi school. The Asiatic mode school has been proposed by Professor Chai-anan Samudvanija, Professor Chusit Chuchart, Professor Sangsidh Piriyarangsan, Professor Pranut Sapsarn, Sirilak Sakkriengrai and myself. The school emphasizes the traditional character of the Thai Sakdina state and the reproductive ability of the Thai village communities, partly because of the continued existence of community culture. Both factors have made the Thai system comparatively stable and structurally unchanged over time. It has made use of the flourishing local studies and it supports the revitalization of the community culture.

The Dependency school emphasized the intruding power of capitalism after the opening of the country to free trade with the Bowring Treaty in 1855. This school does not make use of local studies or recognize the existence of the autonomous pre-Sakdina culture. On the contrary it emphasizes class differentiation within the village and control of the multinational firms in the factory. Thailand has perhaps become an integral part of the capitalist world system. Advocates of this school include Professor Suthy Prasartset, Professor Grit Permethanjit and Professor Rangsan Thanapornpun, all of them economists.
The Nidhi school has been proposed by Professor Nidhi Aeusrivongse of Chiangmai University. The essence of this school is that it emphasizes the adaptability of the Thai Sakdina system and its aristocratic class. The Thai aristocrat has continuously incorporated bourgeois culture, and thus the Thai system has been continuously changing, although little by little.

**Future Directions in Thai Studies**

Now we are at a juncture. We have already identified the cause of underdevelopment and we have rediscovered the guiding spirit in our indigenous tribal culture, but we do not yet know the road we will take to development. Will the community spirit be able to guide Thailand further along this new globalization trend?

I think we are now entering another phase of Thai studies which I would like to tentatively call the "Cultural History School of Thought". The central idea is that Thailand should both incorporate the progressive parts of the world culture and strengthen the roots of her indigenous culture.

Thus there are two future areas of development in the "Cultural History School of Thought" : 1) In order to strengthen the community culture and add to its dynamism, Western culture should be added and instilled deeply in Thai culture, especially parts concerning technology and liberty. Thai scholars should study a history of the process of industrialization and democratic transformation of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan in order to understand these key processes. Then we will be able to adapt and internalize those progressive parts of Western technology, social institutions and culture for the purpose of Thai development.

2) We have to search the realm of the mind, feeling and morality of Tai communities. At this stage, we should consider Tai communities outside Thailand -- Tai Ahom, Shan, Lu, Lao, Black Tai, White Tai, and Zhuang -- which have preserved much ancient Tai culture in manuscripts, rituals and everyday life. The aim is to search for the basic elements of the formation of Tai societies and cultures such as love for freedom, kind-heartedness, and a willingness to help other people, the importance of the institution of the family and of
the village community, etc. These archetypes of Tai culture, once rediscovered, can be revived and utilized to support the strength of the spirit of the community.

These basic and inner elements will help us to stand on our own, and thus aid in the task of the “Cultural History School of Thought”: accept the good parts of foreign culture for the development of Thailand on its own terms in the global age.