The Social Movement of Spiritually Engaged Alternative Education in Thailand Against the Background of Reform and Globalization

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ABSTRACT

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THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT OF SPIRITUALLY ENGAGED ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN THAILAND AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF REFORM AND GLOBALIZATION

The establishment of alternative education, private foundations, and networks linked to socio-political and spiritual advocacies distinguishes the Thai social movement in this research. This research is a qualitative study that has made use of historical accounts to associate with data gathered from extensive interviews and case studies in order to inquire as to whether alternative education represents an historical spiritual tradition of opposition to reform hegemony, and whether it has had an impact on state reform efforts. Also investigated was whether there are some historical patterns associated with the manner in which the state of Thailand has dealt with the forces of globalization and whether the collective action by informal movements of Thai people also has the same predictable pattern of response to the global. Analysis and comparison of these issues contribute in determining the values associated with people in the alternative education movement and the motives and intentions associated with state-initiated reforms. A further related aspect explored is the degree of “Thai-ness” and the embedded historical pattern of both the alternative education movement and education reform. These inquiries were answered through the collection of data from three different trips to Thailand over a four-year period, the last trip a one-year stay that
permitted case studies and observations at three alternative schools, and the interview of a host of participants from home-school parents and students to Ministry of Education staff and officers. In examining the data, a clearer notion of what lies underneath the idea of Buddhist education and spirituality became clearer and how educational reform based on Western ideals and notions has not taken into account Buddhism and culture as education. This illumination brings new insight and also raises a new question as to the difference between social movements in a Buddhist nation such as Thailand and social movements in the West.
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CHAPTER 1
Purpose, Questions, and Significance of Research

I’ve said two things about it [objectivity] One is that it’s not possible. Two, it’s not desirable. It’s not possible because all history is a selection out of an infinite number of facts. As soon as you begin to select, you select according to what you think is important. Therefore it is already not objective. It’s already biased in the direction of whatever you, as the selector of this information think people should know. So, it’s really not possible. – Howard Zinn

1.1 Introduction
Thailand has never been a stranger to global influences, in fact it has often welcomed influences from afar only to adapt and fashion the influences to fit the customs of the local. A quick look at Thai cuisine and agricultural production will clearly reveal this point – staple fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes as varied as pineapple, watermelon, peanuts, sweet potatoes, cashews, guava, capsicum (hot chili peppers), papaya, and cassava, among many others were not indigenous to Thailand but were brought by adventurers and tradesmen. In my research and interviews I have heard accounts of how Ayutthaya, an old capital of Thailand, invited and welcomed foreigners and that dozens of languages were spoken in the capital, an incomparable cosmopolitan and multicultural hub that was rare for those times. Examining historic Thai cultural details reveals that even Thailand’s spiritual “glue” teems with outside influences of animism, Jainism, Brahmaism (Hinduism) and Buddhism while the artistic and civilizing features of the land are more than tinged with a variety of characteristics that have been assimilated into a local style from ancient international influences. One might say that the global provided the resources for the people to create the land of Siam and
those who drew up the plans of a nation, also dictated the Thai identity of what is now known as Thailand.

Thailand has not only encountered global influxes of people, ideas, and treasures, but it has developed strategies over time to incorporate these influxes into a somewhat coherent cultural landscape, a landscape not as idealistically sculpted and defined as many contemporary Thais would believe, but one that has retained patterns of managed design. These designs have began in various reforms, and for the purpose of this research, the major reforms examined have occurred over the last 150 years. These reforms have, however, been arguably the largest civil reforms Thailand has undertaken, determining the frontiers of geography, administration, and reaching as far as formulating and inculcating notions of what it means to be Thai.

This notion of being a Thai is at the center of this research because the means to accomplish the task of defining a Thai identity has been ingrained though the use of Buddhism and inculcated through education. The relationship between Buddhism and education is particularly significant because before the reforms started 150 years ago, Buddhism and education were one and the same for the villager and commoner, perhaps not in substance, but certainly in the learning of how to make life worth living as an individual and as a member of a family and community. Education and Buddhism represent the interface between Siam and what has become Thailand; what was once spiritual has now become religion; what was once living-learning has now become formal schooling; and what was once for the benefit of the community is now for the benefit of the nation-state. The reform of 150 years ago cleaved education from
Buddhism yet both continue to play significant roles in the implementation of the educational reform of 1997. It is the evolution of the relationship between education and Buddhism and their interface with reform that is of specific relevance in this research.

1.2 Purpose of this Research and Research Questions

As in any case regarding social or cultural movements, one must inspect the historical context. The historical context of the alternative education movement in Thailand is fixed in notions of spirituality and, in particular, Buddhism. The notion of spirituality in Thailand has also been entwined in the traditional model of king as enlightened spiritual being (Bodhisattva) and the development of nation-state. This creation of a nation-state has been motivated by the attempt to interact with the forces of globalization on an even footing and not as a country in an inferior position – first in the 19th century during the Colonial era, and then again in the 20th century during the era that promoted modernization, industrialization, and global economies. The reforms necessary to develop a strong state has an historical pattern of manipulating social class structures through the utilization of what I refer to as “reform utilities” – state-determined notions of culture, Buddhism, and education. I make the assumption that it is the control of these concepts that defines the issues and distinguishes the value differences between the alternative movement and the state. While the basic values in Buddhism and education are shared, the value differential is in the interpretation of the principles, purpose and practice of both – a wide chasm exists.
In order to conduct this research and examine these issues and assumptions, I ask four primary research questions:

1. What social, cultural, political, and spiritual values inform alternative education activists in Thailand?
2. What are the differences in spiritual and/or educational values between alternative educators/homeschoolers and policy-makers/formal educators in Thailand?
3. What has been the impact of alternative schools and homeschooling on decentralization and reform in Thailand?
4. What (if anything) is distinctly “Thai” about Thai reform and Thai social movements?

1.3 Significance of this Study

Scholars lack an understanding of how globalization works in cultural contexts, which is particularly striking since globalization has its manifestations in the educational systems of many countries, particularly developing ones. A number of scholars have noted how surprising it was that very little research done on the topic of education decentralization uses an international comparative approach; and, in addition, other researchers have asserted that only one in twenty research studies compare the outcomes of education decentralization with other local areas within a nation. The obvious paradox facing an educational policy-maker is that decentralization is so routinely prescribed as a conscious remedy, but is based on so little empirical knowledge. In this regard, it is assumed by many that developing nations undergo
reform to various degrees due largely to international pressure and factors related to globalization. It is my supposition that educational reform and the related redefinition of cultural values in Thailand have resulted as much from homegrown alternative education movements as they have from external pressures.

This being the case, themes that will reoccur throughout my research will be globalization as the paradoxical paradigm of change; power and its relation to cultural conflict; culture as an expression of learning and adapting to international influences; spirituality as a valuable cultural embodiment of education and social movements; and administrative educational reform of the state and the educational reform by alternative educators. These themes are important to look at because they reveal cultural motivation and the mechanisms in which societal change occurs. As for Thailand, social movements generally go hand in hand with culture, spiritual values, and education to inform and reinforce deeply embedded values; oppositional and protective intentions that lead to reform of the systems of learning; and which, ideally reflect civic participation and public good in educational form. Regrettably, however, it is rare to have policy-makers consider these factors because the notion that popular movements may be significant means to guide executive decisions threaten traditional cultural hegemonic patterns and turn power frameworks upside down. This research will bring to light how significant and beneficial alternative education and local social movements are to regions and nations in a globalized world.
1.4 Theoretical Framework & Discussion of Issues

This research has been informed by several broad theoretical frameworks, including:

- globalization (particularly related to decentralization);
- educational decentralization in a developing country context;
- the cultural influences of social movements;
- comparative education and culture, contemporary Asian social movements;
- and Thai Engaged Buddhist social movements.

Other important frameworks presented throughout this research include:

- Buddhism as a historical, cultural, and contextual reference;
- Western notions of spirituality is placed in a comparative context with Buddhism as a spiritual basis for an engaged social movement;
- and alternative forms of education and learning is contextualized in traditional forms of Buddhism as education, as a form of holistic education, and as a form of opposition to global pressures, hegemony, and cultural and moral coherency.

My research priority was to examine how individuals or communities appropriate from the global and re-define the local, and in turn, instruct the national and regional through discourse on multiple stages. These theoretical frameworks were found to be useful in framing the discourse between participants and in understanding the deeper significance and complexity of issues not previously examined by researchers or amongst the participants themselves.
2.1 Globalization & Decentralization as the backdrop for Education, Buddhism, & Culture

Buddhist reform cannot be separated from social reform; they are “dual missions” that concerned people must carry out together… Reforming Buddhism is the only way to liberate its potential to support civil society. – Phra Paisal Visalo

2.1.1 Globalization, Decentralization, and Reform

There is no end to the amount of research on globalization, nor will there be for quite some time to come. This is due to the very thematic foundations of globalization that continue to be prevalent concerns to every country – movement of ideas/people/interactions/industry, appropriation, and reform. These foundations represent the power that is projected and passes unimpeded across and within national borders to effectuate multi-leveled disturbances through the galvanization of global economic configurations that advocate “excessive consumption, individualism, and competition – the three dominant traits of our times” (Stromquist, 2002). These traits, however, are not merely the influences of a globalization process characterized as “a passive diffusion; it is also an active, even aggressive, process of social transformation” (Astiz, et al., 2002). These transformations are not only instigated at the insistence of transnational entities, but are also capitulations made by states to bring about a sense of development commensurate with those determining the requirements and price of

admission to the developed world. Stromquist (2002) exhorts us to look closely at how globalization’s “economic dimension is deeply guided by a development model based on the hegemony of the market and the role of the state as a key supporter of market decisions.”

Contemporary globalization represents nothing less than confrontation at multiple intersecting levels – culture, technology, religion, politics - and is driven not only by powerful economic dynamics, but by institutional reform that imposes social transformations. Transformations are commonly of the type whereby familiar cultural beliefs deeply rooted in traditions and/or socio-political conventions are vibrantly challenged at seemingly mystical levels through the intervention of media technologies. These are generally market strategies that present enticing promises of modernization, progress, and empowerment. In a 2003 Pew Research Center report on globalization, “In 41 of 44 nations surveyed by Pew, majorities think growing trade and business ties are both good for their country and good for their families” with “at least two-thirds of the public in every country - except Jordan and Tanzania – think it is a good thing that their countries are becoming more connected to the world through trade and communication”; however, “people are also unwilling to link problems like economic inequality, the lack of good-paying jobs and poor working conditions to globalization.”

Ironically, the majority of people in all nations support modern communications and international commerce, but acknowledge that global problems are getting worse, people’s traditional ways of life are being disrupted and threatened, and “the erosion of
traditional ways is often blamed on commercialism and consumerism… and are a threat to our culture.”

According to Wang (1996), the research literature on education decentralization is uneven in its definition as many people give it the meaning most fitting for their context. Although they performed their research over two decades ago, Rondinelli, Cheema, and Nellis are still considered the foremost authorities on educational decentralization in developing nations by both Wang (1996) and Rhoten (1999). Their typology of the four modes of decentralization in developing nations: deconcentration, delegation, devolution, and privatization remains the standard model simply because there is not a great amount of literature on education decentralization in international contexts. Rhoten (2000) has contributed her own description of educational decentralization in the nested framework of “international origins,” “national intentions,” and “local interpretations,” and this has paved the way for uncovering globalization from local and regional perspectives.

Noel McGinn and Thomas Welsh (1999) mention factors in how the democratic emphasis of decentralization is often subjugated by centralized forces and Bray (1999) reports that decentralization often perpetuates inequalities and policies often tend to exclude people who have already been largely factored out of the national development equation. Similarly, Mary McNeil (2002) believes that there is a need for a concerted effort by communities to learn how to administer their educational needs through a democratic process to approximate political effect. It would seem reasonable then to expect equity to become a concern since scholars believe that the divide between rich
and poor will widen; however, decentralization normally reflects a managerial perspective on change rarely asking how local actions and social movements could beneficially influence its implementation. Prompilai Buasuwan explains from a world-institutional theory that “the quality of a national educational system is increasingly being held to international standards” (2003: 249) and this in turn is to the benefit of the elite in maintaining their socio-economic status.

Transformation comes also as a political and administrative implementation that presents the enticement of modernization and empowerment, generally through education decentralization and related reform measures. The accompanying rationale for decentralization and reform offers the explanation that centralized states are inefficient and do not deliver the resources to compete for a place in the global market. Paradoxically, decentralization and adjusting to the demands of the market do not necessarily bring about beneficial outcomes. Jere Behrman et al. have pointed out that “decentralization of education management simply shifts the same old problems to levels that are less capable of resolving them” (2002: 3) and “is largely driven by the fact that it can relieve strained public sector finances” (4).

Even though the intent of decentralization is to devolve some authority to the local level and improve administration, in practice its rationale has been reinvented by policy-makers in many developing countries to become a means for a state to be more internationally competitive. This reform language designates a political ideology of government-directed initiatives (Young & Levin, 1999) that often perpetuates inequalities and policy processes that generally exclude educators and people who have
already been largely factored out of the national development equation. These ideologies are driven by concern for economic standing and achieving development based on production, not equity. According to Martin Carnoy, decentralization in developing countries is generally finance-driven and “its primary effect on their education systems is to increase inequality of access and quality” (1999: 60) as the nation-state fails to determine the means to develop an “educational process and practice within the context of globalization rather than on globalization’s financial imperatives themselves” (Ibid.).

Reform is generally a formulaic prescription for the benefit of the global economic standing of the nation-state. Reforms read like litany emphasizing the means to attain global educational values; in addition to decentralization, you will frequently see a variety of practices that support economic interests of education – national standards, accountability, testing and quality assurances (Stromquist, 2002). The growing alliances between education and economic interests are obvious, but questionable in practice. Policy-makers have determined the necessity for educated, skilled labor and radical changes “in what is learned and how it is learned, even though there is little evidence that this change is or will be accompanied by positive social transformation” (Stromquist, 2002: 61); in effect, education still represents the political ideology of the market and not the public good. It is not a coincidence that much of the language around educational reform has been coined by the business world, particularly as applied to the technological world – a short list that includes: knowledge management, efficiency, accountability, quality assurance, equity, and competitiveness.
The education systems of many countries, particularly developing ones, often experience firsthand the manifestations of globalization. Diana Rhoten asserts that education decentralization is one of the “most salient and tangible public policy manifestations of globalization” (1999: 1), but suffers from an even greater lack of understanding, particularly “in terms of implementation and impact” (3). This is an unsettling characteristic of decentralization and reform because decision-makers rely on the consequences of acts that have little precedence – conscious remedies based on very little empirical knowledge, and few decisions are made reflectively and with insight by decision-makers.

What makes reform particularly problematic is that, like Diana Rhoten (1999) and Dani Rodrik (1997) both affirm, there is a lack of understanding of how globalization works in cultural contexts. Martin Carnoy has given several reasons why examining the effects of globalization in cultural perspectives is essential: “schools are transmitters of modern culture” (1999: 76); globalization redefines culture and the nature of identity; globalization defines the sorts of knowledge and skills to be valued in a culture; and global markets create and rend communities. Carnoy also reminds us that not only does globalization alter cultures, but the resistance arising from social movements allows a relative amount of self-assurance in appraising the degree of power a community of individuals has in life to define one’s environment. It would seem that a society’s ability to change consciously comes down to who wields consensual power and who directs the forces of culture.