

Weapons of Mass Assimilation: A Critical Analysis of the Use of Education in Thailand

Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Nova Southeastern University (USA)
Vannapond Suttichujit, Lynn University (USA)
Md Shukri Shuib, Universiti Utara Malaysia
Mohamad Faisol Keling, Universiti Utara Malaysia
Mohd Na'eim Ajis, Universiti Utara Malaysia

Abstract: *The present paper aims to problematize education in Thailand. Jan Nederveen Pieterse's model of ethnic domination is used as the theoretical framework to reveal the important and often ignored role of education in perpetuating socioeconomic and political elite dominance in Thailand. Ethnic domination is complemented with Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy. The paper shows how ethnic and economic domination of a small Central Thai elite over the vast majority of the population is achieved through a concerted propaganda effort integrating primary and secondary education with tight control over religious practices and strict censorship of the media. Case studies are provided of the role of Ministry of Education in the central government's attempt to forcefully integrate the Muslim Malay population in the Southern Provinces and the Lao (Isan) region in the North. Finally, the contested role of private education is discussed in relation to central control over education. The paper concludes that civic and religious education in primary and secondary schools is part of a broader strategy for the perpetuation of a narrow ethnocracy, and that the recent growth of the private education. An education model based on Freire's concept of "conscientization" is proposed as guiding principle to empower the peoples of Siam.*

Keywords: *Education, Liberation Pedagogy, Ethnic Domination, Thailand*

Introduction

Thailand, formerly known as Siam, means "land of the free" (Rhum, 1996). However, the name is a play with words since "land of the Tai" is pronounced the same in Thai. The Tai are an ethnic group which migrated from southern China and settled in the Chao Phraya river basin more than four hundred years ago (Wyatt, 2003). More than fourteen million

**Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis**

students, at all educational levels, are taught a curriculum based on the idealized history of the Tai ethnic group, while only a third can be said to be Tai (Ministry-of-Education-of-Thailand, 2005). This is more than just another example of virulent nationalism of the post-colonial sort, but rather represents a concerted effort to keep power in the hands of a small Tai traditional elite and their entourage. What is at stake is not only the content of history textbooks but the security of thousands of people belonging to ethnic minorities, their incomes, the natural resources of the country, and the economic opportunities of millions of people in the provinces. Thus, education is linked to political and economic development. Democracy and economic equity are directly affected by education and in turn set the limits to individual capabilities and opportunities.

This paper explores how the present hegemonic Tai based curriculum favors a certain socio-cultural stratum of the population and brings about negative externalities such as the asymmetric development of the country, predatory resource extraction, decreased levels of human and social capital, and ultimately violent conflict. The following section introduces the theoretical background of this study as well as the normative assumptions of the recommendations provided in the final section of the paper.

Theoretical Framework

This study follows the critical research tradition in that its main purpose is to unveil hidden structures of oppression and domination and by doing this promoting the empowerment and actualization of those in need (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007; Stuart Sim, 2005; Willis, 2007). The theoretical approach followed is a hybrid between the concept of Human Security, based on the need for “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear”, Amartya Sen’s concept of development as freedom, and Paulo Freire’s liberation pedagogy (Berthoff, 1990; Feigenblatt, 2009a; King & Murray, 2001; Sen, 1999). There is a clear normative bias in favor of those suffering from absolute and relative deprivation in comparison to a small Bangkok based elite which controls most of the natural resources and virtually all

of the formal political power. Therefore the approach of this paper is neo-marxist in that economic factors are taken into consideration but also constructivist in that norms and symbols are equally emphasized. Thus, culture is not only a functional tool in the hands of those in power, but is also part of the public sphere which is constantly in flux and contested. Jan Neverdeen Pieterse's concept of ethnic domination is applied to culture as a useful heuristic device to explain the role education plays in influencing defining national culture and the effect it has in determining what and who is considered the "other". Finally, the paper applies liberation pedagogy and the concept of "conscientization" to the case of Thai education so as to promote change from below and thus empower individual citizens to name their own world and by doing that, take control of their own lives and future.

Historical Background

Modern day Thailand is an amalgam of peoples and territories with very diverse histories and cultures. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Thailand means "land of the free" but also implies "land of the Tai". Present day Thai culture is an idealized version of the values of the Tai ethnic group historically based in the Chao Phraya River basin in present day central Thailand. Nevertheless the present day version of official Thai culture is not a carbon copy of elements that can be considered traditional of its precursors such as Sukkothai and Ayothaya but rather a mix between a strict version of Theravada Buddhism, with Cambodian Kingship worship, and some aspects of 19th century European romantic nationalism. There are also some elements of early 20th century fascism in some of the more ritualistic representations of the national pathos. In order to understand how Thailand is what it is today, the following paragraphs will trace the migration of the early ancestors of the Tai from Southern China to present day Thailand and the development of a series of political entities or proto-states leading to the formation of Siam, the direct predecessor of modern Thailand.

The Tai ethnic group can trace its origins to Southern China from where it migrated to Southeast Asia. During this

***Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis***

migration, more than four hundred years ago, the Tai ethnic group split into several subgroups which settled in different geographical areas. Some groups moved into modern day Laos, another group into parts of Burma, and a third group ended up in Vietnam. Needless to say, each subgroup developed its own language and their culture diverged over the years. The group that moved to the Chao Phraya basin and central modern day Thailand also divided over the years, with some settling in Northern Thailand and others living in secluded villages in the mountains. Three important Thai centers developed, one in Northern Thailand, the other one, in Laos, and the third in central Thailand. The three most important centers of Tai political power remained separate from centuries until the one based in central Thailand managed to exert some measure of control over them through vassalage and tribute. It should be noted that the proto-states of the time did not have a modern idea of the territorial nation-state and the main resource was labor rather than land. This led to a series of cycles in the relative power of the central Tai proto-state vis a vis the other center of power. To the West of Thailand an important contender for power developed, Burma and to the South the Malay world had developed and thrived since before the Tai ethnic group migrated from Southern China.

The early identity of what came to be known as Siam was partly formed in opposition to Burma. Thus, Siam came to be defined as opposed to the aggressive "other", Burma. Several feudal entities developed and eventually joined under the loosely exercised control of Bangkok. It should be noted that Siam was a multicultural realm at this point and that it encompassed a great variety of languages and religious practices. However, the rise of the European power and the subsequent influence they started to have in Southeast Asia alarmed the ruling elite, mostly composed of ethnic Tais. It was feared that Great Britain and France would use the loose structure of the realm as an excuse to either invade the country or to make some of its vassal states protectorates. During the nineteenth century Britain controlled most of the Malay world and France controlled Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Another important historical development during this period was that a greater number of Siamese aristocrats

travelled to Europe in order to get a modern education. Those graduates returned to Thailand with European ideas of nationalism and attempted to implement them in Siam. King Chulalongkorn, also known as Rama V, became a symbol of this modernizing impulse and heralded a new era in Siamese history. However, it was a superficial modernity that was brought and imposed on Siam. It was about form rather than essence and mainly had the effect of centralizing power in Bangkok and standardizing State rituals. The model followed resembled the Prussians rather than the more liberal English and was superimposed on a Cambodian model of kingship strengthened by a tightly codified and controlled Theravada Buddhism.

The dawn of the 20th century saw further movement towards a military model and ultimately led to the end of the absolute monarchy in the 1930s. Nevertheless, the coup that ushered the first constitution of Thailand was later on co-opted by right wing elements and reinterpreted to fit into the traditional model of divine kingship. Marshall Pibum Songkran rose to power through a military coup and further perfected an extreme Tai ethnic chauvinism based on the fascist model of the axis powers. Predictably Thailand, the name given to Siam by the ultranationalist Songkram, joined the Japanese cause during World War II. This period saw greater censorship of history textbooks and also the closing of hundreds of Chinese and Muslim Malay schools. The end of World War II briefly brought about a period of greater period and the ouster of Songkram. Nevertheless the communist threat in Southeast Asia and the beginning of the Cold War changed the geostrategic priorities of the victorious allies. Great Britain had an interest in cooperating with Thailand in order to fight the Communist Party of Malaya and the United States wanted to have a strong anti-communist government in power (Neher, 2002). This led to the return of Songkram to power and the establishment of what Duncan MacCargo calls the network monarchy. Royalist elites allied with right wing elements of the monarchy and the sangha in order to establish a socio-political system with the three pillars of religion (Buddhism), monarchy (revived Chakris), and nation (Tais) at the core (McCargo, 2009).

***Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis***

Control over the media and information in general become more and more important with the development of new information technologies such as the internet and cell phones. The many military coups were internal reshuffles of the leadership rather than true changes in leadership. Power was and mainly in the hands of a conservative Bangkok based elite. During the post-war period control over the education system became ever more important. It was becoming more difficult to control the growing educated middle classes since of its new members were not conservative. The governing elite found itself in a complex paradox that the country needed more education in order to “modernize” and “develop” but at the same time that same education weakened the traditional power of the elite. It was a matter of “guiding” or controlling education so as to make it just another tool rather than as a way for the population to reach self actualization.

The next section deals with the instrumental use of primary and secondary education in order to control the population. Several examples are provided of how education became a tool for the government to extend its control over non-Tai minorities as well as their resources. Power went hand in hand with education and the Ministry of Education grew in importance.

An Introduction to the Thai Education System

The education system in Thailand originally designed two separate curricula compatible for two types of population; the ruler and the subordinates. The rulers were defined as governors and religious leaders. Education for governors involved the subject areas of literature, mathematics, law, history, leadership, and methods of authorizing regulations.

At the same time, education in religious institutes involved several levels of education from basic literacy and mathematics to the analysis of abstract concepts that were profound. People who graduated from religious institute were able to apply advanced literacy and analytical skills to study curriculum for the governors as well. Therefore, Thai people use religious institutes (temples) as the opportunity to improve their social level in future generations. However,

such opportunity is only to improve their social level to the extent of being military leaders (and police) instead of being a part of civic bureaucracy or lordship. The reason is because positions in civic bureaucracy were obtained only through connections of lordships that were inherited for generations.

The subordinates were merchants and farmers whose education involved only basic skills of writing numbers and combining alphabets into small words for recording names. Merchants applied the skills in recording the customers' names and the number of merchandised purchased. More merchants were involved in basic education than farmers due to the fact that they have more interactions with customers on a daily basis.

The education system in Thailand remained segregated between the two classes until Rama IV period (YEAR) when the British Bauring Treaty became part of Thai society. The importance of bringing all the Thai citizens to reach the highest standard had become necessity. By the early period of Rama V (YEAR), the education system in Thailand had been reformed to provide Thai citizens the skills for working as part of the bureaucracy. Temples were changed to become formal schools to promote 12 years education among farmers and merchants in addition to promoting the opportunity of becoming bureaucrats. At the same time, the institute for training and recruiting bureaucrats for post secondary education was founded and later changed the name to "Chulalongkorn University".

Meanwhile, the alternative branches of education other than bureaucracy also reached Thailand such as Western Medicine, foreign language, international trade, etc. The missionaries founded schools for educating Catholic religion in addition to mainstream subject areas. Most Catholic schools are non-co Ed. At the same time, Chinese merchants started to establish and fund schools for Chinese teaching Chinese language and other mainstream subject areas as well.

King Rama V (YEAR) began to centralize the education system in Thailand by establishing the ministry of education. The main purpose of the ministry of education is to give citizens in Thailand, regardless of race, the sense of nation.

Chinese schools were viewed as the institute for recruiting communists and therefore General P.

**Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis**

Piboonsongkram had an order to limit the Chinese school hours to be operated at the maximum of one hour per day. Many Chinese schools were closed for teaching longer than one hour per day. The schools were constantly screened and evaluated by people from the Thai government. Most of the time, the arrangement were settled prior to the evaluation day and therefore some Chinese schools survived from being sanctioned.

Postsecondary education in Thailand was reformed during the 1930's along with the political reformation (the beginning of democracy). Several political parties were established as well as Thammasat University. Thammasat University trained students to work in ministries and other civic organization including the training for working in the justice system such as Judge, police, sheriff, etc. The mission of the university is to fulfill the purpose of political reformation for democratic system. Private universities were opened for different missions such as a university for business administration. At the same time, private schools also offered vocational courses such as schools for commerce and schools for assembling hardware.

The mainstream K-12 education in Thailand nowadays is integrated between the original system designed after the United Kingdom during the mid 1800's, Chinese education system, and the American system. Thai education consists of lower primary (1st-4th grade), upper primary (5th-6th grade), lower secondary (7th-9th grade) and upper secondary (10th - 12th grade). Primary grades are called "Pratom 1 to 6" and secondary grades are called "Mattayom 1-6".

Students from 1st to 9th grade receive mainstream education which all the texts and curriculum are designed for all learners. Students at 9th grade who which to continue the standard k-12 education needs to choose the major to continue in the 10th to 12th grade. There are three majors for upper secondary level; science-mathematics, standard major (same as k-9 subjects but for high school level), and language.

Students are required to take additional physics, chemistry, biology but less language class that the other two majors. Standard major requires students to take the same number of mathematic classes as science mathematic major but less science class. Language major requires students to

take less science and mathematics than the other two major. However, students of language major have to take additional English language class in addition to choosing one alternative language such as Japanese, French, German, or Chinese.

The instructional pedagogy in Thai Education is integrated between traditional British system and American system. Originally, students are taught through memorizing the texts and what teachers explained on the board. In 1995, the system called "child center" was integrated according to the American System. Students are required to attend classroom regularly but part of the assignments required students to conduct independent research and the works are collected as port folio. Moreover, teachers are also trained to encourage students to participate more in the classroom.

This system has been quite a challenge in Thailand due to the limitation of academic resources outside of classroom. Moreover, students have always been taught as passive learner and therefore it is difficult for students to conduct analytical skills and self-questioning strategies. In addition, teachers tend to refuse giving active roles to students as it is against the authoritarian characteristics of Thai society.

Thai education also follow the Chinese system of conducting standardize test as an indicator to screen applicants for their annual academic performance or the admission. Students are not allowed to submit reports instead of attending the examination. The decision of whether the tests will be norm-referenced or criterion-reference depends on the schools and teachers who are responsible for the subject taught. Teacher can choose whether to accommodate students with low academic achievement or not.

Students in rural areas receive long-distance learning through the use of live video recording from the model public schools in urban area. The use of computers and other technology is still quite limited in Thailand due to the amount of funding and the teachers' knowledge in using the technology.

In terms of classroom management, students are mostly seated according to their heights and behavioral or academic performance. Students at the front roles are mostly

**Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis**

short or unable to cooperate during the class. The classrooms are arranged in a way that students are seated facing the blackboard in front of the class. Most schools apply the British system where teachers are rotating to classrooms while students remain seated in the same room throughout the day. Students are usually rotated to another classroom only when specific facilities are required such as biology lab and PE class.

Most classrooms apply high control approach as the model of discipline along with the characteristics of authoritarian society in Thailand. Teachers are the only persons who decide classroom rules and daily functioning for students to follow. The use of reinforcement and punishment is quite apparent in schools in Thailand although the Ministry of Education already limited corporal punishment to be conducted in certain ways.

Exceptional education in Thailand does not have inclusive classroom policy with general education students. Exceptional schools in Thailand include only schools for students with intellectual disabilities and schools for students with visual and hearing impairments. Children with severe intellectual disabilities are mostly in specialized orphanage or staying at home. The term "specific learning disabilities" is not yet acknowledged in Thai education. Students with specific learning disabilities attend general education and are viewed as "lazy students" or "misbehaved students" without any accommodations.

Use of Primary and Secondary Education

Greater educational opportunities were viewed as important by the Bangkok elite as a way to jump on the modernization bandwagon (Wyatt, 2003). Nevertheless it should be noted that this instrumental need for education viewed people as tools for economic growth. Children were supposed to learn how to become efficient and obedient workers and subjects. The goal was not for most of those children to enjoy the fruits of development during their lifetime but rather for them to work for the good of the "nation" which truly meant the growth of Bangkok and the interests of the elite (Ungpakorn, 2007).

The school curriculum was designed to fulfill those needs and therefore included a disproportionate number of classroom hours in morals and religion. Students were and are still taught mostly about how to behave and what to believe in primary school. Only about thirty percent of classroom instruction at the elementary school level is devoted to substantive subjects such as writing and math. In addition to that, that thirty percent contains a hidden curriculum in that the passages students are told to write deal with the moral values that they were taught in the other seventy percent of the day. Thus, the entire curriculum is devoted to teaching the values of obedience, respect for authority, a narrow version of Theravada Buddhism, and a distorted view of history. Rather than the different aspects of the curriculum fitting together naturally they are shaped in order to promote the 'three pillars' ideology mentioned in the introduction to this paper.

Primary and secondary education have two main purposes in Thailand which are firstly to assimilate the entire population into the elite world view based on the three pillars and secondly to prepare them to participate in the national economy as tools of economic development (Feigenblatt, 2009c). The ideal is to shape children into submissive workers who are satisfied with what they have and who do not question authority. This is done through teaching a narrow view of Buddhism which favors a deterministic view of the world. According to this view a person has little power over his or her destiny and should therefore accept it and prepare for the next life. Furthermore, reaching nirvana is impossible for most according to this view of Buddhism and therefore it is not a very egalitarian philosophy (McCargo, 2009). It should be noted that the values taught by official Theravada Buddhism favors conformism and the status quo.

Mass assimilation is done through the combination of distorted history lessons, civics, and Buddhism. The history books used in schools provide an idealized view of Thai history from the point of view of the Bangkok elite. According to this view of history, Thailand was predestined to exist since before the Tai people moved to the Chaophraya river basin. Moreover, historical events are centered around powerful individuals while the people are made invisible and

**Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis**

become part of the background. Thus, reading official history books is like reading a list of “great men of history” who single handedly changed the destiny of the nation. According to Patrick Jory this genre can be traced back to the work of Prince Damrong in the fifth reign and was later perfected by the military governments following the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 (Jory, 2003). This Nationalist Historiography achieved hegemonic status in Thailand and permeated every aspect of the educational system. Due to its retrospective nature, Thai Nationalist Historiography, favors the mythic history of those in power, namely the Tai Bangkok elite. Therefore, the result is a view of history that ignores or omits the history of other important ethnic groups in Siam such as the Hmong, Malay Muslims, Indians, and Chinese. Members of those ethnic groups only appear in history if they have assimilated by adopting Thai names and customs and most importantly acted supporting the three pillars. The next section discusses how primary and secondary education was used as a weapon of mass assimilation in the case of several important ethnic groups in Thailand. Jan Neverdeen Pieterse’s model of ethnic domination is used as the theoretical framework for the discussions to follow (Pieterse, 2007, 2008). Basically, ethnic domination refers to how one ethnic group can exert power over others in a nation-state. While ethnic domination includes aspects such as control over resources and economic inequality this paper concentrates on the discursive and ideational issues. Pieterse describes how ethnic domination can translate into ideational and discursive control in the following passage: “Discursive power lies with the center. The center establishes the boundary, the ranking discourses that frames the meaning of difference (Pieterse, 2007, p. 93).”

“Educating” Minorities

Thailand is home to a large number of minority groups but few are as distinct from the official view of national cultures as the Malay Muslims in the South and the Hill Tribe people. Both groups have historically developed completely separately from the Tais of the central river basin. Malay Muslims belong to the Malay cultural world and share with it

not only a joint history but also religion as well as language (Perkasa, 2008; Roux, 1998; Syukri, 1985). Hill Tribe people reside in mountainous areas of Thailand and also speak a different dialect and have their own customs. From a religious point of view they are animists and were not touched by the waves of Indian and Buddhist influence that shaped Thai culture. Due to their cultural resilience and clearly distinct identities, both groups were targeted by the central government for education. In this case the role of education was not only instrumental in the sense of teaching them useful skills for economic purposes but the goals were also cultural and political.

Malay Muslims have traditional schools called pondoks which teach religion, Malay language, and local Patani history (McCargo, 2008). Pondoks tend to be boarding schools and are central cultural parts of the community in the South of Thailand. The central government perceived the independence and local nature of pondoks to be hampering the national assimilation process and thus in the 1960s started to bring them under its control. Both incentives and coercion were used in order to bring them under the government fold. The first attempt involved setting up competing Thai public schools in the deep South and making attendance compulsory (Perkasa, 2008). This was not effective because parents refused to send their children there while they continued to attend pondoks. During the 1970s and 1980s a different approach was attempted which involved both compelling pondoks to register with the ministry of education as well as offering financial incentives to those schools that combined the traditional Thai curriculum as well as religious teaching. Thus the government attempted to introduce a Trojan horse into the pondok system by offering money in exchange for control over the curriculum. This approach was highly effective and discredited some pondoks in the eyes of the local population. As a result of this the number of pondoks has greatly decreased during the last decades. Nevertheless there is still broad opposition in the Deep South to public schools teaching Buddhism, Thai official national culture, and Thai language. The local population interprets the central government's attempts to spread public education in their region as an attempt to forcefully assimilate them and thus

***Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis***

deprive them of their group identity (Feigenblatt, 2009b). In summary, Malay Muslims resent the central government's disregard for their own local history, their language, and their religion and thus view public primary and secondary education as just another method of oppression and forceful assimilation wielded by the central government.

The situation for the Hill Tribe people has been even more difficult in terms of education. Their group lacks such a strong civilization background as that of the Malay Muslims and their education was informal and concentrated on preparing children for subsistence in the mountains and some rituals for animism. Due to this, development projects launched by the central government to help the hill tribe people in terms of economic growth were easily combined with education (Mulder, 2000). Public schools were built to cater to them and they were staffed with young central Thai interns. The curriculum taught by those schools was the nationally approved one. Therefore hill tribe children were taught a history in which they are invisible, they are taught central Thai language rather than their own dialect, and the hidden curriculum is based on a Buddhism which is foreign to them. This approach proved to be very effective as a way to assimilate them into the dominant national culture and it did not meet as much local resistance as other similar attempts in the Malay South. Nevertheless it should be noted that the result has been to alienate the new generations of Hill Tribe people from their own history and the older generations.

Effects of Thai Nationalist Education

The imposition of Thai Nationalist Education on the entire country has had many important effects both on the country as a whole as well as on its minorities. One of the most important effects has been the strengthening of a central Tai elite centered on the Monarchy and Bangkok (Ungpakorn, 2007). Education justifies the concentration of power through a combination of history, ethics, and religion. This has both economic and political consequences. Since children are taught to obey and not to question the status quo it leads to conformism and to political apathy. Evidence

of the two previous assertions are the lack of understanding when it comes to concepts such as democracy and the rule of law shown by the majority of the population as well as popularity of the monarchy among a large part of the population (Albritton & Bureekul, 2004, 2007).

Another important effect has been the spread of the myth of an ancient Thai unitary Nation-State destined to become present day Thailand. It is surprising how uninformed the average Thai citizen is about history. Due to the distorted version of history they are taught in school they learn historical propaganda rather than what actually happened in their region. One prominent example is the history of Thai script. Most experts agree that it slowly developed from Lao and that it was not properly codified until the late 18th century, however official Thai history claims that it was singlehandedly invented by King Ramkhamhaeng at a much earlier date (Perkasa, 2008). Other examples of distorted historical views involve the role of Thailand during World War II, in which it was allied with the axis powers. The main result of education in relation to nationalist history is to justify the present by making up the past.

A related effect has been the forceful assimilation of most minority groups in Thailand. As it was explained in the introductory sections of this paper, Siam was a multicultural state rather than a unitary nation-state. Regional variation in terms of culture has suffered a gradual erosion due to public education. Local practices have given way to national civic culture in both the cultural and religious realms. Some minorities such as Chinese outside of Bangkok have undergone cultural assimilation to such an extent that they have given up Taoism and do not speak any dialect of Chinese.

Instability has resulted in some regions due to opposition to the previously mentioned attempted cultural assimilation. The most prominent case is that of the Muslim South in which schools and temples are often attacked by militants as clear symbols of central Thai oppression (McCargo, 2008). In this case education is an important grievance held by the local population and at the same time a powerful weapon in the hands of the central government. Both sides attempt to use education to preserve their group

*Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis*

identity and to press their claims both on history and on present political and economic control over the region.

Liberation Pedagogy

Freire's liberation pedagogy can serve as a good model for education reform in Thailand. This approach to education was developed for a Third World country, Brazil, and it is meant to be elicitive rather than prescriptive. What this means is that liberation pedagogy is supposed to guide the student in the learning process rather than impose a single path. In other words, liberation pedagogy is about empowering children to learn, by giving them the opportunity to name their world. By naming their world, what is meant is that students are encouraged to go beyond the veil of official discourse set by the center and are allowed to describe things as they see them (Berthoff, 1990). Their perspectives are not only welcomed but are given primacy over official orthodoxy. The results of this approach to education go beyond the attainment of instrumental knowledge but also help develop the overall character of the child. Empowerment is achieved by awakening the potential already possessed by the child. Thus the goal of liberation pedagogy is to free the minds of children and improving their self-esteem. It is clear that some of the goals of liberation pedagogy are necessary in order to institute sustainable participatory democracy. Therefore, the application of this model for Thailand would have positive effects not only in terms of economic growth, greater creativity, but also in educating the future generations to be better citizens.

Some Possible Changes to the Thai Education System

Taking liberation pedagogy as the guiding theoretical framework several important changes could be made to the present Thai education system. First of all the curriculum should reflect a greater emphasis on analytical tasks and creativity rather than simply rote learning. One way in which this could be achieved is by eliminating some of the periods devoted to Buddhism, morals, and ethics and merging them into a course called social studies. This new course should

also include civics and its goal should be to introduce students to important issues in democracy and citizenship. The goal of this course would be to help the students think of themselves as capable and interdependent citizens who are engaged with the political and social future of their country. Multiculturalism should also be included in this subject in order to reflect the diversity of the country's population. Reform is also necessary for history lessons. The overwhelming emphasis of national history for most of primary and secondary education should be changed to a more balanced coverage of world, regional, national, and local history (Sweeney & Zandan, 1981). Interdependence should be emphasized and national events should be linked to regional ones and so on so as to show students the complexity of the historical process. This would help correct the distorted view of history previously taught at schools and thus empower members of groups whose histories have been marginalized.

Another important reform would involve the previous emphasis on instrumental knowledge and modernization. Teaching farming in urban schools, vocational mechanics to future politicians and ignoring social studies in the education of future engineers are important flaws of the current system. The present system concentrates on passing on factual knowledge to students so that they can learn a trade and help in the modernization process of the country. The problem with this system is that it is instrumental and treats people as tools. One of the results is that students who take the math and science track in secondary school have deficient language skills and little knowledge of the outside world. The Thai education system should be reformed in order to concentrate on what the Germans call *bildung* which refers to the search for knowledge in order to gain understanding and thus becoming a better person. This view of education is more holistic and prepares students not only to learn a trade but to become responsible and informed citizens. Another added advantage of this approach is that students are taught how to think analytically and thus gives them more flexibility to change career paths in the future if they wish to do so. A change to *bildung* in Thailand would involve the elimination of the three tracks presently offered in Thai secondary schools in favor of a single one in which

**Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis**

basic subjects are encouraged and problem solving is emphasized.

In summary the Thai system needs to be reformed in order to be more student-centered as well as more holistic. The goal should be to empower students rather than shape them into mindless tools for the economic development of the country. The proposed changes should be applied flexibly and taking into consideration the local context but the sooner they are put in place the better the future of the country and of the present generations will be.

References

- Albritton, R. B., & Bureekul, T. (2004). Developing Electoral Democracy in Developing Nations: Thailand [Electronic Version]. A *Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development, Working Paper Series*, 1-33. Retrieved September 20, 2009, from <http://www.asianbarometer.org/newenglish/publications/workingpapers/no.17.pdf>
- Albritton, R. B., & Bureekul, T. (2007). Thailand Country Report: Public Opinion and Political Power in Thailand [Electronic Version]. A *Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance and Development, Working Paper Series*, 1-38. Retrieved September 20, 2009, from <http://www.asianbarometer.org/newenglish/publications/workingpapers/no.34.pdf>
- Berthoff, A. E. (1990). Paulo Freire's Liberation Pedagogy. *Language Arts*, 67(4), 362-369.
- von Feigenblatt, Otto F. (2009a). ASEAN and Human Security: Challenges and Opportunities. *Ritsumeikan Center for Asia Pacific Studies Working Paper, No. 09-5(July)*, 1-22.
- von Feigenblatt, Otto F. (2009b). Human Security and the Responsibility to Protect: A Holistic Approach to Dealing with Violent Conflict in Southeast Asia. In A. K. Pandey, S. Verma, R. P. Pathak, B. Paranjape, N. K. Mishra, Gangatharan, D. Pande & B. K. Choudhary (Eds.), *Repositioning 'Subalternity' in Globalized India: The Dynamics of Social Inclusion* (pp. 130). Delhi: Macmillan.
- von Feigenblatt, Otto F. (2009c). The Thai Ethnocracy Unravels: A Critical Cultural Analysis of Thailand's Socio-Political Unrest. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 1(3), 583-611.

- Jory, P. (2003). Problems in Contemporary Thai Nationalist Historiography. *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, 3(March 2003).
- King, G., & Murray, C. J. L. (2001). Rethinking human security. *Political Science Quarterly*, 116(4), 585-610.
- McCargo, D. (2008). *Tearing Apart the Land: Islam and Legitimacy in Southern Thailand* (First ed.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- McCargo, D. (2009). The Politics of Buddhist identity in Thailand's deep south: The Demise of civil religion? *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 40(1), 11-32.
- Ministry-of-Education-of-Thailand. (2005). *Students in Formal School System by Jurisdiction in Bangkok Metropolis and other Provinces : Academic Year 2005*. Retrieved from <http://www.moe.go.th/English/nu/stat2005/Student05.pdf>.
- Mulder, N. (2000). *Inside Thai Society* (1st ed.). Bangkok: Silkworm Books.
- Murphy, E., & Dingwall, R. (2007). The Ethics of Ethnography. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography* (pp. 339-351). London: Sage Publications.
- Neher, C. D. (2002). *Southeast Asia in the New International Era*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Perkasa, K. (2008). *Patani: Behind the Accidental Border*. Los Angeles: KijangMas Perkasa.
- Pieterse, J. N. (2007). *Ethnicities and Global Multiculture: Pants for an Octopus* (Hardcover ed.). Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Pieterse, J. N. (2008). Global Multiculture, Flexible Acculturation. In K. Archer, M. M. Bosman, M. M. Amen & E. Schmidt (Eds.), *Cultures of globalization : coherence, hybridity, contestation* (pp. 65-79). London: Routledge.
- Rhum, M. R. (1996). 'Modernity' and 'Tradition' in 'Thailand'. *Modern Asian Studies*, 30(2), 325-355.
- Roux, P. L. (1998). To be or not to be: The Cultural Identity of the Jawi (Thailand). *Asian Folklore Studies*, 57(2), 223-255.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Stuart Sim, B. V. L. (2005). *Introducing Critical Theory*. London: Icon Books.
- Sweeney, J. A. C., & Zandan, P. A. (1981). International Political Socialization of Sixth Grade Elementary Children: What and How Do Japanese and Thai Children Know about the World? *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l'Education*, 27(3), 271-300.

**Otto F. von Feigenblatt, Vannapond Suttichujit, Md Shukri Shuib,
Mohamad Faisol Keling, and Mohd Na'eim Ajis**

- Syukri, I. (1985). *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani* (C. Bailey & J. N. Miksic, Trans.). Athens: Ohio University.
- Ungpakorn, G. J. (2007). *A Coup for the Rich: Thailand's Political Crisis*. Bangkok: Workers Democracy Publishing.
- Willis, J. W. (2007). *Foundations of Qualitative Research: Interpretive and Critical Approaches*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Wyatt, D. K. (2003). *Thailand: A Short History* (Thailand ed.). Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.