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HISTORICAL PRACTICES AND MODERN INTERPRETATIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE WAI KHURU CEREMONY AS A THAI EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL TRADITION

Faculty Article by Ryan V. Guffey, Ph.D. and Anothai Kaewkaen, MFA

Abstract

While working in Thailand, education professionals from Western backgrounds often remark on a certain social eminence accorded to teachers by Thais, and many will also experience, especially in abridged form, the rituals of the Wai Khru, or Homage to Teachers, ceremony. However, it could be that few without direct cultural orientation can appreciate these traditions to the depth such long-standing cultural practices deserve. More detrimentally, they may not be aware of the social expectations these traditional views place on educators within Thai society. Drawing on primary sources from Thai literature and media and their own experiences as educators in Thailand, the authors of this article—both Thai-American and foreign—place the Wai Khru ceremony, along with the social status and responsibilities implicit on being an educator in Thailand, into historical and social context, with the aim of shedding light on these topics for other professionals looking to work or conduct research in this Southeast Asian nation.

Introduction

By tracing the etymologies of words, we often arrive at the meanings they held in their original historical contexts. Thus the origins of our present-day university in Christian Europe is apparent in its Latin roots: from *uni*, “one,” and *versus*, “to turn.” Thus the university was originally an institution where humans studied that “One” around which the whole of the universe rotates (or, perhaps, the One who sets the universe in motion), and the various arts and sciences were conceived of as adding to our understanding of the nature of Creation. We can see other holdovers from such ages, perhaps most explicitly in the clerical design of university robes, but the religious origin of the modern university is also implicit in its very name.

Thailand established Chulalongkorn University, the first in its modern educational system, in 1917, long after the overtly religious connotation of the word had, by and large, faded with the changing nature of higher education. Not surprisingly, the Thai word for university, an amalgam of Indic roots, is more neutral, one might even say secular: a university is a *mahavidalaya*, an “abode” or “dwelling” for “Greater or Higher Learning” (-*Alaya* is the same suffix that ends “Himalaya,” the “abode of snows”). And yet to say the contemporary Thai place of learning and the Thai educator are free of spiritual expectations would be inaccurate. The Western scholar, arriving in Bangkok or Chiang Mai to teach or conduct research, is confronted with this history in her very first introduction to her Thai students and colleagues: *ajahn* they will call her, the same title for Buddhist monks. And should she arrive in Thailand at the right time of year, or should her host institution be particularly zealous, she will be exposed to the rites of the Wai Khru ceremony, in which elements of ancestor- and spirit-worship, Buddhist ethos, and even Brahmanical rites, can be seen. Thus, to be an educator in Thailand, especially as a foreigner, one must understand that the original template for Thai education is the Buddhist monastery, with all the trappings of religious syncretization its Thai incarnation possesses, and that the role of Buddhist monks as spiritual and moral authorities often blur with those of teachers, even those who teach the most mundane disciplines.

Education in Thailand: An Overview

As stated in the previous section, Thailand’s modern university system began with the establishment of Chulalongkorn University in 1917 for the sole purpose of educating the ruling elite to serve the modern bureaucracy (Wyatt, 1969). Later, as the government needed to develop different sectors, more universities with further specialized instruction emerged: Thammasat in political science and law in 1934, Kasetsart and Silpakorn in 1943 in agriculture and the fine arts, respectively, and Mahidol University in 1969 in medicine. While these and other early universities were located in Bangkok, the 1960s saw the diversification and expansion of the Thai higher education system, with regional universities springing up in other parts of the country and the establishment of open enrollment universities such as Ramkhamhaeng and private universities. According to Thailand’s Office of Higher Education, as of 2012 Thailand boasted 171 higher education institutions: 80 public and 71 private (Lao, 2015, p. 11). Currently, there are 9,300 academic enrollment opportunities between public and private higher education institutions under jurisdiction of the Commission on Higher Education, Ministry of Education (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2016, n.p.).

On the primary and secondary levels, Thai law mandates nine years of compulsory education, with an additional three years of upper secondary schooling available to students who pass entrance examinations. The school year is divided into two semesters, from May to October and November to March, though some institutions, such as Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai, match the traditional American semester schedule.

Formal education consists of 12 years of basic education. Basic education is divided into six years of elementary education and six years of secondary education, the latter being further divided into three years of lower- and upper-secondary levels. Kindergarten levels of pre-elementary education, also part of the basic education level, span 2–3 years depending on the locale. Non-formal education is also supported by the state. Independent schools contribute significantly to the general education infrastructure (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2016). In terms of high school achievement, the Program of International Student Assessment (PISA), which is funded by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), surveyed over half a million 15-year-olds across 70 countries world-wide. PISA conducts the survey every three years and Thailand has participated continuously since 2000. According to the 2015 results, Thailand ranked 54th for math, 57th for reading, and 54th for sciences (Fredrickson, 2016).

Ajahn and Sit: The Buddhist Vocabulary & Worldview of Thai Education

The role of the Buddhist monastery in providing not only spiritual but practical education to the masses in pre-modern Thailand is well-documented. “While the palace was a place for princes and noblemen to receive education,” wrote Lao (2015), “the temples provided the space for the commoners to learn [Pali], the language of the Buddhist texts, and Thai” (p. 10), with instruction conducted by the monks themselves. The mid-19th-century installation of murals and stone tablets at Wat Pho, Bangkok’s oldest and largest monastery, treating subjects such as traditional medicine, child-rearing, and geography, also revealed a precedent for the Buddhist temple as a place for study broader than simple literacy or religion. In addition, during the early days of modern education in Thailand and in many rural areas today, schools were housed within or adjacent to Buddhist temples, “which became places for propagating mass education, while all textbooks and syllabi were developed by a centralized ministry in Bangkok” (Baker & Phongphaichit, 2009, p. 202). Thus, the existing network of Buddhist monasteries was reappropriated to serve the needs of a modern education system—or, seen another way, modern education emerged from a monastic center.

So deeply are these monastic origins embedded in Thai conceptualizations of schooling that much of the vocabulary Thais use to refer to students and teachers comes directly from inside temple walls. While *nak rian* and *nak suksa* are fairly recent coinages and mean “primary and secondary school student” and “higher education student,” respectively, the word *sit* (“disciple in the religious sense”) is also common parlance. In classical texts like the *Lokanit*, a collection of proverbs believed to have been compiled by monks as long ago as the thirteenth century (โคลงโลกนิติ พระนิพนธ์, p. 32), words like *bandit* (“scholar,” cf. pundit) and *prachya* (“philosopher”) are used interchangeably with monks and are now used to describe anyone who takes up formal study in a university. Finally, terms for teachers are ultimately derived from the heads of Thailand’s Buddhist institutions: *khru* (cf. guru), especially for primary and secondary school teachers, and *ajahn* (cf. Sanskrit *acharya*) for professors and instructors on the collegiate level. Thus, Watson (1980) was not incorrect when he noted that in bringing a

modern educational system to Thailand a “Western, Protestant, urban, competitive, materialistic school system was grafted onto the existing monastic system without any clean attempt to define its objectives” (p. 135)—or, the authors of this article contend, to create a new ethos as regards the nature of education or the relationship between teacher and student.

The implications of these historical origins and cultural paradigms for teaching professionals in Thailand have been little discussed, especially as regards foreigners working in Thailand. The absence of new terminology is one indicator that traditional modes of thinking endure: the teacher-student relationship is literally constructed as one between an *ajahn* and his *sit*, words which carry with them implicit social and cultural expectations shaded by their origins in the temple. To this, teaching professionals in Thailand, especially foreigners, can owe the sense of social stature accorded to them while in Thailand, however superficial or nominal it may be. They must also, however, be mindful of the association of their role with that of the spiritual mentors with whom they share their titles, and the social expectations that this gives rise to.

What are these expectations? A good place to begin might be with the aforementioned *Lokanit*, a self-styled “guide to the world’s and its ways” (Verse I). In Verse 229, we hear:

ช่างหม้อตีหม้อไซ้...ตตตีฉาน
แตกนา ตีแต่เอางามงาน....ชอบไซ้
ดุจศิษย์กับอาจารย์...ตีสั่ง สอนแฮ
ตีให้ตีจกให้.....สสสุห้องอบาย

A potter does not beat a pot
to shatter it, but to give a form
that's fair for use,
just as a teacher (*ajahn*) strikes his pupil—not
to cause him harm
or lead him towards abuse.

In Thai, the final line literally reads “not for the student to enter the room [i.e. the state] of *abai*,” a word the critical edition defines as “the quality of being without betterment,” best translated perhaps with the English word “deterioration.” While this can be interpreted simply to mean that a teacher does not strike a pupil to bring him pain, *abai* also suggests that a teacher *might* strike his pupil so that the pupil does not enter into *abaiyabhumi* or *abaiyamukh*, both Buddhist terms. The former is a spiritual deterioration brought about by ignorance of the Buddha's teaching and consequent clinging to material things, and that leads to rebirth in the lower realms of hell or as a “hungry ghost” or animal. The second is a worldly sort of decay brought about by indulgence in intoxicating substances, indolence at work, and other unproductive behaviors. The proverb underscores the *ajahn's* role as preceptor of spiritual values as well as practical knowledge.

Another verse (233) reads:

เย็นเงาพฤกษามิ่งไม้...สุขสบาย
เย็นญาติทุกชี้อาราย...กว่าไม้
เย็นครูยิ่งพันฉาย...

Gentle and cool is a leafy trees' shade,
but gentler than that is the shade made
by one's family, where one finds ease.
Yet a teacher's (*ajahn's*) shadow is greater than trees
by the thousands shed...

The central image of the poem, that of a kindly, shade-bearing tree, is dwarfed first by the loving care of one's family, which in turn pales against the shelter offered by an *ajahn*. In a historical context, this is because tutelage under an *ajahn* led to spiritual self-betterment along with practical skills, especially literacy—things that the modern educator, no matter of what subject, is still expected to model, if not provide.

National Teachers' Day

How can we say that this is so? One need look no further for proof of the persistence of this ethos—of teacher-as-moral-preceptor—than the most recent National Teachers' Day commercial produced by the 7-11 corporation, a chain so ubiquitous that it has in and of itself become part of the social fabric of Thai urban life, a phenomenon that deserves a paper of its own. National Teachers' Day was first observed in Thailand on January 16th, 1957. It is the brainchild of then-Prime Minister Plaek Phibulsongkhram, who a year earlier at a meeting of the nation's *khurusapha* ("teachers' council") declared that the day of their annual conference should also be used as a day to honor teaching professionals throughout the nation. The council itself was founded by a royal order issued on January 16th, 1945, that called for a committee within the Ministry of Education composed of teachers from across the country, whose duty was to contribute to the shaping of policies affecting education and research, as well as to share best practices and establish social services for educators and their families. In his 1956 address to the council, Phibulsongkran explained the need for a teachers' day as follows (as quoted by วันครูแห่งชาติ 2016):

ที่อยากเสนอในตอนนั้นก็คือว่า เนื่องจากผู้เป็นครูมี บุญคุณเป็นผู้ให้แสงสว่างในชีวิตของเราทั้งหลาย
ข้าพเจ้าคิดว่าวันครูควรมีสักวันหนึ่งสำหรับให้บัณฑิต
ลูกศิษย์ทั้งหลายได้แสดงความเคารพสักการะต่อ
บรรดาครูผู้มีพระคุณทั้งหลาย เพราะเหตุว่าสำหรับคน
ทั่วไปถ้าถึงวันตรุษ วันสงกรานต์ เราก็ให้นำเอาอัฐิของผู้มีพระคุณบังเกิดเกล้ามาทำบุญ
ทำทาน คนที่สองรองลงไปก็คือครูผู้เสียสละทั้งหลาย ข้าพเจ้าคิดว่าในโอกาสนี้จะขอฝากที่ประชุมไว้ด้วย
ลองปรึกษาหารือกันในหลักการ ทุกคนคงจะไม่ขัดข้อง

What I wish to suggest at this moment is: whereas teachers are people to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude for bringing light into our lives, I think that there ought to be a Teachers Day wherein students can show their respect for the teachers to whom they owe so much. My reasoning is that, on holy days and Songkran [the Thai New Year] most of the populace take the ashes of those who have *phra khun*, make spiritual merit for them, and give them offerings. Second only to these people are teachers, who are always sacrificing [for their students]. I'll take this occasion to leave this idea with the Committee. Consult on it with each other, and I doubt you will be disinclined.

As briefly explained in footnote 3, *khun* or *phra khun* is a quality one possesses after having done good to another; that other is subsequently indebted to you in terms of respect, loyalty, and gratefulness. In his speech, the Prime Minister refers to the practice of honoring the spirits of one's progenitors on holy days with religious rites and offerings, and specifically names teaching professionals as second only to them in the reception of such veneration. One should keep in mind that he is not speaking to a group of monks, but professionals paid to teach by and large secular subjects and practical knowledge. Phibulsongkram's words vaguely recall the *Lokanit* verse 233 from the previous section in which various groups of people are compared to the shelter cast by a great tree. In that poem, the shade cast by teachers is said to dwarf one's immediate family, a relationship which Phibulsongkram inverts here. Nevertheless, his rationale for the establishment of a national teachers day is very much reflective of a worldview in which educators are worthy of the same religious rites and observances accorded to ancestors and spiritual authorities. The Council voted to approve the holiday, and Phibulsongkram subsequently signed it into law on November 21st, 1956, setting the date as January 16th of every year.

It should be noted that under Phibulsongkram, Thailand saw a rise in nationalism influenced by certain European fascist ideologies, which was meant to efface regional and ethnic differences within Thailand and establish a "standard" Thai culture and etiquette that was nevertheless in line with Western models of the same. Especially during 1939-42, a number of *rathniyom*, "state [cultural] mandates" were issued targeting a range of cultural identifiers including modes of dress, ways of speech, establishment of a national dance, etc. The creation of a national teacher's day can be viewed as part of this "Thaification" process in which the cultural practices of the Thai ethnic majority—the traditional veneration of teachers—and, tellingly, not of a minority group like, say, the Chinese, was codified into national policy.

In January 2016, in anticipation of National Teachers' Day, the convenience store giant 7-11 released a short film based on the life of M.R.M. Rucheesamorn Sukhsawat, teacher and later principal at Warnawidhya Primary and Lower Secondary school, on social media, where it was widely circulated. The school, which is located near Bangkok's Silom district, serves mostly working-class families.

Beginning in 1967, when a neighborhood fire forces a number of the student body into a local shelter, the nearly 10 minute-long slot dramatized the life of the educator. The real Sukhsawat, now 96 and bed-ridden, but apparently still in good spirits, appeared to

comment on the various subplots that the advertisement interweaves. When the younger Sukhsawat purchased new school uniforms for her displaced students out of her own pocket, the older Sukhsawat said, “Money is just scraps of paper. A child has a life and spirit (ชีวิตจิตใจ) and needs to receive good moral instruction (การอบรมสั่งสอนที่ดี)” (โมโมโร, 2016). Later, when she disciplined two boys she caught in a fist fight by binding their arms together, she said, “A good teacher must love children, have compassion for children, must teach and instruct children[1]. Not just cane them again and again...It’s words, rather, that creates good children.” When, at the film’s climax, a young girl who kept leaving class early to tend to her sick mother finally becomes orphaned, Sukhsawat embraced her and vowed, “I myself will be your mother.” The black-and-white image of the two of them hugging faded into a color photograph of Sukhsawat, now much older, embracing the same girl, now grown, in university graduation regalia.

As the emotional film drew to a close, former students and colleagues poured into the elderly Sukhsawat’s room to thank her and pay homage by singing a traditional song venerating teachers. In a voiceover, Sukhsawat commented on the importance of Thailand’s Teachers’ Day and of teachers in Thai society in general: “Teachers Day is an important day for children because teachers have a duty to mold children into good people by giving them (moral) instruction...and imparting them with practical knowledge” (วิชาความรู้[2]). Sukhsawat’s listing of the two as separate and yet inextricably linked, as well as her use of the word “duty” (หน้าที่), is telling, and encapsulates the ideal of the educator in Thai society as both accomplished in study and in spirit. As if to underscore this point, as well as demonstrate, once again, how deeply monastic paradigms are embedded in how Thais conceptualize even secular education, the film ends with a Buddhist proverb, in Pali, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism, with a Thai translation:

ปาเจราจริยา โหนติ คุณตตธานุสกา
ครุเป็นผู้มีคุณยิ่ง ผู้ร่ำสอนศิลปวิทยา

Teachers possess surpassing virtue[3], who transmit skills and knowledge

[1] “Teach and instruct”: In Thai, Sukhsawat used the words สั่งสอน and อบรม. The former more closely means “to teach” in the sense of imparting (practical) knowledge, though สั่ง (“to command or instruct”) does have a moral overtone to it. The latter is more explicitly ethical in nature; it is derived from the term used for the process of scenting clothes with fragrant herbs or other substances, and thus metaphorically suggests imbuing a person with positive qualities. “Indoctrinate” might be a closer translation, but still falls short.

[2] วิชาความรู้: a วิชา (*wicha*) is a body of knowledge that can be applied. The word is also used in the same way as the English word “subject of study.”

[3] “virtue”: The word translated here as “virtue” is คุณ, which is considerably more complex. Basically, an individual who has คุณ (khun) is owed respect and loyalty by others for having performed good services to them, such as a parent (for giving his or her child life), a monarch (for providing for his people's physical and spiritual welfare), and a teacher, for supplying an individual with the skills and knowledge to make a livelihood.

Wai Khru: Guide to Rites and Symbolism

Before the bell announces the start of their match, *muay thai* fighters engage in a ritualistic dance to the sound of traditional Thai musical instruments. It is a *wai khru* dance—a dance in homage to the teachers who instructed them in the martial arts, both past and present, as well as to the spirits of Thai kick-boxing. Behind the curtain, just before they step on stage, Thai classical dancers in their gilt robes and tall headdresses raise their hands, palms pressed in prayer, above their heads to honor their teachers. Before filming begins on a big-budget movie or TV serial, the cast and crew offer food to the spirits of past *khru*, thanking the ancestral instructors for the craft that has been transmitted through them.

The above examples reflect individual or occasional practices of paying homage to teachers, which Thai culture deems necessary before the use of any knowledge received through instruction and training. However, with the establishment of a nationwide teachers’ day, Wai Khru festivals have become institutionalized throughout Thailand’s education system from elementary schools to universities. Ironically, although the template for Wai Khru activities was established by the Teachers’ Council when National Teachers’ Day was implemented in 1957, the January 16th date falls awkwardly in the middle of the normal Thai semester system and is thus rarely chosen for the ceremony. Instead, most schools observe Wai Khru towards the beginning of the semester, and always on a Thursday, which in Thai is named after Brihaspati, the Vedic god of wisdom and teachers (Coetzee, Shipton, & Takeuchi, 2013, p. 557). (Curiously, in as much as she can be considered a reliable source, Anna Leonowens—the famous English woman hired in 1862 to teach English to King Mongkut’s children—noted that she had to wait to begin lessons on a Thursday as well).

In general, the Wai Khru ceremony falls into three parts:

1. Buddhist prayer and invocation.
2. The presentation of ritual offerings by students to teachers.
3. Speeches and/or awards from teachers to students.

While some schools host contests for the decoration of *phan*, a type of pedestalled metallic tray used to present offerings in ritual contexts, offerings made to teachers during *Wai Khru* generally resemble those made to monks and spirits, and at their core consist of joss sticks, candles, and flowers. One flower in particular, the crimson “needle blossom” (*Ixora coccinea*, commonly called “West Indian jasmine”), with its pointed red petals, is most closely associated with the holiday as it represents mental acumen.

After these are presented to teachers, usually by individual class representatives, students might queue before their teachers and formally pay them obeisance by bowing with their hands pressed in *wai* position, or with the two palms pressed together as in prayer and greeting. Teachers will then offer words of encouragement, sprinkle holy water on their students, and tie around their wrists a white cord—the same kind of cord used in Buddhist monks in ceremonies such as marriage and exorcism. Thus, in these ceremonies, teachers assume the role of Buddhist monks, performing similar rites and even making use of the same material items in their ritualized functions.

Conclusion

Of course, it could be said that teaching professionals everywhere are expected to act as positive role models for their students, especially the younger those students are. Educators in the United States and elsewhere are careful to monitor their social media accounts and keep a professional distance from their pupils. Yet, while this may be attributed to a sense of common propriety, Thai expectations towards a teacher’s role and behavior are deeply rooted in spiritual and religious expectations originating in the Buddhist monastery, and find formal, institutionalized expression in national holidays like Teachers’ Day and the rites of *Wai Khru*, and persist in the very lexicon Thais use to describe the student-teacher relationship.

Despite the pressures of globalization and recent student unrest for the perceived inadequacies of the Thai educational system, the cultural complexes discussed in this paper are likely too deeply imbedded in Thai symbolic culture and values to be eroded in the near future. The authors encourage other education professionals teaching or conducting research in Thailand to be aware of the cultural forces surrounding their status, as well as urge them to be aware of the responsibilities their position entails.

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