

The “Bad Students” Movement and Human Rights in Contemporary Thailand

El Movimiento de los “Malos Estudiantes” y los Derechos Humanos en la Tailandia Contemporánea

*Otto F. von Feigenblatt¹, Phillip Pardo², Malcolm Cooper²

¹*Royal Academy of Economics and Financial Sciences, Spain.*

²*Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan.*

**vonfeigenblatt@hotmail.com*

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Abstract

The present paper explores the role of the “Bad Students” Movement in Thailand’s pro-democracy protests. Local issues such as the social studies curriculum, school uniforms, and disciplinary measures in the public school system, are presented by the “Bad Students” Movement as a human rights issue. The discourse used by the Group is deconstructed so as to identify some of the problems posed by the use of the broader human rights language to challenge strongly held mores and norms of the Thai education system.

Keywords: human rights, Thailand, bad students, reform

Resumen

El presente artículo explora el papel del movimiento de los "malos estudiantes" en las protestas a favor de la democracia en Tailandia. Los problemas locales, como el plan de estudios de estudios sociales, los uniformes escolares y las medidas disciplinarias en el sistema de escuelas públicas, son presentados por el Movimiento de “Malos Estudiantes” como una cuestión de derechos

humanos. El discurso utilizado por el Grupo se desmonta para identificar algunos de los problemas planteados por el uso del lenguaje más amplio de los derechos humanos para desafiar las costumbres y normas del sistema educativo tailandés.

Palabras clave: derechos humanos, Tailandia, malos estudiantes, reforma.

Introduction

The Kingdom of Thailand, formerly known as Siam, is known for one of the best education systems in Southeast Asia (Amyot, 2003). Part of the country's success in the field of education can be attributed to the intervention of enlightened members of the Royal family since the reign of King Mongkut in the 19th century who hired Anna Hariette Leonowens to serve as a teacher at the Siamese Court (Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2005; University, 2014). This early school for members of the Royal Family would become the prototype for the entire primary and secondary school system.

King Mongkut's grandson, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) established Chulalongkorn University, based on the former school for civil servants, as the country's premier university (University, 2014). The University was named in honor of King Rama V, who played a very important role in modernizing the country in the late 19th century (Wyatt, 2003). Chulalongkorn University is ranked as one of the top universities of Asia and it has a very strong corporate culture emphasizing loyalty to the monarchy and service to the nation (Amyot, 2003).

It should thus be noted that the Thai education system reflects many traditional values considered to be central to Thai culture (Schiller & Liefner, 2007). One of the peculiar features of Thai education at both the secondary and even undergraduate levels is that students wear uniforms to class (Amyot, 2003). Thai students at the primary and secondary school levels also have to follow strict rules regarding the length and color of their hair. Historically the purpose of uniforms

has been to inculcate loyalty to both the institution and to the nation as a whole through an emphasis on group identity rather than on individual differences (Feigenblatt et al., 2010).

Discipline is also very strict in comparison to Western standards and students are singled out for shaming as a mild form of punishment for offenses against the norms of the group. Moreover, there is a strict hierarchy among students based on seniority which is enforced both by teachers as well as by the students themselves (Feigenblatt et al., 2010). The system encourages conformity and obedience, and it resembles military and other total institutions in that the individual is shaped to fit the ideal mold provided by the institution.

Thailand's education system is a reflection of the country's strict social hierarchy, classified by Hofstede as high power distance (Eldridge & Cranston, 2009; Poocharoen, 2010). Teachers are treated with utmost respect and there is even a yearly celebration in which the students have to prostrate themselves in front of their teachers to thank them for their guidance and support. Even though many of these rituals and practices run counter to American and Western European cultural norms of equality (Rouault, Pardo, & Drugmand, 2020), they are perfectly compatible with Thailand's traditional cosmovision based on the three pillars of the kingdom, namely, religion (Theravada Buddhism), the monarchy, and the nation (Dalpino, 2011; Feigenblatt et al., 2010; Unger, 2009; Wyatt, 2003).

In recent years, in particular since the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra in the early 2000s, countercurrents proposing alternative norms and mores have become more visible (Hamlin, 2009; Sinpeng & Kuhonta, 2012). Electoral victories by the Thai Rai Thai, a populist party with a strong base of support from the poor north of the country, have challenged the traditional view of Thailand as a land of consensus and social stability (Dalpino, 2011; Dressel, 2009). Two subsequent military coups further evidence the challenges presented to the traditional monolithic view of Thailand as

a country universally in support of the three pillars (Murphy, 2009). Nevertheless the strong counter currents to re-impose a conservative view of the nation and of the state also support the view that there is still a large percentage of the population who supports the traditional order represented by the monarchy and by institutions such as schools, public universities, and the military (Le-Coz, 2009).

Recent events in Thailand, preceding the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic, such as the drafting of Thailand's most recent constitution, guaranteeing considerable power for the military and other conservative institutions, resulted in widespread protests by a very eclectic group of non-state actors (Ngamkham & Mala, 2021). Protests included members of the business elite who were dissatisfied with the role of the bureaucracy and the central role of the military in Thai politics, poor farmers from the Northeast who want a larger share of the country's wealth, aging agitators from the leftist fringe of academia with memories of the failed attempts at reform of the 1970s, and a larger number of students, inter alia (Ngamkham & Mala, 2021; "Thanathorn ordered to erase vaccine supply criticism," 2021). A group in particular, calling itself the "Bad Students", is of interest because of its complaints and demands to the government and its institutions ("Bad Students" hang up uniforms at Education Ministry," 2020).

The present paper does not attempt to assess the legitimate/illegitimate claims of the many actors involved in the protest movement of 2020-2021 but rather focuses on the opportunistic discursive co-optation of Human Rights language by a small, yet highly vocal and visible group of disaffected students calling itself the "Bad Students". Extreme broadening of the purview of Human Rights, as presented by many activists and nonprofit organizations in Southeast Asia, and particularly in Thailand, has had the detrimental effect of hardening the attitudes of many members of the regional political elites in relation to this type of discourse (Chang, Chun, & Park, 2007;

Kim, Fidler, & Ganguly, 2009; Rüländ, 2011). Competing models and terms such as social justice, sufficiency economy, sustainable development, inter alia, are gaining traction at the expense of “human rights” (Chachavalpongpun, 2009; Unger, 2009). A similar process has taken place with the discourse of “human security” due to its expansion resulting ambiguity (Akaha, 2009; Battersby & Siracusa, 2009; Bhattacharjee, 2007; Feigenblatt, 2010b; King & Murray, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

The present exploratory paper is guided by a critical theory approach to political contestation (Stuart Sim, 2005). Nevertheless critical theory is broad and has both materialist and constructivist variants, the present paper favors the constructivist end of the critical theory spectrum. Moreover a narrative analysis approach is applied to public statements made by the “Bad Students” group in order to interpret their goals and demands (Cortazzi, 2007).

“Bad Students”

Traditional Thai culture has a high regard for education as a sign of merit (Amyot, 2003). There is a certain religious element to education in that people with a higher level of education are considered to have accumulated a higher level of merit. Thus, from a Theravadha Buddhist perspective education leads to enlightenment and people who possess it have a certain aura of wisdom. The clearest observable example of this is the Wai Kru celebration in which students prostrate themselves to pay respect to their teachers. Offerings of flowers and food are provided to teachers and the teachers then bless the students. The ritual reinforces a hierarchical relationship between student and teacher which affects even the way in which teachers interact with students and their parents outside of school (Heidhues, 2000). Tellingly, parent teacher associations in

Thailand are dominated by teachers, and parents, in particular those from humble backgrounds, approach teachers with a very deferential attitude.

Thailand has a centralized system of education headed by a Ministry of Education which controls the curricula and emphasizes the teaching of traditional Thai values, including a very strong “civic religion” teaching students the importance of the “Three Pillars” of the nation (Feigenblatt, 2016; Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2005). Education, in particular public education in Thailand, is as much about teaching content as it is about socializing future members of society (Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2005; Suttichujit, 2013). Form is as important as essence in that dress, manners, and discipline are considered to be as important as or even more important than educational attainment (Lavankura, 2013). Thus, there is very little tolerance for deviance from social norms. Education is aimed at creating functional members of society who can contribute to the group and who are willing to sacrifice their personal short term wants for the benefit of the community (Wyatt, 2003). Therefore in this type of system and educational context, deviance of any shape or form is not only frowned upon but it is severely discouraged. Examples of practices which differ from contemporary trends in American, and to a large extent Western European practice, include the use of public shaming as a punishment, corporal punishment while technically illegal is still prevalent, and scores are still posted publicly.

It should be noted that norms are enforced not only by teachers, parents, and other adults but by the students themselves. There is a tradition, prevalent in most of Asia, of the junior (nong)/senior (pi) relationship which functions as a way for upperclassmen to help socialize underclassmen into the norms accepted by the institution, and in this case of the entire nation (Amyot, 2003; Morton & Olenik, 2005). Thus, there is a total control of the individual in which the goal is for the individual to reshape his or her identity based on what is needed by the

community. In this type of environment, individual eccentricities are not taken as a sign of genius but rather as a flaw that needs to be corrected (Smith, 1997; Wyatt, 2003). The system is designed to help the majority of the student population rather than focus on the minority of students who do not fit the ideal mold, either because they have learning disabilities or deviant cultural backgrounds (Feigenblatt, 2016).

The previous paragraphs provide context to the emergence of the “Bad students” group. Students who disagree with the strict rules regarding uniforms and behavior are exposed to competing social norms supported by Western powers, and in particular by the United States. This is particularly true in the field of education, which is dominated by American faculties of education favoring models of educations with an emphasis on the holistic development of the individual (Eldridge & Cranston, 2009; Feigenblatt, 2016; Georgakopoulos, 2009). Examples include, inter alia, universal design learning (UDL) and the Montessori system (Hallinger & Lu, 2013; Praphamontripong, 2010). Terms such as “individualized learning”, differentiation in teaching, and “scaffolding”, all reflect an emphasis on the needs of the individual rather than on those of the community (Hallinger & Lu, 2013; Scholz, 2013). Another interesting term is “learner centered classroom” which also takes away the focus from the teacher in favor of the student (Hallinger & Lu, 2013). Students in Thailand and many of their parents, in particular young cosmopolitan couples based in the capital, are exposed to these new trends in education through international print media and movies and conflate the high quality of life in Western industrialized countries with the previously mentioned education methods (Unger, 2009; Rouault et al., 2021). The denial of the highly centralized Thai education system to cater to the demands for change of that very vocal minority and the very real social sanctions suffered by those who challenge the system has resulted in many proponents to adopt the language of human rights in an effort to gain more

international support and to integrate their demands into the wider struggle for democratic reforms (Ungpakorn, 2007, 2010).

The Group calling itself the “Bad Students” club is relatively small in terms of numbers, approximately 100 core members, even though it is very hard to ascertain the exact numbers because of the diffuse nature of the movement (“Bad Students” hang up uniforms at Education Ministry,” 2020; Ngamkham & Mala, 2021; “Thanathorn ordered to erase vaccine supply criticism,” 2021). Another challenge in terms of understanding this particular group is that many of the participants in their rallies may be opportunistic rather than devoted members. Another important challenge is that the movement seems to be propped up by foreign groups, most of their media coverage is foreign rather than local and thus their actual influence on the group may be much smaller than expected (“Bad Students” hang up uniforms at Education Ministry,” 2020). Mirroring the environmental movement’s choice to elevate teenage Greta Thurnberg as a poster child, the foreign media has also narrowed its focus on Ploy Benjamaporn, a 15 year old student who has served as informal leader of the “Bad Students” group (“Bad Students” hang up uniforms at Education Ministry,” 2020). There is also an interesting connection between local nonprofit organizations supporting the movement and international media outlets. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights seems to be a core organization based on its defense of members of the group accused of breaking Thai laws during their protests (Ngamkham & Mala, 2021).

The language used by “Ploy” to describe the goals of the movement and its criticism of the government and the education system is clearly based on Western discourses about human rights and feminism. “I think that girls and LGBTQ people are suppressed by the patriarchy both at home and at school. This has made me come out to fight for myself and for everyone” claims Ploy (“Bad Students” hang up uniforms at Education Ministry,” 2020; Martin & Chaisamritpol, 2020). She

takes this argument one step further by stating that “Schools are like small dictatorships, with all their rules” (Martin & Chaisamritpol, 2020).

One of the challenges in terms of understanding this particular group is that communication seems to be centered on this particular student leader, “Ploy”, filtered by the groups’ allies in friendly non-profit organizations (Kittisilpa & Thepgumpanat, 2020; Martin & Chaisamritpol, 2020). It is hard to ascertain whether the emphasis on the language of human rights and the use of Western standards of schooling is something that was sincerely expressed by the student protesters or it is imposed by their Western backers.

The Co-optation of Human Rights Discourse for Ideological Purposes

The discourse of human rights is not new to Thailand (Akaha, 2009; Dalpino, 2011; Tow, Thakur, & Hyun, 2000). Many academic conferences have been held about the topic and there are several programs at the master’s and doctoral level with a concentration on the topic. Mahidol University, one of the top public universities of the country, has a very strong program focusing on human rights (“Social Science Division: Mahidol University International College,” 2016). Nevertheless, there is ambivalence in the academic community of Thailand regarding the usefulness and applicability of the “Human Rights” discursive paradigm for the Thai socio-cultural context (Amyot, 2003; Chachavalpongpun, 2009; Chang, Chu, & Park, 2007; Lavankura, 2013). Competing and overlapping concepts such as Human Security and most importantly the concept of “Sufficiency Economy” deal with similar issues from different perspectives (Battersby & Siracusa, 2009; Bhattacharjee, 2007; Brown, 2014; Feigenblatt, 2009b, 2010b; Unger, 2009).

The universal claims of Human Rights are a great strength but also a weakness in the Southeast Asian context. A history of colonialism in the region paralleled by Euro-American ethnocentrism

makes local intellectuals and policy elites suspicious of paradigms making universal claims (Kim et al., 2009; McCargo, 2005). Thai scholars have pointed out how some aspects of the human rights paradigm are clearly nested on Western conceptions of individualism and Judeo-Christian philosophy (Pitiyanuwat & Sujiva, 2005). There is also a resistance to the emphasis on rights rather than a more holistic approach to development and governance that also includes duties.

Another challenge in terms of gaining the support of stakeholders in Thailand for the demands made by the “Bad Students” is that Thailand is already facing many pressing challenges such as a very deep economic recession, high unemployment, and an overstretched healthcare system (DRESSEL, 2009; Feigenblatt, 2009a, 2009c, 2010 2012, 2020). Thus if everything is a “priority” then nothing is a “priority”. This same phenomenon of donor exhaustion and general desensitization was observed with the concept of “human security” in the early years of the 21st century (Feigenblatt, 2010a; Gilson, 2007; King & Murray, 2001; MacFarlane & Khong, 2006). For unemployed workers in the Northeast and for street vendors dealing with the challenges of the COVID restrictions, the students’ complaints about dress code and hair style rules may seem minor and foreign.

Thailand has a very strong norm favoring seniority in all aspects of life (Wyatt, 2003). Respect for elders is part of the country’s traditional culture which results in people in positions of power in most sectors to be quite advanced in age, over 60 in some parts of the economy. Thus, the generations now in power grew up during the time of the Cold War in which Thailand was in the front lines of the global struggle (Wyatt, 2003). The Cold War was experienced differently in Thailand compared to Western Europe or the United States in that the struggle was for the protection of what was perceived as traditional Thai culture and independence (Roux, 1998;

Syukri, 1985). At the core of the struggle was the institution of the monarchy, Buddhism, and the military as the protector of the nation.

The vast majority of the elite are trained at two historical institutions, namely the Chulachomkiao Royal Military Academy (CRMA) and Chulalongkorn University (Amyot, 2003). Both institutions have a long tradition and a strong connection to the monarchy. The CRMA and Chula (Chulalongkorn University) are both highly selective and follow a strict seniority system ("Graduate School: Admission and Study," 2016). CRMA trains the military elite while Chula trains the civilian elite. Thailand does not have a legacy system in terms of admissions but rather has very competitive entrance examinations. Moreover, once admitted the student/cadet must go through a painful socialization process into a strict cohort system based on seniority and loyalty to the group and institution. Interestingly, socialization of new students is mostly in the hands of senior students, who are in charge of organizing and overseeing a complex program of activities and rituals with the ultimate purpose of rebuilding a new identity for the new students (Amyot, 2003). The process includes hazing and a certain degree of public humiliation but it produces a highly loyal, devoted, and qualified cadre of military officers and civil servants. Tellingly, the "Bad Students" have virtually no support from the current or former students of those two elite institutions. The main lesson in the complex set of events and rituals used to socialize new students is that privileges and membership in the group have to be earned. New students are reminded of the proud history of the institutions and that they have a great opportunity to be reshaped or formed into successful professionals if they follow the rules and put in the work. This is a very deferential attitude to authority which in many cases is surprising to the outside observer. One obvious reason why new students support this system is because they know that everyone has to go through it and that those in power today were the new students of the past. Thus, the rituals might be painful and

demeaning, but someday the new students will become senior students who should also earn their respect.

It is very difficult for graduates of Chula and the CRMA to sympathize with Ploy's complaints about all the rules of schools. In many cases those complaints are viewed as foreign fads fueled by American popular culture and by non-profit organizations funded from abroad. Thus, there is a disconnect (Rouault, Pardo, & Drugmand, 2020) between the social worlds of the "Bad Students" and the graduates of CU and CRMA. Moreover, members of the socio-cultural elite of the country view attacks on traditional norms as attacks on their own positions of authority (Poocharoen, 2010). If discipline and respect to authority figures is a symptom of the existence of a dictatorship, a word with extremely negative connotations in the international realm, and thus regulations regarding dress and demeanor are oppressive symbols of patriarchy, then their years of dutiful service and sacrifice would be meaningless.

Another interesting development in terms of the popular perception of school discipline and rules is the rise of an aspiring business middle class (Feigenblatt, 2016; Lavankura, 2013; Murphy, 2009). The Thai class system is not primarily based on money but rather focuses on education and occupation (Unger, 2009). There is a clear discrepancy between the American ideal of social mobility based on income and the traditional idea of class which is based on status rather than on income (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018). Members of this relatively affluent rising middle class, mostly focused in the business sector, admire the American/Western focus on income and productivity as the main marker of social class and resent the traditional pecking order based on merit and education (Murphy, 2009). One way for members of this particular group to challenge hegemonic discourses on class and status is to enroll their children in schools which follow alternative education models, mostly imported from the West. Not all members can afford to send

their children to these new experimental private schools and therefore find themselves in the uncomfortable position of having to send their children to traditional public schools which favor a traditional view of Thai culture and education. It is interesting to note that the relatively few parents supporting this particular group of “Bad Students” tend to belong to this group of new aspirational middle class urban people, even though at this point data in this regard is mostly anecdotal and superficial (Martin & Chaisamritpol, 2020).

Conclusions

Thai history is the history of “big men” who represent different socio-cultural groups and competing ideologies and most area experts agree that Thai politics are characterized by a clientelism resembling the *caudillismo* of Latin American politics in the 19th century (McCargo, 2009; Pongsudhirak, 2008; Poocharoen, 2010; Unger, 2009). Therefore it is not surprising that both the “mainstream” and the opposition are headed by elites rather than representing legitimate spontaneous social movements (Ungpakorn, 2007, 2010). The role of the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a successful businessman, as the behind the scenes de facto leader of the opposition and the current role of Thanathorn Juangroongruangkiti, a young billionaire turned politician of the disbanded political party known as the *Future Forward Party*, point towards the conclusion of business as usual and of a deeper struggle between the traditional elite and progressive sectors of the business community (Dalpino, 2011; Dressel, 2009; Ockey, 2007).

The co-optation of the language of human rights to promote changes in the education system of Thailand does a disservice to the human rights framework. There are serious human rights issues to be discussed in Southeast Asia such as treatment of refugees, poverty in certain regions, and human trafficking, inter alia (Chan, 2018; Sorajjakool, 2013; Stephens, 2016). The international

attention paid to “Ploy” and the “Bad Students” group shows a double standard in terms of news coverage and serves to distract attention from more pressing issues. Concerns which are better suited for the Parent Teacher Association should not share the public sphere with issues of more pressing concern. The international press is not reporting on human rights abuses in West Point Military Academy USA because of the compulsory use of uniforms there or featuring an editorial about the regulations on hair length at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst in the United Kingdom.

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