The Impacts of Westernization through Short-Term Volunteer Teaching in Ayutthaya, Thailand: An Observational Study

By Elena C. Robertson
Occidental College

Analyzing the manner in which developing nations are incorporating western ideas into their social, economic, and educational development is integral in understanding the consequences of "globalization/ westernization" in developing nations. In emerging Southeast Asia, the incorporation of western values into a traditional system has greatly increased in the last several decades. Therefore, it is an ideal region for observational research on globalization in the volunteer teaching industry.

While it has been frequently occupied by various militaries throughout its history, Thailand is the only country in the region that has retained autonomous rule. Because of this, Thailand's experience with globalization/westernization is fairly distinct. The globalization of Thailand has largely been driven by a strong tourism as Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular, is one of the most popular backpacker destinations in the world.[1]

Thai Culture: The Struggle to Maintain Tradition in a Global System

Ayutthaya was the capitol of the Kingdom of Siam until 1767 and is still often considered the cultural capitol of Thailand. Located two hours by train outside of Bangkok, Ayutthaya has a constant stream of tourists who patronize the many ruins and more than 500 temples within the city. With this constant flow of foreign nationals comes an inevitable exchange of ideas between tourists and inhabitants.

The presence of tourists and foreign business people is not new to Ayutthaya. In its peak in the 18th century, Ayutthaya was a haven for a large portion of the world's sea merchants. Indians, Malays, Vietnamese, Japanese, Persian, and later Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, and French traders made their port in Ayutthaya.[2] The presence of these traders has created many sub-groups within Ayutthaya, as strong Chinese and Japanese influences can be seen in the architecture, religious sites, and food. Because so many non-Thai traders came to Ayutthaya to sell their wares, the Thai people and government have had to adapt accordingly to the presence of non-traditional beliefs. In the 17th century a large number of Muslim merchants had settled in Ayutthaya so King Narai (r.1656-1688) built a mosque to show that his government and country welcomed the Muslim merchants and respected their faith.[3] This shows that the Thai kingdom has a history of "openness" when faced with the necessity to adapt, a willingness that is more than crucial in the globalization of an ancient culture.

This readiness to adapt can further be seen in the recent increase in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Thailand and, surprisingly in Ayutthaya. Several Chinese and Japanese factories have businesses in Central Thailand and have branches in the greater Ayutthaya area.[4] With an increase in FDI; the region has seen a shift in employment opportunities, especially for the middle class. This in turn has caused the government to design educational reforms meant to better prepare students for non-traditional jobs. While these businesses may be Eastern in nature, their presence suggests a greater level of connectivity between Thailand and other Asian countries. Furthermore, the move of these companies into Thailand will likely provide job opportunities that may necessitate some sort of standardized education, which is where a generic "western" education could come into play.

A culture steeped in tradition, the idea of introducing a western education is often met with resistance from Thai people. "In the past…the lives of Thai people revolved around the temple…[but] ever since [Thailand] opened its doors to the western powers, the Buddhist condition has gradually deteriorated. Our ruling elites were sent to study abroad instead of to the local temples… relegating the temple to the backseat."[5] With western cultural influences come western ideals, some of which are thought to be rather incompatible with a culture rooted in Buddhism. According to Sulak Sivaraksa, one of Thailand's leading Buddhist scholars, "technology and modernity uproot and destroy the traditional way of living and the traditional conception of beauty and goodness. …All this is being done in the name of 'being civilized' or western civilization."[6] Buddhism does not hold the same place in modern Thai culture as it once did in the traditional culture. However, it is still seen as an integral part of the education system and society. For example, the older student body of Pratomwittahyakom School visited Wat Pranhomyong. During this time at Wat Pranhomyong, students were instructed by monks in the many different ways of praying, meditating, and the core social values of Buddhism. The monks used a range of media to instruct the children, utilizing mainly a lecture style for prayer instruction, interactive sessions for meditative instruction, and a variety of videos downloaded from the internet to illustrate the Dos and Don'ts of Buddhist culture. The usage of non-traditional media to convey very traditional Thai values epitomizes the changing status of Thai culture within the education system.

While Ayutthaya is a relatively heterogeneous population (approximately one third are Muslim, a very high concentration for its region), Thailand as a whole is still relatively homogeneous in religious association. 90% of Thailand nationals identify with Theravada Buddhism, which is the traditional and more conservative form of Buddhism.[6] Buddhism has influenced Thai culture and education in many ways, including the strong belief in the importance of literacy and the emphasis of learning through experience. It has also lead to the building and maintenance of expansive libraries and to the idea of learning from all fields of knowledge.[7] Buddhism played a fundamental role in the development of Thailand as a state and culture, a fact which is still observable in educational values.

The History of Western Ideals in Thailand: The Pibul Era

Returning once more to Thailand's history of autonomous rule, it is important to examine the manner in which Thailand has introduced western ideals into its society. Unlike their Malaysian, Indonesian, or Vietnamese counterparts, the Thai people never had a western societal framework brought on by colonization. This has resulted in the Thai government having to internally set up a system of globalization, which, according to some, was highly detrimental for Thai society.

Chao-Tzeng Yawnghwe, of the University of British Colombia wrote that "Pibul was very much influenced by ultra-nationalistic, authoritarian European regimes and Japanese militarism… He strove to emulate…Mussolini and Hitler. Thus inspired by fascism, he introduced measures to instill a nationalistic, militaristic spirit in the Thai people and to socialize them in the ways of modern nationhood… Pibul changed the name of the country from Siam to…Thailand in English. He also decreed a set of "cultural mandates", which compelled Thais to learn the national anthem…and dress in western garb, among other things. He employed the mass media and educational system to popularize a new history, [which] was filled with prideful ethno-national rhetoric, tales of great saviour-kings, ancient empires, and glorious wars… It deliberately emulated contemporary western history books which aimed to provide the nation with an organic-historical link to its "golden past"".[8] Unlike many developing nations, Thailand has had to internally force westernization through political policy instead of through colonization.

History of the Thai Education System

The easiest way to indoctrinate a society with a new ideology is through the education system; if young children grow up learning a certain set of ideas, they will act in accordance with those principles. Indoctrination of a countries youth allows ideas to become the norm of a society. When Thailand laid out its ambitions to create a more global youth, they identified the educational system as one of the most important targets. This was seen in 1999 during the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, where leaders from 155 states from around the world agreed that education was a basic fundamental right and necessary to develop.[9] The government has passed many minor and several major reforms in order to ease the transition of a totally Thai education system to one that is capable of using western material and teaching styles.[10]

Throughout Thailand's long history of education, there have been several periods of extreme change within the system. In Buddhism, the concept of education is very important. Literacy is thought to enable one to better understand and analyze the world, which furthers one's ability to understand how to distance oneself from the mundane and eventually achieve Nirvana. Thailand has had at least some form of formal education for several thousand years and the education system has changed based on the introduction of new ideas or even on the whim of a leader. The first modern reform for education came in 1921, when King Rama V enacted a compulsory primary education law that made some primary education mandatory for all children. Previously, the formal school system consisted of four years of lower-primary, three years of upper-primary, three years lower-secondary, and two years of upper-secondary, or three years for the vocational stream. It was colloquially called a 4:3:3:2 (or 3) formal school system with four years compulsory for all geographical areas and seven years compulsory for some large communities. In this system, it was found by many researchers that half of the fourth-grade leavers did not graduate to the fifth grade and in addition, a third of those fourth-graders lapsed back into illiteracy after three years. New reform changed the 4:3:3:2(3) school system to the 6:3:3 system with six years compulsory for all Thai children.

Prior to this law, only students living in the metropolitan areas were legally required to attend school. For the next several decades, the percentage of students enrolled in schools increased at a steady rate with the implementation of minor education reforms, until 1999 when another series of major reforms were set into motion. A sudden, dramatic increase was not seen partially due to the shortage of trained teaching personnel. The 1999 reforms dictated several things: firstly, that the standard lecture/rote memorization system of learning was no longer ideal and that a more dynamic and analytical form of teaching would be used in the school system; secondly, the education system was also decentralized (from being controlled entirely by the Ministry of Education (MOE)) to allow communities to have more autonomy in their educative decisions; under these reforms, teachers are now required to undergo more rigorous training in order to obtain and maintain their positions; and, finally, a more stringent internal and external evaluation system was developed by the MOE.[11] In implementing these reforms, the Thai government sought to bring the Thai education system up to the same standards as its western counterparts; no longer would Thai students learn by rote memorization. Instead, an actual understanding of the "why" aspect would become an integral part of the education system.

The actual presence of these reforms in Prattomwittahyakom School was less than obvious. While it is not possible for this research to include a comparative field analysis of the pre and post-1999 reforms, it is worthy to note that at least within Prattomwittahyakom School, the teaching style continues to be based almost entirely off of rote memorization. With that being said, and with a short background of the history of the region and general education reforms within Thailand, an analysis of Ayutthaya's school system and its efforts to modernize can begin.

The Education System and Westernization: Challenges with Short-Term Teaching Volunteers in Ayutthaya

As the process of globalization has greatly accelerated within the last several decades, the Thai school system has determined that the need to modify its educational system in accordance with global expectations is of great importance. This movement has resulted in many schools undergoing major reforms to incorporate a global curriculum into their existing school system. However, some other schools have chosen to adhere to their traditional values and incorporate only small amounts of global material in their curriculum. The struggle between globalized culture and Thai culture can be found time and again in the education sector. This dichotomy between the two cultures has manifested itself in the "widespread recognition that the current [education] system is inefficient and ineffective at meeting the demands of the emerging era… [but] the values and assumptions underlying these 'modern' educational practices run counter to traditional cultural norms of Thai Society".[12] In Pratomwittahyakom School, this dichotomy has manifested itself into the importation of both native and non-native English-speaking teaching volunteers in an effort to bring an element of the West to students' education without overhauling the entire system. There are many advantages and disadvantages to this system of teacher-importation. Two of the most obvious are that Thai students benefit through the opportunity to learn from Westerners of different nationalities and backgrounds, but then are conversely

subjected to the many different "dialects" of English that are heard between American, German, British, Australian, and Icelandic teachers. During research, volunteers from all of the aforementioned regions as well as France, Mexico, Ecuador, and Canada. The subject of the different accents of English upon English acquisition in English language learners has been studied for a number of years. In one such study done on English language learner accent preference, 52% identified American English as the easiest form of English to understand.[13]

This may be because American English (when compared with English spoken with British, Chinese, and Mexican accents) is spoken at 147 words per minute, as is Chinese English, while British English is spoken at 160 wpm and Mexican English is spoken at 180 wpm. This conclusion was evident in the communication between various volunteers at Pratomwittahyakom school; teachers and students alike were virtually incapable of understanding English spoken by British volunteers purely because of their accents. On multiple occasions, a British volunteer would ask a question and, instead of attempting to respond, the person in question would immediately default to an American volunteer to repeat the question. Thus suggesting that it was the accent, and not the content, that caused Thai persons such difficulty in comprehension. In Ayutthaya, there is an ever-changing range of accents, from European to North and South American, making it even more difficult for students to understand how to pronounce many English words and even how to identify certain objects. For instance, in Britain and Australia the word Honeydew refers to what is called Cantaloupe in America. The word Honeydew, in America, refers to a melon that is called Winter Melon elsewhere. While this may seem like a trivial matter, these minute differences in the English language exacerbate the difficulty of learning English from foreign nationals.

Many of the detrimental aspects of short-term volunteer teachers observed in Ayutthaya were also found in a study on volunteer teaching conducted in the Ningxia province of China. In both the Ayutthaya and the Ningxia province, the short-term aspect of the teachers "failed to solve the fundamental problem of teacher shortage [and]…disrupted the normal teaching schedule."[14] Because teaching contracts in the aforementioned study are usually around one year long, the challenges seen by schools in Ayutthaya are greatly exacerbated. Volunteers in Ayutthaya are usually present between one and eight weeks, but occasionally up to twelve or more. During the period of study in Ayutthaya, the school semester was in full swing and the constant introduction of new volunteers to the schools was a continual disruption for both permanent faculty and students. Each volunteer is essentially dropped into his/her respective school without any guidance from the organization or host school, and it is up to the individual volunteer to create a lesson plan each day. This is clearly less than ideal; volunteers whose teaching experience ranges from none to being retired school teachers are left to their own devices to design and implement daily lessons for children of all ages. Without the continuity of a long-term curriculum, students' English education is extremely choppy and disorganized, which has little benefit for the students. Furthermore, because so many of the teaching positions are often occupied by western volunteers, the need to find permanent teachers does not seem as prudent as it truly is. The schools do not seem to be understaffed, when in reality there is an extreme shortage of hired teachers. At Pratomwittahyakom School, for instance, there were seven full time teachers and between one and three volunteers depending on the week. The use of short-term volunteer teachers by Ayutthaya's school system is an extremely unsustainable manner in which to teach English. Furthermore, it brings about negative economic consequences for Thai teachers. That is, that Westerners *pay* to teach in the schools instead of being hired. Also, the flow of volunteers is inconsistent and subject to major increases and decreases depending on the season. The high tourist season in Thailand is from November until mid April, and with the influx of tourists comes an increase in volunteer teachers. Because the Central Thai school year starts in May and goes until February, with a month long break for the flood season in mid-September through mid-October, the arrival of volunteer teachers rarely coincides with the beginning of a school year. This uneven distribution of teachers causes even more disruption to students' education and teachers' yearly activities.

Role of the Volunteer and Effects Upon Students

It is entirely up to the volunteer to design and implement teaching plans, and the level of planning for this depends exclusively on the dedication of each volunteer. There was no guidance from the volunteer organization or from the school on the classes' English abilities. No advice was given on what to teach or the most effective manner for English instruction. Besides the obviously frustrating set of circumstances for each volunteer, this "laissez faire" system is detrimental to the Thai students' English acquisition. Because there was no coherent lesson plan available for volunteers, each volunteer created his or her own curriculum on a daily basis. Throughout the time spent researching for this project, there was never a coherent flow of teaching, mainly due to the informal nature of the instruction as well as the school's ever-changing placement of each volunteer.

A volunteer's placement varied on a daily basis between classrooms and age groups, depending on the availability of the actual teachers. It appeared that the role of each teacher at Pratomwittahyakom School was undefined. Whenever a volunteer was sent to a classroom, the class was always unsupervised. One could go hours without walking by a supervised classroom. In these "free" classrooms, students either sat in their desks quietly, played with whatever materials were available, or talked to each other; teachers could often be found snacking outside or chatting in the staff lounge. It should be noted that, due to the researcher's lack of comprehension of Thai, it is possible that the teachers were planning lessons or discussing topics relevant to the school year. However, due to the body language and facial expressions of the teachers during these periods, this seems unlikely.

In a news article written by a teaching volunteer in Israel, he noted that the school was always "noisy, with kids running around everywhere, and no one listening to anyone else. While the teachers do not seem fazed by this, it seems impossible to get anything done."[15] This observation is entirely applicable to the Ayutthaya school system-- not only were teachers not fazed by the chaotic nature of their students, but they seemed blissfully unaware of what was going on or, at least, were not perturbed by the lack of formalized learning. At Pratomwittahyakom School, the majority of the teachers could usually be found sitting under a tree and talking during school hours, while the Head Teacher (principal) was nearly always doing paperwork in the teacher's lounge. Unlike their western counterparts, principals in Thailand are responsible not only for paperwork and the daily goings-on at their school, but they are also responsible for teaching one or two classes per day.

A daily conversation in Prattomwittahyakom School occurred between Miss Sudha (the English teacher) and various volunteers consisting of: "Head Teacher busy, you teach." It was

never made clear *why* so many classrooms were unattended, or what the day-to-day duties of the teachers actually were. Upon entering unattended classrooms, students sometimes appeared to be occupied: on one such occasion, students were busily copying a scientific diagram of the human digestive system. A teacher informed the researcher that this was "Health" class, and promptly left the room to attend to other matters. The secondary classes in particular were a most concerning environment. When teaching in the secondary classes, there was a visible divide between students who cared about school and those who did not. This became evident in their handwriting and their ability to read, write, and speak English. This observation is not meant to be unique to Thai schools; this scene could be played out in any school in the world. It was of note mainly because of the gross discrepancies in English fluency between students. Some students are able to read and write English and understand the concepts of punctuation, plural versus singular, and understood that spaces are a necessity between words. Others simply do not have this understanding, and their handwriting is barely legible. While this issue cannot be blamed upon the short-term volunteers, their presence does not help the matter. As was already mentioned, volunteers teach alone or with other volunteers, but never with the assistance of a Thai teacher. The language barrier between volunteer and students seemed far greater in the secondary classrooms (due to the type of activities that were presented) and the material far more integral to English comprehension. Explaining the concept of spaces between words is nearly impossible without a minimal comprehension of a common language. The discrepancy between students' English abilities speaks to the need to have permanent teachers who are fluent in English and Thai instead of importing native/non-native volunteer teachers, as many of the issues found during transliteration cannot be communicated without a basic understanding of Thai. In the context of the 1999 education reforms, it is obvious that there is much work to be done regarding teaching style in Pratomwittahyakom School.

Volunteers and the Potential Inconvenience for All

During the period of research, many volunteers came and went without making too many ripples, so to speak. Volunteering attracts a wide variety of people with an equally broad set of goals, there is no assurance for the host-school that their appointed volunteer will be useful, and nothing can be done if the volunteer ends up being a nuisance and overall inconvenience for teachers, staff, students, and other volunteers alike. Even in the cases of volunteers who made every effort *not* to make a fuss, it was clear that their presence was a tax on the school system and staff. Volunteers could not go anywhere unattended to by at least one student or teacher, and could not do anything (such as go to the bathroom) without being asked if everything was okay. Food and beverages were constantly being supplied to the volunteers, and the schools' cooks happily accommodated any and all of the volunteers dietary restrictions (such as vegetarianism), and often made entirely separate meals for the volunteers based upon these restrictions. This, to a certain extent, is part of Thai culture; volunteers are treated with a great deal of respect and thus their happiness is very important to the school. However, it was the continual disruption of the staff's daily activities that warrants note as teachers would consistently accompany volunteers anywhere they went and were known to pop into classrooms just to ensure that the volunteers were not thirsty or hungry. This was an inconvenience for staff and students. The aforementioned negativities of volunteer teachers are completely aside from any of the harmful psychological effects volunteer teachers could potentially have upon students and staff. If westerners are consistently seen as the only legitimate English teachers in Ayutthaya's schools, this could decrease students' motivation to learn English and consider teaching as a profession. Would this not also discourage Thai teachers from learning and then practicing their English with each other or any volunteers present? The observations made during this research are that the answer to these questions is overwhelmingly: Yes. Older students have become so accustomed to seeing westerners as their only role model for speaking English that they appear to have lost any desire to learn the subject and fail to realize why it could be useful in the future. This could be due, in part, to their English books. These books were made in Thailand to teach British English at an extremely advanced level that lacked any cohesion between lessons. One section in particular was extremely inconsistent; in one lesson, students were learning to identify objects in the classroom, and in the next they were supposed to conjugate and practice contracting various verbs. After a month of working with the secondary school students, it became painfully obvious that their grasp of the English language was little better than that of the students in the lower stages of the primary school. Teachers appeared to be terrified to speak English to the volunteers, and would immediately default to Ms. Sudha for any question the volunteer posed to a Thai teacher. Some of this can be attributed to the teachers' lack of knowledge of the English language; several staff members knew nothing beyond basic greetings, while the Head Teacher/Principal did not appear to know any English whatsoever.

Anecdotal Observations of the Relationship between Thai and Western Culture

Despite the lack of an obviously western curriculum in Pratomwittahyakom School, there are many examples of a great awareness of the western world. In the fifth week of this study, students made posters to decorate the various classrooms, and in any poster featuring a person (to represent an action, for instance) the drawing was always of a Caucasian person, and the activity was usually a non-traditionally Thai one, such as Baseball or Ballet. Primary students were given the afternoon off of regular classes in order to make these posters, and were more than happy to curl up on the ground and color away for several unsupervised hours.

Several other observations are that the new school building features western toilets instead of the normal squat toilet found across Thailand. All of the students' English workbooks are made in Thailand to teach British English (and are subsequently filled with activities that revolve around British monuments and history). Students wear uniforms that could be found in any western school, complete with tall socks and sneakers. While research was based at Pratomwittahyakom School, observations were also made in Koh Samet, Koh Samui, Chiang Mai, and Bangkok. In Chiang Mai, where there is a high concentration of hill tribes, mandatory, formalized education might as well not exist; among indigenous people formalized education is a sticky topic. When visiting the hill tribes, it seemed that there was no formal building for education and that all children were assisting their parents in their duties as opposed to attending school. There is the possibility that this was done solely for the enjoyment of the tourists (that is, that when tourists were present the tribes people abandoned their usual duties to participate in more aesthetically pleasing tasks such as embroidery), but with the constant flow of tourists this hardly seems practical. In Bangkok, the education system is comparable to any major metropolitan city in the western world: busloads of uniformed students attend International Schools

(which often times use the International Baccalaureate curriculum) where only trained, hired, and paid teachers are in charge of educating the students. In Island communities, such as Koh Samet and Koh Samui, a dramatically greater number of school-aged children were seemingly not enrolled in any sort of school; children could constantly be seen selling goods on the beach or in touristy spots as well as helping their (assumed) parents with their food/ trinket stalls in market areas. Because the Thai islands are infamous for their beauty (assisted by Alex Garland's The Beach infecting a global generation with the travel bug), travelers flock from around the globe to soak up the sun and salt in the Gulf of Thailand. This has resulted in several of the islands, mainly Koh Samui, Koh Phangan, and Koh Samet (which is on the eastern side of the Gulf), becoming Thailand's version of the Hawaiian Islands. Because the culture between Central, South, and North Thailand are all so drastically different, being able to see the island culture allowed this research to gain stronger footing in the basic concept of Thai culture and how the western world fits into this. For instance, take Koh Samui: a beautiful island with several pristine white sand beaches, (most notably Chaweng Beach) which are buzzing with tourists, and is thought to be Southeast Asia's most popular island getaway. However, once one leaves the beach-side lounges available for rent, the ratio of Thai people to westerners resumes its "normal" balance, and, the further one ventures from the tourist hotspots, there are drastically more Thai people than western. The culture of the Thai islands is, like many island states or nations, very laid back. The food takes a long time to cook and is full of fresh, spicy flavor; children run around assisting their parents regardless of the day of the week or time of day; and even the way in which western culture has altered the traditions is different than anywhere else in Thailand. Yoga studios, many of which are owned and operated by westerners, cater to western and Thai people alike, as well as the presence of more "laid-back" western music such as reggae, as opposed to the thundering bass-lines of Dutch "House" music that can be heard throughout Central Thailand. Many of these observations about Thai and western culture were made at the end of the volunteer project and outside of the school environment, and thus provided a different examination of these two cultures than was made at the beginning of the project.

Conclusions

From this study it is clear that Thailand is at a crucial point in its move towards becoming a global giant. The government recognizes the internal changes that are necessary to educate generations of intelligent, "global" adults, but is struggling to actualize these hopes within the school system. This is due, in part, to the history of education in Thailand; without teachers educated in the western manner, it is nearly impossible to produce students who are educated in a western style. From what was gleaned from speaking with other volunteers and through observations at Prattomwitthayakom School, it appeared that, at least for Ayutthaya, the goal of an inquisitive, western style school system is many decades in the future. The observations made in Ayutthaya have led to a rather negative view of the short-term volunteer teaching industry; short-term volunteers are, for a plethora of reasons already discussed, a greater cost to the schools than they are a benefit. While volunteers often come away with a much greater understanding of the world they inhabit and how their cultures differ from the rest of the world, the host-country is left with an economy dependent on tourism and school systems dependent on volunteers. In the context of Thailand as a whole, however, Ayutthaya's experience with western education seems to be relatively balanced between Bangkok's rigidly International approach to education and the loose approach of the island and more rural regions. This is indicative of Thailand's position in the globalizing world; struggling to develop a strong westernized generation while desiring to maintain its cultural roots by allowing indigenous people to continue practicing their traditional way of life.

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