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## Decolonising the “Thai-ness” Discourse in Education

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### Introduction

The discourse on Thai-ness, as established by government-supported intellectuals, and propagated through the educational policy, curriculum and textbooks, remains highly influential, and is highly respected by Thai society. However, Thai-ness inevitably goes through a process of hybridisation due to the driving forces of globalisation and neoliberalism, which in recent decades have resulted in the emergence of an anti-establishment discourse on Thai-ness from critical educators. This can be seen in the white ribbon movement, which consists of students and youth demonstrating against an oppressive education system and undemocratic political institutions; also, the Thai civic education network, made up of teacher and teacher educators fighting for democracy, equity and

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justice (Jatuporn, 2019; Lertchoosakul, 2021). With a specific focus on the years 1957 to 2018, this chapter aims to problematise the concept of Thai-ness as a given for absolute knowledge in the social studies curriculum; in school textbooks, and through its discursive practices of power in Thailand, all of which have been regulated and formally approved by the Thai Ministry of Education (Department of Academic Affairs, Ministry of Education, 2018). The critical discourse analysis method can be applied as both a theoretical and methodological framework, which can reveal the discursive practices of social studies curriculum and textbooks as agentic forces of the dominant culture, which function to reinforce existing power relations, asymmetries, and forms of domination. This chapter demonstrates how discursive curricular practices have been mediated by the nation-state to inscribe rationalities in the minds of individuals, which in effect, legitimise historical tradition, garner the allegiance of people to the existing political status quo, and place them into a single set of unifying imaginaries about citizenship. Therefore, the curriculum and pedagogy of ‘decolonisation’ is essential as a pedagogy of liberalisation that can truly empower the Thai people.

## The Production of Thai-ness

To understand the production of official knowledge for the educational system in Thailand, the relationship between the curriculum, textbooks and discursive practices combining to produce a dominate version of knowledge, culture and power, must be considered. An examination of the operation of knowledge that was circulating and disseminating in society during a period can reveal how this was able to successfully shape and sustain a particular image of the Thai nation. Variations in the curriculum and textbooks can be uncovered, demonstrating how the official knowledge of the nation has been adapted to fit with the image of Thai-ness according to the time. At this crucial point, the curriculum and textbooks were exploited by the state to inject the state’s ideology into future-to-be citizens (Apple, 1990).

That is to say, the image of Thai-ness has led to the clear establishment of a knowledge system management that operates through the social studies curriculum and textbooks, and which has become a technology of power that the state uses to project the image of the Thai national community among Thai people to create a common identity (Arphattananon, 2013; Panpothong, 2015). However, the evolution of the social studies curriculum and textbooks as well as the related subjects of history, religion and civic education during the years 1957 to 2018 indicates that the image of Thai-ness has adapted according to the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts both within the country and of the international community. Therefore, Thai-ness never ceases to change. It is instead *re*-presented to fit in the contemporary situation or context of a particular time. Although Thai-ness seems to change with the times, I argue that these are merely illusory practices designed to uphold the invariability of the central tenets of Thai-ness, i.e. the institutions of ‘nation’, ‘religion’ and ‘monarchy’, all of which have remained intact regardless of the context.

Thai-ness, as formulated by the hegemonic alliances of Thai elites and ruling classes, is highlighted by the social studies curriculum and textbooks, in which the state itself has set the dominant framework for the desired Thai-ness (Sukata, 2014). What compliments and fulfils such Thai-ness at a particular given time is the social studies curriculum and textbooks as well as related subjects of history, religion and civic education, all which contain a set of intersectional discourses among knowledge, culture and power, and a set of explanations that fall closely in line with the framework of Thai-ness. Interestingly, a set of discourses of social studies knowledge in each period may be found disconnected from or totally different from other discourses.

This chapter was therefore conceptualised through analysis of the social studies curriculum, and textbooks, as well as the related subjects of history, religion and civic education, all of which it is argued have been imposed on the Thai citizen, crafting them to be equal only as a docile subject under the democratic regime of the government with the King as Head of State during the years 1957 to 2018 (Fairclough, 1995). Using a critical discourse analysis method, the purpose of the study was set to problematise Thai-ness within social studies curriculum and textbooks,

and thus obtain an understanding from which will lead to further deconstruction and decolonisation of Thai-ness as the hegemonic discourse in the spheres of education and civic culture in Thailand.

## Thai-ness as Hegemonic Ideology in Social Studies Curriculum and Textbooks

The set of discourses within social studies knowledge which is pivotal for Thai-ness during the years 1957 to 2018 includes that of ‘nation’, ‘religion’, and ‘monarchy’, as evidenced in the social studies curriculum and textbooks during the years 1957 to 1967 (Leawparoj, 2018). However, this mainstream discourse has transformed, as well as being incorporated into the discourse of ‘national security’ and ‘democracy’ with the King as head of state. This was especially the case within the social studies curriculum and textbooks during the years 1977–1987 (Leawparoj, 2018) and with the emergence of the discourses of ‘sufficiency economy’, ‘sustainable development’, ‘democracy’ with the King as head of state, and the ‘twelve Thai values’ in the social studies curriculum and textbooks during the period 1997 to 2018. All these mainstream discourses evidence the superior status given to ‘nation’, ‘religion’, and ‘monarchy’ as the core tenets of Thai-ness (Jatuporn, 2021). Although the discourse of ‘national security’ seems to have weakened by the end of the Cold War<sup>1</sup> it has been replaced with the discourse of democracy with the King as head of state, which is significantly evident at any time from 1957 to 2018. This clearly demonstrates that this set of discourses of social studies knowledge perfectly embraces the core tenets of Thai-ness (Jatuporn, 2021). In fact, the seeming discontinuation of all these discourses indicates the unchangeable growth of the same ideas,

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<sup>1</sup> The Cold War was a period of geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies, the Western Bloc and the Eastern Bloc, which began following World War II. Historians do not fully agree on its starting and ending points, but the period is generally considered to span the 1947 Truman Doctrine (12 March 1947) to the 1991 Dissolution of the Soviet Union (26 December 1991). Thailand was a member of the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) alongside the United States from 1954 to 1977 and is a Major non-NATO (since 2003).

but with different manifestations. Therefore, the outer appearances of these discourses may have changed, but the traces of their core origins still exist. This means that Thai-ness from the dominant perspective of the state and Thai elites/ruling classes has been intermittently reinforced over many generations of Thai society.

As a result of this, the social studies curriculum and textbooks, approved by the Department of Academic Affairs, Ministry of Education from 1957 to 2018 often created enemies who were portrayed as ‘the others’, to maintain the hegemonic power and status quo through the mainstream narrative (Winichakul, 2000).

The main enemy that has always been presented in the social studies textbooks from 1957 to 1977 was the threat of communism. To combat this, the state laid an ideological foundation which was to create an understanding and awareness of the danger of communism until it reached its peak in 1977 (Leawpairoj, 2018). When the threat of communism ceased following the end of the Cold War, the threats or enemies shifted towards globalisation and other related concepts such as modernisation, westernisation and internationalisation, as appeared in the social studies textbooks from the year 1987 onwards. However, there seems to be a certain level of hesitation and reconciliation represented in social studies textbooks, as the Thai nation still desires beneficial positionality in the global community. It is quite impractical for Thailand to be an isolated nation and indiscriminately keep the core tenets of Thai-ness intact. Therefore, new enemies must be produced; that is, the people within the Thai nation, who showed resentment or dissidence towards the original Thai-ness created by the state. All these enemies have effectively sustained the discourse of Thai-ness.

The mechanism of the production of knowledge, culture and power circulating in the social studies curriculum and textbooks reveals the state’s motives for producing a particular set of hegemonic discourses as follows:

The ancient Thai predecessors had sacrificed themselves for the sake of the country in every historical period. During the state of war, they were in unity to battle against enemies with brave dignity and self-sacrifice to protect the national sovereignty which had been maintaining independent status from the past until the present. (Worakawin, 2012, p. 45)

The discourses may appear distinct but are almost always served to maintain Thai values. In analysing the contents of social studies curriculum and textbooks during the years 1957 to 1967, the state's reasons for emphasising a series of discourses on development and the modern period is revealed. In these documents, Thailand was not only heading towards modernisation, but also allowed for the exposure of Western (American) civilisation and modern technology, representing Thai modernity in the context of traditional Thai-ness. The real essence of being Thai is thus manifested through the modernisation process during this period.

The social studies curriculum and textbooks from 1977 to 1987 reveal the state's rationale for manipulating knowledge about the enemies to Thailand's national security, in particular the threat of communism:

Our ancestors had sacrificed their lives to protect the Thai national sovereignty. The ancient Thai predecessors were generous and benevolent. They knew how to adjust themselves in accordance with the changing context of society. As a Thai, we should embrace and follow this characteristic as a model for living our lives to uphold the sovereignty of our country. (Worakawin, 2012, p. 59)

The process of doing so was likened to the opening of the nation's door to welcome the knowledge of neighbouring countries, and the international community. However, the hostile behaviours towards Thai-ness were not perceived by 'the other' enemy nations. The knowledge of those nations that can be classified as friends of Thailand reflects the expected behaviour of Thai elites and ruling classes, who had been projecting and further highlighting the values of Thai-ness that have been going on for hundreds of years (Mukdawijitra, 2013). The Thai state also manages knowledge about Thailand in the global community, concomitant with the embrace of the world's progress. The projecting

of the image of Thai-ness, along with the dissemination of the values of the Thai nation, is implemented through the learning of foreign cultures within the unfolding processes of globalisation.

When scrutinising the social studies curriculum and textbooks (Leawpairoj, 2018) used in the years from 1997 to 2018, the ultimate values of Thai-ness are clearly illustrated (Jatuporn, 2021). The dangers of globalisation emerged in the form of capitalism and neoliberalism, which are emphasised as being the main cause of the Thai nation having had to face an economic crisis. In reaction to this, the sufficiency economy is presented as the gateway to survival, revealing the values of traditional Thai-ness based on culture and wisdom at both the local and national levels. The values proposed by sufficiency economy were soon confirmed to be authentic Thai. Both trends of the essence of real Thai-ness and unreal Thai-ness came to a major collision with the emergence of the twelve Thai values discourse (Leawpairoj, 2018). Particularly under the current regime of the junta government, the twelve Thai values have been emphasised in the current education reform. They have materialised in the social studies curriculum and textbooks, while their discursive practices of power demonstrate a sense of collective identity using language, such as the *Thai people*, *the people of Thailand* and *we the people*, which aims to reveal the core values of Thai-ness through the main institutions of the ‘nation’, ‘religion’, and ‘monarchy’. This can be traced back to the sets of discourses from the social studies curriculum and textbooks in the years from 1957 to 1967. From the past six decades until now, therefore, the discursive practices of these values have been circulating throughout Thai society, having a very much influential moulding impact upon it.

As mentioned previously, the social studies curriculum and textbooks serve as significant tools of power for the state to assign knowledge through a series of discourses. Meanwhile, the discursive practices from teacher educators, educational supervisors and teachers who enact the social studies curriculum and textbooks, in effect disseminate this power, which is installed in the students’ subjectivity and internalised in the organic make up of society. The discursive practices of social studies knowledge as well as the related subjects of history, religion and civic education can be referred to as disciplinary powers that create an identity

that is directly dependent on state power due to a particular governmentality that becomes deeply ingrained in the individual (Arphattananon, 2021; Boontinand, 2021). All these knowledge discourses do not only serve the purpose of imparting knowledge and constructing a particular idea of Thai-ness to cultivate Thai subjects with ideal notions. This sense of Thai-ness that was formed by a set of knowledge discourses further drives the individual to follow, conform with, and/or share some common conscience with the state (Mukdawijitra, 2013). All of these are supported by mechanisms of the ecosystem of power and knowledge production, such as schools and educational institutions at different levels, and the power relations between teachers and students, while the social studies curriculum and textbooks serve as the medium.

Considering this, the effects of the discursive practices that penetrate the mental recognition or consciousness of the individual are conditioned by the distribution of power from the state to power in social studies curriculum and textbooks (Leawpairoj, 2018). The disciplinary powers which are imbued in social studies knowledge will manipulate the identity of the individual, resulting in the establishment of the Thai identity that is imagined and espoused by those in power. Therefore, the power of knowledge via the social studies curriculum is gradually transferred into individuals, inducing them to question themselves: 'Who am I?' The knowledge discourse of Thai-ness was designed to address that question by answering for the individual what it means to be Thai. Thus, the social studies curriculum and textbooks, and their discursive power, in effect convert a person into an educational object, that is, the person's identity is 'Thai', mostly in line with the elitist knowledge discourse of Thai-ness.

Thus, the level of Thai-ness is associated with how people respond to the realities of society at that time, and which appear through the social studies curriculum and textbooks. This reflects a clear reliance on the state and the production of social studies knowledge, both of which play an important role in forging the correct Thai identity. Thus, through social studies knowledge and its discursive power, Thai people have been programmed with Thai-ness, who must cherish and preserve the core pillars of the Thai nation according to elitist Thai epistemes (Chutintaranond, 2009).



## Decolonising the ‘Thai-ness’ Discourse in Education

Ultimately, this chapter intends to reveal that the true goal of the social studies curriculum and textbooks and their discursive power is to incorporate a series of discourses that can construct the ideal image of Thai-ness. This is a technology of power that is supported by publishing companies and the public–private partnerships in educational capitalism such as Aksorn Charoen Tat and Thai Wattana Panich (Leawpaioj, 2018). These discursive practices have real affects upon individuals, actively moulding the Thai citizen into a docile subject under a democratic regime of the government with the King as Head of State (Sripokangkul, 2020). Moreover, through the disciplinary powers, of governmentality and the supervision of the state of social studies knowledge, discursive practices can nurture the organic mechanism and thus, of dominating society. All these processes result in the creation of the state of Thai identity, which is the real goal of the social studies curriculum and textbooks. That is, the practice of being a Thai person is propelled by the driving force or the growth of Thai-ness subjectivity, with its advent in the social studies discourse in the years 1957 to 1967, followed by an altered Thai-ness, which appeared in the social studies discourse in the years 1977 to 1987. And most recently, Thai-centric orientations of educational policies, such as the National Education Act 2019, have become evident in the latest constitutional draft written by the junta-appointed constitution drafting committee and the educational reform roadmap, which is a major vehicle of educational policy. Additionally, the highly centralised control of administration and supervision has served nation-centric orientations. Although there have been some recent efforts at decentralisation and, in fact, to increase local autonomy in education, the education ministry continues to exercise great power. Considering these educational practices, social studies education as well as the related subjects of history, religion and civic education aimed at cultivating royal-nationalist narratives, while Thai nationalism was exploited to maintain the status quo of the elites and ruling classes who have held privileged positions within Thai society. This *re*-presentation for the King and royal family is clearly illustrated in the new revision

of the social studies, religion and culture textbook for the fifth grade (Puttmee, 2018).

It is plausible to state that the Thai nation employs various technologies of power; that is, the social studies curriculum and textbooks are tools of transmitting state power into Thai society. This, in effect, moulds individuals into subjects of the state; a process of which is achieved by the disciplinary power attained by the mediated discursive practices from teacher educators, educational supervisors and teachers enacting the social studies curriculum and textbooks. Therefore, the power of social studies knowledge is a bridge through which state power and the power of a particular subjectivity converge. The specific values of Thai-ness will then be embedded within everyone, which will eventually lead to their self-examination and examination of others. If successful, this process will spread the power of the state and receive the tacit submissiveness from the individual. Viewed in this sense, Thai-ness did not emerge from the power of the state alone. Rather, it also happens through the politics of negotiation, contestation and recognition that occur between state power and individual subjectivity.

I would like to assert that the state cannot achieve its objective of constructing and disseminating the national ideology, the ideology of Thai-ness, or the nationalist ideology to the citizens successfully without the awareness and consent on the citizens' part. The inculcation of the knowledge discourse of Thai-ness, as evident in the social studies curriculum and textbooks mandatory to all citizens, familiarises the Thai people with the imaginary Thai-ness community, while establishing Thai identity to be absorbed into the consciousness of the Thai individual. The status of the Thai community is, therefore, an important factor in urging citizens at the individual level to support, empower, protect, cherish, and ultimately maintain the state's power.

Throughout the period of 1957 to 2018, Thai-ness has revolved around circumstantial forces, which may seem to reflect the discontinuity of its propagation. Yet, the findings of this chapter indicate that such discontinuity was expected or even designed to preserve the continuity of the core values of the Thai nation that had been established since 1957. The social studies curriculum and textbooks remain effective in reshaping the hegemonic narrative and status quo so that Thai-ness never subsides

from the mainstream ideology of Thai society. For this reason, people who have different backgrounds in terms of age still perceive the core values of Thai-ness collectively. The knowledge discourse of Thai-ness dissolves the generation gap of people in Thai society.

That is to say, the social studies curriculum and textbooks are not only designed for teaching students who are young citizens, but also to educate people in Thai society. The people in the Thai community become ‘children’, whom which Thai identity becomes established and imparted regardless of their age. The first group of children who are expected to receive the message from the social studies curriculum and textbooks is social studies teachers and educators. This set of knowledge discourse will then be passed on to people in society for people to develop a conscience of Thai identity. This process can be traced back to the effects produced by the disciplinary power of the knowledge discourse on Thai-ness in the social studies curriculum and textbooks. When the life-worlds of that individual are strongly dominated by such hegemonic ideology, it is likely that such individual will find it not difficult to punish or eliminate those who do not belong to the Thai-ness community created by the Thai state. All of this can occur in which the state hardly has to exert any operational power to their people.

## Conclusion

This chapter is an attempt to widen the knowledge frontiers of the study of state ideology, with the social studies curriculum and textbooks and their discursive power often being used as a gateway to the understanding of politics and state power. It is often found that Thai-ness or Thai nationalism as mainstream ideology are forged and propagated to citizens in a vertically hierarchal manner. Yet, I have attempted to point out the incessant growth of the Thai-ness discourse, purported to maintain the strength of the core values of the Thai nation, and achievable by implanting state power into the subjectivity of the individuals and indoctrinating the correct Thai-ness into mainstream public narratives, school curriculums and textbooks; all of which have been regulated and formally approved by the Thai Ministry of Education (Department of Academic

Affairs, Ministry of Education, 2018). Thus, the horizontal inculcation of power using a series of discourses that have been circulating in society, through discursive practices of the social studies curriculum and textbooks, allows us to see the vital mechanisms that are meant to protect the core values of the Thai nation that are confronting contemporary challenges and rapid changes. It allows us to obtain a glimpse of the reason why individuals are willing to sacrifice their lives for the 'nation', 'religion' and 'monarchy'. An individual may perceive that his or her systematic thinking is modernised, yet the Thai-ness discourse is functioning incessantly at the consciousness and internal subjectivity of every Thai citizen.

The curriculum reforms in democratic societies show that the main factor to successful reforms has come, not from globalisation or neoliberal policy, but from the internal realisation that the country and its citizens are the major beneficiaries of educational reform. Given that democratic government is crucial for democratic citizenship, the curriculum and pedagogy for 'decolonisation' are essential for the pedagogy of liberalisation, which can better empower the Thai people.

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