



# State, university, and society: higher educational development and university functions in shaping modern Thailand

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Published online: 5 November 2018  
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## Abstract

The case of higher educational development in Thailand is intriguing in the sense that the country, with the deep religious root of Buddhism, was never colonized; however, the shadow of Westernization in the higher education system is strongly evident. The functions of Thai higher education have played a crucial role in shaping the country's modern society in political, economic, and social aspects. The five terms of the state, the university, society, changing environments, and higher education functionality are adopted as a conceptual ground of the investigation. The intertwined roles and power relationships of the three actors—the state, the university, and society—surrounding by the changing environments at global, regional, and local levels have largely influenced and determined the functionality of universities in the country's development. The paper investigates the actions and interactions among these three factors under the changing environments that have shaped the major shifts and incidents of the country's development. It highlights the universities' functions in modern Thai society in the different eras. With the conceptual framework, the historical account of Thai higher educational development is analyzed through six phases: (1) Buddhism and Thai higher learning; (2) the threat of colonialism; (3) the Siamese Revolution and the end of absolute monarchy; (4) the Cold War and the military regime; (5) the Student Uprising, democracy, and soaring population; and (6) the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and the forces of globalization.

**Keywords** Higher education · Thailand · History · Development · Non-colonized · Westernization

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## Introduction

Each nation in Asia has different paths in their higher educational development. It is undeniable that the Western world has made a significant impact on Asian higher education systems. Altbach (2016) indicates that there are two realities that shape Asian higher education systems: the foreign origin of the academic model and the challenges of the indigenization of these Asian universities as part of the development process. Thailand was one of the three key Asian nations (Japan, China, and Thailand) that was never colonized by the Western powers and subsequently had independence in choosing an education model from the West without direct foreign domination (Altbach 1989). Many would argue to be peculiar to Thailand, as it premised on the fact that Thailand was never colonized, and the development of the higher education to the present day have much to present about Western influences in a Buddhist setting. Jackson (2007) uses the notion of semi-colonialism to indicate that Siamese/Thai incorporation within the West's politico-economic hegemony does not conform to strictly colonial or postcolonial patterns.

The case of higher educational development in Thailand is intriguing for an in-depth and in-breadth investigation. First, there is very limited literature on the historical account of Thailand's higher education system. Secondly, the higher education sector has played an important role in shaping the crucial shifts and incidents of the country's societal development, and thirdly, the country has various components of the system development—non-colonized heritage, independence in choosing academic models, and substantial influence of Western university ideas with strong religious root of a Buddhist setting.

Therefore, this paper aims to critically investigate a historical account of the development of higher education in Thailand. The paper departs from the point of how Thai higher education has played a role in the country's political, economic, and societal development. The study journey is traced back to the time before the Western modern universities were established on the soil of Thailand, until the current environment of how the higher education system has responded to the forces of globalization. The data analysis used in this paper draws upon from both Thai and international literature. The literature contains public and official documents, academic papers, academic books, and dissertations. The literature incorporates multiple sources of various disciplinary perspectives such as higher education, history, political sciences, economics, and anthropology, published ranging from different times between 1969 and 2018.

## Higher educational development and conceptual understandings in different contexts

A number of theoretical concepts are applied to analyze both educational and national development. From the view of structural-functionalism, society is seen as a system composed of interrelated parts (religion, education, political structures, the family, etc.). These parts strive to adjust in order to achieve equilibrium (Fagerlind and Saha 1983). Fagerlind and Stromqvist (2004) argue that, from the view of institutional theory, world society is organized through nation-states along the lines of common traits and standardized ideas on education. From the Western Developmentalist perspective, education offers an attractive, compelling, and logical institutional solution for the problems and conflicts of national development, including the most important institutional means for improving the quality of human capital (Bock 1982). In

addition, Bock also points out the conflict theory's view on why countries are underdeveloped. The conflict theory sees it as a consequence of a stratification process by which losers in the power struggle are allocated to the lower levels of the status hierarchy.

Various conceptual approaches have been adopted to analyze the development of higher education in different contexts. For instance, the center-periphery concept is applied to examine the differentiations of higher educational development between industrialized countries and those in the Third World (Altbach 1998). It presents the inequality anatomy of five elements that describes the development status of universities in the Third World. Nonetheless, Quy (2010) argues that the shortcomings of center-periphery framework are its analytical focus on actions of the “centers” and adherence to North-South discourse. Thus, it gives little attention to the agency of the local actors.

In the case of modern Australian higher education, it is argued that the heyday of the development of the system (1955–1990) was largely a function of government policies and financed by state revenues. The building of the national university system was sustained by an elite political consensus (Marginson 2002). Kaneko (2004) divides the development of Japanese higher education into four periods: institutional buildup, system integration, post-war reform and massification, and structural reforms. It concludes that these periods are characterized into three aspects: the demand and supply of higher education, the strategy of the government, and the formation of boundary and internal differentiation of the higher education system.

To have an in-depth and in-breadth understanding of Thai higher educational and social development, five terms of the state, the university, society, changing environments, and higher education functionality are adopted as the conceptual ground of the investigation. The intertwined roles and power relationships of the three stakeholders—the state, the university, and society—surrounding by changing environments at global, regional, and local levels have largely influenced and determined the functionality of the university in the country's development. Hence, the paper aims to investigate Thailand's higher educational development in two aspects: (1) under the country's disparate conditions, how have these three key actors, the state, the university, and the society, interacted with each other to shape the major shifts and incidents of the country's development? and (2) what are the functions of higher education sector in Thai society that are derived from the conceptual framework?

## **Buddhism and Thai higher learning: the past–1850s**

Philosophical and religious values have played an important role in a gradual process of formulating higher education/higher learning in many nations both in the West and the East. Confucianism, for instance, has passed on its values into education of different Asian economies such as China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao, Korea, Singapore, and Japan. Marginson (2011) argues that the Confucian Model has influenced the higher education sectors of some Asia-Pacific countries through four interdependent elements: strong nation-state, universal tertiary participation, “one chance” national examination, and public investment in research and world-class universities. Christianity also played an important role in higher educational development in Asia. In much of Asia, India, China, and Korea for example, the establishment of early Western academic institutions was due largely to missionary work (Altbach 2004).

Buddhism is one of the crucial elements in shaping the formation of different social tenets in Thai society. In the old days, Buddhist monasteries or Buddhist temples (Wats) were recognized as places for receiving education, including higher learning for Thais. In the past, Thai higher learning was fundamentally based upon Buddhist teachings (Dharma). Monks were usually teachers in literacy skills, some professional and vocational skills, and behavioral and moral education.

Before the establishment of Thailand's first modern university in 1917, the role between kings and higher learning institutions of Buddhist Sangha had a mutual interest in terms of politically ideological support. In this sense, the state might demand the administrative power over the Sangha hierarchy and monastic approval of their rule; and in return, the Buddhist community might insist that the state governed well for the material and spiritual benefit of the people (Baker and Phongpaichit 2007). This Buddhist knowledge for the rulers is called Dharma Racha (Dharma of the king for ruling society).

The Dharma Racha from the Sangha was eventually altered to Thotsapit Radchatum, the ten laws of royal conduct. They are comprised of meaning munificence, moral living, generosity, justice, compassion, absence of bad ambition, suppression of anger, non-oppressiveness, humility, and upholding Dharma. The knowledge of Buddhist teaching was designed to set some limits on the absolute power of the state (kings) at that time.

### **Threat of colonialism: 1850s–1930s**

The threat of the Western colonial powers across Asian countries in the last half of the nineteenth century made a number of fundamental changes to the higher education sector in many countries. In China, the humiliating experience of loss in the Opium War in the 1840s challenged the Sinocentric belief and orthodox Confucianism dominated Chinese education over 2000 years. Their civilization was threatened by the strong ships, gunboats, and powerful guns of the Western advancement. It was a new era of China's open doors to Western knowledge. In Japan, the demand of Western countries to Japan to open its doors was similar to that of China. During the 1850s, Japan had to open its door to the West due to the advanced Western technology of the US black ships steaming into the Mouth of Edo Bay. During the colonial expansion in the region, the case of Thailand is similar to other Asian countries threatened by advanced military weapons. In the 1893 Paknam Incident of the war between Thailand and France, Siam (Thailand) lost its territory of the left bank of Mekong River to France because of the powerful French gunboats. This humiliating incident was one of the main factors that forced Siam to integrate Western models to the country's modernization process in many aspects. The country's first modern university was eventually founded in the Buddhist setting of Thailand. In other words, the changed condition at the regional level by the threat colonial expansion had altered the society of the old Siam into the process of new modernized Thailand.

During the years of 1851–1910, the survival of Siam and the country's independence from the colonial expansion in the Southeast Asian region depended on two kings of Siam: King Mongkut (King Rama IV, who reigned from 1851 to 1868) and King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V, who reigned from 1868 to 1910). It was a dangerous time for Siam, particularly from the European colonial powers of Britain and France. The kings adopted five approaches to handle the threat of colonialism for the country's independence: (1) embracing Western knowledge, (2) signing the Bowring Treaty, (3) building diplomatic allies with powerful

Western countries, (4) relinquishing some parts of the country's territories, and (5) modernizing the country's system. In this era, the embracing of Western knowledge and the country's modernization were crucial elements in the development of Thailand's higher education.

First, unlike some neighboring countries in the ways they responded to the expansion of the colonialism, King Rama IV was alert to and embraced the Western knowledge. He is honored by Thais and the government as the Thailand's Father of Science and Technology. His awareness of the colonial threat and the personal interest in the Western science and technology marked the embracement of Western innovations and knowledge to initiate the process of Siam's modernization.

Secondly, King Rama IV recognized the expansion of British power over the traditional Asian powers in the region. Therefore, in 1855, the Kingdom of Siam had to sign an agreement of foreign trade liberalization with Britain: the Bowring Treaty. It was considered an unequal treaty as Siam was not in a position to negotiate with Britain. Third, King Rama V made extensive visits to Europe to create diplomatic allies with powerful Western countries. He also built good relationships with the monarchs of Russia and Germany to balance the threat of British and French powers in the region. Fourth, during the colonial expansion in the Southeast Asia, Siam also had to relinquish some parts of the country's territories to remain the country's independence. An important crisis was the Siam loss in the War against the French gunboats at the capital. As a result, King Rama V had to renounce some parts of the country's territories.

Fifth, after the humiliating defeat in the Paknam Incident, King Rama V implemented many reforms in the country such as the abolishment of slavery, military, and political reforms and the establishment of modern bureaucracy and modern education. The incorporation of the Western systems into the country's modernization process was adopted to avoid the justification of the colonizers that Siam was an uncivilized and barbarian state. Consequently, the establishment of modern education in the Western sense was established in the land of Siam. King Rama V laid the foundation of the country's higher education by establishing schools for higher learning such as Suankularb School, Army Cadet School, the Cartographic School, the School of Princes, and the School for Dharma Studies. Subsequently, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) saw that the original intention of his father, King Chulalongkorn, was to establish an institution of higher learning. Consequently, Thailand's first university was founded on March 26, 1917. It was named Chulalongkorn University in honor of King Chulalongkorn (Chulalongkorn University's website). The main function of the first university was to train civil servants in order to serve the establishment of Western-style system of legal and administrative operations in that time.

### **The Siamese Revolution and the end of absolute monarchy: 1930s–1950s**

The Siamese Revolution of 1932 is another incident that changed the environment as the local scene that was led by the returnees of Western higher education systems. The incident and its aftermath had shifted the political and social development in two aspects: the end of absolute monarchy and the social mobility of commoners. These Western-educated graduates made a crucial impact on the development of Thai modern politics. The key function of the higher education sector in this era was the transmission of contested political ideologies among new Thai ruling elites who changed the face of Thai political system from the absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy.

Higher education played an implicit role in transmitting political knowledge, particularly Western political ideologies to those Western-educated commoners and elites who played a crucial role in revolutionizing Thailand's political landscape. In 1932, 102 members of the People's Party instigated the Siamese Revolution to overthrow hundred years ruling of absolute monarch. Of all the 102 members, many of them were the product of modern higher education from both domestic and overseas studying.

Western-educated intellectuals have played an important role in social and political movements in a number of Asian countries. These activist intellectuals who acquired intellectual qualifications from abroad were substantially influenced by different educational, political, and social models from the West. Cai Yuanpei, for instance, the first President of Peking University and founder of Academia Sinica, and the first minister of education in China, had studied in Germany from 1908 to 1911. He introduced the European university model to China, and the Peking University became the first truly modern Chinese university through his involvement in formulating the 1912 education reform legislation. As the president, he promoted institutional autonomy and academic freedom and emphasized arts and sciences, instead of ancient classics, patterned after the Western university model (Min 2004).

The Siamese Revolution of 1932 or Siamese Coup d'état of 1932 was a bloodless political transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. The revolution was led by a group of military and civilian people who received their higher education degrees abroad such as in France and Germany. The group called themselves the "Khana Ratsadon" (People's Party). The plan of the Revolution took place on 5 February 1927 in a hotel in Paris France. These seven men who met in Paris were three students at military colleges, a brilliant law student studying in France, a science student, a London barrister, and a deputy at the Siamese mission in Paris. The intellectual leader of the group was a brilliant law student, Pridi Phanomyong, who received his degree in France. Having pursued his studies in the French legal tradition, he saw the importance of placing the king within the law under a constitution; and from studies in political economy, he adopted the idea prevalent in post-war Europe that the state was a powerful instrument to bring about economic growth and greater equity (Baker and Phongpaichit 2007).

After the establishment of the country's first university, five modern higher education institutions were founded during the 1930s and 1950s. These specialized institutions were the University of Ethics and Politics (Thanmassat University) (specializing in law and politics), Silpakorn University (specializing in fine arts), the University of Agriculture (Kasetsart University) (specializing in agricultural sciences), the University of Medical Sciences (Mahidol University) (specializing in medical sciences), and Prasarnmitr College of Education (Srinakharinwirot University) (specializing in education). In addition to the role in fostering the country's political movement, the role of new higher education institutions in that time was also to produce graduates with special skills serving the modern bureaucracy and administration. It resulted in creating "a new ruling class" in Thai society. The ruling class was now comprised of commoners and those descendants of nobles and aristocrats who had access to higher education.

## The Cold War and the military regime: 1950s–1970s

The external pressure of the Cold War in the region altered the function of Thai universities into a new mode as the state's political and economic instruments and the emergence of

university research function. The Cold War had a crucial effect on higher education sectors of many Asian countries. In China, universities and colleges became state-run institutions; the higher education system was reorganized and restructured according to the Soviet model. Missionary-based higher education institutions were regarded as perpetrators of Western cultural imperialism (Min 2004). In Japan, as a consequence of the country's defeat in World War II, the Japanese education system was transformed drastically under US occupation (Kaneko 2004).

The Cold War, in the late 1950s, was also a critical phase of Thailand's higher educational development. There were three key environments that shaped the progress of higher education sector. The first condition was the country's political alliance with the emergence of the US role on the global stage during the post-WW II. A second factor was the significant change in Thai economic development stimulated by the government policy. The third was the expansion of communist movements in the country.

First, the change of international politics emerging from the confrontation of the two main political ideologies between democracy and communism had a substantial impact on the country in many aspects, including the higher education sector. For the US, Thailand became an essential regional ally. The US developed a free-market economy to bond Thailand as an American ally of the Cold War. In the higher education sector, the numbers of Thai students attending American higher education rose from a few hundred in the 1950s to 7000 people by the early 1980s (Baker and Phongpaichit 2007). This created a new generation of people and technocrats who shared an American viewpoint through studying in the USA. In terms of the adoption of Western models, after the beginning of the first university's establishment until World War II (1940–1945), Thailand's higher education system operated a closed approach modeled very closely on European higher education patterns. The underlying principle for establishing those Thai modern universities before the influence of the USA was Napoleon's concept of the *Grandes Ecoles* in France. They were seen as professional training schools for the government rather than as communities of scholars engaged in teaching and research activities (Watson 1991).

However, in the post-war period, it moved towards the North American model in design, administration, structures, and course modules offered but with a West European approach to access (Watson 1989). Furthermore, the research function of the university was increasingly evident in this era. After 1958, the academic work in the field of Thai society and politics had grown rapidly. Both Western academics (mainly Americans) and Thai academics studied and conducted research relating to issues of Thai economy, politics, and society (Kasetsiri 2008).

Second, during the Cold War, the "development" policy and "totalitarian" politics of the Sarit military government were the key factors that rearranged the dispersed authorities of the country's higher education system. The aftermath of the Siamese Revolution of 1932 resulted in competitions for political power among different interest groups. The political instability, which was so endemic in Thai politics in the 1940s and 1950s, found expression in the frequent coups d'état (Yano 1972). As a result, the totalitarian military regime was not considered a wrong thing by the Sarit Prime Minister. Sarit indicated that a coup alone might not be enough to handle the country's political unrest. It also needed a Thai style governance to fit with the nature of Thai people. Unlike the Western-educated ruling elites who led the Siamese Revolution, Sarit was the indigenous product of domestic education. As a result, he applied the traditional authoritarian leadership of paternalism to rule the country. Political parties were banned. A number of newspapers were made to cease publication. The country's constitution was abrogated. Sarit saw himself as the representative of the totalitarian state and

believed that the seemingly uncontrolled struggle of powers among different interest groups in Thai politics had to be avoided by the supremacy power of the military regime. The economic and educational development had to be the first priority of the country's development.

Before 1959, all Thai universities were under the auspices of different governmental agencies (Suthasasna 1973). The government viewed that the structural governance of universities and different governmental agencies was impractical for the national economic development. Therefore, in 1959, these universities were transferred to be under the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM). The rationales were to encourage better coordination among these universities (Ketudat 1972) and enhance the university function as a state economic political mode for the national development policy.

Third, the establishment of the country's three regional universities by the government was utilized as a political tool to handle the communist movements in some regional provinces during the Cold War period. In the 1960s, three regional universities were established as part of the regional development programs. They were Chiang Mai University in the North, Khon Kaen University in the Northeast, and Prince of Songkla University in the South. These universities were designed to substantially solve the disparity problems of economic, social, and manpower development (Sanguanruang 1973). The government implicitly adopted the role of these regional universities to handle the communist insurgency that occurred in the different regional areas at that time. The state deployed the socio-political function of these universities in the sense that those rural people, who might turn to support the communist movements, would be able to feel that they were not ignored by the state (Suthasasna 1973). This was because the five existing universities at that time were all located in Bangkok. In other words, having an equal opportunity of having access to higher education for those rural people was used as both economic and political tools by the state to curb the country's communist expansion.

## **Student Uprising, democracy, and soaring population: 1970s–1990s**

By 1957, Thai universities were controlled entirely by the military. Public universities were led by high ranking serving or ex-military personnel (Kirtikara 2002). From the early 1960s, student publications began to articulate dissatisfaction. Student demonstrations about the war, corruption, and other issues began tentatively in 1968. In 1972, they became better organized and more forceful. An ideological swirl of leftist ideas, democratic liberalism, Buddhist notions of justice, and nationalist opposition to the exploitation by both the USA and Japan had gathered student activists from different financial backgrounds to fight against the military (Baker and Phongpaichit 2007).

University students uprising against the dictatorship of the military government reached its peak in “the October 14, 1973 incident.” It was a watershed event in the country's modern history. Half a million people joined a Bangkok demonstration to demand a constitution, and parallel gatherings formed in major provincial towns. The dispersal of the demonstration on the morning of 14 October 1973 deteriorated into violence. The shedding of young blood on Bangkok streets undermined any remaining authority of the junta, and allowed the king and other military factions to demand the “three tyrants” (Thanom, Praphat, and Narong) go into exile (Baker and Phongpaichit 2007). The university students' uprising as a heroic role in the modern Thai history resulted in the end of the ruling military dictatorship. Thai universities in those days played a significant role in bringing and firmly establishing democracy to Thai society (Watson 1991; Baker and Phongpaichit 2007).



Furthermore, “the October 14, 1973 incident” marked the beginning of a pluralistic society in Thai modern history. University students of this era became active in Thailand’s political development. The university function became a major political force in turning Thailand’s political ideology from the dominance of ruling elites into more pluralistic participation of different interest groups. The emergence of ideological, professional, and social-structural diversity in Thai society was evident because of the October 14 incident (Bunmee 2004). The role of students in 1973 has formulated the beginning of plurality within Thai society, which eventually expanded into various forms of plurality such as political and social movements, creativity, and lifestyles.

The story of Thailand’s development in the 1960s and 1970s was reflected in the soaring population. The population neared 18 million in 1947, then jumped to 26 million in 1960 and 34 million in 1970, and by 1980 it had reached 44 million (Wyatt 2003). University students increased from 18,000 to 100,000 between 1961 and 1972 (Baker and Phongpaichit 2007). As the economy grew resulting from the economic development plan, the demand for having access to higher education rose dramatically. The number of students reached almost 800,000 in 1984 (Suwanwela 2005). The number of enrolments in higher education grew eight times between 1972 and 1984. The demand for having access to higher education extended beyond the old elite’s needs. The availability of seats in selective-admission universities was not able to accommodate the increasing number of secondary-school leavers.

The promulgation of the 1969 Private College Act and the establishment of two open-admission universities, Ramkhamhaeng University in 1971 and Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University in 1978, were targeted to help absorb the growing demand for higher education. The system successfully adopted the Western models of open-admission university to overcome the challenge of rapidly increasing numbers of university enrolments. These two universities still have the role in handling the massification. Prior to the establishment of these two open-admission universities, the government also passed a Private College Act in 1969. The Act allowed private higher education institutions to confer degrees.

## **Asian Financial Crisis 1997 and forces of globalization: 1990s–present**

The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 had a significant impact on many Asian higher education sectors. The crisis originated in Thailand. The country’s financial collapsed when the government announced the flotation of the Thai Baht currency in 1997. It then spread throughout Asia and around the world. The Crisis implied financial stringency for all sectors, including higher education. Many higher education institutions in Asia were affected by the Crisis. They had to decrease their expenses, and some sought alternative income generating. In Korea, the cut was more on administrative staff, and in Indonesia and Thailand, there was a freeze on staff recruitment (Varghese 2001).

Between 1980s and 1990s, Thailand experienced a steady growth of economic boom, with an average of GDP growth over 9%. On the one hand, when the financial trouble hit the country, it put much fiscal pressure on the government. It also had a number of impacts on the country’s economy. On the other hand, the crisis has contributed to two influential opportunities to the development of Thai higher education. Firstly, it facilitated the development of university governance in Thailand in terms of diversification of university financial resources, and increasing awareness and tolerance among university staff and academics towards the government’s university autonomy policy (Rungfamai 2017). The improvement of university

revenue acquisitions through diversified financial bases is one of the fundamental changes in the higher education sector. Furthermore, the institutional-autonomy policy implemented in the form of “autonomous universities” earlier was more successfully realized after the crisis.

After the financial pressure, the freeze on new recruitment of both academic and administrative staff as civil servants was implemented to the system. The new recruitment system was introduced to hire university staff on the basis of university personnel, not as university civil servants. The purpose of the new recruitment policy was to lessen the government’s financial burden on university civil servants, and to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of university staff. The aftermath of the financial crisis has also enabled the institutional-autonomy policy earlier initiated by the government in the form of “autonomous university” to become more successfully implemented although a number of academic and student protests occurred in the beginning. In Thailand, the government currently funds public universities, not private ones. Thai public universities can generally be divided into two groups: government public universities and autonomous public universities (autonomous universities). Government public universities have to comply with the bureaucratic system, while autonomous universities have their own university acts for self-governance and virtually full autonomy. Before the crisis in 1997, there were only 2 autonomous universities in the country. Today in 2017, the country has 24 autonomous higher education institutions. Since the establishment of the first autonomous universities in 1990s, a number of autonomous universities have now relied less than 50% of the government subsidy for their university budget. Diversified financial sources have been adopted by the university.

Secondly, the crisis provided a favorable opportunity for relevant governmental agencies to promulgate the National Education Act 1999 that facilitated the process of the country’s higher education reform. The Act stipulates that Thai education, including higher education, must have quality assurance mechanisms to ensure education quality in the system. It has established a legal framework for quality assurance of higher education sector. Internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA) are the mandatory mechanisms to monitor and oversee higher education quality. IQA requires higher education institutions to monitor and oversee their own institutions. In 2000, the Office of the National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA), as a public organization, was founded as an EQA body to oversee and monitor quality of basic education and higher education institutions.

Interpretations of globalization impacts on higher education systems are complex and diverse. The responses to the interpretations can be found in different forms of government and institutional policies such as policies relating to internationalization, global university rankings, national competitiveness, mobility, and marketing orientations. The borderless landscape of higher education in the globalized world poses a number of challenges to policy makers and higher education institutions. The present environment of the globalized landscape has enabled the Thai state to utilize the university as an essential tool to handle the changing conditions at the global conditions. Three leading policies of higher education have been implemented to tackle both domestic and global challenges. They are (1) incentive arrangements to create World-Class and National Research Universities, (2) internationalization through satellite operations of foreign universities, and (3) restructuring of national governance of higher education.

First, “the National Research University Initiative and Research Promotion in Higher Education Project” was implemented by the government to improve the visibility of the higher education sector in the international rankings, and to increase university-management capacity

and to drive university research. The cabinet approved the project in 2009, under the budget of approximately 12 billion Baht for a 3-year period between 2010 and 2012. However, the financial subsidies were postponed to be included in the 2011 national government budget. Under this project, nine public universities were selected as flagship research universities, which are called National Research Universities (NRUs). One of the vital challenges for these universities is the embeddedness of bureaucratic mindset in their institutional governance. The bureaucratic mindset has still prevailed over university administrative structure of administrators and rules and regulations (Rungfamai 2018).

The primary objective of the National Research University Project was differentiated from the role of existing research granting agencies. Unlike the role of research granting agencies creating linkages between research granting agencies and individual researchers, the additional government financial support of the National Research University Project aimed to encourage those selected universities to create clear direction and recognition of their university research into the national and world-class level. The project was intended to encourage research-oriented universities to alter their university research management, to create their own strength of different research areas, and to build up their own university research prestige. For example, Mahidol University may choose to specialize in medical science research; and Kasetsart University might opt to be recognized in the agricultural research area.

Second, in 2017, the government has initiated the project “Higher Education Support by Prestigious Higher Education Institutions from Overseas.” The scheme allows higher education institutions from overseas to operate in the country’s special economic zone, Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC). The significance of this new decree of the scheme is that foreign universities are permitted to award their own degrees, to arrange their own teachings and to bring in their own academics. In addition, the government will decrease the tax ceiling for those higher education institutions operating under the scheme.

The project has adopted an internationalization approach to enable the domestic higher education players to be more competitive. It also aims to provide teaching and research support to the academic fields that are crucial for the government’s development policy. Top higher education institutions in Japan and the UK showed an interest in establishing their campuses in Thailand. Recently, two institutions from the top 200 of the world-class ranking, Carnegie Mellon University and National Taiwan University, have applied to set up their satellite campuses under the scheme. Carnegie Mellon University cooperating with a local higher education institution will offer courses in the field of logistics engineering, while the National Taiwan University will provide courses in advanced engineering.

Third, a structural governance reform at the national level has been adopted to merge the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) and the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) into the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation. The new key roles of the new ministry are to (1) reinvent the current bureaucracy to the hybrid governance between higher education, and science and technology for efficiency and effectiveness and (2) use the new organization as a key mechanism for the government to drive the country’s 20-year National Strategy and Thailand 4.0 (innovation-driven and value-based economy). There will be two components of the new national governance structure: higher education, and research and innovation. It is also expected that the new ministry will cover 80% of the country’s research activities.

The new higher education governance structure formed by the amalgamation of two governmental organizations, OHEC and MOST, illustrates the state’s awareness and the proactive response to use the university as a primary instrument to handle the pressure of

globalization forces. The national governance arrangement is expected to be a fundamental mechanism for sustaining Thailand's competitiveness and catching up with advanced and developed economies. OHEC is currently under the Ministry of Education. The cabinet approved the act to set up the new ministry in July 2018. The relevant legislative amendments for the new ministry are still in the progress and expected to be completed by November 2018. The new ministry is envisaged to be formally set up in February 2019.

The road to success of Thailand's higher educational sector in the globalized world has many challenges ahead. The National Research University project did not significantly achieve the world-class recognition by the participating institutions although the project's spillover has made these national flagship universities more well-coordinated and cooperative. The new initiative of the satellite campuses by foreign institutions highlights that the government's attempt of the internationalization approach to globally catch up technological advances and internationally compete with changing marketplace of higher education landscape is still in the progress. The recent national restructuring of higher education governance is very challenging. Can breaking the bureaucratic wall with the new hybrid governance generate potential benefits to the higher education sector itself and the society as a whole?

### **State, university, society: globally and locally contextualized function of the university**

Higher education in Thailand has undergone internal changes along with external forces in different eras of the country's modern history. To gain a greater understanding of the system development and its functions in the country's progress, the paper adopts five conceptual terms of the state (kings, governments), the university (Buddhist Sangha, higher education institutions), society (commoners, citizens, students), changing environments, and university functionality to simultaneously and chronologically investigate the roles and functions of higher education. The external factors of global, regional, and local environments have created both crises and opportunities for the three actors. The complex and intertwined roles and power relationships of these players responding to the changed conditions have largely determined the functions of the university in the key shifts and incidents of Thai societal development, and shaped the country's modern society. With the conceptual framework, the functions of the university can be categorized into six periods of the country's societal shifts and incidents.

Before the 1850s, Buddhist Sangha as a higher learning institution (the university) played an important role in the society. The role the university had two important functions in the societal development: (1) knowledge transmission of literacy and some professional and vocational skills, behavioral, and moral education and (2) power balance between the absolute state (kings) and the society through Dharma practices for Buddhist kingship.

The Buddhist influence on Thai higher education remains strong even today in the form of Buddhist universities, as well as the offer of "contemplation courses" in many Thai universities. Furthermore, the knowledge of Sangha's higher learning in the past has still played an important role in different components of the country's society. For instance, the government applied the Buddhist morality to the philosophical concept of Thai "good governance" (Dharmaphiban in Thai) when the economic crisis hit Thailand in 1997. The term of Dharmaphiban itself represents the integrated of the Buddhist teaching values derived from Dharma and the Western knowledge of good governance stemmed from transparency and accountability.

In the 1850s–1930s, the changed environment derived from the threat of colonial expansion across Asian countries in the last half of the nineteenth century became a critical point that changed the old Siam into the new modernized Thailand. The state (King Rama IV and King Rama V) played a key role in minimizing the dangers of the new environment and determined the role of the university for the state and the society. The university had two fundamental functions in the transitional shift: (1) adapting Western knowledge to Thai society and (2) producing civil servants for the country's modern bureaucracy. The threat of the colonial powers implicitly compelled the state to embrace Western knowledge and establish the modern education system as one of the key political instruments to avoid the colonialism of the British and French empires, and preserve the country's political and cultural independence. Thailand lost economic and judicial independence under the Bowring Treaty between Siam (Thailand) and Britain, and some of the country's territories.

In the 1930s–1950s, the universities had an implicit role in revolutionizing the country's politics and creating a new ruling class. The functions of the universities had two crucial and implicit roles in the societal development: (1) changing the country's political system from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy and (2) creating a favorable condition for social mobility of commoners to the new elite groups. Western-educated returnees produced by universities were the leaders of political movements in many Asian countries. The Western-educated promoters of Siamese Revolution inspired by the Western politics and ideologies ended the monarch absolutism deeply rooted in Thai society. In addition, the establishment of new modern higher education institutions brought about an opportunity for social advancement for Thai commoners. In other words, the function of the modern university gradually generated a favorable condition for social mobility. The competency of an individual gaining from attending higher education became a new way of climbing the social ladder in the society. The noble-birth background or blood relations of the high-born, either members of the royalty or sons of nobles, in this respect no longer was the sole pathway for becoming a member of the ruling elite.

In the 1950s–1970s, the changed condition of the American assistance to the Thai state during the Cold War and the absolute state of the military government were two key situations that prioritized the university's functions into three aspects: (1) laying down research function to the university for understanding the society, (2) producing human resources to meet the government policy of political economic development, and (3) curbing the communist movement and solving the socio-economic disparity in the countryside. The various forms of the American aid during the Cold War had altered the dominant role of the university as a learning and training center into more research-oriented function to investigate the political, economic, and social issues in Thai society.

In this era, the concept of "research" from the Western world had become one of the key characteristics of being academics and intellectuals in Thai society. At the beginning of 1960s, the higher education sector played an increasingly important role in the state's attempt at changing Thai society from the agriculturally oriented into the industrially oriented. Professional and vocational knowledge was expected to be taught and trained in higher education institutions to meet the government policy of economic development.

In the 1970s–1990s, the university had a strong intertwined role and power relationship with society to balance the political power of the state. In this historical phase, the university's main function was strongly relevant to raising political awareness and enhancing people power in the politics of Thai society. The university's functions were (1) cultivating student activism, (2) debating and incubating ideologies, (3) altering elite democracy to people democracy, and

(4) handling a great number of students having access to higher education. The development of Thai politics and higher education sector has had a fascinating intertwined relationship as a case study in the Asian context. The university was the place where political economic ideologies and dissent, and nationalistic ideas were discussed and incubated.

University students played a vital role in the country's watershed incident of the Student Uprising against the military government dictatorship in 1973, and finally cemented democracy by the demand of people power into the society. In addition to the significant role in the political arena, the university also had to absorb a great number of students in the higher education sector by welcoming private higher education institutions and establishing two open-admission universities.

In the 1990s–present, the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and the forces of globalization are two critical pressures that have configured the university functions for the state policy of national development in the contemporary society. The government has envisaged the role of the university in helping to handle the contemporary concerns and challenges shaped by the forces of globalization. The university functions in the present condition have been more globally oriented and serving the national policy. The functions of the university are (1) providing quality knowledge, (2) operating as a center of social and economic engagements between the state and the society, (3) generating human resources appropriately to fit with the market needs for both domestic and international levels, (4) fostering innovation and technology-driven development, and (5) working closely with the state to sustain national competitiveness and create sustainable development.

## Conclusion

The relationship between higher education and society is a two-way relationship. The development of higher education in a particular society or/and country is very much affected by the historical development of the country as well as global trends in higher education. On the other hand, higher education can also impact on the economic, social, and political development of the society of which it is embedded in. Higher education models imposed by colonial powers have a number of entrenched impacts on the development of many Asian countries. But Thailand's higher education system exhibits the country's experience in independently choosing elements of foreign academic models and fusing them with the country's indigenous values and heritage (Wyatt 1969; Altbach 1989, 1998).

This study highlights the historical account of an Asian higher educational development with an interesting aspect of non-colonized roots. It attempts to critically investigate how the role of higher education in Thailand has been helping shape modern Thai society in the aspects of political, economic, and social progress. University functions are complex and diverse. Thai higher education exhibits a melting pot of the self-imposed foreign models, particularly Western ones, with the country's indigenous roots through the complex interactions among the state, the university, and the society. The functions of the university have resonated the complexities of intertwined roles and power relationships of three actors in the process of modernization and westernization in the Thai context. In the context of Thailand, higher education sector has been served as an indispensable platform of knowledge creation, diffusion and transmission into the country's development.

It is evident that, besides the intellectual role, the university carries different functions for the state and the society. The roles of the university have to be adaptively served in various purposes of

political, economic, and social aspects. This paper argues that ever since the establishment of the first modern university in 1917, the central transitions of Thailand's higher education and the societal development have been the consequences of external environments in the global, regional, and local contexts. They have explicitly and implicitly enforced the three key actors to strategically handle, and occasionally unwillingly admit, with these external forces. The university as a key player, therefore, has had diverse and complex functions in the country's historical development. These external environments are (1) Buddhism and Thai higher learning; (2) threat of colonialism; (3) the Siamese Revolution and the end of absolute monarchy; (4) the Cold War and the military regime; (5) Student Uprising, democracy, and soaring population; and (6) Asian Financial Crisis 1997 and forces of globalization.

**Acknowledgements** The author would like to thank three reviewers for their precious comments and helpful advice on the manuscript.

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