

Leading Thai intellectuals: role and influence in the public sphere of Bangkok

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Leading Thai Intellectuals :Role and Influence in the Public Sphere of Bangkok

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Leading Thai Intellectuals : Role and Influence in the Public Sphere of Bangkok*

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This paper focuses on the personal aspects of intellectuals in Thailand. The objective is to find out which people are currently accepted as the most prestigious intellectuals in the contemporary public sphere of Bangkok. The high social prestige of intellectuals that I look at is expressed in public recognition.

In Thai society today, the expansion of the public sphere has caused intellectuals to become dramatically more publicized. At the present time, Thai intellectuals increasingly use public media as a forum for participating in social debates. They have emerged to write and speak on social problems and crisis for a broadly educated public by means of mass media. The press and electronic media are, at the same time, providing as public platforms for intellectuals to use in communicating their ideas and commentary (Pasuk and Chris, 1995: 370-371)

I will consider various public media as the intellectual circle which contemporary Thai intellectuals use to actively promote their social ideas and discussions. Leading Thai intellectuals, in my survey, are people who express the most highly influential ideas influencing society. With this basis, the inclusion of high influential intellectuals is indicated by members of the main Thai intellectual circles themselves. They are evaluated by other intellectuals in terms of the high acceptance of their conceptual works.

Public Media : New Platforms of Thai Intellectuals

For intellectuals, the pen and the sword are one. The intellectual role is thus mainly related to the writing and expressing their views by means of literary public media. In the public sphere, literary journals provide the main vehicles for the expression and the traditions of intellectuals (Habermas, 1989: 184-185). Particularly, academic journals in some societies are seen as the most crucial platforms of intellectuals in communicating influential ideas and concepts to the public. Moreover, a leading journal is considered the most important arena where intellectuals communicate public ideas and commentaries, and also viewed as the intellectual circle itself

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within which the worth of ideas and concepts is evaluated by editors, general readers, and even other intellectuals who are members of the same group (Kadushin, 1974; Brint, 1994).

However, while the action field of Western intellectuals remains centered on the leading journals. The ideas of Thai intellectuals are actively presented in *daily newspapers*, *weekly magazines*, and on *electronic media*. This is because, in Thailand, we lack major journals which entirely deal with intellectual views on social and political matters. At this time, there are in Bangkok no major journals published by universities or by other institutions which can be considered as the mainstream vehicles of Thai intellectual opinions. Any Thai journals of social science today would seem to be what Rangsan Thanapornpan has called *the deteriorated matters of culture*.¹ Though, in the past, Thai academic journals played an active role in encouraging a phase of academic progressiveness and social involvement, in particular to opposing authoritarian State power. A non-university journal, *Social Science Review (Sangkomsart Parithat)* was very highly recognized as representing the peak of Thai intellectual community in promoting social and political correctiveness. But this journal was closed by the order of the civilian authoritarian government after the event of October 1976. Most academic journals published in Thai universities now seem to be routine periodicals with shortage of participant scholars, active editors and writers, as well as other supporting conditions. Among Thai social scientists today, we could say that because of the opportunities to earn more money in other economic fields, being an editor and publishing articles in a journal has become a complicated and low paying job. These scientists mainly cause the decline of intellectual journals and also the whole academic atmosphere in Thai universities.

As a result, an academic journal is actually not a channel for Thai intellectuals. Bangkok intellectuals offer public comments rather by writing for daily newspapers and weekly magazines. In addition to offering higher earnings and reputation, presenting ideas and comments by means of these public media also has a great effect on the attitudes of the general audiences. In my survey, I also recorded the answers of 228 contemporary Thai intellectuals who regularly write articles for daily papers and magazines; 39.2 % of these writers believe that daily newspapers and weekly magazines are currently the most effective platforms for communicating public ideas, while only 3.5 % of the respondents mentioned writing for academic journals.

¹ Rangsan Thanapornpan, „Editor’s life“, 1994: 5. *Rangsan Thanapornpan* is one of the most experienced editors of Thai academic journals. He has participated in the editorial team of several university journals since 1963, and also worked as an editor of leading academic journals such as, *The Journal of Thammasat* and *The Social Science Review*. Presently, he is a well-known professor of economics at Thammasat University, who stands in opposition to technocratic economists. Most of his works mainly criticize the development discourses of neo-classical economists in Thailand.

In the modern Thai public sphere, members of the urban middle class are taking a major role in mobilizing public opinions and attitudes. Importantly, they follow the examples of leading intellectuals that are provided on the pages and columns in the Thai press (Pasuk and Chris, 1996: 187). It is true that the idea network, in particular, ideas about societal evolution are built up and shaped by the public discourse of leading intellectuals. Nowadays we often see various prestigious intellectuals, like *Prawes Wasi*, *Thirayuth Boonmee*, *Chai-anand Samutwanit*, *Nithi Eawsriwong*, *Likhit Thirawekin*, and *Sulak Siwarak*, write daily columns, speak at public meetings, and give regular comments on events. In addition to writing in newspapers and magazines, the importance of electronic media such as TV and radio has also become attractive for most Thai intellectuals. As a fashionable job by which they can earn added income, appearing on the electronic media also offers opportunities for social prestige and popularity. For academics, it can, moreover, provide better economic opportunities than a routine teaching post at the university.

Over the past decade, broadcasting media in Thailand have been increasingly developed as alternative channels for providing social commentaries, although both radio and TV are still controlled by the State. Radio, in particular, has been more strictly controlled because most radio stations belong to the army and to government agencies. In general, the Television medium seems to be more removed from the State in presenting news and editorial commentaries. The government has cancelled the central board of censorship allowing TV channels monitor their own programs. The public space of opinion became more widely expanded when the government produced talk shows on TV to provide its own versions of public information. Some university academics were also welcome to work in this context.²

By this opening up of the media in Bangkok, many Thai intellectuals mostly made up by a group of university academics rushed to work in the circle of TV medium. They moderated TV programs with the range of contents and styles including talk shows, news and political events analysis, documentaries, and popular science programs. Actually, being a prominent intellectual in Thai social circumstances approaches being a public figure. Their activities mainly involve both in print and broadcasting media in the forms of writing in daily papers or weekly magazines and speaking on public issues on TV. This scene of activities in the media helps us to understand the shifting role of contemporary Thai intellectuals as *public intellectuals*.

² The turning point in the evolution of Thai television occurred in 1987. This development directly resulted from the innovation in news presentation initiated by *Somkiat Onwimon*, a former lecturer of Chulalongkorn University. This consequenced to open a new outlook of Thai television which became more international, more

Highly Literate Daily Newspapers and Weekly Magazines in Bangkok

All periodicals circulating in Bangkok are of three types. These include daily newspapers, weekly political and cultural magazines, and business magazines. Since the 1980s, reflecting open politics and the growing urban middle class, the number of Thai printed media has increased. Nevertheless, in general, the Thai press remains small. The total number of printed media includes eleven daily newspapers, four weekly magazines, and four business weekly papers. Table 1 shows the list of all Bangkok daily newspapers and weekly magazines differentiated into two kinds of *highly literate* and *mass-oriented* papers. The term, *highly literate* as used here specifies the target group of high-educated readers. In Bangkok, it is obvious that the different characteristics of various newspapers also reflect the distinctive political attitudes and orientations of their readers.³

Table 1: Two Types of Daily Newspaper and Weekly Magazines in Bangkok 1996-1997

Daily Newspapers	Highly Literate	Mass-Oriented
Thai Rath		*
Matichon Daily	*	
Manager Daily	*	
Krungthep Thurakit	*	
Kao Sod		*
Daily News		*
Siam Rath	*	
Ban Muang		*
Daily Mirror		*
Bangkok Post (English)	*	
The Nation (English)	*	
Weekly Magazines		
Matichon Weekly	*	
Nation Weekly	*	
Than Weekly	*	
Siam Rath Sapda Wicharn	*	
Krungthep Thurakit (Business)	*	
Prachachart Thurakit (Business)	*	
Than Setakit (Business)	*	
Wattachak Thurakit (Business)	*	

In terms of content, highly literate newspapers and magazines emphasize economic and socio-political news and analytical discussion of situations in response to the preference of readers in Bangkok. They attract their readers with interesting daily articles written by

independent of the State, especially, more responsive to the mass audience. See more details in Pasuk and Chris Baker, *Thailand : Economy and Politics*, 1995: 372-3.

³ To distinguish newspapers in Bangkok, most people have known very well which ones are aimed at better educated readers. For example, *Thai Rath* is one of the best selling and popular papers read by a large number of those who are more interested in criminal news, entertainment and events in pop stars circles. The educated

public intellectuals and well-known university academics. While others, that I call here *mass-oriented* newspapers capture the mass reader market by emphasizing criminal news and events with sensational headlines and pictures.

Matichon Daily is currently one of the most popular politically oriented daily papers read by highly-educated groups in Bangkok. It was established in 1973 by a group of progressive journalists and writers. Focusing on politics, economics, and matters of social interest, as well as news and events with analytical commentary, *Matichon* is also well-known for providing good daily reporting. Especially, the articles on page 5 written by academics are highly popular among educated readers in Bangkok, who are specifically interested in scholarly views and criticisms on various issues.

It is noted that to become successful as a popular daily newspaper focusing on politics in Bangkok involves the presentation of high-quality articles. This is also a very crucial factor in competing with other newspapers. Thus, all highly literate newspapers, in addition to rapidly and precisely reporting news and events, also attempt to offer insightful commentary and analysis in the form of daily articles. The major source supplying such intellectual products, in particular those which have high social status, is a group of university scholars.

In practice, newspapers can not find news and articles enough to publish a complete edition every day. A good way to find extra articles and sufficient copy to fill up the paper each day is to connect with the universities and other academic institutions. In this way, *Matichon Daily* can offer at least one or two articles on page 5 every day while other newspapers on some days have no articles to publish. *Matichon* obtains scholars' articles through cooperation with several academic institutions such as The Institute for Social Research, and The Institute of Asian Studies of Chulalongkorn University, The Faculty of Political Science at Ramkhamhaeng University, The Institute of East Asian Studies of Thammasat University. Besides these sources, it also gets articles from free-lance scholars.

Because of the high levels of competition for the reader market, the shortage problems of articles are solved by hiring famous academics to write for the paper as regular columnists. Some newspapers pay a high monthly salary or even pay more for one article than their competitors. Many well-known academics write as columnists in *Manager Daily* on this basis.⁴ *Manager Daily* rose to become the most successful newspaper during an era of economic boom in Thailand. It was started as a weekly business magazine and later developed

strata, middle-class, and upper class read *Matichon*, *Than Sethakit*, *Manager*, and *Krungthep Thurakit* respectively.

to be a daily newspaper. Its editorial direction is different from that of *Matichon Daily*. While *Matichon* represents mostly progressive readers, *Manager Daily* has targeted a rising group of younger urban professionals or *Yuppies* who work in business sectors. As it can offer the good-quality daily articles written by many famous intellectuals, as well as provide the news contents in focussing in the business sectors, *Manager* has succeeded in combining its globalized image with the contributions of academics and information demands of business groups.

Looking at Thai weekly magazines, at the present time there are only eight weekly magazines being published in Bangkok. Four of them are business magazines reporting particular news and events in business and commercial circles. In accordance with their target readers mostly including businessmen and executives of the private sector, these magazines emphasize the business look of quality paper and colored pictures.

The other four magazines selected as my sample are weekly magazines of politics and culture. These are: *Matichon Weekly*, *Nation Weekly*, *Than Weekly*, and *Siam Rath Sapda Wicharn*. In general, the politics and culture magazines present in a similar way of contents that summarize the news and events each week and feature columns on social and cultural matters. A competitive market also forces weekly magazines to focus on attractive and interesting columns written by popular writers. Most of the columnists who write in weekly magazines are popular free-lance writers and academics. Academics comment and offer analyse of domestic and international news and events, and other writers present documentaries, entertainment, short stories, novels, and a variety of cultural issues. *Matichon Weekly* and *The Nation Weekly* are highly accepted by general readers for providing more interesting articles and columns than the others.⁵

In this context, the public arena based on literary media in Bangkok can be seen as expanding. On one hand, this has resulted from the active following of large number of the Bangkok educated stratum, of the public figures writing for literate daily newspapers and magazines. On the other hand, many public intellectuals themselves also use this role strategically to promote their ideas through journalistic media. We often note that *Prawes Wasi*, *Sulak Sriwarak*, *Thirayuth Boonmee*, *Chai-anand Samutwanit*, *Likit Thirawekin*, *Saneh*

⁴ The manager pooled many famous professors of social science to write for it such as *Chai-anand Samutwanit*, *Rangsan Thanapornpan*, *Seksan Prasertkul*, *Kasem Sirisampan*, etc. These people circulate to write each day in a week. This point made *The Manager* become rapidly popular among the Bangkok middle-class readers.

⁵ I came to this point of view by informally asking some writers and intellectuals who regularly follow the public agenda and opinions by reading articles and columns in weekly magazines. Most of them agree with my claim that the most popular Bangkok weekly magazines read by intellectual readers include *Matichon*, *The Nation*, *Than*, *Krungthep Thurakit*, and *Siam Rath*, respectively.

Jamarik, Nithi Eaewsriwong, have used the pages of daily newspapers to express their critical views on political events not only to the public, but also to the authorities.

Within this active participation by means of the press, it is no wonder that some of the social ideas of leading public intellectuals have influenced the emergence of a social agenda. Today, public discourses on Thai social reform first published on *Matichon* are becoming part of the main social agenda. These concepts remain in wide discussion and encourage many groups and institutions to think about the direction of Thai society.⁶

In some cases, the comments on a certain event expressed by leading intellectuals can significantly influence a change in politics. For a clear example, in the current political situation following the economic slump in 1998, Chaowalit's government lost credibility with the majority of Bangkok's middle class. This Thai middle class, especially, the group of white-collar employees and businessmen expressed political interests and demands that were important in influencing political change in Bangkok. In this situation, they wanted Chaowalit to resign in order to elect a new Prime Minister. The situation became more tense when Chaowalit and his coalition parties tried to keep their political camp in power by attempting to reshuffle the new cabinet. Most people in Bangkok realized that if Chaowalit's government stubbornly tried to keep its position, this would result in a dead-lock situation for Thai politics. Probably, another bloody event, as in May 1992 or a military coup would occur again. However, Chaowalit's government came to an end when *Matichon* on November 7, 1997, published a short article written by *Prawes Wasi*.⁷ In it the author strongly disagreed with General Chaowalit holding on to power and warned him to do what was good for the country. He wrote that:

....six political parties and Chaowalit have to apologize to the Thai people and must take full responsibility for their failure which has damaged the country. Don't try to come back again. A normal man must have morality and integrity, especially, a politician must have a very much higher moral standard of action than an ordinary person because politicians are those who volunteer to work for the country. A country that has politicians without morality and integrity, of course, that country faces disaster.... (Prawes, 1997).

⁶ For example, the idea of *Good Governance*, and Prawes Wasi's concept of *National Crisis and Strategies*. Especially, *Good Governance* is currently a prominent idea supported by many public groups, such as academics, businessmen, and the military as well. Each group has promoted its own versions of this idea to mobilize into practical solutions for society. see Pittaya Wongkul (ed.), *Good Governance (Thammarath) : The Turning Point of Thailand*, 1998.

⁷ In my view, this writing of *Prawes* in *Matichon* can be compared with an open letter written by *Puey Ungpakorn*, a former governor of the Central Bank of Thailand, to the head of government in 1972. He warned the government of that time before the revolution of October 1973 happened. Puey's letter was written under the title of *The Letter from Nai Khem Yenying to Phu Yai Ban Thamnu Kiatkong* on February, 1972. The contents of his letter had a very great effect on the formation of contemporary Thai intellectuals in the struggle for democracy.

This clearly shows that leading Thai intellectuals have effectively intervened in national politics. They work closely with the public media to express and articulate social criticisms and dissenting discourses. Importantly, their visions of proper social order can be used to legitimate or delegitimize the ruling government and also powerfully influence the climate of public opinion.

TV Talk Shows

In addition to focusing on the public role of Bangkok intellectuals in the press, I also paid attention to their ideas expressed on TV. In Thailand, TV talk shows are seen as a crucial platform where intellectuals actively participate in debates on public issues. There are in total five interesting talk shows currently produced and broadcasted by the TV in Bangkok. The first is *Talking About the Country's Problems (Sonthana Panha Ban Muang)* on the military channel 5. This program was officially launched to disseminate government opinions and information. The second program is *Nation's News Talk* on channel 9, moderated by the well-known journalist *Sutthichai Yoon*. This show focuses on current political news and insights. The third is *A Look at Different Views (Mong Tang Mum)* produced by Dr. Jernsak Pinthong, a professor of Economics at Thammasat University, with his team of lecturers. This program also emphasizes news and events and allows audiences to participate in discussions. The fourth is *The Villagers' Forum (Wethi Chao Ban)* which focuses on rural problems by arranging discussions in various provinces. The last is *Let's Think About That (Kho Kid Duey Khon)*, an interesting show which discusses general topics and ideas of social issues. This show is also moderated by Prof. Dr. Jernsak Pinthong.

In regarding the program contents of talk shows involved with social ideas, I used the content of *Let's Think About That*, produced during the year 1996, in surveying the name of public intellectuals in Bangkok. I included this program in my sample because that its contents covered the wide range of various intellectual ideas concerning social problems, criticisms, and solutions for the problems of Thai society. Table 2 shows the very wide spectrum of topics discussed in 1996. It can be noted that most of the contents have to do with more generalized knowledge rather than the more specific *nuts and bolts* of technical matters. As shown in table 2, various issues on the social, philosophical, political, economic, and even cultural dimensions of human life and society were debated in an intellectual style.

Table 2: Topics of Talk Show *Let's Talk About That* programed in the year 1996-1997

- Who made a mistake, when a son is gay?
 - Revealing Thai Politics
 - On the Business of Modeling
 - Man and Buddhism
 - Law and Thai Society
 - Confronting Social Conflicts
 - Family, Marriage, and Thai Law
 - Thai people on the Path of Drugs
 - Ghost!
 - Love in Globalization
 - Happiness
 - Thai Military in Globalization
 - Looking forward and backward at Thai Political Leaders
 - The Economic Policy and Thai International Relations
 - An Old Man
 - Revealing Thai Mass Media
 - Save Energy, Save Money
 - *Wang Chuie* : The Science of Location and Housing
 - The Independence of the Central Bank of Thailand
 - Whisky
 - Gossips and Rumors in Thai Society
 - To Think and To Eat
 - The Housewives of Bangkok Governors
 - Sustainable Tourism
 - The Election of the Governor of Bangkok
 - The Decentralization of Financial Power
 - People in Music Circles
 - Towards *Chao Sua's* Life (Chinese Tycoon)
 - Mass Media in the age of Satellites
 - Women and Buddhism
 - How to make Thailand work without Coup
 - Casino: Who gives?, Who takes?
 - The Life and the End of Local Mafia (*Chao Poh*)
 - When Bangkok lacks Oxygen
 - The Human Being in Globalization
 - Thai Culture, What do we fight for?
 - *Pao Bun Chin* and the Thai Justice Process
 - Language and Social Reflections
 - Thai Local Government : Who governs?
 - The Liberalization of Telephone Business
 - Entrance Exam : The Dark Side of Thai Education System
 - The Next Step for Thai Politics
 - Hope and Hopelessness in Thai Politics
 - Business and Election
 - Death
 - Thai People in the Information Age
 - Banks and Competitiveness
 - No Sun, No Earth
 - Thai Women Tomorrow
 - Initiative Thinking
 - Water
 - Who Killed *Chiengmai*?
 - The Thai Social Crisis
 - Thai Educational Reform
 - Birth
-

Public Intellectuals in Bangkok

In conducting the empirical survey on the main body of public intellectuals in Bangkok, at the first step, I selected the group of people who regularly published articles from 1995-1996 and early 1997 in four daily newspapers and four weekly magazines. These included *Matichon Daily*, *Manager Daily*, *Krungthep Thurakit*, *Siam Rath Daily*, *Matichon Weekly*, *Than Weekly*, *Nation Weekly*, and *Siam Rath Sapda Wicharn*. In order to provide for the representation of public intellectuals in the modern electronic media, I also added the 150 names of guest speakers involved in a program, *Let's Think About That* in 1996-1997.

To survey articles in these newspapers and magazines, I emphasized only the writers who considered themselves as *generalists* rather than *specialists*.⁸ Intellectuals obviously take

⁸ It is important to recognize that intellectual and scientific concerns are different. Intellectuals involve themselves with ethics, literature, arts, politics, and morality all which are counted as generalized knowledge. Scientists are people who deal rather with the technical dimensions of problems. Thus, to view a social problem

part in the epistemic culture of a country, but concentrate on basic issues rather than technical details (Evers, 1999). Thus, I focused on the writings of people who were engaged in discussing ideas, principles, moral and ethical views, and cultural debates on problem issues in terms of generalized concepts rather than scientific matters. Technical concerns with kinds of *know how* were excluded from my survey. Analyzing all articles that had appeared during 1995-1997 in those newspapers and magazines, I found that there were 230 people whose intellectual products could be described as reflecting social involvement. With the supplement of 150 guest speakers of the talk show, *Let's Think about That*, therefore, I have a total of 380 people as my primary sample. This group is regarded as representing members of the Thai intellectual circle based on the role and concern of social discussions by means of public media. Again, the intellectual circle here refers in particular to the community where these people feel that they are an active part of. With this process, the highly recognized people are indicated by following the principle of colleague evaluation, not by my judgement.

In a further step, I questioned all 380 members of the representative sample with mail questionnaires. One of the main points was to find out how these contemporary intellectuals themselves think about the role and influence of leading intellectuals. On the questionnaire, I allowed all 380 members of the sample to name the list of ten people whom they believed having the highest prestige on social-political issues in the Thai intellectual circle in general and to specify the names of intellectuals whose ideas on social, political, and cultural issues have particularly influenced them.

Based on these questions, I collected the names of certain intellectuals repeatedly nominated in each answer. The group of 98 intellectuals shown in table 3 were compiled from various answers of the 228 respondents and could be differentiated into three ranks of more and fewer votes. Table 5 shows the *top ten* list of the most influential Thai intellectuals as mentioned by the 228 respondents. These are currently considered to be the highest ranking intellectuals in Bangkok in terms of public prestige.

Thus, my major findings about public intellectuals in Bangkok are based on these 228 respondents (the response rate is 59.9%). Obviously, there might be other names that were excluded on the list. However, looking at each name of these 98 people, I observed that this list includes the majority of important Thai intellectuals who are actively participating in the public events and media now in Bangkok. I think, at least, the list can be utilized to see which

such as the topic of water in Chaopraya River, most intellectuals tend to deal with this issue in moral debate. They may argue that such problem resulted from the lack of ethical and social accountability of owners of factories along both sides of the river. Meanwhile, scientists focus rather on technical means to solve this

individuals are considered by the majority of intellectuals themselves as leading intellectuals influencing Thai society today.

Table 3: 98 Public Intellectuals in Bangkok (1996-1997)

1. Rank of 1-10

Anand Panyarachun	Chai-anand Samutwanit	Likit Thirawekin
Nithi Eawsriwong	Pra Thammapidok	Prawes Wasi
Saneh Jammarik	Sippanont Ketuthat	Sulak Siwarak
Thirayuth Boonmee		

2. Rank of 11-35

Amorn Chantarasomboon	Amorn Raksasat	Bowornsak Uwanno
Chattip Natsupa	Chaun Leekpai	Ekawit Na-Talang
Jermsak Pinthong	Kaewsan Atipote	Kamol Thongthammachat
Kasem Sirisampan	Pradit Chareonthaitawee	Pra Panyananta
Pra Payomkalayano	Puey Ungpakorn	Rangsan Thanapornpan
Rapi Sakarik	Seksan Prasertkul	Somchai Pakapaswiwat
Sopon Supapong	Srisak Wallipodom	Suchit Wongtes
Sutthichai Yoon	Than Puttathas	Uthai Pimchaichon
Wallop Tangkananurak		

3. Rank of 36-98

Akin Rapeepat	Ammar Siamwala	Amnuey Wirawan
Anek Laothammathat	Aree Walayasewi	Bamrung Kayota
Boontien Kamchoo	Chaiwat Sata-anand	Chakkapan Posayakris
Chanwit Kasetsiri	Chatsuman Kabilsingh	Jamlong Srimueng
Jettana Nakwatchara	Kanchai Boonparn	Kanit Na-Nakorn
Kasem Suwannakul	Kasien Techapira	Kien Theerawit
Kirkiat Pipatseritham	Kosit Panpiemrat	Kotom Areeya
Kowit Worapipat	Kriensak Chareonwongsak	Kwansuang Atipote
Meechai Ruechupan	Meechai Wirawaitaya	Nakorn Sriwipat
Narongchai Akaraseni	Noranit Settabut	Nukul Prachuapmoh
Oran Chaiprawat	Paiboon Damrongchaitham	Pairot Peugsamli
Pasuk Pongpaichit	Prateep U. Hata	Prasong Soonsiri
Prem Tinnasulanont	Rawi Pawilai	Sakchai Bamrungpong
Sem Pringpuangkaew	Seri Pongpit	Sida Sonsri
Sombat Chantornwong	Somsak Chootoh	Somsak Kosaisuk
Somsri Sukumonlanan	Suchart Sawatsri	Sucheep Punyanuparp
Suchit Boonbongkarn	Sumet Tantiwetchakul	Suni Sinthudecha
Suwina Pornawilai	Tienchai Wongchaisuwan	Thanadsri Sawatdiwat
Thongbai Thongpao	Thongrot Onchan	Weerapong Ramangkoon
Weng Tojirakarn	Wibul Kemchalerm	Wicharn Panit
Wichit Srisa-an	Witayakorn Chiengkoon	Witsanu Krua-ngam

* All the names are listed in alphabetical order

Bangkok : The Center for Thai Intellectuals

It is still true, as someone said, that Thailand is Bangkok and Bangkok is Thailand (Korff, 1993). Today, Bangkok is the central area of modernity and development in Thailand. Over the past years, we (I mean, the group of Thai academics) have attempted to push for the decentralization of economic growth, social policy, and education, as well as devolving of political and administrative decision-making to the regional and local areas. But this attempt still remains unfulfilled. The major obstacle to this goal is the structure of government which is too much centralized in Bangkok. More importantly, it is very hard to change the attitudes of bureaucrats to allow and support local people in managing their communities by means of local government. Consequently, we see that today Bangkok is not just the area where many aspects of development are concentrated. In terms of the existence of a public sphere, Bangkok is also the central place where certain social and political issues are determined, in the interests of the public, as the *public agenda*. Most public intellectuals in Bangkok actually play a crucial role in publicizing and even politicizing various public agenda by means of the mass media. At this point, Bangkok represents the entire nation of Thailand and also a central place for emerging intellectual discourses.

This is a crucial point for seeing the distinction between the *nationalized level* and *localized level* in the Thai public sphere. In terms of the two levels of social involvements, this factor also leads us to differentiate a group of public intellectuals in Bangkok from a category of local intellectuals.⁹ The reason why I overlook some people who are also engaged with social issues and problems in local communities is that a public intellectual, in my view, refers to people who mainly publicize the national agenda by focusing on political, economic, social and cultural problems characteristic of Bangkok. In the process of making ideas public, there is no question that Bangkok is the central community for Thai public intellectuals. The importance of Bangkok is based on its strong concentration of modern public media which promote and attract most intellectuals to perform their social role in its public space. Thus, all 98 mentioned public intellectuals enjoy a high level of recognition among the general public in Bangkok. This high level of recognition depends mainly on their active participation in the public media. When we read newspapers and magazines and watch TV in Bangkok today, we can often observe 98 members of this group of intellectuals providing various comments and

⁹ I received some comments on this point from one of the respondents. In the case of *Wibul Kemcharerm*, an agriculturist in Chacherng-Sao province, he is probably accepted as an intellectual because of his widely respected ideas on integrated agriculture. His intellectual works are currently committed to the local people in Chacherng Sao. However, Wibul Kemcharerm is an exception in my study. I think, he is a local intellectual because he does not deal with the national public media of Bangkok.

analyses of important public issues. Their commentaries can significantly influence the development of educated public opinions.¹⁰

The centralization of Bangkok has also affected the form and characteristics of the intellectual network. Even though members of network do not know each other personally, they can communicate mainly by means of non-face-to-face connections. I believe that these 98 intellectuals of Bangkok are, indeed, interacting with each other in terms of common interests, ideas, public activities and contributions. More than this, one person may know about some details of personal backgrounds of others including their specialization, ideas and attitudes expressed on a certain issue or event, etc.¹¹ This form of personal reference is one of the basic factors organizing intellectual activities in Bangkok. It is clear to arrange a public forum in Bangkok, because of the very close social contacts and geographical concentration of the intellectual network in Bangkok, we know who is the appropriate to be approached for the best insights on a particular issue. Thus, in Bangkok today, it can be said that intellectual activities focus around the connections among these 98 intellectuals participating in the network. Moreover, together with the expanding role of the public media, this process shapes Bangkok as the main center of the Thai public sphere.¹²

The Dominance of University Academics

Actually, the 98 public intellectuals are well-known people who all have high public reputations. Over 90 percent are public servants working in the State sector. As a result of the expansion of Thai bureaucracy, during the modernization period, the majority of scholars who graduated from universities abroad were recruited to work at the universities and in State agencies. The Thai government at that time set up several new agencies, universities, and academic institutions, in particular to recruit all intellectual workers who studied abroad with foreign assistantships. In the era of development, new universities and departments were set up for instructing the newly academic field of the development.¹³ This resulted in the strength

¹⁰ Recently, there have been many public issues discussed and politicized by these intellectuals which have then become crucial in the national agenda, for example, the issue if we should directly elect the prime minister or not, the issue of the status of the Senate in Thai political processes. At the present, we are discussing the issue how we can solve the economic crisis under the control of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), at the same time can we keep our own independent decision-making power over the nation? These topics become the public agenda within the widely debates of the Thai public sphere.

¹¹ For example, I heard that, within the Bangkok intellectual circle, one often refers to another in terms of political orientation, that he or she is more or less conservative.

¹² I discussed this point with some of the 98 intellectuals including *Saneh Jammarik*, *Seri Pongpit*, *Chaiwat Sata-anand*, *Preecha Piempongsarn*, *Kasien Thechapura*, and others, whom I met several times in academic seminars in Bangkok. Most of them argued with me on the fact that among 98 people, it is possible to know each other and the others by means of following someone's ideas and activities through the Bangkok public media.

¹³ Initially, most scholars of NIDA received scholarships to further study at Indiana University in the United States. NIDA was set up for the very specific goal of academical transfer, in particular, to adopt the

of Thai bureaucracy in terms of an increasing number of bureaucrats and technocrats. Until today, the state educational system and the bureaucracy are still the main sources providing intellectual workers for the Thai society.

Table 4: Occupations of the Bangkok Public Intellectuals

Occupations	Numbers	in Percentages
University Professor	44	44.9
Journalist	16	16.3
NGO Leader	8	8.2
Civil Servant	7	7.2
Politician	6	6.1
Medical Doctor	5	5.1
Businessman	5	5.1
Monk	4	4.0
Writer	2	2.0
Lawyer	1	1.0

N=98

In terms of occupation, we can see that a large proportion of public intellectuals in Bangkok are professionally involved in the production of social knowledge. In table 4, 44.9 percent of the 98 intellectuals are professors and lecturers at universities, 16.3 percent are journalists. Although in many countries writers, poets, and novelists usually represent the majority of intellectuals, in this survey, we found that Thai writers made up only 2.0 percent.¹⁴

As to this result, we can say that Thai intellectual life today is mobilized by the larger group of academics rather than by non-academics. More than half of the academics are social scientists concentrated at two famous universities, Thammasat, and Chulalongkorn. They teach political science, economics, humanities, sociology, anthropology, and the like. Social scientists usually write and speak about social issues more often than other disciplines. Nevertheless, it does not mean that they always provide the most high-quality and creative ideas for society. Several leading intellectuals, included in the top ten list, for example, were not trained in social sciences. Among them are *Prawes Wasi*, a medical doctor, *Sippanont Ketutat*, an applied scientist, and even *Thirayuth Boonmee*, who originally studied in engineering and later switched to study sociology.

disseminating discourses of *development* and *modernization* as eventually popularized fields among the large American and Thai social scientists.

¹⁴ At this time many university academics are also working as columnists, some journalists are included in the group of academics. It is to be noted that being a public intellectual can be also seen as a public writer which has to use intellectuality, creativity, and writing skill. A writer is like an artist who similarly works in the world of personal ideas and imagination. However, in Thai society, both writer and artist are not highly-prestigious if compared with university lecturer. The number of free-lance and professional writers in Thailand is thus small. Resulting partly from the social value of *security of living*, Thais prefer to work in attaching to institutions such as the bureaucracy and business firms.

The fact is apparent in the large majority of contemporary academics which is comprised of two generations of Thai scholars. After the event of October 1973, most younger scholars become to play a rising role as a larger group.¹⁵ The first generation includes the *elders* who graduated and returned to Thailand to work in the bureaucracy during the period of 1950-60. This group includes *Saneh Jamarik*, *Kien Theerawit*, *Pattaya Saihu*, *Somsak Chootoh*, *Sippanont Ketutat*, *Akin Rapeepat*, *Kamol Somwichien*, etc. These people are now over sixty years of age and are mostly retired from their teaching positions.

During the modernization period in Thailand, this generation played a very active role in influencing the direction of society. Among Thai social scientists, there is a well-known expression comparing the peak of the Thai academic community in 1960-70s with *the Age of Chomchai-Saihu-Chootoh*. This rhymed expression tends to honor the outstanding roles of three Thai scholars who at that time were highly respected in terms of their intellectual contributions to the society. These are, *Prachum Chomchai* an economist, *Pattaya Saihu* a sociologist, and *Somsak Chootoh* a political scientist. The three therefore represented the contributions of three disciplines of social science, which have been crucial in Thailand's development in terms of its economic, social, and political dimensions.

The second generation includes most younger scholars, who at present are between forty to fifty years of age, such as *Chai-anand Samutwanit*, *Rangsan Thanapornpan*, *Charnwit Kasetsiri*, *Chaiwat Sata-anant*, *Kasien Thechapira*, *Seksan Prasertkul*, and *Theerayuth Boonmee*. This shift in intellectual generations occurred at the end of the 1980s, as many young scholars returned from abroad to work at various universities. This change of generation also affected the new orientation of academic interests among the young scholars and the role of Thai intellectuals today. Within the new contexts of economy and politics in Thailand, most young intellectuals may not need to demonstrate dissenting views or to fight for democracy. At the present time, the typical discourses of influential intellectuals now are mainly debates over the new influences of the global economy and culture currently challenging Thai social life. We can see that in the context of the country's modernization, the older generation of Thai intellectuals experienced themselves as *State intellectuals* working in the realm of development policy. But, today, more democratized politics and the global

¹⁵ See details about the changing of Thai scholarly generations in Chai-anand Samutwanit, *Chiwit Thi Leuk Dai (Life is My Own Choice)*, 1997.

influences force most members of the younger generation to play instead a critical role in representing the interests of the public sector and the people in general.¹⁶

Who are currently the Top Ten Intellectuals

The list of 98 public intellectuals includes ten people who were most frequently voted as the most prestigious intellectuals in Thailand. The 228 respondents specified these ten intellectuals based on the fact that they are currently presenting ideas on social and political issues and have, in general, the highest prestige in Thai society. Table 5 shows the top ten leading intellectuals whose ideas the mass media and large audiences in Bangkok currently pay attention to.

Among ten intellectuals, *Prawes Wasi* is the very outstanding person who plays an influential role in sensitizing the crisis of Thai society. Prawes is a doctor. He was born and grew up in the countryside of Kanchanaburi province. He came to Bangkok to study science and medicine at Mahidol University. As a fellow of King's scholarship, he furthered his Ph.D. in hematology in the United States and also got the specialized training in genetics for three years at University of London. The backgrounds of living in the countryside, importantly, in an agriculturist's family influenced Prawes to comprehend social problems. Moreover, with his long experience of curing patients, he could deeply see and touch the poverty of people in the rural area.¹⁷

Table 5: The Top Ten Leading Intellectuals

Leading Intellectuals	votes (%)
Prof. Dr. Prawes Wasi , Mahidol University	90
Prof. Dr. Nithi Eaewsriwong , Chiangmai University	66
Sulak Siwarak , a free-lance intellectual	64
Pra Thammapidok , an intellectual Monk	62
Thirayuth Boonmee , Thammasat University	46
Anand Panyarachun , a former Prime Minister	44
Prof. Dr. Chai-anand Samutwanit , a former professor, Chulalongkorn University	42
Prof. Saneh Jamarik , a former professor, Thammasat University	24
Prof. Dr. Sippanont Ketuthat , President, National Economic and Social Development Board of Thailand	22
Prof. Dr. Likhit Thirawekin , Thammasat University	22

N = 228

¹⁶ This situation became more obvious when the country faced the economic slump in 1998. Now we are discussing the myth of country's development that was provided by state intellectuals. See the criticisms of this point in Saneh Jamarik, *Towards the New Choice in Thai Society*, 1998:6-14.

¹⁷ Prawes received the name of *Moh Chaoban* which means a doctor who contributes very much to the work in the rural area. See the life backgrounds of Prawes in Yos Santasombat, *Thailand in the Dream of the Senior Thinkers : Prawes Wasi*, 1996: 5-6.

One interesting point is why have these ten people become leading intellectuals. Or say, what are the contexts which could serve as a space for the emergence of these most influential intellectuals. Considering the context of these intellectuals, we can distinguish them in two groups in terms of the aspects of social crisis that they get involved. Based on the opinions of 228 respondents, the most important crisis in Thai society today which should be solved at first priority includes the *bad politics*, the *failure of industrialized development*, and *over consumerism*, respectively.¹⁸

Most leading intellectuals on the top ten list now concern themselves with various aspects of the country's crisis. In politics, we have the major problem of corrupt politicians and the incompetent political system which can not recruit and attract good men to work for the country. In the general attitude of Thais politics is a bad thing that no one wants to get involved in. This is the reason why in the Thai public today, all groups of people are demanding the political reform.

Prawes Wasi, *Chai-anand Samutwanit*, *Thirayuth Boonmee*, *Anand Panyarachun*, and *Likit Thirawekin*, directly involve in expressing ideas and interpretations on the criticisms of Thai politics. The consensus of these leading intellectuals on basic principles of the reform is that we need to improve Thai politics to be opened for the participation of people and every social movement. Prawes Wasi worked as the head of the committee of Democracy Development approved by the Parliament. Many basic concepts created by this committee became as the framework of the political reform and was put order will be put in the new draft of Thai constitution such as the monitoring mechanisms of the State authority, the right of community, the transparency of State agencies and activities, etc.¹⁹

Anand Panyarachun, a former Prime Minister, also received an important position as the head of the team drafting the new constitution. Other leading intellectuals, although they did not concern in official actions in the reform, always express ideas and comments through the mass media, such as *Nithi Eawsriwong*, *Thirayuth Boonmee*. The topic of the political reform raised in the Thai public was debated almost every day in Bangkok daily newspapers. Particularly, several groups and movements played an active role to express the effecting aspects of the reform, comments and opinions before and during the writing of the new constitution. We can say that in contemporary Thai politics, the political reform has been the most concrete public issue which shows the active participation of leading Thai intellectuals.

¹⁸ The question was, what are the main issues of social, political, and economic crisis in Thai society today that you think they should be solved at the first priority ?

¹⁹ See the details of new proposed issues in the Committee of Democracy Development, *The Propositions and Conceptual Framework of Thai Political Reform*, 1995.

While most leading intellectuals played a role in concerning the political change, *Sulak Sriwalak* focused his critical role in the emphasis on over-consumerisms and counter-globalized culture and new middle-class lifestyles.²⁰ He produced many intellectual works providing the dissenting interpretations of moral and ethic decay, the problems in the Buddhist religion's circle, as well as destroyed environment and natural resources. In this line of critical discourse, the main point is the criticisms on the bad consequences of the unbalanced Thai economic development. This group includes several social critics, *Pra Thammapidok*, *Saneh Jamarik*, *Sulak Siwalak*, *Nithi Eaewsriwong*, and *Sippanont Ketuthat*.

In addition to suggesting the symptoms of the country's crisis by writing and speaking by means of the media, some also take a pragmatic role by working in NGOs. For example, Prof. Saneh Jamarik after retiring from the Thammasat University, at the present working as as director of the Institute for Local Community Development emphasizing the alternative concept of *community culture*. While Sulak, with his experience in education, participates in an alternative institute of higher education. He established *Sem Sikkalai* as the first reform university in Thailand focussing on the specific teaching of Buddhist philosophy, the local wisdom, and oriental knowledge.

Conclusion

Thai Intellectuals : Representing the Masses or the State ?

To study the role of leading Thai intellectuals, the image or standing point of idea expressed to the public is very interesting. Theoretically, it is to see how intellectuals react the changing contexts in the relation to the *State* and the *masses* (Eyerman, 1994: 189-190). This leads to consider the distinctive role of *public intellectuals* and *State intellectuals* in Thailand. The fact also shows that all ten leading Thai intellectuals as mentioned above have the image of public intellectuals more than technocrats. At least, they try to keep the image of *critical intellectuals*, although by the occupational status, most of them work in the State bureaucracy.

However, the image of leading intellectuals in Thai society seems to generally provide critical ideas against the State. In this study, we found that the majority of top the ten intellectuals on the list still keep the self-image of being critical intellectuals. No one enters to work as technocrat, except *Sippanont Ketuthat* who is now the president of NESDB (The National Economic and Social Development Board of Thailand).²¹ It can not be said that

²⁰ As known in Thai society Sulak has attempted for a long time to imply the oriental philosophy and culture as the alternative discourse. He believes that to return to our own knowledge existing in old Thai social wisdom can direct the country's development better than to transfer the knowledge and technology from the West.

²¹ I think, Sippanont is not seen as a technocrat, although he was selected to be the president of this organization. NESDB is mainly the state organization in planning and implementing the development policy. Many

becoming a State intellectual is not good for the image of Thai intellectuals. But rather, the main point is to see under which conditions intellectuals become technocrats. There have been some leading intellectuals who took a crucial part in changing the gear of the Thai economy. During the era of General Prem Tinnasulanont, since 1973, several leading intellectuals have participated as the Prime Minister's advisors and as staff working in the various government committees. For example, *Saneh Jamarik* and *Chai-anand Samutwanit* worked for a short time as the committee members responsible for drafting the sixth national development plan. The concept of *poor rural area* was introduced by these two people. It had the effect of shifting the direction of the sixth national development plan. In particular, at that time we began to speak about the concept of poverty and how to really and practically distribute income to the people in the rural area.

Thailand has been run for four decades up to today through the application of eight national development plans. Currently, we realize that the over emphasis on economic growth in terms of industrialization caused most Thais, especially, those livings in the rural area to become poorer. Despite this, Thailand succeeded in enjoying a boom in some economic sectors such as import-export trades, and the financial sector for a short period. But the current economic crisis shows that the strategy for gearing the country to be a newly industrialized society is wrong. It created more problems than good consequences for the Thai people as a whole. Thus, looking positively, economic crisis has become the current context that, at least, can stimulate a group of leading Thai intellectuals in seriously rethinking and reinterpreting the new wisdom and alternative solutions for Thai society.

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economists who concerns themselves as policy experts are concentrated in this agency. The reason why the government appointed Sippanont to be the head of NESDB is the conviction that the image of Sippanont as a scholar who has worked in education will make the good image for this organization. It was a surprise for all the academics and intellectuals in Bangkok, when Sippanont became president of this agency. Previously, persons who held this post were technocratic economists and worked closely with the government. However, Sippanont works in this position with the expectations shared by most intellectuals, that the policy orientation on national strategies for development should be changed. At the very least, social problems, the environmental issues, and the life quality of the poor will tend to be emphasized in the national plan rather than promoting only the growth of the industrial and business sectors.

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