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Communication and Preservation of National Identity

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In this paper I would like to look at communication as a dialectical process of constructing and deconstructing a nation. In this sense communication is more than the transfer of information from one point to another point. But as Wimal Dissanayake points out that it denotes "the creation of a shareable life-world". From this perspective communication, therefore, involves questions of values, perspectives, and human understandings. Jurgen Habermas even suggests that through communicational activity, which is a venue for human interaction aiming toward political and ethical goals, individuals as social subjects are able to emancipate themselves.

If we take into consideration the social process of communication, especially in the post-industrial era, as a mode of information, we could designate two major roles of communication: domination and liberation. Since


2Ibid., p. 195.
communication involves human interaction with social environments, including the state, productive forces, and culture, its impact upon the life and mind of a certain group of citizens is immense. The direction of a particular audience in a society to which communication will direct its influence also depends more or less on the nature of the state. Since communication originated and develops with the help of technologies, which in turn are controlled or supervised by the state and later market forces, the role of the state and production in communication is crucial. Nevertheless, given the two-fold nature of communication, at a certain time and space, it could also exert immense impact upon the state and economy.

In the history of pre-modern Siam, official communication was conducted through religious practices and political control of the court. Both utilized one-way communication, from top down. The language of communication was formal and sacred. The Buddhist sangha used Sanskrit and Pali texts for teaching and learning. It was a universal language in terms of cutting across state boundaries and time spans. Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka and India or China could communicate with Siamese monks through their common Pali language. But to the local life and activities of common populations or subjects of these kingdoms, the religious language had a very limited role and impact; partly it was hard to access because of its strict religious character and usages. Another form of communication then was court orders and commands which were intended to instruct and create a desired social order within a state. The aims of the absolute rule were obedience and practice of the subjects without questions and doubts. It was total submissive one by faith another by fear.

A modern communication system was introduced into Siam together with the modernization of the country and the formation of a nation-state around the turn of the nineteenth
century. It was the Age of Colonialism and expansion of capitalism on a world scale, processes which were enhanced by applied scientific knowledge and technology. Beside the government and legal reforms in Siam, there also came the communication reform, including transportation, education, and the press. The main area where technological transfer took place was in transportation both by water and land with engines replacing human labor of old. Next came the wire communication of telegraph and radio and telephone. Because of its high cost and control by the government, wire services were not available and accessible to a wider audience but rather limited within an upper strata of society and government. The most influential and far reaching impact upon Thai society was the printing press, which, by comparison, was accessible and crucial in creating an active audience for a new form of communication. By and large, the introduction of modern communication into Siam in the early twentieth century therefore brought tension and soon conflict into the kingdom. On the one hand, it tended to install and disseminate modern or western science and culture among the elite class, thus preserving essentially elite culture. On the other hand, by demonstrating modern science and knowledge to the "public" (which also was a Western invention), it unmistakably started to unleash the potentiality of local cultures and the sense of personhood among the common subjects.

The notion of elite culture is very important in understanding the Thai national identity because it is the former that largely informs and shapes the latter. The Thai elite culture in the premodern state was essentially court culture based on Hinduism and Khmer kingship culture united by Theravada Buddhism. The development of traditional Thai culture or the Great Tradition also drew its strength and vitality from local culture or the Little Tradition of various ethnic populations and communities around the kingdom. Even though there were spatial differences and
discrepancies between court culture and people's culture, the two were not exclusively separated from each other. On the contrary, they mutually coexisted and borrowed from each other to feed on their own development and creation. This pattern of cultural exchange and relation between the high and the low was dramatically changed after the transformation and modernization of Siam into a modern nation-state.

Modernity brought in a new meaning of culture and communication. For example, the works of art in the old days were associated with spiritual experience and the unity of one with the universe. With the formation of modern classes in a capitalist mode of development, the upper class felt the need to exclusively demonstrate their unique and particular culture and expression of their selves. Now cultural practice was no longer an expression of the spiritual experience in isolation from the worldly development. Andre Malraux once wrote that for Asians the objective of art was not for public enjoyment and intellectualization. Rather the works of art demanded their isolation from the public so that the owner could contemplate in a fitting state of grace. The function of art in pre-modern Asia thus was to "deepen and enhance his[the owner] communion with the universe." That spiritual function of art has gradually been replaced with the modern idea of art and culture as a means to self expression and intellectual stimulation.\(^3\) The creation of the self, sexuality and class in the age of modernity thus pitted the old world and culture against the new one.

For a nation, the creation of a national identity was an extension of the self and personhood through the state. In Siam, the monarchy assumed responsibility for transforming the old Siam into the new one under the Chulalongkorn Reforms in the 1870s and 1890s. The important result was that Siam managed to maintain its independence from colonial threats.

and pressure and the Jakkri (or Bangkok) dynasty remained the ruling sovereignty. The absolute monarch even became more stable and stronger with all the aids of the modern standing army, revenue and taxation, communication and transportation, and education system. For example, in the late 1890s Buddhism was institutionalized in accordance with the reform movement. The ecclesiastical commissioners were posted to all regions of the country. The government surveyed rural monasteries and schools, and reconstituted the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Channels of communication were opened through which religious practices, texts, rituals, and ideas could flow from Bangkok to the provinces. The Buddhist reform almost achieved a uniform and common Buddhism for the kingdom. In the mid-nineteenth century under the reign of king Rama IV, the government also prescribed the use of central Thai language in official communications throughout the kingdom. In fact, Bangkok had never ruled and exercised its power over the whole kingdom as effectively as this period onwards. Thus Bangkok and its elites became the symbol and center of the newly created Thai nation-state.

The last issue that I would like to discuss here is the role of mass-media, especially the newspapers and television, in the process of national development. Historically, the press came quite early into Siam with the introduction by an American missionary, Dr. Dan Bradley. Since its inception, the press enjoyed a relatively high degree of freedom of expression, partly the monarch did not know what to do with the contents of the newspapers and could hardly see any effect and influence of the press upon the mostly illiterate population. After the 1850s, the king began to realize the impact of the press upon the growing townspeople, but he

still could not suppress freedom of the press. Because Siam had signed unequal treaties with many Western countries and Japan, allowing extra-territoriality rights for Western citizens and subjects, many Thai newspapers which were critical of government policies and practices would hire foreign subjects to be their editors. Thus they could avoid prosecution by the Thai court.

But this is not to say that the Thai government had always allowed freedom of the press to be practiced in the country. On the contrary, once the government succeeded in modernizing Thai law to the Western standard, the government started to use modern law as an instrument to curb the undesirable freedoms of the people. For example, the absolutist government issued law of defamation in 1899, prohibiting defamatory utterances directed against the leaders of foreign nations with whom Thailand had friendly relations. The second restriction on freedom of speech was directed at criticism of the Thai government or king. The law was strongly against the encouragement of the people to change the form of government by extra-legal means. But the right to representation in government was not allowed or encouraged, with the exception of a limited popular election at the two levels of the province.

Even without the censorship law, the government could punish those who violated and defamed the king’s rule and authority. The famous journalists and intellectuals who were prosecuted by the king were Tienwan and K.S.R. Kularb. Tienwan was an editor of a magazine which criticized the backward policies of the absolute monarchy, and even called for the Parliament and modern education for citizens. K.S.R. Kularb was also an editor and practicing historian. He published a rare history book and had to delete and rewrite parts of the texts to make them different from the royal version. In fact, he copied the texts from the old history texts owned by the prince. As a result of his liberal interpretation and rewriting of royal history, he was
punished and his name was known to the public as associated with "lying". In the 1920s, the first Thai Labor Association was founded. It also published its own newspaper, Kamakorn[laborer], which criticized government labor policies and social inequality. The newspaper demanded freedom and liberty for workers and was against all forms of exploitation in the relationship between the capital or master and worker or servant. No doubt the government wished that this newspaper closing down as quick as possible.

This tradition of a critical press is still alive in contemporary Thai politics and government. The best example was during the bloody May crisis in 1992. It was during this crisis that the Thai press really stood up in unity against the tyranny of the military-led ruling clique. They defied and bluntly turned down the order by the Police Chief to comply with the censorship. Instead they told the police to come and close down the press by themselves, but the editors would not show up at the police headquarters as was customary in the past. The police was confused too, knowing not what to do. This scene was possible at this time due to the presence of the masses in the streets of Bangkok, demonstrating against the appointment of the army commander to be the prime minister. After the May event, the press became more respectable and influential. It's not an over statement to say that the press exercised its influence and criticisms of the past two elected governments much more than any political institutions or pressure groups.

It is interesting to note that governments and bureaucracy have a rather conservative attitude towards the role of mass-media. They tend to look at the media as part of the government system and bureaucracy working to preserve and fulfill the goals of national unity and stability and social order. Given the weak tradition of democratic rule in Thailand, the bureaucracy became the most powerful organization in the country. Hithereto, there has been a major expansion of cultural and educational bureaucracies.
These bureaucracies have interlocked with the political, economic, and administrative bureaucracies, in ways that compose an organizing system of the country. Thus any cultural work and new idea, have to be defended, not on their progressive or scientific merits alone, but rather in terms of contributions to alternatives to this dominant general system.\(^5\)

That the government and bureaucracy are the ones who play a strategic role in defining the meanings and goals of national interests could be seen in the introduction of television into the country. The idea of having a television broadcasting in Thailand started around the late 1940s.\(^6\) The main reason, expressed by the prime minister and the concerned bureaucrats, was that TV was the latest symbol of modernity and national progress. This project of installing a TV station was resisted by many members of the Parliament as not suitable and not addressing the right problems facing the nation then. The cost of the TV transmitter, 14 million Baht, almost equalled the combined budgets of the two ministries of foreign affairs and industry. Because of media criticisms and Parliament scrutiny, the government had to organize the TV station as a private enterprise. But the board of the Thai TV Co., Ltd., consisted of army chiefs and government bureaucrats, using money from the military budget and excise taxes on liquer, cigarrets, lottery and sugar from the department of revenue. So the Thai TV Co., Ltd., was the first and only one special company in Thailand, which was private but owned, operated and subsidized wholly by the government and the bureaucracy. Ten years later, the company


was finally turned into a state enterprise, by that time the public already forgot about its dubious beginning and doubtful operation. Since then the television has been expanded into many channels but one thing remains the same. They are owned and strictly controlled by the government and the responsible bureaucracies. No doubt, the contents of TV programs are mainly entertainment and government news with no comments and feedbacks from the audience. The first independent and free television in Thailand finally came after the bloody May event in 1992. The story of the Thai TV and radio is that the best control of the media by the government and bureaucracies was and is through ownership. The use of legal and physical means to shut down the media is not a wise policy because it will ignite people's resistance sooner or later. But by leasing the stations to private groups to run the programs, the government simply whispers softly to the operators that it doesn't want to see or hear negative and radical opinions and stories in these stations. And that is enough to get the censorship working in the Thai media. However, this kind of "soft" censorship will not be tolerated by the public viewers any longer. The reason is that now with the spread of cable and satellite TV alternatives, the Thai public could notice the missing facts and information from the local government-controlled TVs. The public begins to demand for quality and accuracy in media communication.

Communication thus has been important to the process of national development and its identity. The point is such a process can not be monopolized by the state and the market but should allow the public to have an active and meaningful participation, too. Too often, conflicts occur between the government and bureaucracy and the public over the policies and interests of the nation. In order to facilitate and encourage popular engagement in creating a national identity,
a democratic government and responsible civil society must be respected and encouraged.