

Science War in Thailand: Clashes Between Traditional and Modernized Belief Systems in the Thai Media

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Introduction

In December 1999, a relatively old magazine reemerged in the Thai literary scene after a period of inactivity. The weekly magazine, *Arthit* (Thai for the sun or Sunday), came out in a distinctly different form from what it used to appear many years ago. The magazine used to be a weekly news and analysis magazine, focusing on current affairs in politics, business, just like other weekly news magazines in the market. However, the first issue of *Arthit* after its reappearance in December came with a picture of a Buddha image on its cover page, and just below the title there is a motto: Energy of rationality and free spirit, showing the truth and eliminating superstitions. The magazine is clearly trying to put something new on the Thai literary scene. What it is trying to do is to produce a news and analysis magazine, together with columns on Buddhism, God, spirituality, and meditation techniques. The most conspicuous character of the new *Arthit* is that it unashamedly promotes what other magazines would shun, thinking that it belongs to the superstitious past. *Arthit*, however, embraces the issues of extrasensory perception, reincarnation, karmas, as well as ghosts and deities in the traditional Buddhist pantheon.



Cover page of the inaugural issue of the new *Arthit*.

Issues like these are nothing new in the Thai literary scene. There are scores and newspapers and magazines dealing with such topics as potent amulets, reincarnation, monks reputed to have extraordinary powers to heal and to endow prosperity to anyone who pays homage to him, and so on. These newspapers and magazines, however, are regarded as 'low brow', consumed by most uneducated people in the countryside, a large number of whom migrated to the city to find employment. *Arthit*, however, projects itself as an educational, 'high brow' magazine. It contains columns from well known and well respected members of the Thai élites, some of whom used to have high positions in the previous governments. Usually the 'high brow' magazines would frown upon such 'superstitious' issues. This makes the appearance of *Arthit* a very striking phenomenon in the country.

Arthit, it appears, is trying to bring about the issue of spirituality back to the Thai society after it had suffered tremendously from the economic crisis which took place in 1997. Its purpose is to show that the way of thinking and belief of the Thai people for the past few decades has been wrong. Thais were expected to enshrine materialist values and follow the lead of globalization blindly. This has led to the bubble economy and the crisis. As a result, *Arthit* tries to reawaken the Thai people to their latent spirituality as a leverage against the force of globalization. One chief arena where this contest for the minds is being played out concerns scientificity. Suwinai Paranawalai, one of the founders of the new *Arthit* and a much respected professor of economics at Bangkok's Thammasat University, writes in one of the articles in the inaugural issue in December, 1999 that "a problem is that in this age when the cult of science worship is in ascendancy, those who are spiritually transformed have to hide themselves. They become alienated in the eyes of the general public. This denial of the existence of the other, spiritual dimensions has driven the mysterious

issues underground. These issues are then absorbed into capitalism and consumerism, creating an uncontrollable upheaval and chaos."¹ Clearly there is here a conflict between the globalizing force, which tries to merge the Thai economy with that of the world, and the anti-globalizing force, which emphasizes the role of the cultural tradition and an antidote for the overly consumerist attitude that is afflicting the Thai nation.

What I intend to do in this paper, then, is to analyze this conflict in terms of a 'science war', taking the term, of course, from the raging science war in the West between the proponents of scientific and rationalist attitude (or whatever you want to call it) and those who are against it. I will show that *Arthit* is a reaction against the force of globalization and especially against the latter's use of science as a means toward realizing its goals more efficiently. However, an interesting aspect of this phenomenon is that, though the conflict is a real and a serious one, one can nonetheless discern that both parties of the conflict actually share a lot together in terms of cultural background and tradition.

"The Cult of Science Worship"

I would like to call the group promoting globalization in Thailand 'the globalization party', and the second one, which opposes it, 'the anti-globalization party'. The first party consists of the bureaucrats, business people, most economists and policy makers in the current government; the second party, on the other hand, consists of member of the NGOs, village leaders, and academicians who double as public intellectuals. The war between the two parties revolve around the issue of whither Thailand should be heading. An important characteristic of the globalization party is that it sees itself as a

¹"Dr. Suwinai Paranawalai Speaks about the "Sacred Mission" of *Arthit*" *Arthit Magazine* Vol. 22 no. 1100 (December 1999): 31-39, p. 33 (in Thai). The translation is my own.

progressive force, and regards the old beliefs in ghosts and deities as nothing but mere superstitions to be get rid of wherever they are found. This attitude is precisely what is derided in Suwinai's article I quote above as "the cult of science worship." That is, blind faith is put toward science as a panacea for the ills of the society, just like in the old times when the cult of the gods were in vogue and the gods were called upon to help during bad times.

Of course the globalization party does not see itself this way. As a progressive and modernizing force, members of the party (sometimes genuinely) have good intentions toward the society and its people. They see science as bound up with economic progress and prosperity, as well as with globalization. Advances in science should lead to more economic growth, and so on. During the economic Boom Years starting in the early 1990's and ending abruptly in mid 1997, this rationalist attitude was very strong, as it was perceived to be the right way of thinking. Everybody, it seemed, turned their backs against their own cultural tradition, especially its spiritual and epistemological part which forms the core of the tradition itself. Outward expressions of the culture remained, but these were stripped of their real meanings. People did not pay particular attention to what their cultural tradition told them how to behave and what to believe, but for them culture became merely another commodity. Culture became something they do out of habit from earlier generations without pausing to think what it was all about.

Alternatively, the culture and the force of the earlier generations of Thais were channeled by the globalizing force to acquire whole new meanings and practices. Monks were traditionally expected to be the exemplar of virtue and the living embodiment of the Buddhist teachings. However, during the madness of the Boom Years monks were taken to help the people to get even richer. Their spiritual powers were co-opted and channeled toward creating more wealth to the people. That is, as people still believed that some monks have

supernatural powers, the people flocked to well known monks and asked them incessantly for blessings and amulets which would bring them good luck in their business dealings. Spirituality became subservient to consumerism.

It is a very curious situation that the belief in science and rationality occurred side by side with the beliefs in the supernatural powers of the monk to create more wealth. But I think we can understand this situation better if we realize that science, rationality and technology here is nothing but their outward and objective faces. What the Thai people wanted was anything to help them with getting richer and richer. And if science and technology can do the job, then it is all the better. There is little discussion about the belief systems underlying the conduct of science. In this case, science is taken on a par with superstitions. So long as they can do the job, then they are valuable.

Thus, when *Arthit* attacks 'the cult of science worship' what it attacks is not science per se, but the attitude to science which takes it as an agent of material acquisition. Its portrayal of the superstitious issues made it a controversial publication. What is precisely controversial in this is that, unlike the usual 'low brow' magazines, *Arthit* tries to make these issues 'scientifically respectable.' Instead of assuming that these issues are real, writers presenting these issues in *Arthit* are fully aware of the criticisms leveled against these issues by the progressive, rationalist party and are defending them employing learned methodology previously preserved to the rationalist party only. This controversial attitude not only has made *Arthit* a unique publication so far, but has also resulted in Suwinai himself being criminally charged with misleading and providing false information to the public. This shows how serious the issue of traditional versus modernized beliefs is in Thailand today. This matter concerns the case of the *pret*, which is a kind of ghost in the Buddhist cosmology, to which I now turn.

The *Pret* Controversy

According to Buddhism, *prets* are creatures that suffer as a result of their bad deeds in their previous lives. They are generally portrayed as extremely thin and tall; their mouths are as small as a pinhole and they are always hungry as they cannot find enough food to feed them. They don't have any clothing on their bodies; give out exceedingly bad smell and are always moaning loudly out of intense pain and suffering. Anyone who does one of the following misdeeds will be born as a *pret* in his or her next life: corruption as a public official, saying bad things to a monk, burning forest causing animals to die, and others.

In early April 2000, an issue of *Arthit* came out with a purported photograph of a *pret* on its cover page, together with an editorial detailing the experiences of the editorial team of the magazine who had ventured into a *pret* territory in Northeastern Thailand and apparently met and photograph a *pret* for publication.² The team went to a forested area in Udon Thani, a province northeast of Bangkok, called 'Kham Chanode'. This area is widely believed by locals to be a sacred place, the place where hell and earth connect and where hellish creatures such as *prets* can appear to unaided, naked eyes of living human beings. The team went to Kham Chanode under a guidance of a man, known as "Ajarn Koo" ('ajarn' is a word denoting a special position as a professor or a guru), who claimed to be a spiritual leader who knew how to bring up *pret* for inspection. Ajarn Koo and the team went into Kham Chanode on the night of March 21, 2000 and saw a few creatures purported to be deities protecting the place. Finally the team saw (or thought they saw) a tall, exceedingly thin creature wearing nothing and putting its hands out wide. The team took two photographs of the creature, which Ajarn Koo said was a *pret*,

²"*Prets* are Real: Bad Politicians, Fraudulent Rich People and Sinners BEWARE!" *Arthit Magazine* Vol 22 no. 1112(9-15 April, 2000): 26-35 (in Thai).

and these photos were eventually published in *Arthit*, together with the long editorial arguing that *prets* actually existed.



Cover page of the *Pret* issue. One can see the alleged ghost on the page.

The issue immediately caused a tremendous stir in Thai society. People started discussing whether *prets* actually existed or not. Even though the Buddhist canon directly mentions the existence of these creatures, together with other dwellers of hell as well as of heavens, many Thais were reluctant to admit that they actually exist. Many took the 'instrumentalist' stance and said that the belief in the existence of *pret* was a useful one in maintaining the moral order. This instrumentalist position seemed to be the mainstream one officially upheld by the elders of the Buddhist hierarchy, who are desirous of maintaining some sort of a harmony between Buddhism and modern science.

However, *Arhit* cared nothing about instrumentalism. Its stance is that Thai people in the past knew nothing and would have cared nothing anyway about instrumentalism. For them *prets* were as real as elephants or horses. Thai people today, on the other hand, are so remote from the religious and cultural tradition that they forget what the teaching was like just a few decades ago, according to the editorial in the magazine.³ What the article is trying to do is to bring back spirituality to the Thai people, to get them back to their roots as Buddhists who believe in the reality of *prets* and not as clever gimmicks. Implicit throughout all this is a strident attack on the globalization party and all it entails. The economic crisis was said to be due to the Thai people forsaking their spiritual roots and the Buddhist moral order; the antidote is to get them to believe in the actuality of *prets* and by implication all the other deities and ghosts in the Buddhist cosmology. This is not just a belief per se. The editorial article in *Arhit* does not intend Thais to become fundamentalists. But it can't be denied that it wants Thais to fear becoming *prets* in their next lives. If moral order cannot be maintained through the modern means, then perhaps the old way should be resorted to.

³"*Prets* are Real: Bad Politicians, Fraudulent Rich People and Sinners BEWARE!" *Arhit Magazine* Vol 22 no. 1112(9-15 April, 2000): 26-35 (in Thai).

However, about a month after the publication of this *pret* issue, another team of "*pret* hunters" approached Ajarn Koo and asked him to show a *pret* in Sanam Luang, which is large field right at the middle of Bangkok, for all the people to see on the auspicious occasion of Visakhabucha, the day when the Buddha was born, attained Enlightenment and died, which this year took place on May 17. The issue became much more visible in the public's eyes when the *Thai Rath* daily, the most circulated and influential daily newspapers in the country, put the issue on its front page. At first the tone of the news appeared to be in approval of the deed. However, after a lot of discussions and debates on whether *prets* could be brought in real life. The tone of subsequent news reports on the subjects turned to be negative. Finally the real identity of Ajarn Koo was revealed. He was in fact a charlatan, a master con man, who had swindled money from many people by pretending to be a monk or a guru. It turned out that the *pret* sighting reported in *Arthit* in April was a major hoax perpetrated by Ajarn Koo and his followers. As a result, Ajarn Koo was arrested. Suwinai at first tried to defend his master, and doing that he was accused by a woman who claimed that he defamed her by saying that the woman, who had filed a charge against Ajarn Koo for swindling, had no credibility since she had consented to follow Ajarn Koo in the first place. In the end, the court refused to grant bail to Ajarn Koo, and Suwinai escaped indictment because the woman eventually dropped the charge. During these few months the whole country was fixated by the incidence. Talks and discussions on *prets* and other creatures of Buddhist cosmology came to public attention; this has never happened before. Debates were between those who believed, as did Suwinai and the *Arthit* magazine, that *prets* were real, and those who perceived themselves as progressive, scientific and rational. These latter group viewed *prets* as only a sign or at most they concede that they exist, but only in a transcendental realm which no modern science can attest. (Suwinai, however, later admitted that he was duped by

Ajarn Koo. He said that he followed Ajarn Koo because of his strong faith in the master con man, who appeared very respectable. However, after he had learned the truth, he was still adamant that his program of bringing spirituality back to Thailand was on the right track.)

Science War in Thailand

It is quite clear that the debate between *Arthit* and its rationalist (and skeptical) opponents reflect a greater conflict on which way Thailand should be heading as the new century is dawning. In its rush toward globalization, many fear that Thailand will leave its cultural roots and traditions behind, with a disastrous consequences. The economic crisis, which still persists even today, present a clear support of this point of view. On the other hand, the globalizing and progressive party, though admitting that the economic crisis was due to wrong policies, nonetheless strongly claims that the only way out for Thailand is not through isolation and fetishism of the old traditions, but through increasing competitiveness in many fields, which naturally requires a strong performance in science and technology. Those who criticized *Arthit* for misleading the public were of the opinion that it is not appropriate to publish in a respectable magazine a report on sightings of *prets*, even though *prets* are mentioned explicitly in the Buddhist canons. This would only make it more difficult to diffuse positive attitudes toward modern science and technology to the population, which is perceived to be a key toward solving the problems in the country.

We have seen, however, that *Arthit's* attack on the attitude underlying "the cult of science worship" shows that the direction proposed by the globalization party has been shown to be wrong. Thailand should never follow the same path again. Instead it should reexamine its culture, its past and

historical traditions in order to strengthen its spiritual resources which would as an antidote for the senseless frenzy of the Boom Years. This debate is still being played out today, and it is still unclear at this moment who is the winner or who will emerge the winner in a foreseeable period to come.

This science war is quite different from the war in the West, where opposing parties fight over what should be taken as the epistemic status of science as well as its position in society. As the Sokal Affair has shown, the war in the West is between those who would like to affirm the legitimacy and the justification of the scientific enterprise, and those who wish to criticize it, to cut science down to size, so to speak. In a way there might seem to be a parallel between what is happening in the West and in Thailand. Those who wish to justify the objectivity and epistemic status of science could be regarded as an ally of the globalization party in Thailand, and those who oppose it with the anti-globalization party.

However, when examined more closely, the parallel works only at a superficial level. The globalization party itself is situated within the cultural milieu of Thai society. Outwardly, they propose a kind of adoption and integration of 'scientific culture' into Thai culture, in the same way as what Margaret Jacob describes in her book.⁴ That is, what is being proposed is not the kind of adoption of the scientific attitude and a wholesale rejection of the past as happened in the West during the scientific and industrial revolutions. But inwardly the force of traditional culture remains very strong. The globalization party looks at science and technology as a finished product, which could be adopted as is from the West to Thailand. Less emphasis seems to be placed on the actual practice of science than scientific knowledge as a product. Here one can see that the beliefs of the globalization party stems from the traditional one

⁴Margaret Jacob, *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

of looking for a kind of magic or outside help when faced with problems, and science and technology are such magic. To illustrate, a young chemist was recently interviewed in another magazine and he said that it was much more difficult doing science in Thailand than in the US because in Thailand in order to obtain the resources one had to have the right connections.⁵

According to the globalization party, science and technology are indicators of economic competitiveness, and so Thailand should embrace them. The party wants Thais to become 'modern' in the sense of thinking and believing in the rationalist mode, because they, perhaps naïvely, believe that in order to be 'modern' or 'globalized' one needs to adopt such an attitude—even though only on the surface, so to speak. There have been calls for more public spending on research and development, as well as reform in science education. However, one doubts whether this effort will eventually succeed in making Thai culture a scientific one (in Jacob's model) because there are many grains in the scientific culture which run against some typical Thai traits. In fact, most calls for more science in Thailand neglect to consider this question of culture, believing that science and tradition could stay within their separate domains within the same society.⁶ However, if science really is a culture, to keep the two strictly apart would be problematic.

⁵"Dr. Sanong Ekasit: Before Becoming a Scientist" *Update* 15.157(September 2000): 89-93 (in Thai).

⁶It is one of the chief characteristics of the Thai people to keep different domains in their lives separate. However, in "Future Vision for Science and Technology in Thailand" (in *Science and Technology in Thailand: Lessons from a Developing Economy*, Yongyuth Yutthavong and Angela M. Wojcik, eds. [Bangkok: NSTDA/UNESCO Publishing, 1997]: 129-138), Yongyuth Yutthavong, a noted Thai scientist, discusses the relation between science and Thai culture, looking for ways for Thai culture to contribute to the former. However, absent from this discussion is a critical attitude toward Thai culture itself. The culture presented is highly idealized, and only those parts of the culture which appears to support science are selected. There is little discussion of how the two can interact in a meaningful way. For example, there is no discussion of how Thai culture itself needs to change in order to accommodate science, and no discussion of how science itself could be adapted in order to fit and to serve the culture.

It would require much more study than available in this paper to do justice to the claim I just mentioned. Here I can give only a few examples. In order to integrate science into the culture, not only science as a body of knowledge has to be taught to students, but the whole political and social structure has to be revamped, since science does not exist merely as a body of knowledge, but a set of practice which would not prosper if this is embedded in other types of practices which do not promote it. For example, Thais usually want to have a high standard of living without working hard for it. But as we learned from Jacob, this is quite contrary to the entrepreneurial attitude so important to the integration of science into culture.

Conclusion

The science war in Thailand, then, is a conflict resulting from modernity and globalization that is spreading all over the globe. Many fear that the tide of globalization will eventually erase cultural differences and create one giant, 'monolithic' global culture. However, I have tried to show that both sides of the war in Thailand still belong to the same culture. Then what are some of the implications for the science studies community? I think one implication is that the task of integration of science into a culture originally foreign to it is much harder than it might appear. However, I think this can be done if we recognize that, instead of forcing a culture into science, we should instead adapt science and put it inside the context or the mold of the culture. This could make it easier to integrate science into a culture, if it is indeed a desirable thing to do that.