

The Blooming Years: Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia

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Note from the Editor

This collection of articles from the Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia (KRSEA) is published with the financial support of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Kyoto University. We have compiled all the English articles from Issue 13 (March 2013), to Issue 20 (September 2016). This period marked a turning point for KRSEA with the relaunch of the website in March 2013 and the new online archive of earlier issues. That was when I was assigned as the chief editor of the KRSEA.

Looking back to the original KRSEA, it was launched in March 2002 by CSEAS to promote exchange among the intellectual communities of Southeast Asia. The primary goal was to bring news of important publications, debates, and ideas into region-wide circulation through lively and accessible writing. It also wanted to encourage more sustained engagement between university-based intellectuals and those working in NGOs, journalism, and cultural production. Those ambitions are still at the root of today's publication.

The KRSEA Committee recognizes that mutual inaccessibility of national languages is an arduous barrier in deepening the knowledge of neighbouring countries. To address this, we use translation to facilitate informed discussion. All thematic articles are translated into the national languages of selected Southeast Asian states, for now Thai and Bahasa Indonesia, as well as two languages, English and Japanese. It is the only journal, which carries articles in four languages. We plan to add more languages to the translations, possibly Vietnamese and Burmese in the near future. However, in the volume, we only include the English version of all articles.

Currently, there are two thematic issues per year. Each issue is organized around a subject important to public discussion. We work closely with other communities aside from the academic one in order to broaden our discussion, understanding, debate and argument. For example, we work with non-governmental organizations, international organizations and political parties in order to engage them in the public discourses pertaining to their line of responsibility. We also have a review section. We look at recent works, especially books published in the region and in local languages.

Moreover, there is a new column, Young Academic's Voice, launched in September 2013, to promote works among young intellectuals who conduct research on Southeast Asia. We provide a platform for them to disseminate their work through our extensive networks across the globe. With KRSEA being an online journal, we pay special attention to bring visibility to this writing. The fast development of the cyber community allows KRSEA to connect with readers in many ways. The impressive statistics of those visiting our website each quarter is a testament of how the Internet is vital to the future of knowledge dissemination.

Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia also acknowledges the support of the Toyota Foundation and Southeast Asia Studies for Sustainable Humanosphere and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Asian Core Program. We would like to also thank the director of CSEAS for his unfailing support. Thanks also go to all the guest editors who have worked closely with us through different issues, and the translators who have done excellent jobs within a tight timeframe.

We rely on numerous academic networks to help us circulate the KRSEA. We are extremely grateful to the TLC group (Philadelphia University), the Michigan University, and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) Singapore for providing an avenue to showcase our issues. A greater connection with our networks allow us to achieve a high number of visitors to our website each year.

My appreciation goes to a number of individuals who have made KRSEA a success, including Nick Potts who takes care of the website, Kumiko Kawamiya for her assistance in liaising with paper writers and translators and ensuring deadlines are met, Tomoko Kawai for her excellent budget arrangement for this publication, Ida Aroonwong for introducing me to a publisher in Thailand who was able to print this book at the last minute, Wasin Pathomyok who designed the cover, and the CSEAS's Bangkok Office which acted as a "middle man" in delivering copies of the book to Kyoto.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the present and past KRSEA committees. The present team consists of Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Fumiharu Mieno, Yoshihiro Nakanishi, Ozamu Kozan and Jafar Suryomenggolo. Of course, I am grateful for the unfailing support and encouragement of the current director, Kono Yasuyuki.

Please visit us at www.kyotoreview.org. Also visit our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/kyotoreview/>.

Pavin Chachavalpongpun
Chief Editor
KRSEA
Kyoto
February 2017

Foreword from the Director

It is my great pleasure to congratulate the success of Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia, and in particular this collection of interesting articles on the region. Since the re-launch of the KRSEA website in March 2013 under the editorship of Dr Pavin Chachavalpongpun, KRSEA has been successfully exposed to the international academic community with a greater accessibility and newfound excitement. KRSEA has become the most visited website of our Center for Southeast Asian Studies. I am glad to know that, with KRSEA's extensive academic networks, it has drawn readers from wider regions beyond Southeast Asia.

As its trademark, KRSEA is still the only online journal which offers scholarly yet accessible articles in selected Southeast Asian languages, Thai and Bahasa, apart from the English and Japanese languages. This separates us from other journals and the outcome means we have gained a great increase in readership from Southeast Asia.

This collection of KRSEA articles is a result of the hard-work enterprise of the KRSEA team. I hope you will find past articles in this volume intellectually stimulating. The Young Academic's Voice forum has been an admirable initiative in opening up a space for young scholars to showcase their work and to exchange opinion with fellow scholars.

I am looking forward to more articles from KRSEA. KRSEA has become a part of our center's effort to internationalize and at the same time to promote excellent scholarship in Southeast Asia.

Kono Yasuyuki
Professor
Director of CSEAS
February 2017

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1 May 2016

The Good Child's Duties: Childhood in Militarized Thailand

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The Thai national children's day (*wan dek*), the local version of the International Day for Protection of Children, is celebrated in Thailand on the second week of January. For the occasion, various government offices, including major military installations, are open to children and their families.

On *wan dek* in 2014, I went to the Bangkok *headquarters of the Royal Thai Armed Forces* on Chaengwattana road, where celebration activities for children were taking place, to understand how the public characterization of Thai childhood was staged. During the day soldiers proudly showed astonished and exalted children the best pieces of the Thai Army's military arsenal: helicopters, battle tanks, war weapons of various kind. Similar to their everyday lessons at school, children were almost obsessively taught that to be a "good child" (*dek di*) is to be authentically Thai – that is to honor the monarchy, Buddhism and the nation. Even during the day formally dedicated to their rights, children were instructed to always be grateful and obey *phu-yai* (big people). To be a *dek di* is to emulate the example of Thai soldiers: the nation's brave and generous defenders, ready to sacrifice for the good of "Thainess" and the national family.

Not long after *wan dek*, these heroes of the nation would topple the democratically elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra.

The Universal Children's Day, whose establishment was recommended worldwide by the UN in 1954, is officially aimed at promoting children's rights. The UN's convention on the Rights of the Child, signed by Thailand on the 27th of March 1992, sets out a number of children's rights, including the right for children to have their views heard in a "horizontal" relationship with adults and to be protected from violence. Now, given this premise, it was curious that children's day was transformed into an ultra-nationalist military parade. Indeed, to see how war weapons – the

quintessential technological materialization of violence – were patriotically employed simultaneously as instruments of pedagogy and as a form of entertainment.

What is at stake here is a clear contradiction between two different cultural and political conceptualizations of “childhood”: On the one hand, the western-based juridical definition of children promoted by UN agencies in Geneva and only formally acknowledged in many both western and non-western countries. Such definition highlights children as full human beings who have the right to freely express their views on all matters affecting them, – On the other hand, the local militarized portrait of the Thai “good child”, as an obedient and loyal subject subordinate to both adults and the will of the nation itself.

As social scientists have shown, “childhood” is not a fixed universal experience. Conceived as a concept, childhood is a social construction, a set of historically and culturally specific ideas, practices, interpretations of the first years of human beings’ life which divergently interact in defining what “childhood” is and should be. This is conceived of differently by different societies and at different times (James and Prout, 1997). At the same time, in the context of modern nation-states, “the birth of a child is a political event” (Handwerker, 1990:1). By virtue of being the tomorrow’s citizens, children are often considered not-yet complete subjects to be socialized, educated and moralized in order to ensure the continuity and reproduction of normative social, moral and political order. Their minds and bodies are thus at the center of public debates about ethnic purity, national identity, and the transmission of fundamental cultural values in schools – the state’s primary institutional device for the fabrication of “normal childhoods”. As a matter of fact, public interventions and policies addressing children reflect precise projects of governance, visions of the world, and arrangements of citizenship (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998).

The discursive, aesthetic and ritual framework of *wan dek*, and the ways in which the public concept of childhood is elaborated in this context, reveal the ideological and institutional apparatus deployed by the Thai state in its attempt to construct a desirable childhood. Moreover, being focused on children, the event also symbolically offers a vision into state projects of the nation’s political future and its ideas of proper citizens yet to be.

The militarized and hyper-nationalistic setting of both children’s day and Thai school system are historically comprehensible if we consider that their modern establishment took place during the military dictatorships of field marshal Phibun

Songkran (1938-1944; 1948-1957), the father of Thai ethno-nationalism and “Thainess”, the fundamental discourse about national identity.

Rather than being subjects of rights, Thai children are the subjects of duties. Indeed, the song composed specifically for Children’s Day – “the child’s duties” (*nathi khong dek*), even known as “oh child, good child” (*dek oei, dek dee*)⁵³⁹ – plays haphazardly throughout public spaces all along the day. Introduced in the 90s, the song reports a list of ten duties the child must fulfill in order to be considered good. These include: uphold Buddhism, keep with Thai tradition, be grateful and obey parents and teachers, behave according to the nation’s principles and for its prosperity and development.

Besides almost caricaturing a kind of nationalist fanaticism, the song highlights some important dimensions of the Thai normative conception of childhood and of children’s moral position within family. First, children are inserted in hierarchical (as opposed to horizontal) relationship with adults. They are the passive recipients of the adults’ knowledge and morality and must be obedient, polite and grateful. Second, the song reflects Buddhist concepts of *bun-barami* (merit), karma, and *kathanyu* (gratitude), which are used as moral bonding agents connecting the sacredness of parents with the obligation of children’s obedience and gratitude. Finally it emphasizes the role of school teachers – the first state officials children meet along their path into society – strategically redrawn as near parents. This way their figure symbolically works as emotional link between the family and the nation-state.

If we consider children and adults as respectively symbolizing citizens and authority, then we can fully appreciate the political implications of such a construction of childhood. The ideal child, like the citizen, should be passively prone to welcome parents’ (state authority’s) superior benevolent knowledge and abilities. Only by doing so, each child-citizen will harmoniously fit the Thai socio-moral and political hierarchies.

The entanglement between the language of power and that of kinship is historically and cross-culturally well documented. The place of children within the family and in relation to parents, in particular, has been a strategic locus of symbolic investment in

⁵³⁹ เพลงเด็กดี [*phlaeng dek di*, song ‘good child’], Online Videoclip, YouTube, Author: Wonrapha Sutaratham. YouTube, 03 August 2010. Web. 14 March 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KehD-MmKmC8>.

monarchical, hierarchical and patriarchal societies. One might think of Confucian filial piety in China, or consider the symbolic triangular sacralisation of God, King (God's representative in the world) and Father (God's representative within family) at the basis of the *ancien régime* Catholic absolute monarchies in Europe.

In the specific case of the paternalist monarchical cosmology, which the Thai socio-political and religious order is historically grounded, the moral paradigm of benevolent parenthood is embodied by the royal family with respect to which citizens-subjects are grateful sons and daughters. The King, often designated by the term *pho* (father), is described not only as the supreme embodiment of Buddhist dharma but also as father of the nation.

After the fall of the absolute monarchy (1932) and the rise of military nationalism, childhood became even more charged with political meanings. Under the “despotic paternalism” (Thak, 2007) of field marshal Sarit Thanarat (1957-63), in particular, the moral authority descending from the monarchy was rehabilitated to promote a representation of the nation as family and of citizens as its children. Father's day falls on the King's birthday, for example. Indeed, this notion is such a mundane part of life in Thailand that a recent cycling event held in honor of the King was called simply “Bike for Dad”.

In this way, schools are like militarized political laboratories for the creation of the child-citizen formulation. Within schools kids practice ethno-nationalistic rituals of hierarchy and “Thainess” via top-down teaching methods and by learning moral lessons stressing their status of “small people” (*phu-noi*) and the importance of their devotion to the family and, by extension, the nation's “big people” (*phu-yai*). *Phu-noi*, however, are not only children but, more generally, anyone relating with big people (*phu-yai*). Children in relation to parents, laity to monks, as well as citizens to the state's representatives, are *phu-noi* who must demonstrate absolute loyalty, respect and gratitude to *phu-yai*, of which the King is the highest referent. Within *sakdina*, the feudal system of pre-modern Siamese society, the term *phu-noi* was officially used to describe lower rank people or commoners with respect to nobility and higher rank people. The widespread informal usage of these hierarchical labels in today's Thailand reveals the social persistence and relevance of the “sakdina ideology” into the (only) formally democratic structures of the modern nation-state.

The changing conceptual nature of childhood is linked to shifts in the political and socio-cultural spheres. Even in Thailand,

the post-war radical social transformations brought about by fast-flowing processes of modernization, economic development and democratization seemed to have paved the way for a new idea of children and their relationship with adults. An outcome of this can be identified in the 1999 Thai Education Act, especially one of its more symbolically meaningful innovations: the so-called *child-centered learning method*. The latter aims at promoting children's participation, critical thinking, and the right of expression in the scholastic setting. It was officially conceived to recalibrate, in horizontal terms, student-teacher relationships and highlight children's (rather than teachers') centrality. The democratic administrations of both Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006) and his sister Yingluck (2011-2014) were particularly committed to promoting child-centered learning methodologies, technologically advanced didactic tools, and to acknowledging regional ethno-linguistic specificities in the elaboration of scholastic curricula.

The May 2014 military coup, through which former Thai army chief general Prayuth Chan-ocha toppled Yingluck's government, put an end to the jointly unstable trends towards political democratization and progressive re-interpretation of children as individuals with rights. Besides enforcing martial law, summoning activists and academics for "attitude adjustment", and extensively restricting civic and political rights, interestingly one of the military junta's first official interventions was to introduce a new daily nationalistic ritual for students to be performed daily in all the country's schools: before classes, students have to sing a new national song on the "twelve key values (*khaniyom*) of "Thainess"."⁵⁴⁰ The first of the twelve military-designed values recommends the good children to preserve and worship the sacred triad of monarchy, religion and nation; another primary important value, not surprisingly, is *kathanyu*: the gratitude children owe to parents and teachers.

Prayuth-headed military junta seems intent on pursuing an attempt of "restoration" in which the governance of children at school and the public usage of political meanings of "childhood" articulate with the resurgent strength of the monarchical paternalism of "Thainess", and its military grammar, in the wider society.

⁵⁴⁰ เพลงมาร์ชคำนิยม 12 ประการ [*phlaeng khanyom 12 prakan*, song '12 values'], Online Videoclip, YouTube, Author: Kawee Jongjitt. YouTube, 07 October 2014. Web. 14 March 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cy7cpnNXnTO>.

It seems likely that children's duties – rather than children's rights – will continue to be at the core of the Thai public conceptualization of childhood, and that adults holding war weapons will still play a major role in the next Thai children's days.