

**Education for Enculturating the “Thainess” Ideology:
Decolonizing the Siamese Colonial Discourse in the Social Studies Curriculum**

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Abstract

After the junta came to power in May 2014, the military government started exercising their nation-centric hegemony through the educational policies and curriculum planning. Contemporary curriculum reform is employed as a mechanism for maintaining the status quo of elites group who have held privileged positions among the Thais. Looking through the social studies curriculum, it becomes the centerpiece of public schools’ efforts to cultivate younger generations into what it means to be “*Thainess*”. However, Thainess becomes inevitably hybrid to certain extents in the era of globalization. By looking into the contemporary context of education from the political dimensions of curriculum and cultural studies, I argue that if educationalists are to educate young Thais for global citizenship in today’s pluralistic society, the social studies curriculum must go beyond the Siamese colonization of knowledge construction, and also provides pedagogical spaces of the experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of diverse people in Thai society.

Keywords: Thainess, internal domination, curriculum ideology, social studies curriculum, global citizenship

Introduction

As the world enters into the 21st century in which the colonial era is long gone, Thai education is still reproducing the old kind of knowledge although such conditions and threats no longer exist (Winichakul, 2014). In this essence, it can be seen explicitly in the contested notions such as *Thainess* and the essence of what it means to be a Thai as well as Thai-centrism in which nationalism is a part. These notions are institutionalized to represent the uniqueness of Thailand. On the one hand, Thainess becomes inevitably hybrid to certain extents because the discourse of multilingualism, cultural hybridity, and linguistic flexibility are gaining recognition as central to the forging of a cosmopolitan identity and diverse lifestyles (Padunchewit, 2001). Despite the evolvement of Thainess, what remains unchanged until the present is its focus on king-centered ideology, which has played a crucial role in shaping the notion of Thainess (Sattayanurak, n.d.). To some extent, this nationalistic view influences Thai people even today and has been reproduced by the government through a variety of pedagogical tools such as historical narratives, textbooks, films, monuments and the like. While mainstream curriculum discourse can provide one frame of reference, it can also seem detached from my critical understanding of curriculum and pedagogy in Thai society. Additionally, decisions taken about education, curriculum and pedagogy are widely believed to affect the construction and reconstruction of societal and national identities. They must take into account deep processes of social critical reflection on the meaning of citizenship, collective memory and shared identity (Tawil & Harley, 2004).

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The contents in this paper are mainly based on the documentary study, using various written materials, ranging from research papers, theses, as well as general curriculum studies and social studies education documents, reviewed between 2000 to present. However, I choose to present the results as critical reflection and inquiry into the field of curriculum studies which is threatened less by its internal complexity than by external political conditions (Pinar, 2007). In this regard, the studies of political dimensions of curriculum and cultural studies are gaining recognition among the categories of post-1995 scholarly production into multiple specializations in curriculum studies field. This paper, therefore, will provide educationalists a framework for critique “imagination” which is used to construct the seam of a collective narrative in education, curriculum and pedagogy (Kanu, 2003) and offers an alternative to the fractured, contested version of Thai-centrism, Thai nationalism, Thainess, and far-reaching yet contested values which have been dominating education in Thailand for years.

As for the understanding of ideology in the context of curriculum studies, curriculum scholars assert that ideology is read from curricular texts and that the relationship between each text and its culture is traceable to ideological roots. It has been assumed by many scholars that curriculum and society have a more or less mutually reflective relationship; that is, the curriculum is seen as a reflection of the dominant beliefs and values of its society. However, the ideology of a curriculum does not take the form of direct statements or reflections on a culture; rather, it lies in the narrative structure and in the discourse employed. Therefore, curriculum represents pictures of reality through the codes, conventions, myths, story, and images. The depiction of reality in the curriculum is that this perspective is offered from the point of view of the ruling classes, in other words, that is an instance of the dominant ideology (Paraskeva, 2011).

As was noted above, the curriculum in any particular society is made on the basis of that society's main ideology, which they are supposed to transmit, whether implicitly or explicitly. If the socio-cultural ideology of the society undergoes changes, these will be reflected in the curriculum as well. Therefore, it can be assumed that in any examination of changes in the curriculum of a society, the changing socio-cultural background of that society necessarily has to be taken into account in the study. For this reason, it was important to look closely into the social studies curriculum as it is manifested in different “curriculum ideologies” (Eisner, 2002). The social sciences can, of course, be variously oriented. Taking the United States social studies into accounts, social studies curriculum in Thailand has shared a common ground in terms of curriculum ideologies. That is, the most widely taught social studies subjects have been to construct a “unifying” national narrative (Barton & Levstik, 2004; FitzGerald, 1979; Moreau, 2004). In the next section, I will provide the contemporary context of social studies curriculum in Thailand.

The Contemporary Context of Social Studies Curriculum in Thailand

Social studies education is called *Sankom-suksa, Sasana and Wattanatam* that means social studies, religion, and culture in Thai. It is divided into five learning areas as follows: 1) religion, morality, and ethics, 2) civics, culture and living in society, 3) economics, 4) history, and 5) geography. Literally speaking, social studies education is the study of social issues, so the integration is the lifeblood of social studies curriculum and pedagogy. Both teachers and students must make use of more than one academic discipline such as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion and sociology as well as appropriate contents from the humanities, mathematics and natural sciences if they would like to resolve any social issues with

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knowledge from various dimensions. However, all parties and stakeholders in education agree that citizenship education is the primary concern of social studies education. In the current national curriculum, social studies curriculum comprises the body of knowledge, significant skills, and desirable characteristics, attainment of which is acquired by all students to be citizens who are “good citizenship” and live “peacefully coexistence in Thai society and the world community” and have “faith in religious teaching” and “appreciation of resource and the environment” as well as “patriotism and pride in Thainess” (Office of the Education Council, 2013). Therefore, social studies education includes the notion of active citizenship and civic engagement in local, national and global contexts:

Learners also acquire patience, forbearance, and acceptance of differences. They are endowed with morality and the ability to adjust knowledge gained for application in leading their lives as good citizens of the country and desirable members of the world community. (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 151)

In this regard, students are seen as active learners when they engage in the multifaceted experience of citizenship and civic participation. As the social studies curriculum illustrates, the concept of active citizenship in various contexts has become the educational priority. However, I must state that the state of social studies education in Thailand is facing, in some ways, an identity crisis (Ross, 2001). As the nature of the field, the social studies education struggles to reconcile multiple and, at times, conflicting rationales and is a particularly ambiguous subject area because it is inextricably linked to values and belief systems and ideas of what makes a “good” citizen (Thompson, 2006).

Thus, the notion of a good citizen is not only contentious but highly complicated and contested one. Emerged from my critical reflections toward the current national curriculum, there are crucial questions of *whose* version of citizenship we (national curriculum) are talking about. Is it an inclusive or an exclusive notion of citizenship? How does this relate to questions of local community, nation-state, race, culture, identity, ethnicity, religion and language which is defined and constructed by dominant ideologies of its society? On the side of globalization, the notion of citizenship is further complicated by population migration, as well as common awareness of multiculturalism across countries (Sears, 2004) and can never truly be set as realistic and achievable educational goals. Sharp and persistent debates regarding both the meaning and the aim of education for democratic citizenship still persist (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Stanley, 2001).

Perhaps, the greatest results which social studies curriculum can offer its 21st-century learner is the development of active, responsible and democratic citizenship through multiple perspectives for the benefit of fostering a sense of inclusion and a commitment to building a cohesive Thai society. Toward this end, I propose that social studies curriculum should be read and interpreted in relation to their spatial and political relations to the nation-state, as well as in counterpoint to the projects that dominated people themselves produced in response to internal domination. This kind of geographical sensitivity may help students to critically examine and question their own historical understanding of the society in which they have been living for years.

Social Studies Curriculum as a Site for Struggle over Knowledge Control

The Thai junta under the banner of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) came to power in May 2014 and started exercising their nation-centric hegemony through the educational policies

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and curriculum planning. The educational policies are executed through various concerned institutions and the national curriculum is planned for both public and private schools throughout the country while textbooks and instructional-related materials are selected by schools themselves and must be under the approval of the committees appointed by the Ministry of Education. In this regard, the website of the Ministry of Education has published the NCPO's plan for education which reads: "To promote patriotism and national interest amongst Thai youth. To promote love for the monarchy, pride in Thai history and ancestors and instill a sense of gratitude to the nation, not pushing the way forward and abandoning the good of the past entirely" (Thongnoi, 2014). Together with these plans, the government proceeds to take control over the educational policies and curricular planning. The military leaders have imposed and instilled in Thai children a sense of "good" citizen by following the "Thai values" and patriotism via the educational reform and through the policy of "Returning the happiness to Thailand" as well as speaking in the program "Reconciliation to Build the Nation". Social studies curriculum, therefore, has been the centerpiece of public schools' efforts to cultivate younger generations into what it means to be "Thai". In a similar manner, the social studies curriculum in the United States has been used as a tool for enculturating new generations and immigrants for being "American" for many decades (Merryfield & Subedi, 2006). However, it is worthwhile mentioning that the educational policies and curriculum planning in the United States have been carried on under the spirits of democracy and multiculturalism, while the education reform in Thailand has currently been under the absolute control of military regime which is in contrast with democratic principles and social justice in education.

One of the contemporary contexts of curriculum controversies is that citizenship education or generally known as "civic duty" in Thai, together with history education as part of social studies curriculum is designated for 40 hours per year based on the national curriculum. At this scenario, the military government and the bureaucrats expressed their concerns that the amount of time was not enough for students to learn about morality, discipline and the patriotism, religion and the monarchy. In the second semester of the 2014 academic year, the amount of time for the instruction in civic duty from primary grade 1 to secondary grade 9 was 40 hours per year while secondary grades 10-12 was extended to 80 hours throughout three years of the higher secondary level (Jirakittikul, 2014). Looking specifically in terms of the history of social studies curriculum and development in Thailand, it is concluded that Thai government utilized the social studies curriculum and textbooks as important tools for transferring ideologies and beliefs as well as instilling the Thai values and cultures, civic duty as part of broader social studies curriculum had brought up good citizens ideology for the state's legitimacy since the change from Absolute Monarchy to Constitutional Democracy in 1932. The contents of civic duty subject about political socialization and Thais' duty were clarified according to the new political system relating to the perspective of the imagined nation-state within the democratic society of the revolutionists. Later on during 1957 to 1973, the curriculum had been adjusted by focusing on the stability of 3 pillars of Thailand: the nation, the religion and the monarch (Pungkanon, 2009). Until recently, civic duty lessons such as rules and regulations, the balance of power, democratic development, the role of Monarchy in reassuring democratic stability, as well as the rights, freedom, and duties of good citizens designated in the social studies curriculum have been explained and more emphasized in detailed rather than any periods.

In the similar vein, history education has been exploited by the Thai government to instill selected myths and narratives through history curriculum which requires the social studies teachers to teach Thai history contents for both primary and secondary students in all levels of basic education. In light of this issue, history curriculum has been, and still is, considered as an inherited tradition of Thai

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historiography which has been constructed based on its embracement of the Thai values, experiences, worldviews and traditions of the elites and ruling classes in Thai society (Tawil & Harley, 2004). This inherited tradition of history education was due to the fact that the development of a more “popular” and relevant school history including social and economic history, local history and grassroots history in terms of contents, perspectives as well as “hidden history” is imminent in Thailand (Jory, 2003). Because of these intellectual and controversial contexts, studies into trends in popular interests in history as reflected in the history education projects as well as the content selection and perspectives of popular history materials are under the directive of scholars who devoted themselves professionally to revealing the untold histories of others who have been segregated by the nationalistic history written by the elites and ruling classes in Thai society for many decades.

Consequently, these contemporary contexts of history education have influential effects on some elites and ruling classes which seem to be living in a lost paradise vision of history. At this crucial point, the military leader expresses his concerns about how the younger generations don't know about famous historical figures such as King Naresuan, Queen Suriyothai, or selfless soldier Pantai Norrasingh. Bureaucrats also perceive that the social studies curriculum including citizenship education and history education provide little space to glorify former kings and monarchy-related contents as well as important royal figures. This situation reflects the shortcomings of the present history curriculum in Thailand in providing all children with a “historical identity” as implied by the *Thainess* ideology. In light of this, scholars pointed out that the governments of Thailand have promoted both the image of a homogenous, united and securely bounded nation, as well as taking action to counter the lively and extensive reality of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the populations that comprise the kingdom (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2016), while the history curriculum does not include the experiences, beliefs and traditions of all in Thailand's pluralistic society. Therefore, students do not gain a holistic historical understanding of the past. Muslims, Christians, and children of minorities who were born and have been residing in Thailand for years, as well as immigrants from our neighboring countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Burma inevitably feel alienated because the history of their experiences, beliefs and traditions is not represented in school history curriculum. They are still denied the curricular and pedagogical experience of identifying with the content and exploring more relevant alternative perspectives or voices of the history curriculum and pedagogical approaches.

Regarding citizenship education, scholars point out that the name the course *Civic Duty* is misleading. It needs to be replaced with *Citizenship Education* or *Civic Education*, which needs to be taught in conjunction with democratic principles and institutions, the rule of law, and human rights. Children have to be familiar with these concepts at an early stage before developing a genuine respect for other people. Thus, by separating the subject, the students' ability to perceive the world from various angles can be narrowed. Even though the educational policies are strongly criticized by scholars, bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education still claim that there is an urgent need to divide the history education and citizenship education from the broad fields of social studies education as a single subject in its own right (Areerat, 2015).

Correspondingly, the Ministry of Education has published new national history textbooks and announced the lists of history textbooks to reinforce the correct version of history as well as Thai values among Thai students. At this point, there is a sharp contrast between the social studies scholarship worldwide and the contemporary policies of the military government. The National Council for the Social Studies (1994) defines social studies as follows: social studies education is the

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integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school curriculum, social studies education provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.

History and geography are the core subjects for social studies but economics, political sciences, sociology, and anthropology make significant contributions as well. Scholars of social education propose that topics for study contain subject matter from more than one of the disciplines in primary school level. These integrated studies focus on ideas and concepts that are essential in gaining an understanding of the topic. Thus, teaching individual subjects such as history and geography or any of the individual disciplines is not consistent with the concept of thematic social studies curriculum. Rich social studies teaching should offer students opportunities to direct their investigations into the world around them and answer those investigations more thoroughly through citizenship, economic, geography, history, and multidisciplinary venues (Grant, 2013). In addition, history education has been seen as a school subject that can develop the values of citizenship in the postnational era (Phillips, 2002) and many concepts in history that we must learn if we are to understand the past and the present deeply and critically; some are directly related to citizenship (Davies, 1992; Phillips, 2003). Among these concepts are power, force, authority, order, law, justice, representation, agency, individuality, freedom, welfare, democracy, fascism and communism. These concepts help us understand how democracy and the political structures of the modern world have been reshaped. If students learn history as a process of inquiry that deals with substantive concepts like those above they will also develop the skills of active citizenship (Demircioglu, 2009).

In addition to the educational policies exercised directly through the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture was utilized as a means for promoting a correct understanding of Thainess and national history as well. In so doing, the use of other media and learning resources such as historical movies, visual media and documentaries based on the lives of heroic kings of Siam such as King Naresuan and Queen Suriyothai were used to promote a sense of pride in being a Thai citizen and reinforce the royal nationalistic version of Thai history (Mukdawijitra, 2013). Furthermore, the latest version of the textbook on “Thai national history” was written by historians of the Fine Arts Department who spent only a short amount of time to complete it after the department was assigned the task by the Ministry of Culture who was directly responded to the instruction of the military leader with the expectation for promoting *patriotism and nationalism* among Thai citizens and students. One the 3rd page in the prologue section of Thai national history book, General Prayuth, the military leader, wrote the message which read: “*Studying history is crucial to help us understand the sacrifices of ancestors who maintained the integrity of the nation and to be grateful for the kindness of the great kings who protected the people from all difficulties and hardships.*” Further, people would understand the “*origin of the Thai nation*” and be proud of “*the Thai national sovereignty*” (Areerat, 2015). In a similar vein, the construction of Ratchapakdi Park which is a theme park with grandiose monuments of seven ancient kings of Siam and the several campaigns for free screenings of patriotic movies as well as the project of Thai patriotic songs comprised of the songs composed by the King Rama IX and the songs about national victories in the past were used to boost nationalism among Thai people and foster reconciliation as promised to the public by the military leader.

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Having discussed the contemporary contexts of education and the state of social studies curriculum in Thailand, it must be noted that social studies curriculum has been exploited by the military government as a space for recounting Thainess and instilling Thai nationalism. Scholars pointed out that Thai-centrism plays an important role both in the school curriculum and textbooks especially in social studies education (Laongsri, 2001) which can be classified into major themes as follows.

First, Thailand is presented as the unique country despite numerous studies showing that Thailand has long been an integrated part of Southeast Asia. India and China have been the main sources of cultural and social influence for all countries in the region. Among many things, Thailand is presented as the only country in Southeast Asia that was not colonized. This view does not only create an exaggerated pride but also discriminates neighboring countries as if they failed to resist colonization (Mukdawijitra, 2013; Winichakul, 2000). This theme of the only uncolonized country, however, presents the history of border demarcation during the 19th century in the view that originally owned territories of Thailand were seized unfairly by colonizers, and thus it suggests that Thailand was a victim of colonization and the seized territories need to be reclaimed. (Mukdawijitra, 2013; Winichakul, 1994; Winichakul, 2000). *Second*, social studies textbooks present neighboring countries as the historical enemy while focus largely on the current monarch and heroic kings who protected the sovereignty of the Thai homeland against neighboring states in the past and portray neighboring countries, such as Myanmar and Laos, as inferior and enemies of the nation (Jory, 2003). The texts repeat the ruling class's perspective on Thai history by presenting the ruling class's history and benefits as if they were the people's history and benefits. According to this logic, the ruling class's enemies are people's enemies (Mascharoen, 1990; Mukdawijitra, 2013). *Finally*, those countries that are not represented as enemies, are viewed as smaller and/or weaker countries that from time to time need help from Thailand. In several instances, some nations are represented as ones who betray Thailand. The textbooks are replete with often humiliating images of the Thai kingdom's subjugation of its neighbors. In one famous episode, King Naresuan supposedly beheaded the King of Lawaek (Cambodia) and bathed his feet with his blood. In another, King Anuwong (Laos prince), leader of a revolt against Thai regimes in the 1820s and a nationalist hero in modern Laos historical discourse, is paraded through Bangkok in a cage before his eventual execution (Jory, 2003). In the state-based social studies textbooks, they were depicted as the wicked kings who were relatively lower in the hierarchy comparing with the Thai kings in the end and better eventually be loyal to Thailand (Arphattananon, 2013; Laongsri, 2001; Mukdawijitra, 2013).

Today, Thai-centrism is still vivid in the minds of the majority of Thai people. The Thais have been dominated by this overarching ideology since the end of the 1950s, since then, the ideology has functioned as an obstacle to prevent Thai people from adapting to the rapid and critical changes in both Thai and global society. More importantly, this ideology has been consistently cultivated in the society that it became to be seen as truth that influences the way the Thais think and reflect everyday reality in Thailand. At present, it is still unclear how history education in social studies curriculum will change from the previous curriculum that was introduced three decades ago. History education has regularly been criticized: on the one hand, critics point out that history education in Thailand is one-sided and has features of propaganda, on the other hand, conservatives argue that the root of the country's conflict is because history education is not patriotic and nationalistic enough and should be amended to be even more patriotic to unite all Thais (Areerat, 2015). The truth is that this kind of grand narrative stands in contrast with the spirit of global citizenship education as well as government's policy to become a hub in the ASEAN nations.

Concluding Remarks

Under the internal domination discourse or otherwise known as the Siamese colonial discourse, the military government has been achieved, in most part, in using this discourse to influence the Thais. One of the clearest examples of the Siamese colonial discourse can be seen in the educational reform agenda. The word reform, in general, gave us a sense of improvement, empowerment as well as transformation. In light of curricular terms, curriculum reform aimed at empowering students, especially those from victimized and marginalized groups, must help students develop the knowledge and skills needed to critically examine the current political and economic structure and the myths or ideologies used to justify it. Such curriculum reform must cultivate students' critical thinking skills, the way in which knowledge is constructed, the basic assumptions and values that undergird knowledge, systems, and how to construct knowledge themselves. In Thailand, contemporary curriculum reform, on the other hand, has been employed as a mechanism for maintaining the status quo of the elites and ruling classes. As I mentioned previously, the military government exercised their power through education and school curriculum so that the curriculum will more accurately reflect the selective experiences, visions, and worldviews of some groups. The hierarchy of knowledge and values, most recently repackaged with the discourse of nationalism, is in fact not new at all. The elites and ruling classes occupy more privileged spaces than the general public that is the majority of the society, and it is the general public that usually endures the most pronounced experiences of otherness.

Thus, we as Thais should bravely acknowledge our position and accept such commonalities, the common fate and destiny of the world influenced by globalization and neo-colonization. While the new body of knowledge may have a Thai character, it may also have the quality and values to make a meaningful contribution to global knowledge whose diversity we can cherish and embrace them as well. However, through understanding contemporary education in Thailand in broader national contexts and particularly through social studies curriculum revealed that the military government has been reproducing the Siamese colonial discourse and exercised the internal domination projects to control their population. Under this condition, all Thais should actively engage in deconstruction and rethinking this colonial mentality, which deeply permeated our ways of thinking, understanding and being in the present (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986). Thai-centrism once has served its purpose in modernization and in fighting communism during the Cold War, but that era is long gone. Yet, the colonial legacy still exists through internal colonization because it is not only deeply embedded in our social system but also remains mostly unchallenged.

By looking into the contemporary context of education in Thailand from the political dimensions of curriculum and cultural studies, social studies education scholars, curriculum scholars and educationalists can work with their students in order to bring to light the discourse of internal domination, and to use perspectives from critical, political and cultural dimensions of curriculum in order to understand contemporary education issues, curriculum, the media, pop culture and historical contexts (Saada, 2014). If we are to educate young Thais for global and democratic citizenship in today's pluralistic society, the social studies curriculum must go beyond the Siamese colonization of knowledge construction, and also provides pedagogical spaces of the experiences, knowledge, and perspectives of diverse people in our society. To do so, students will understand that in studying any society – past or present – they must attend to both the existence and influence of societal perspectives, as well as to be aware of how those perspectives are characterized by dominant hegemony and power relations (Barton, 2016). Finally, I hope that this paper will shed some greatest

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light for decolonizing our (the Thais) mind from the internal colonial discourse which is still powerful in our country.

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