Ambivalence to Quality: Thai universities' reception to global education policy

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Introduction

This paper will analyse Thailand's reception to global education policy, particularly focusing on quality assessment in higher education. Theoretically, it is situated in the broader theoretical attempt to understand the complex interplay between global forces and local selection and adaptation. Within policy borrowing and lending framework, this paper develops an argument that there exists "the culture of borrowing." Rather than being driven by political or economic pressure to "borrow" best practices or global policy, it is possible that countries' thirst for globalization because their cultural aspiration for modernity. Historically, Thailand has always had an appetite for western norms and policy models. In fact, the Thai quest for "modernity" or to follow "global trends" serve as the ends, almost in and of itself. Rested on the post colonial concept of "Ambivalence", countries are "attracted" to the allure of westernization, colonization and in this case globalization and "repulse" to them all at once – inserting traces of rejection to claim "idiosyncrasy" and "uniqueness" (Takayama and Apple). Thailand's adoption of quality assessment in higher education reform illustrates just that. While policy elites have been eager to follow global trends at all cost, the proponents introduced the buddhist concepts of "amicable assessment" to tone down the western style "assessment." While policymakers and administrators embrace the notion of "university ranking" and "international league table," nationalistic sentiment persisted and called for greater attention to "local needs" or "wisdom." Reception and rejection of western modernity or globalization occur at multiple levels, created contradictory discourses and resulted in conflicted and convoluted implementation. The contradictory reception of global influences serves to illustrate the complexity of reception and translation of global education policy and the importance of the historical legacy, socio-logic and context. Thailand serves as a useful case of a developing country who was not "officially" colonized by the west but has self-volunteered to follow global policy with highest enthusiasm and continuous sense of doubts.

Ambivalent and the Culture of Borrowing

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Policy borrowing and lending usually happened between two countries: the borrower and the lender. Phillips's (1989) substantial work on the British interest in German education as well as Halpin and Troyna's (1995) work on the Transatlantic assimilation between the British and American education systems illustrate this point. Undoubtedly, globalization has indeed blurred the origins of where the policy has been borrowed from. It has created “new imaginative regimes” or an “imagined international community” whereby international discourses and policy packages have traveled globally to replace bilateral borrowing. When policy reaches the status of becoming a global or international policy, countries can selectively borrow differing aspects of the policy they want to implement (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). They are free to borrow the wholesale package or bits and pieces of the policy. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) outline eight possible categories of a policy that can be borrowed: policy goals, structure and content, policy instruments, policy programs, institutions, ideologies, ideas and attitudes, and negative lessons (p. 12). Countries can also refer to international discourse rather than policy practices. The international discourses include quality, efficiency, and accountability (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010). Discursive borrowing has been evident in the emergence of QA, as the proponents repeatedly underscore the needs for the education sector to have quality, accountability, and transparency.

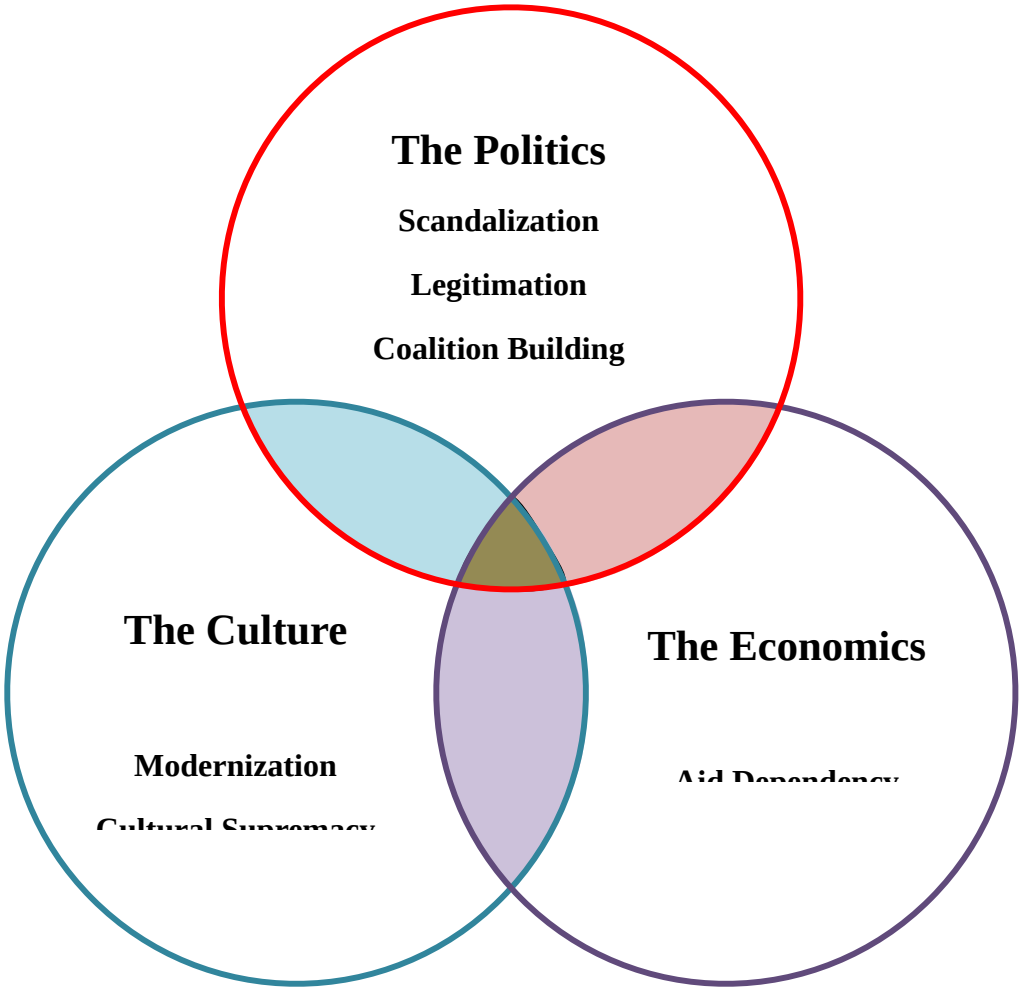
Policy borrowing in education reveals the complexity and contradictions that arise when global forces meet local factors. The politics of borrowing expect that a reference to elsewhere is used to mitigate or replace existing a locally contested reform agenda, while the economics of borrowing are mostly the product of aid dependency. Although the politics and economics of policy borrowing have dominated the academic discussion on the rationale behind the logic of borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, Steiner-Khamsi and Waldow, 2012), the cultural aspect must also be acknowledged (Takayama and Apple, 2008; Lao, 2012). The culture of borrowing highlights how modernity and cultural supremacy are important factors to induce change. In short, policy borrowing explores the process of “de-territorialization,” “externalization,” and “re-contextualization” of global reform into local contexts (Steiner-Khamsi, 2000). Each theoretical perspective will be discussed.

Even in an absence of the politics and economics pressure to emulate policy from elsewhere, it is argued that there exists the “culture of borrowing” (Takayama and Apple, 2008; Lao, 2012). This perspective highlights the supremacy of one culture above the other. While the former is often the developed countries in the west, which is perceived as “modern” and more “civilized”, the latter is often developing countries in eastern hemisphere. In this case, borrowing policy from the west has a clear function to upgrade and improve the images of the latter to be more acceptable and civilized. Takayama and Apple (2008) coined the term “cultural politics of borrowing” to advance the

theoretical discussion on the rationale behind countries' adoption of foreign models. The culture of borrowing highlights the cultural supremacy and symbolic power of the western ideas and standards over non-western others. Influenced by the postcolonial concept of *ambivalence* (Young 1995 cited in Takayama and Apple 2008), the decision, of a non-western country, to borrow education policy from the west is a function of a complex interplay between "attraction" vis-à-vis "repulsion". On the one hand, non-western countries look to west with admiration and aspiration to assimilate the western culture, values and lifestyles. Therefore, borrowing policy from the west represents a higher symbolic power for the non-western countries. On the other hand, the non-western countries also view the west with nationalistic rejections, associating anything western with negative connotations and contempt. In their own words, Takayama and Apple argued:

> Western colonial power possesses powerful symbolic appeal for non-western others, constituting the seemingly universal standard of human esthetics, cultural values, and social progress to which non-western others are compelled to conform…Simultaneously, repulsive responses to western ideas and discourses are a common nationalist reaction in non-western nations (Takayama and Apple 2008, p. 291).

This cultural politics of ambivalence helps to explain how Japanese education policymakers actively and selectively constructed the 'crisis-and-success' of British education policy in order to legitimize Japanese highly controversial education policy promoted by the Conservatives. While Japanese conservatives constructed a bias narrative to praise the British education reform successes under Thatcher government, they also rejected western style child-centered ideology as a 'culprit of economic and moral decline'. Such paradoxical approach to praise and reject examples of education reform in British epitomizes the ambivalent culture of borrowing in the non-western Japan. These selected examples demonstrate how a reference to education policy or models in another country can been used for political, economics and cultural purposes. Despite their nuance differences outlined above, each case of policy borrowing is not mutually exclusive. As it will be illustrated in the case of Thailand, a closer scrutiny to the development of each policy can be an amalgam of multiple rationale working coincidentally. The figure below maps out different possibilities and interactions of policy borrowing and lending.



<Figure 1.1: The Politics, Economics and Culture of Borrowing>

Postcoloniality and Higher Education Reforms in Thailand

Although Thailand is known for not being "officially" colonised by the west, scholars have recorded the closely knitted relationship between Thailand and western modernity. Specially, the edited volume by Harrison and Jackson (2011), *the Ambiguous allure of the west: traces of colonial in Thailand*,

and Peleggi (2002), *Lord of things: The fashioning of the Siamese Monarchy's Modern images*. These two polemic work stand at the apex of scholarly contribution to the line of thought and reasoning of this paper. It is argued, without direct presence of colonialism, Thailand was culturally influenced by the west and western aesthetics, ideas and policies, in this case, quality assessment policy, have enormous ramification to the development of Thai higher education. This line of reasoning is well documented in Lao (2015), *A critical studies of Thailand's higher education reform, the culture of borrowing*. Given limited space available, a short introduction will be described in here as to how western influences have perpetrated in higher education reforms.

From historical period until contemporary development, the Thai state has often and always used "externalization strategy," which is a reference to education reforms elsewhere, to legitimize contested reforms at home in order to serve internal political, economic and cultural agenda. Historically, the Thai state has been an active borrower and importer of European ideas in various realms ranging from the restructuring of royal households to public administration and higher education policymaking. Under the contemporary influence of globalization, Thai policy elites refer to globalization, global competition, and global trends instead of identifying any one particular country as the frame of reference in order to generate reform pressure to overhaul Thai education system. The emergence of National Education Act of 1999 is the case in point.

Secondly, 'modernity' has served as the most important motivation driving the emulation, adoption, and borrowing of foreign-based examples for Thai elites (Peleggi, 2002). There existed a strong obsession to achieve modernity through active emulation of Western values and models (Anderson, 1978; Winichakul, 2000). In a polemic article on the quest for "Siwilai," Winichakul (2000) aptly argued that since the late 19th century, Thai policy elites have strived and aspired to become "Siwilai" – a term transliterated from the word "civilized." In his own words:

> Ideas to make Siam siwilai ranged from etiquette to material progress, including new roads, electricity, new bureaucracy, courts and judicial system, law codes, dress codes, and white teeth. The list could be much longer. But unlike the European experience, the Siamese quest for siwilai was a transcultural process in which ideas and practices from Europe, via colonialism, had been transferred, localized, and hybridized in the Siamese setting. (p. 529)

The passage above illustrates that selective borrowing has been an ongoing strategy of the Thai state to introduce and implement reforms with the clear objectives of becoming civilized and modern. Despite the embracement of western models and images, Thai policymakers have taken pride in being

able to selectively and strategically borrow foreign policy. According to the well-known historian of the 19th Century, Prince Damrong argued:

> The Tai [Thai] knows how to pick and choose. When they saw some good feature in the culture of other peoples, if it was not in conflict with their own interests, they did not hesitate to borrow it and adapt it to their own requirements. (Prince Damrong Rachanuphat, cited in Peleggi, 2002, p. 12)

The quotation from Prince Damrong reflects how selective borrowing of foreign concepts, cultures, and policy has been an integral part of the formation, evolution, and development of the Thai state. Despite the country's receptiveness to borrowing from external sources or influences, such borrowing must not be “in conflict with their own interests”. This is illustrative of how the choice of borrowing must synchronize with the socio-logic of the borrowing country or sub-system. Similar sentiment has been expressed by Keith Watson, the well-known historian of Thai education system:

> Such is the nature of Thai society and history, that the authorities have sought and used what they wanted, have rejected ideas and models considered unsuitable, and have developed their own unique approach to dealing with things (Watson, 1981, 93).

The historical analysis illustrates that Thailand’s aspiration to become modern is not a straightforward account of copying others or shared international norms and values. Throughout the process of modernization, Thai ruling elites overtly highlighted their ability to selectively borrow and promote western culture (Peleggi, 2002, p. 16). Thai policymakers have highlighted the flexibility of the policy agents to “pick and choose” western elements to fit their own agenda (Harrison, 2010, p. 15). Selective borrowing and local adaptation have been extensively used in public policies to exemplify the uniqueness of Thai policy elites to become modern while maintaining Thai and Buddhist traditions. Although such discourse has been used to herald Thailand's independence and her uniqueness, it is important to read beyond the normative and nationalistic discourse. Nuances are necessary to understand the westernization/ localization of Thailand.

Despite the absence of the official “colonizer,” the political, economic and cultural influences of the western empires were paramount in the formation of the Thai state and construction of “Thai-ness.” This is where “repulsion” becomes the defining factor of policy agenda. Jackson (2007) point out to the growing researches to indicate that the development of Thailand “economy, polity, culture, and social structure were all deeply impacted by western imperialism in ways very similar to the situation in direct colony” (p. 331). Thailand might have escaped direct colonization, but the remnants of western political, economic and cultural influences are paramount in all realms. Nevertheless, by

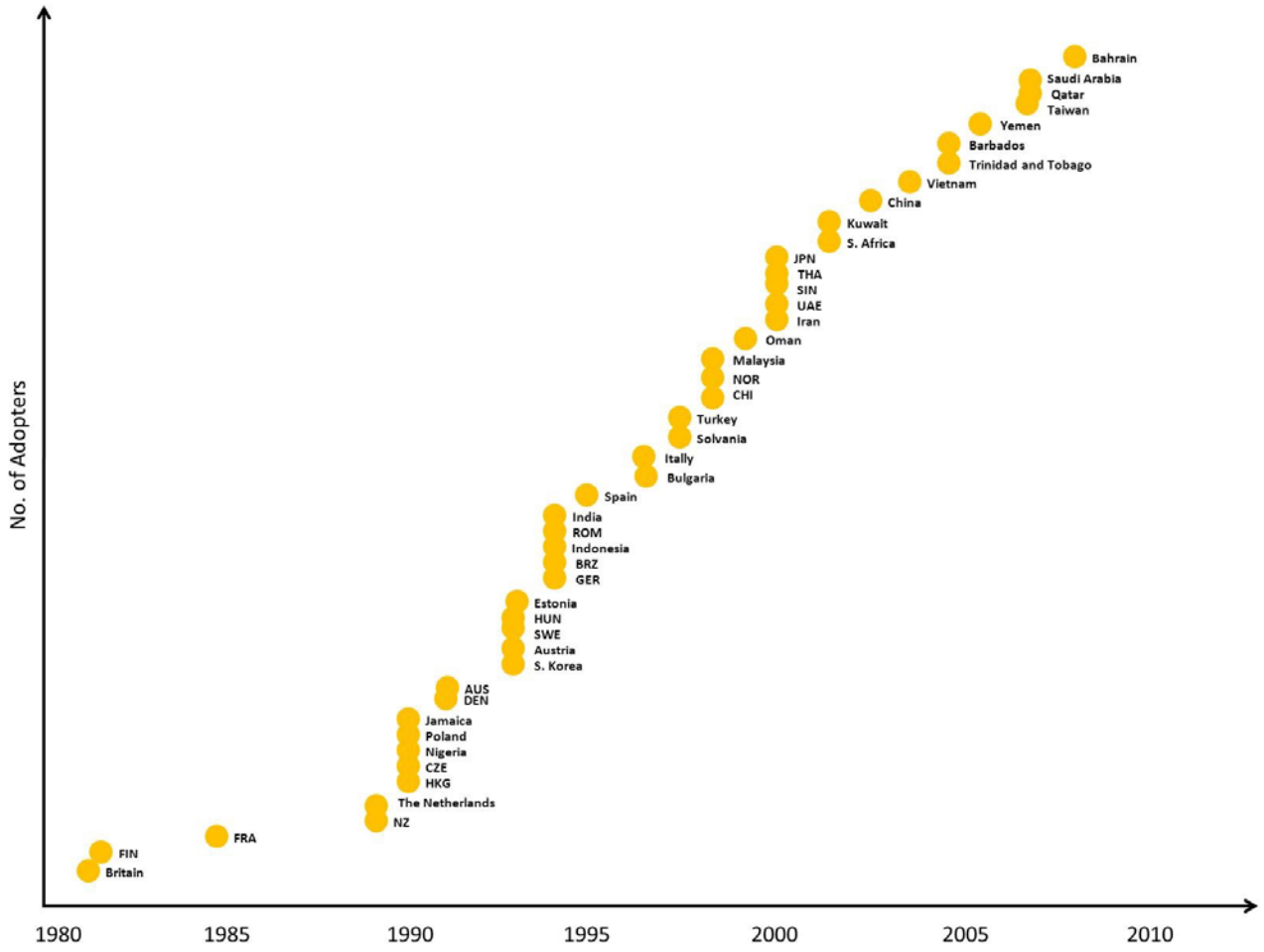
being officially independent, the Thai state has had relative autonomy to select and borrow what they deems necessary. The integral relationship between being “non-colonized” by the west but heavily influenced by its models and values has resulted in the creation of what Herzfeld (2002) called the “living paradoxes” of dependency and independence. Herzfeld (2002) argue that the “living paradoxes” are “they are nominally independent, but their independence comes at the price of a sometimes humiliating form of effective dependence” (p. 901). Winichakul (2000) has moved beyond the normative and nationalistic explanation to these “living paradoxes” in the “not colonized but colonized” situation. Thailand's struggle to emulate western models and its obsession to emphasize local idiosyncrasy reflects the inherent logic of the Thai state to maintain “relative superiority” (p. 537). On the one hand, the acquisition and appropriation of western elements enabled the Thai elites to paint itself as being “civilized”/ “siwilai” - an equal partners to the west. On the other hand, the selective westernization and localization discourse served to elevate Bangkok elites as more advanced, more modern than the rest of the country as well as better than other colonized countries in the region.

This postcolonial perspective of ambivalent, push and pull, attraction and repulsion, between western modernity and Thai-ness is a useful heuristic perspective to understand and analyse Thailand’s position regarding globalisation, global education policy - specifically quality assessment. The following pages will demonstrate this.

Attraction: Thai Elites’ Reception to Global Education Policy

One of the most common rationale to support the establishment of QA was because “other countries are doing it.” Responses such as “everybody has it” are common across the interviews. There is a sense of policy competition and a necessity to keep up with international best practices in order to remain on a par with other countries. The graph below illustrates global expansion of quality

assessment. By the time Thai policymakers adopted QA, more than 40 countries globally had already



implemented it. This illustrates global pattern of policy penetration.

Figure 1: Global Expansion of QA (Lao, 2012).

Accordingly, Thai policymakers felt compelled to introduce QA due to external pressure. Some argued that it was a self-imposed pressure. One senior bureaucrat at the Ministry of University Affairs argued:

> It is a global trend. When we began talking about the need to have QA in Thailand, almost every developed country had already introduced the QA system. If Thailand does not have a QA system, how can we assure others that our higher education is in good quality? This is the essential reason that we needed to develop a QA system in Thailand (Interview, 3rd of August 2010).

Given that he was committed to the policy and strongly believed that Thailand needs to catch up with others, he was rather uncomfortable with the question. According to him, this was a commonsense thing to do and should not be questioned. Many policymakers also used globalization or global trend

as their immediate answer to the origin of QA in Thailand. Some even argued that Thailand would be at a disadvantage if they did not follow:

> This is an international trend. If we don't do it, we will be in trouble. Whether we like it or not, we need to have these policy tools too. If we are slow, it will be impossible to catch up. If our university is careless about these developments, surely we will be falling behind (Interview, 10th of September 2010).

Policymakers also learn from each other through increasing public policy spaces for policymakers to exchange ideas about the latest international trends. Thai policymakers received external influence through both reading and attending international seminars. Prior to the promulgation of the National Education Act of 1999, there were myriad commissions conducting institutional research on the best practices of various aspects of education reform. A literature review of other countries' experiences contributed to background knowledge of the policy, its structure, and its implications. There were many study visits, which are a more traditional form of education policy learning. The government commissioned senior bureaucrats and academics to go to various countries and "learn from the best practices." Many policymakers would cite their study visits to foreign countries as the origins of QA policy. During the policy formulation period, Thailand commissioned various study tours to learn about QA issues in countries such as New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Those three countries have been the pioneers in both the QA initiative and in New Public Management. The Office of National Education Council also invited their representatives to Thailand. These included the Chief Inspector of the Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED hereafter) of UK, the British Council, and the Head of the Education Review Officer, New Zealand (Interview,7th of December 2009).

The global model is referred to in order to scandalize educational problems, strategically used by local policy elites, and intentionally erased when it provokes local resistance (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Interviews and policy documents illustrate that global trends were consistently used and referred to throughout the interviews with policymakers as the rationale for having a quality assessment policy in Thailand. This without exception applied to the creation of ONESQA. From the first paragraph in the preface of the ONESQA policy document, globalization was used as a justifying rationale, necessitating the new policy tool and new organization. Global competition and global cooperation were used as the main justifications. The preface stated:

> The current trend of global development pushed all countries to compete and cooperate in different ways. The important factor and resource is quality human resources, which are essential assets for national development in all realms such as economic, socio-culture, politics and environment. Education is an essential tool to develop human

> resources and educational management must be a quality one for all (Office of National Education Council, 1999, p. a)

The generic conviction of globalization and education as a panacea to solve all problems illustrates how Thai policy elites have internalized these issues. In fact, the direct link between globalization and the need for education reform is presented as an uncontested justification for many policy elites across the globe. Thailand is no exception in this global trend. In an in-depth interview, one of the key policymakers of ONESQA referred to global trends as the rationale and linked the emergence of ONESQA with the experiences from policy visits to various countries.

> The creation of ONESQA came from the concern of the lack of quality. There was an international ranking and none of the Thai universities ranked at the global level. We were thinking of how to upgrade the quality of our education. Hence, Office of National Education Council sent teams to study the experiences of UK and New Zealand for models. (Interview, 18th of January 2010)

The above excerpt is telling in several significant ways. Firstly, international rankings played a significant role in indicating the low level of education in Thailand. As mentioned before, it is a standard practice amongst Thai policy elites to use results from international rankings to create social scandal and justify the need for reform (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Secondly, the interview elucidated the policymakers' conviction that study tours to other countries provide the solution for education reform in Thailand. Not only has globalization as a broader phenomenon been used as a justification for education reform, but trends from international organizations and various countries have also been specifically referred to in order to support the emergence of ONESQA. The Office of National Education Council (1999) argued that the system of quality assessment, comprised of Quality Control, Quality Audit, and Quality Assessment, is standard practice for internationally acclaimed industries and companies around the globe. Codes of conduct of the International Organization for Standardization, better known as ISO, are used to exemplify how the global quest for quality is an international best practice. Hence, the education sector should follow the global movement for quality.

Despite references to global trends, the overt nationalistic element of selective borrowing is pertinent. Interviews with policymakers demonstrated outward reluctance for Thailand to adopt the global policy of QA in its entirely without adapting it to meet Thai-specific contexts. Thai policymakers actively and strategically borrowed bits and pieces to fit the educational landscape. Some interviewees went as far as to argue that Thailand learned the strengths and weaknesses of other countries and came up with a more appropriate model. In an interview with one of ONESQA's key policymakers, he argued that the establishment of ONESQA was intended to rectify all the plausible

problems that existed in other models. ONESQA was meant to be more efficient and cost-effective than its policy counterparts in the UK as well as New Zealand. The excerpt below encapsulates the Thai policy elite's active engagement with various global models.

> Other countries have quality organizations like ONESQA. However, most of the existing organizations were separated into different units in order to assess different levels education by sector. We went to the UK and New Zealand and realized that this kind of organizational structure was wasteful for the allocation of resources. More importantly, it created disconnection between different levels of the education system.... ONESQA was created to oversee all levels of education. From my knowledge, this is only one of the two organizations in the world that conducts assessment for all levels. Another organization is Denmark. (Interview, 18th January 2010)

This excerpt sheds light on the complex interplay between global models, educational policy borrowing, and selective adaptation. The policy elite portrayed himself not only as an educated and informed policymaker aware of educational models from elsewhere, but also as critical of the wholesale import of different organizational structures. He suggested that Thailand has not only learned from various existing models, but that policymakers have realized the limitations and disadvantages of the existing model. The most important element illuminated by the interview is the clear sense of pride, nearly policy nationalism. At the end of the excerpt, the policymaker reported with pride that ONESQA is only one of two quality assessment organizations in the world that assess all levels of the education system. The sense of nationalism that Thailand is always a unique case in the global landscape is rooted in part as an important aspect of the logic of the Thai state. Despite overwhelming the influence of global models, Thai policymakers without fail felt compelled to underscore the country's unique position. An active engagement between international models and local adaptation is a pertinent facet of the relationship between the Thai state and globalization. Unlike the perception that globalization is an overt imposition from above, the passage illustrates a two-way interaction between global policy and local policymakers.

The referencing of global models became more pertinent during the policy process and political negotiation of the structure of ONESQA. The main disagreement focused on where and which organizations would oversee the operation of ONESQA. While a group of senior policymakers envisioned ONESQA to be under the Ministry of Education, others highlighted the importance of making ONESQA an independent and neutral organization without political influence. One of the key policymakers recounted:

> We believed that if ONESQA was created as a part of the Ministry of Education, the director of ONESQA would be just like another Director General of a Department that

> is subjected to political influence and constant change. Policy continuity would be absent. (Interview, 4th of September 2010)

Given that the Ministry of Education is considered the major stakeholders, many policymakers were fearful that if ONESQA was under the umbrella of MOE, politicians and senior bureaucrats would be able to insert their power and hence influence the findings of the performance assessments. It was also argued that placing ONESQA under MOE would create a conflict of interest. Since MOE is the host organization of most of the educational institutions in Thailand, founders of ONESQA believed that senior bureaucrats from MOE would be incentivized to intervene with the results in order to improve the image of MOE performance. Those advocating that ONESQA be out of Ministry of Education control stressed the importance of independence and neutrality. To strengthen the argument supporting this policy option, advocates strategically highlighted the experiences of other countries as examples. In both interview and policy documents, Thai policymakers referred to their policy visits in the United Kingdom and New Zealand as examples of best practices. In the United Kingdom, the Office for Standards in Education: OFSTED was under the auspices of Her Majesty's Chief of Inspector or HMI, while the Education Review Office: ERO in New Zealand was directed by a separate Ministry. Evidently, references to the ongoing practices of other countries were used as the justification for ONESQA not being subjected to Ministry of Education control. Models from UK and New Zealand were seen as just, fair, and neutral organizations, and thus became politically convenient to the advocates for an independent ONESQA. Citing examples from abroad provided strong political leverage for the advocates to push for their preferred agenda.

The 1990s witnessed a burgeoning of international publications and conferences regarding QA and there were numerous policy channels for policymakers to learn about QA. One of the policymakers at MUA captured her experience during the QA policy formulation:

> I am working in the International Affairs Department at the Ministry of University Affairs. During that time I had various opportunities to attend international conferences and all of them were talking about quality. Therefore if Thailand was to "play up in the international role," we have to focus on quality of our higher education. (Interview, 2nd of August 2010)

This quotation exemplifies how international conferences provided a policy space to reiterate the importance of QA. QA has become the equivalent of modernity and in order to be perceived as "*at par"* with other countries. The policymaker related how Thailand's aspiration to be respected in the international arena was based on the implementation of QA and quality issues in higher education. This reinforced the concept of self-imposed aspiration among key bureaucrats and executives.

Although Thailand has not been an aid-dependent country in the traditional sense (with the exception of the Asian economic crisis of 1997), the country has received generous international support and technical assistance from various international donors. Specifically for QA, international actors played important role in fostering dialogue and cooperation across borders. Organizations involved include UNESCO ASIA-PACIFIC and the World Bank and the International Networks for Quality Assurance Agencies (INQAHEE), which was created to endorse QA globally. These international organizations created policy spaces for policymakers from various countries to meet and discuss the quality agenda. They also created policy opportunities to foster international or bilateral cooperation. Their involvement is particularly acute in countries that depend on the financial assistance of international organizations to start a policy. In the name of "capacity building," UNESCO-Asia Pacific funded projects in the region and nurtured policy co-operation. UNESCO helped to push forward QA as a policy recommendation. By commissioning reports and organizing conferences, UNESCO Asia-Pacific has provided technical assistance for countries in the region to learn about QA policy. Although UNESCO does not directly fund the creation of QA agencies in Thailand, their involvement in nurturing international and bilateral cooperation among experts of higher education policy has been significant.

The World Bank has also played a role. After ten years of QA implementation in the country, the World Bank's new grant is meant to fund a pilot project within the Office of Higher Education Commission on the Malcolm Baldridge approach to QA. Although QA has been quite established in Thailand and the country did not need financial assistance in this area, a discussion with the key informant revealed that this project is meant to indirectly encourage/enforce civil servants within OHEC to push for the Malcolm Baldridge approach. This reinforces how Thai policymakers are able to bring in international/ external influences to benefit their policy agenda. Although Thailand does not require financial assistance from international organizations, their role has been significant as the instrument to convince other bureaucrats to support the project.

Bilateral cooperation between the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia has played pertinent roles during the policy formulation. For the UK, the British Council and Office for Standards in Education, and Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) funded workshops for QA and sent their Chief Inspector to Thailand during the early days of the QA process so that the Thai policymakers could learn from the UK system (Interview, 7th of December 2010). The policymaker indicated that Thailand continued to receive policy advice from the British Council and OFSTED during the critical days of promoting QA in the country (Interview, 7th of December 2010). Sharing of policy belief in broader issues is also a significant factor. Given that New Zealand has championed the

decentralization process and been acclaimed for its New Public Management reform, Thai policymakers have visited the country and cited it as a crucial example for policy learning (Interviews, 11th of August 2010). The shared policy belief between policymakers in Thailand and New Zealand in terms of increasing institutional autonomy and the need for accountability provided the necessary dialogue for learning, emulation, and exchange.

Australia has been increasingly more aggressive in promoting their education services for Thais to study abroad and opening up their institutions in the country. Hence it has an interest to expand its policy influences to the Thai higher education sector. Australia has given 1 million Australian dollars to fund policy studies of the National Qualification Frameworks (NQF), which later became the Thailand Qualification's Framework (TQF). While the relationship between Thailand and each bilateral partner varies, historical legacies, institutional contexts, and national agendas continue to shape policy cooperation, emulation, and borrowing.

Repulsion: University's Reception to Global Education Policy

Not only was the establishment of ONESQA a product of policy borrowing from the UK and New Zealand, but the concept of external assessment itself was seen as the import of a foreign model into Thai culture. The establishment of ONESQA and the introduction of external quality assessment received social resistance from various groups, especially educators. In interviews with policymakers and QA users, the reason for resistance was framed as a clash of culture. A binary between foreign culture versus Thai culture was presented as a backlash and a struggle to overcome. In his public speech, former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who was one of the key advocates of ONESQA, captured the social response to the new policy.

> We knew it was difficult because in Thai culture, assessment is a contested concept amongst different groups. This is especially the case for external assessment. There is a culture that is fearful of assessment. People were anxious and aware that the assessment would mean a pass or a fail. We knew from the start that this is not an easy issue. Even in countries that have experienced educational quality assessment, they had to take time to overcome the challenges and struggles. (Keynote speech, Abhisit Vejjajiva, 20th of December 2010)

This statement explains that social resistance is a part of Thai culture. Although quality assessment was presented as a foreign idea and culture, the former Prime Minister acknowledged that resistance is also a part of the policy scenario in other countries. Hence the ongoing discontent is a shared phenomenon. Again, experiences from abroad were selectively used to highlight the role of the

agency. Thai culture as an obstacle and resistance to quality assessment was a recurrent theme from all ONESQA advocates. According to the policymakers, the public resistance and negative attitude toward ONESQA was termed "evaluation phobia." One interviewee stated: "Thai people have evaluation phobia. They are scared of being evaluated. They said if we already knew that Thai education lacks quality, what's the point of assessment?" (Interview, 18th of January 2010).

This led to active adaptation of the policy language. An important aspect of selective borrowing is also evident through the changing discourse of quality assessment in Thailand. At the beginning, experiences from other countries were constantly used. These were soon dropped and replaced. If the problem of social resistance was framed as a cultural issue, an appropriate alternative would be to make the assessment more Thai. ONESQA's first director, Dr. Somwung Pittiyanuwat, actively instilled Thai values and cultures into the language of QA. The concept of "Amicable Assessment" was announced and promoted as a guiding philosophy for ONESQA. Dr. Pittiyanuwat expressed the objective of the principle. He said: "The model was specifically tailored to the Thais who cherish their strong social traditions" (Pittiyanuwat, 2008, p. 1). Evidently, there was a strong intention on the part of the policymakers to integrate this globally accepted standard of quality assessment program into the values and cultures on the ground. The emphasis on a tailor-made assessment policy to meet Thai social traditions reinforced the main theme of policy nationalism in Thailand. In an interview, a senior policymaker at ONESQA further explained what Amicable Assessment is:

> Amicable Assessment is an attempt to bring Buddhist principles and concepts into the modern policy tool. Venerable monks have preached that the best way to achieve truth is to remain neutral. Walking through the middle-path is the beginning of development. Therefore to achieve development, one must begin with neutral assessment. (Interview, 18th of January 2010)

The Amicable Assessment aimed to present QA as a friendly policy tool, driven toward the development of the institutions being assessed. Not only does it illustrate how Thai policy elites attempted to merge global concepts with local values, but it was also a policy response to local resistance against QA. The interviews with policymakers revealed that significant resistance occurred after ONESQA was created and QA was officially mandated. Different forms of resistance happened at various levels – national and institutional.

Responding to Resistance: QA Instead of Ranking

The results of ONESQA can be understood as a policy replacement of any national system of ranking. Through this view, policy elites have strategically selected a global policy tool that mitigates local

contestation and conflicts. Despite enthusiasm to use quality indicators to dictate policy direction and outcomes, policymakers strongly reject and resist the idea of ranking the results from the assessment. The senior policymaker at ONESQA argued: “It is not ONESQA’s responsibility to rank. Although the newspaper takes the numbers published by ONESQA and ranks the universities, the results are unreliable because different groups of the universities cannot be compared” (Interview, 15th of January 2010). This senior policymaker from ONESQA strongly disagreed with the idea of using ONESQA’s results to rank universities in Thailand. Furthermore, it is noted that the newspaper publication on the university ranking was not the direct responsibility of ONESQA. Not only did ONESQA senior policymakers reject the idea of ranking the institutions, but they were also aware and sensitive to how ONESQA’s induced information could be used against its objectives. During the observation of the ONESQA Higher Education Task Force Board members, this point received considerable attention in discussion about the drafting of the third round indicators and methodology. Although in the third round criteria, ONESQA classified the results of university assessment as very good, good, satisfactory, needs improvement, and requires immediate improvement, it was agreed that the exact results of the assessment would not be published in order to prevent others from ranking the results (Observation, October 2010). While the consensus was that it was not the role of the state to rank differing universities, another senior policymaker at ONESQA and OHEC took a different approach to private sector or newspaper ranking. He argued:

> Ranking is not the role of the state institution. The state is only responsible for providing public information. Whoever demands the information, we must be able to provide it to them. Ranking is the responsibility of the private sector or newspaper. However, every ranking system must provide adequate information on what indicators and criteria they use. The responsibility of state organizations such as OHEC and ONESQA is only to provide accurate information. (Interview, 11th of January 2010)

The interviewee clearly differentiates between the expected roles of the state and private sectors in quality higher education in Thailand. While the state is expected to provide adequate and accurate information, based on the results of quality assessment, it is not expected to judge and rank the institutions. Although there seems to be a division of labor between the public and private enterprises, it is worth noting that the policymaker envisions the role of the state to be an information provider not only to students and parents, but also to the private sector.

Fear of ranking the universities can be understood from at least two different vantage points. On the one hand, it is an acknowledgement of the policymakers that universities in Thailand differ substantially. In an interview, the former Secretary General of OHEC argued: “Thai universities have different purposes; it is impossible to compare apples and pears” (Interview, 5th of January 2010).

This acknowledgement of different purposes and resources has resulted in the policy attempt to differentiate the universities by different tracks. Based on the second Fifteen-Year Long-Range Plan (OHEC, 2007), universities have been grouped into four tracks: research intensive universities, liberal arts universities, cultural preservation universities, and community universities. ONESQA embraced OHEC's differentiation of the universities. From the second round of assessment onwards, these four tracks became the main factor in determining on which indicators the universities will be assessed and what weighting system will be used. Furthermore, the policymakers argued that the need to differentiate universities is not based on any value judgement or hierarchy but rather on an understanding of their context and diversity. The senior advisor to OHEC and ONESQA argued:

> We are trying to differentiate the universities into four groups. We are not trying to say which one is better. Research universities are not better than Rajabhat universities. Each institution has to ask themselves where they want to belong. (Interview, 10th of September 2010)

On the other hand, this is an attempt by ONESQA advocates to mitigate potential social rejection or resistance to the policy. Under the language of "Amicable Assessment," ONESQA aims to make the assessment process a friendly reflection of existing quality rather than judging the institutions (ONESQA, 2001). In this scenario, the resistance to national ranking illustrates a negotiated attempt of the Thai policy elites to mediate local rejection of the policy.

ONESQA Advocates

The data generated divergent responses on the achievements of ONESQA. Advocates of ONESQA strongly believe that the organization has achieved what it was set to be. Former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva was one of the key advocates of ONESQA during drafting of the National Education Act 1999. In his keynote speech at the conference, he shared his optimism on the successes ONESQA has achieved and overcome. According to the former Prime Minister, the successes of ONESQA were based on its ability to establish an organization, fulfill its legal commitment to conduct two rounds of external assessment, and overcome resistance on the ground. In his own words:

> I think ten years of ONESQA, it has had enormous responsibilities. I remember when we began with the law, Thailand had so many educational institutions. When we wrote the law, we wanted to have 7 to 8 years. But the parliament decreased the timeline. We were worried whether ONESQA would achieve the targets on time. We began with the creation of the organization, the process and the indicators. We must admit that ten years have passed, we have managed to overcome these problems and succeeded in evaluating all the educational institutions for two rounds. I have followed all the assessment results.... I must admit, we have achieved everything we set up for. (Keynote speech, Abhisit Vejjajiva, 20th of December 2010)

This positive view of ONESQA success is shared by senior policymakers in the Ministry of Education, the Office of Education Council (OEC), and the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC). The responses differ in degrees, however. The former Secretary General of OEC persuasively argued that ONESQA is a successful product of the National Education Act 1999. Accordingly, "ONESQA is a golden child of the National Education Act. With ONESQA policy, institutions are able to know their strength and weaknesses. ONESQA enabled them to mirror the reality. Without this reflection, it is impossible to move forward" (Interview, June 10, 2009). When probed about examples of ONESQA successes, he reported that "ONESQA has successfully assessed all the educational institutions on time as legally mandated by the Act." A similar argument was made in published reports of ONESQA, which used quantitive measures of how many schools, institutions, and universities ONESQA assessed during the first and second rounds as an indication of success (ONESQA, 2009).

A comparison with other countries has also been used by various stakeholders to indicate ONESQA success. In the formal video presentation at the conference, the message reiterated ONESQA success by comparing to international experiences. According to the presentation, "quality assessment is an essential process in the development of quality education that all the world has implemented. Even though Thailand has only had it for 10 years, we are progressing much faster than other countries" (ONESQA, 20th of December 2010). The success of ONESQA is also compared in quantitative numbers. According to a ONESQA senior policymaker, "Within five years, ONESQA has assessed more than 60,00 institutions. This is double the size of the United Kingdom" (Interview, 18th of January 2010). In these instances, the policymakers used the experiences of other countries as the baseline to indicate ONESQA's achievement.

Similarly, the former Secretary General of OHEC and the Minister of Education agreed that ONESQA has achieved its objective. He argued: "ONESQA is the only one organization that has achieved what the National Education Act intended to do. Although the results from the first and second round of assessment have not been used effectively, the organization slowly develops in the right direction" (Interview, 11th of August 2010). These statements reflect Thailand's senior policy elites, who worked closely with the creation of ONESQA. They provide insight into the perceptions of the founders of the organization. They hold high stakes in the success of ONESQA since they were actively involved in the creation of this new organization. Official organizational documents also have a strong tendency to portray the organization in a positive light. Hence, these portrayals of ONESQA must be considered in the context of who is speaking.

In fact, the limited link between assessment results and educational development is a widely debatable issue regarding the success of ONESQA. This is the point of departure amongst ONESQA enthusiasts and its critiques. Many interviewees acknowledged the lack of a link between assessment and development, yet that is not used to measure ONESQA's performance. Senior policymakers at ONESQA began to re-define the role and expectations of the organization. The founders of ONESQA responded that it is not ONESQA's responsibility to improve educational performance. Rather, it is the role of the host agencies to use the assessment results more effectively. One of the key founders of ONESQA argued, "Actually, to make education work is not the direct responsibility of ONESQA. It is the direct responsible of the host agencies. In the case of higher education, it is the responsibility of OHEC" (Interview, 18th of January 2010). In spite of the rhetoric of cooperation, many senior leaders of ONESQA highlighted the division of labor between ONESQA and responsible agencies. Ironically, all policy statements and policy expectations justifying the establishment of ONESQA overtly link quality assessment with quality education.

Questions and Criticisms

In contrast to the positive views painted by the founders of ONESQA, others have posted critical reflections on the roles and successes of the organization, its methodology, and outcomes. Many critiques of ONESQA have gone as far as calling for closure of the organization. This resistance to ONESQA's performance and philosophy dates back as far as its inception (Interview, January 18, 2010). Discussions on the successes and failures of ONESQA must clearly differentiate between ONESQA's external quality assessment policy and its methodology when criticizing ONESQA as an organization. Interestingly, many of these critical reflections came from the advocates of ONESQA and active promoters of QA policy in Thailand.

ONESQA's discontent came from disappointment with what the organization aspired to achieve versus its performance. The limited link between assessment and educational development was the most frequently quoted criticism. ONESQA critiques use it to question the credibility of the organization. In the annual academic conference of the Thailand Development Research Institute, researchers overtly criticized the performance of ONESQA, and the criticism was widely published in all the major newspapers. One of the articles encapsulated this: "The problem of Thai education is caused by the mismatched in the assessment results. While the assessment results continue to indicate positive improvement, quality of students and their academic outcomes continued to decline" (Matichon, 20th of February 2012). This view is shared by one of the board members of OHEC, who

aptly argued: “I have disagreement with ONESQA. It is a evaluation driven development. Perhaps, there is no development at all. The reality should be development led evaluation” (Interview, 4th of September 2010). Although this policymaker was one of the participants in the policy studies in New Zealand, he refused to associate himself with the implementation.

Secondly, the issues can be summed up in terms of the methodology and QA indicators. The critics of ONESQA argued that the methodology is too simplistic to capture the quality of the educational institutions and students’ outcomes. If the organization’s main mandate is to come up with quality indicators to guide policy change, ONESQA is expected to come up with dynamic indicators that would capture and reflect the quality of the institutions and students. According to one OHEC board member:

> The role of ONESQA is not to produce static indicators. For example, to evaluate the quality of the graduates, ONESQA continues to count on the percentage of employment 6 months after graduation or employment’s satisfaction. Ten years passed, ONESQA continues to come up with simplistic indicators. Time passes, ONESQA must evolve and be more precise (Interview, 4th of September 2010).

This view explains why the majority of the institutions are able to pass the quality thresholds set out by ONESQA. ONESQA system was based on a checklist rather than a thorough evaluation of quality. A longstanding policymaker in the realm of QA observed:

> This system must change. I don’t think it should be easy. When it is too easy, it does not help anyone on quality. Each university just wanted to get good grades. It is a pity because every system that the government has introduced is like this. All the governments have been very enthusiastic about the QA and they created more and more systems that imitated the easy style of check-list. (Interview, 9th of September 2010)

He further suggested that this is not conducive to the development of the universities. So far, the universities are driven to meet ONESQA criteria in order to get better grades rather than attaining the quality of the institutions and student outcomes. Regardless of the intrinsic rationale for universities to follow ONESQA’s indicators, it does suggest ONESQA’s ability to drive policy change at the university level through its indicators and regulations.

Conclusion

This paper has deployed a postcolonial perspective of ambivalent to analyse and understand Thailand's reception to global education policy. The paper began by explaining how ambivalent can be used to explain the cultural reason behind policy borrowing and lending. Subsequently, it uses such perspective to analyse the logic of Thai higher education reforms. According to literature on Thai studies, postcoloniality has been a useful tool to critically analyse the reception of western modernity by the Thai state. Particularly, the works of Harrison and Jackson (2010) and Peleggi (2002) are found useful to develop this perspective. Based on the author's fieldwork on Thai university's reception of global education policy, it is argued that *attraction* to global model of quality assessment is prevalent amongst policy elites in Thai higher education. "Everyone has it" has been used as raison d'etat to the implementation of QA. Thailand found it convenient to look to abroad to formulate its quality portfolio. However convenient, Thailand's position in this policy is not straightforward. Repulsion is also another side of the same coin. Despite the fact that Thai policy elites felt compelled to borrow best practices from elsewhere, they have developed a strong resistance and reservation against this western model. The development of "amicable assessment" or a buddhist perspective to assessment illustrates Thailand's assertion of Thai-ness. This case study offers a useful lens not only to understand the policy in and of itself, but it offers a fertile ground to understand the relationship between western modernity and the field of higher education. Given the dearth of a critical studies of Thailand's education policy, this paper contributes to the advancement of Thai studies through the lens of higher education reform.

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