

THREE DECADES OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THAILAND

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INTRODUCTION

In Thailand, the discipline of public administration has been flourishing for three decades. Thirty years ago, in September 1955, the government established the Thai Institute of Public Administration (TIPA) at Thammasat University. Later on in April 1st 1966, TIPA was reorganized to form the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA). From 1955 to the present, several Thai universities have successfully provided public administration education to thousands of students who now work as *karajchakarn* or officials in the Thai public bureaucracy.¹ Also during the past thirty years, many books and articles—mostly in Thai—about the Thai bureaucracy have appeared.² If we solely consider the amount of publications and the large number of public administration graduates, we are inclined to agree with the proposition that the discipline of public administration in Thailand is “quite well developed.”³

It is, however, the contention of this paper that although the quantity of graduates and publications do matter, what matters even more is our wisdom about the Thai bureaucracy. The ultimate goal of our profession, I believe, is to build a theoretically and empirically sound body of knowledge about the Thai bureaucracy. Therefore, the question to be answered in this paper is, “What conceptual frameworks do we utilize to understand the Thai bureaucracy?” It must

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be noted here that this significant question has not been posed by other scholars. Existing writings on the discipline of public administration are usually descriptions of the history of public administration education, public administration programs in Thai universities, background of faculty members, research institutes and journals.⁴ In other words, existing studies represent efforts to describe public administration education in Thailand rather than serious discussions of the development of our body of knowledge about the Thai bureaucracy.

After reading the numerous works on Thai bureaucracy, I have come to the conclusion that during these past three decades Thai scholars have utilized three major models to explain the Thai bureaucracy. These explanatory models represent my own perception of how Thai scholars think about the Thai bureaucracy. In the first part of the paper, I will lay out the assumptions of each model. Then, I will discuss problems contained in each model, and suggest future directions to improve the body of knowledge of public administration in Thailand.

THREE MODELS OF EXPLANATION

Three models of explanation to understand the Thai public bureaucracy have received attention by Thai scholars : 1) the "personnel administration" model, 2) the bureaucratic development model, and 3) the bureaucratic polity model.

The "Personnel Administration" Model

The "personnel administration" model was the first to appear around the late 1950s. During that time, the field of public administration was introduced by American public administration experts from American universities, such as Indiana, who served as advisors to the Thai Institute of Public Administration. The Thai government strongly supported public administration education because they believed that knowledge from the field of public administration can help solve administrative problems within the Thai bureaucracy. At universities, public administration education was aimed at training prospective officials who are knowledgeable about the mechanism and regulations of the complex administrative machine, the Thai bureaucracy.

The "personnel administration" model starts with the simple proposition that the Thai bureaucracy is an extremely inefficient organization because it is overwhelmed with problems. Accordingly, the Thai bureaucracy is predominantly a spoils system whereby nepotism, patronage, and corrupt practices prevail in every government agency.⁵ The proponents argue that the inefficiency of the Thai bureaucracy has its roots in the Thai culture and traditional values which have for generations dominated Thai ways of life. Fortunately, they contend, public administration knowledge can ameliorate the problems of the Thai bureaucracy.⁶ Two major

solutions are proposed. First, personnel administration within the Thai bureaucracy should be guided by the principles of the merit system instead of a patronage one.⁷ It is imperative that the Thai bureaucrats should strictly abide by the written rules and regulations of the bureaucratic organization. Written rules and regulations should be clear and comprehensive—covering every aspect of work in the bureaucracy. For example, the personnel administration of public officials is guided by the civil servant act of 1975 A.D.⁸ At the same time, there is need to review existing formal rules which are outdated so that structural and procedural reforms could be appropriately established in the Thai bureaucracy.⁹ Committees should be used as decision-making bodies to initiate changes in the personnel and legal systems of the bureaucracy.¹⁰ Second, public administration knowledge can be used to mold the attitudes and behavior of Thai officials. Through systematic training programs,¹¹ Thai bureaucrats will eventually give up their traditional administrative attitudes and behavior for modern ones which are congruent with the new merit system being instituted. In practice, these changes have to be carefully monitored by top bureaucrats. Changes can only come from the top, and a hierarchical structure of organization is highly advisable.¹²

The Bureaucratic Development Model

Three major factors laid down the necessary foundations for the formulation of the second model. They are : 1) the formation of the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA) on April 1st, 1966 as the national institute for "development administration," 2) the beginning of a tradition for Thai government to have five-year plans for national socio-economic development, and 3) the circulation of the Thai Journal of Development Administration as a forum for scholars to express their ideas about the Thai bureaucracy and national development. These three factors drew the attention of many Thai scholars to focus their teaching and research on the topic of development administration. The central goal of public administration education became one of producing graduates who would act as development agents in the Thai bureaucracy. These practitioners would possess administrative knowledge such as planning and management skills which are suitable for their development duties.

The main concern of proponents of the bureaucratic development model is how the Thai bureaucracy can most effectively implement government's national development goals.¹³ They believe that the Thai bureaucracy at present is incapable of performing its development functions successfully because it has several key weaknesses. Two central questions are then, what are the characteristics within the Thai bureaucracy which acted as obstacles towards achieving its development objectives?, and how can we remedy the weaknesses of the Thai bureaucracy? The bureaucratic development model assumes that the major problems of the Thai

bureaucracy are 1) lack of systematic planning, 2) overcentralization, 3) low level of citizen participation, 4) lack of coordination, and 5) inadequate information. Therefore, an efficient bureaucracy should be able to handle these five problems. In the first place, there is an urgent need for systematic policy planning and management. The bureaucrats who implement policies need to know precisely what the actual policy really is.¹⁴ These officials must also have administrative skills in planning and project management.¹⁵ Secondly, administrative power should be decentralized. Lower level bureaucrats should have greater autonomy in their work, and more policy-making authority should be delegated to them. On the other hand, superiors should exercise minimum control over their lower subordinate officials. Unfortunately, Thai traditional values and customs very often run against the principles of decentralization.¹⁶ Thirdly, the government should encourage the local community to participate in the nation's development programs. Members of the community should be involved in the policy-making and implementation of government programs.¹⁷ Fourthly, experience has shown that numerous government agencies responsible for carrying out development projects do not coordinate their activities. Overlapping of work is known to be a common phenomenon in the Thai bureaucracy. Nowadays, the problem of administrative coordination is said by some scholars to be the most serious.¹⁸ Fifthly, the bureaucracy urgently requires a developed management information system which could effectively supply bureaucrats with reliable and sufficient information necessary performing their development functions well.¹⁹

In consequence, the next question posed by the bureaucratic development model is : "How can we solve problems of coordination, decentralization, participation, planning and information?" Again, public administration knowledge from the United States provides the proponents with ready-made solutions. I am here referring to the "nuts and bolts" or the tools and techniques in public administration such as PERT (Program Evaluation and Research Techniques), OD (Organization Development), ZBB (Zero-Based Budgeting), and Cost-Benefit Analysis. For example, it is believed that a bureaucrat's administrative skills in planning can be acquired by training that official about PERT. To decentralize authority in the bureaucracy, the government can introduce OD to the officials concerned.

The Bureaucratic Polity Model

Like the second model, the bureaucratic polity model has its origins in the year 1966. Writings about Thai politics and administration by American scholars such as Fred W. Riggs, William J. Siffin, and David A. Wilson,²⁰ have to a great extent shaped the thinking of many Thai scholars, mostly political scientists, about Thai bureaucracy and politics. The third model is a reconstruction of the logic-in-use of this group of scholars. According to the bureaucratic polity model,

Thai politics since the 1932 coup has been exclusively in the hands of bureaucratic elites. The main character of Thai politics has been the continuing dominance by bureaucrats in the top echelons of the government. Thus, for some Thai scholars, the study of Thai politics is the study of Thai military and civil bureaucratic elites. A sound analysis of Thai politics will have to incorporate the political role of the Thai bureaucracy. The bureaucratic polity model contains two major propositions.²¹ First, the proponents believe that the problems of Thai society are to a great extent caused by the Thai bureaucracy. Thailand, they argue, has not reached the desired level of national development because Thai bureaucrats have not done their best. The Thai bureaucracy is strongly condemned for its lack of responsibility and efficiency. To solve these problems these scholars contend, we have to *reform* the Thai bureaucracy. Effective measures should be taken to lessen the power of the Thai bureaucracy, for example, promotion of anti-corruption agencies, serious efforts to control the growth of government agencies, and measures to build responsiveness of the bureaucrats towards the public. Despite the emphasis on administrative reforms, the bureaucratic polity model suggests that it is futile to improve solely the Thai bureaucracy without concurrently developing the Thai political system. The Thai bureaucracy can be responsive to the public only after the Thai political system has developed to the point that it can effectively control the bureaucracy. The proponents believe that changes introduced to alter personnel and financial systems within the Thai bureaucracy will not solve the problems of the bureaucracy as long as the political system remains underdeveloped. Hence, the second major proposition advocated by the bureaucratic polity model is that Thailand must develop "extrabureaucratic political institutions" which, they believe, will control the bureaucracy in the interest of the Thai people. Thai scholars trained mostly in the United States have opted for Western democratic institutions such as parliament, elections, political parties, and interest groups. They believe that the political development of Thai society should move in the direction of Western democracy.

PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

After three decades of scholarship in the field of public administration in Thailand, there is no denial that we have accumulated a large body of literature. Indeed, we have reached that stage of development in which patterns of conceptualization about the Thai bureaucracy can be discerned and distinguished. In this paper, I have suggested that there are three major models or conceptual frameworks in the study of Thai bureaucracy: the "personnel administration" model, the bureaucratic development model, and the bureaucratic polity model. These three models represent three distinct strands in the field of public administration in Thailand. In other words, they represent three different ways of perceiving the Thai bureaucracy. Each model identifies different problems within the Thai bureaucracy, and proposes

a different set of solutions to the problems. Thai scholars in general do not seem to be aware of the fact that their thinkings about the Thai bureaucracy fall into patterns. They often take for granted certain assumptions about the Thai bureaucracy, which alarmingly they think to be "truths" about the Thai bureaucracy. Since most Thai scholars teach at Thai universities, they have become too overly concerned with educating and training students who upon graduation would become government officials in the Thai bureaucracy. Priority is given to educating practitioners, not to theory-building. Public administration knowledge from the United States have served as convenient learning packages for Western-trained Thai professors who spend most of their time making a living by teaching, administering their universities, and doing consultant work. Little time is left for serious reflection about the suitability of foreign knowledge for Thai society. As a consequence, American public administration has been taken for granted by Thai scholars. They are thought to be sophisticated knowledge, applicable across nations.

I am here neither advocating professional nationalism nor the supremacy of indigeneous scholarship. There is nothing wrong with Western knowledge as long as it works. My point is, however, that the three models of explanation that have unconsciously dominated the thinking of most Thai scholars are far from perfect. Unfortunately, Thai scholars have accepted American frameworks as givens, and they have allowed themselves to see things— the Thai bureaucracy— as they were told or taught to. It is about time that we should give serious thoughts about the assumptions of the three existing models of Thai bureaucracy. Are the problems and solutions about the Thai bureaucracy as proposed in each model well-taken? I believe they are not. For example, the "personnel administration" model tells us that the Thai bureaucracy is a spoils system, a corrupted organization. Patronage and nepotism are seen as abnormal phenomenon which ought to be eradicated. However, if we look back at Thai history and its people, we can see that what Western scholars have called and defined corruption and spoils system, have in the past been consider as a normal phenomena which for centuries provided stability to the Thai society. Furthermore, corruption and patronage systems have to be carefully defined within the context of Thai culture and life style. Thai scholars and foreign alike have not come to an agreement on this. And if the problems of the Thai bureaucracy as postulated by the personnel administration model are not well-grounded, how can we be so sure that the proposed solutions such as establishing a "merit system" are practical? In the same fashion, the bureaucratic development model brings in a set of administrative concepts such as planning, decentralization, participation, coordination, and information, —and suggests that these concepts be used as yardsticks to reveal the problems of the Thai bureaucracy. The problem is that no one really know what should be the ideal degree of planning, decentralization, participation, coordination, and information the Thai bureaucracy should possess in order to become most effective. It is not

difficult to point out that officials are not coordinating their work. However, it is extremely difficult to explain why they are not coordinating, and to what extent is coordination needed in that organization, and how should this be achieved. We have to know exactly what we mean by planning, decentralization, participation, coordination, and information. Otherwise, these administrative concepts become nothing more than academic jargons. In practice, it is almost impossible for the proponents of the bureaucratic development model to accurately pinpoint the problems of the Thai bureaucracy. Even worse, the choice of the solutions to the problems is discredited because, as several scholars have pointed out, American administrative tools and techniques chosen may not be appropriate for the Thai cultural context. Further more, knowledge about tools and techniques in American public administration develop so rapidly that a tool thought to be efficient capable of years ago, may today considered to be damaging for organizations. The third model, the bureaucratic polity model, suffers from the predetermined preference for Western democratic forms of government on the part of some Thai scholars. The fact that Thai bureaucratic elites control Thai politics is considered by proponents of the model to be irregularities, - a state which has to be altered with the development of Western political institutions like political parties. This bias against the bureaucratic institution in Thailand has blinded some Thai scholars about the positive contribution of the Thai bureaucracy.² At the same time, it has created an illusion that once political development is accomplished, political and administrative problems will be resolved.

In conclusion, the three models of explanation about the Thai bureaucracy lack sophistication. They contain unclear and questionable assumptions. From a pessimistic point of view, it could be said that the discipline of public administration in Thailand is in a stage of "professional crisis." We urgently need to go back to the fundamental questions: What are really the problems of the Thai bureaucracy? How should we devise solutions to these problems? How did the Thai bureaucracy evolve during these past centuries? How does a typical Thai bureaucrat behave? How do Thai bureaucrats make a living? What is considered to be "wise" or rational behavior for Thai bureaucrats? To produce better scholarly work we need to reform ourselves. Thai academics will have to become scholars who devote their time doing research, writing and criticizing one another's work. We urgently need a professional organization on public administration which will act as a forum for scholars and practitioners to exchange their ideas about the Thai bureaucracy. Public administration specialists should have the "professional spirit" to courageously comment one's colleague work, and at the same time, accept criticism from others like a "gentleman." An assistant professor should not shut his mouth when he sees a full professor publishing a below than average piece of work. We also need to build strong graduate programs which will support the development of knowledge

on public administration. Besides training prospective bureaucrats, public administration education also has to mature in terms of our understanding of the Thai bureaucracy. After all, we teach what we believe in. Don't we?

FOOTNOTES

¹For a historical account of the development of public administration in Thailand see Amara Raksasataya, "Preparing Administrators for National Development. Thailand Experience," in Hahn-Been Lee and Abelardo G. Samonte (eds.), *Administrative Reforms in Asia* (Manila : Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration, 1970), 199-239. See also Uthai Laohavichien, "The Problems and Prospects of Public Administration Education in Thailand," *Asian Journal of Public Administration*, 6/1 (June 1984), 46-60.

²For a comprehensive study of the writings on public administration by Thai scholars see Bidhya Bowornwathana, *Public Administration in Thailand : The Works of Contemporary Thai Scholars* (Bangkok : Odeon Store Press, 1983), 222 p., in Thai.

³This proposition is suggested by Jon S. Quah. He wrote : "In conclusion the study of PA in the ASEAN countries depends on the establishment of an institute of PA and the amount of research done. More specifically we find PA as a discipline is quite well developed in Thailand and the Philippines, developing in Indonesia and Malaysia, and the least developed in Singapore." Jon S. Quah, "Public Administration : An Introduction to the Discipline for Students in the ASEAN Countries," Occasional Paper No. 41, Department of Political Science, National University of Singapore (Singapore : CHOPMEN-Publisherxs, 1981).

⁴For examples see Uthai Laohavichien, "Public Management Education in Thailand," (Doctoral Dissertation, University of the Philippines, 1982); Amara Raksasataya, "Development of the Administrative Sciences in Southeast Asia and Oceania," *International Review of Administrative Science*, 44 (1-2, 1978), 56-60; Praty Vesarach, "Public Administration Curriculum in Thailand," in Uthai Laohavichien, Praty Vesarach, Chalernpol Srihongse (eds.), *Public Administration : Scope, Status, and Development in Thailand* (Bangkok : Thammasat University Press, 1979, 175-204, in Thai.

⁵See for example Choop Karnjanaprakorn, "Municipal Government in Thailand as an Institution and Process of Self-Government," Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University, 1959).

⁶See for example Chakrit Noranitipadungkarn, *Somdej KromPhraya Damrongrajanupab and the Minister of Interior* (Bangkok : National Institute of Development Administration, 1963), in Thai.

⁷See for example Kasem Suwanakul and Kasem Udyanin. *The Civil Service of Thailand* (Bangkok : The Social Science Association of Thailand Press, 1965).

⁸Pairoj Sittapricha. *Personel Administration in the Thai Civil Bureaucracy* (Department of Public Administration, Monograph Series No. 15, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, 1979), in Thai.

⁹See for example Amara Raksasataya, *Improvement of Salary scale and Planning Process* (Bangkok : Mongkol Press, 1966), in Thai.

¹⁰See for example Tawat Wichaidit. "Provincial Administration in Thailand : Its Development and Present Problems," (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1973).

¹¹See for example Choomphol Sawasdiyakorn "The Development and Scope of Training for Public Administration in Thailand," (Doctoral Dissertation, Syracuse University, 1968).

¹²The author's original thoughts about the "personnel administration" model are outlined in Bidhya Bowornwathana, "Paradigms in the Field of Public Administration : A Critical Analysis of the Writings by Thai Scholars." *Thai Journal of Development Administration*, 21/4 (October 1981), 1-24.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴See for example Chakrit Noranitipadungkarn, "New Concepts for Rural Development," in Bidhya Bowornwathana, (ed.), *Public Administration : Works of Contemporary Thai Scholars* (Bangkok : Chulalongkorn University Press, 1983), 462-513.

¹⁵See for example Amara Raksasataya, "Program Administration," *Thai Journal of Development Administration*, 12/2 (April 1972), 233-257.

¹⁶See for example Arsa Meksawan, "The Roal of the Provincial Governor in Thailand," (Doctoral Dissertation, Indiana University, 1961).

¹⁷See for example Chakrit Noranitipadungkarn and M. Ladd Thomas, "Research Management as a Requisite for Irrigation Development in Northeast Thailand Stemming from the Pa Mong Daw," *Thai journal of Development Administration*, (April 1972), 220-232.

¹⁸See for example Chakrit Noranitipadungkarn, "Planning and Implementation of the Nationa Highway Plan in Thailand," *Thai Journail of Development Administration*, 12/3 (January 1972), 347-386, in Thai.

¹⁹See for example Amara Raksasataya, *Policy Development* (Monograph Series No. 27, National Institute of Development Administration, 1977), in Thai.

²⁰Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand : The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu : East-West Center Press, 1966), William J. Siffin, *The Thai Bureaucracy : Institutional Change and Development* (Honolulu : East-West Center Press, 1966); and David A. Wilson, *Politics in Thailand* (Ithaca, New York : Cornell University Press, 1962).

²¹For a detailed analysis of the bureaucratic polity model see Clark D. Neher and Bidhya Bowornwathana, "Thai and Western Studies of Politics in Thailand" *Asian Thought and Society* (March 1986) Vol. XI, No. 31, 16-27.

For examples of analyses of Thai bureaucracy from a bureaucratic polity perspective see Chai-anan Samudavanija, *Politics and Administration* (Bangkok : Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, 1977), in Thai; Likhit Dhiravegin, *Political Attitudes of the Bureaucratic Elite and Modernization in Thailand* (Bangkok : Thai Watanapanich, 1973); and Thinapan Nakata, "Thai Political and Administrative Systems : Development Plans for the 1980 Decade." Paper presented at the conference on "Strategies and Methods for National Development on the 1980 Decade," 12-14 February 1982, in Thai.

²²I have discussed this point in Bidhya Bowornwathana, "Thai Bureaucracy : Peesuasamut or Nangnguak," *Thai Journal of Development Administration*, 22/2 (April 1982), 1-11.
