Thailand's Ajarn: Tracing Material-Semiotic Relationships in Thai Higher Education

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Abstract

Thailand aspires to be a high-income nation through higher education global reform. This article explores Ajarn, the entry-level role and venerated honorific title for university academic faculty in Thailand, who, we contend, are key to international progress. It seeks to explain the relational symmetry between their role and the broader challenges encountered in Thai HE. Using a literature review drawn from sociolinguistics and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) semiotics, furthered by Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michel Callon, we adopt a theoretical material-semiotic approach to trace problems influencing Ajarn. We conclude with recommendations to support Thai HE reforms for collaboration on a global stage. In doing so, we offer an appreciation of the cultural complexity, sociolinguistic history, and capital of the Ajarn role. Indeed, greater cross-cultural understanding of this is needed, as we move, within Thailand, towards transformation in a more internationalised, therefore global, educational system.

Keywords: Thailand 4.0, Higher Education, Communication, Actor-Network Theory, International Education

Introduction

Thailand has one of the largest wealth and education inequality gaps in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and this is something the Thai government has sought to change, by introducing the Thailand 4.0 agenda to create a digital economy and position the country as a frontrunner in the region it is located within (Chaitrong, 2019; Lao, 2017). At the forefront of their plans is to enhance Thai Higher Education (Thai HE). There has been falling Thai HE student enrollment, but an increase in international student admissions in the last decade (Waters & Day, 2022). This has shifted Thai education towards a more global landscape. However, this landscape is muddied and clouded by domestic academic problems of over-staffing, lack of skills to offer online distance learning, a cultural system based on hierarchy, resistance to change, often led by more conservative older academics, poor international staff integration and retention, and, most importantly, pedagogy grounded in dominated learning and patron-client relationships (Joungtrakul, 2019; Waters & Day, 2022). This all prevents globally-minded reform and international collaboration in higher education. Such education is, after all, inherently complex; each university tradition, system, and structure is a process of relational networks, some ancestral, others contemporary. These networks, at their core, have created communities of practice that are not easily changed. Different actors reflect measures of agency within such networks, reshaping them; such networks exist in Thai HE.

Culturally, academia yields diverse practises felt differently depending on the setting, or even in the experience of the beholder.

We now require greater academic awareness and understanding of Thai HE. Jones and Pimdee (2017) argue that Thailand 4.0 could help, acting as a catalyst, so a bridge, for international change, but, in our emphasis, it might be shaped by business forces, as seen in previous government agendas that have sought to govern Thailand (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009). Thailand 4.0 has many aims, including advancing "a high-income nation through developing it as a knowledge-based economy, with an emphasis on research and development, science and technology, creative thinking, and innovation" (Wittayasin, 2017, p. 29-35). Then, it seeks a digitally empowered citizenship, a point echoed in western countries as a priority for young people (Day, 2014). However, despite many outstanding teachers in Thai HE, it is not unheard of for instructors to hold only bachelor's level qualifications and, for many, the skills of digital innovation are problematic to deploy within Thai HE. Little emphasis exists on continued professional development within Thai HE, and many academics entered the profession long before the Internet, or digitally enhanced teaching, was a common feature of teaching or learning.

Traditionally, Thai academics are experienced professionals who rely heavily on old-fashioned mechanisms of teaching (Mounier and Tangchuang, 2010; Sasiwongsaroj and Burasit, 2019; Kamnuansilpa, 2018; Mala, 2019b). This can include reading from a textbook, to a class of students. It is usual for academics to be older, and they may have years of proficiency as educators in a university system not aligned towards global expansion, before even taking on a PhD; in their roles, they often use Rote learning styles, not reliant on critical thinking tools, or even formal teaching qualifications (Day et.al, 2021). This is a very different status quo to the one found in western academia, where having a PhD is often required, as is formal teaching fellowship, yet neither is a guarantee of employment in a university setting, given a

significant shortage of roles. Given such disparity, discussions about quality and qualifications in Thai HE are to be expected and are raised at length by Lao (2015), Kanjananiyot et al. (2002) and Kaur et al. (2016).

All exemplify this paradox further, some suggesting that Thai HE relies heavily on a 'culture of borrowing' of ideas, not always with attribution, and add that poor English language education is also problematic for global transformation of higher education, making it a challenging objective to realise. Not all Thai staff speak English, indeed very few do. Yet this language medium has become a de facto norm, at a publication level, internationally. This reinforces the idea that whilst all PhDs are equal, some PhDs are more equal than others. Knox (2019) argues diverse academic identities influence international collaboration, often creating a challenge for applicants trained in other settings to navigate. After all, some countries grant proximity to teaching, others research, and some, even, service and citizenship. Cruces et al. (2014) likewise describe gender barriers and authoritarianism as limiting higher education reform. This prevents uptake from marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ and minorities. Within Thailand, critical thinking skills in pre - university mainstream education are still very vulnerable and, therefore, developing, placing Thailand behind other countries in ASEAN (OECD, 2016; 2019).

Hence, in this article, we seek to explain why Thai academics have an important role, and thus presence, within Thailand's transformation; we contend they are vital to the future of Thailand and its stability. This is because Thai academics are seen as role models that have long been expected to represent a shifting value set known on the ground as "Thainess", an informal cultural nuance tied to ideas of nationalism, values, and identity (Skulsuthavong, 2016; Lao, 2015; Chaitrong, 2019; Day & Skulsuthavong, 2021a; 2021b; 2022). Historical evidence can be found to reinforce that values-based education has

long been a priority within Thailand. As a linguistic item, the often-venerated Thai title for academics and those who lecture in universities is known as "Ajarn" (อาจารย์), which draws heritage from both Buddhism and Hinduism. It is granted to those within Thailand in higher education academic positions, such as lecturers and researchers, after a period of, or for, service, often denoted with an acronym (อ) that sits in front of the bearer's name.

According to the Theravada monk Bhikkhu Sujato, the title is likewise often applied to ordained Buddhist monks once they had completed ten Vassa, known as monsoon retreats, which help them learn to become advanced mentors and gain higher knowledge of their field (Sujato, 2010). Consequently, then, what is often misunderstood as simply meaning an educator, the word 'Ajarn' carries significant cultural capital and is derived from the Sanskrit-Pali word "acariya" and means "one who is versed" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; Sujato, 2010). Ajarn, viewed linguistically, also contains sociolinguistic significance and historical power. Variants of this Sanskrit-Pali word can be found in other South-East (SE) Asian cultures, usually in contexts having to do with teaching, or wisdom, which shifts Ajarn as a term extending beyond Thailand. Yet, exploring the history of Thai Ajarn invokes a snapshot of an earlier period of educational reform in Thailand; Buddhist monastic education has always been present in Thailand and its precursor, Siam. This led to the formation of current "modern" Thai universities (Baker and Phongpaichit 2009).

Yet, its meaning encompasses much more than just lectureship; some instructors and other tutoring staff, sometimes referred to simply as experts, do exist within Thai HE without ever being granted the title of Ajarn. As a title, it is also bestowed by others, usually institutionally senior staff, onto the receiver, signifying that often one does not simply take up a title as Ajarn without this

significant act, because it would risk cultural embarrassment or loss of face, two features of Thainess. Therefore, Ajarn, as a title, has sociolinguistic heritage, one of value derived from monkhood, alongside cultural importance by connecting educators to spiritual enlightenment. Granted, it is a mark of acceptance within Thai society due to the presence, as well as proximity, of patronage towards the role through heritage shared with learning institutions and those with power. Hence, Thai Ajarn, found in academia, are selected on criteria beyond just educational attainment, loosely upholding a long tradition of philosophical reflection, service, and thinking as championing "Thainess". In other words, academic Ajarn are seen as those suitable to educate loyal, service-minded members of Thai society, becoming champions of everything Thai (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2019; 2021a; 2022).

Thus, in Thailand, Ajarn is still used as a title for monks, usually of the Northern Thai forest tradition, alongside higher educators, granting a special semiotic meaning and status. The concept of semiotics alludes to the study of signs, symbols, or relationship values embodied in an entity, along with their use and interpretation. A word, or a title, can represent something as a sign, then, as well as have relational value. A sign is defined in symbiosis with other things, then, be them artificial, or natural, and organised in systems such as syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. This suggests that words have relational, deeper meanings tied to values, actions, practises, cultural nuances, and interactions with other words, aspects of language, forms of communication or society (Halliday, 2016). Semantics, which incorporates this thinking, is the study of linguistic, visual, audial, haptic, and spatially relational networks that are often driven by the way words, dialogues, or meanings are expressed. Within the application and study of linguistic communication, words can have implicit symbolism embedded within and pragmatic positions that communicate information. Put simply,

not only are many words polysemous, but the meanings of words can expand over time and vary according to context (Halliday, 2016).

The secular, non-Buddhist use of Ajarn is one such example of a complex, multifaceted word that underwent semantic expansion. It began as having a spiritual, values-based component and then manifested as an academic title around the end of the 1800s when Western educational concepts began to be imported and overlapped with the pre-existing Thai monastery education, which placed it under gradually widening emphasis within Thailand's internal policy and intent towards citizens (Ministry of Education, 1998). Ajarn have a symbolic closeness to revered figures within Thai society who played key roles in furthering education, such as those in monkhood (Fry, 2018). There is something grander about the social capital afforded to them than to an everyday citizen or even a comparable lectureship in a Western higher education setting. This goes so far as to adjust the way Thai people address and see them because the word 'Ajarn' is a grammatical honorific as well. Linguistically, honorifics are grammatical features of a language used to indicate the formality of a situation or the power distance between people.

The Sociolinguistic Importance, Meaning and Semiotics of "Ajarn"

In the case of Thai, these honorifics are built into the pronominal system; the Thai language is multifaceted, which means a Thai speaker must choose the appropriate term of address and alter the pronoun with which they refer to themselves according to their position in the social hierarchy. Thai society is itself a "high-context culture"; a portion of the communicative practice is implicit and embedded in pragmatics rather than syntax, leaving interpretation contingent upon mutual understanding. So, "part of the message"

encoded in the linguistic aspect of Ajarn creates a sociocultural force, which is problematic if such culturally specific meaning is not known (Croucher et al., 2012). Being referred to, or referring to, the title of Ajarn, which does not exist in academia as a formal honorific beyond the Thai context, with the right tone, conviction and meaning, is an important part of Thai society. Likewise is the appropriate use of a title, without misappropriation.

There fore, to Thai people, the title is a high-meaning concept just as valid, and valuable, as Professor or Dr. and this can govern considerable relational value for academics without what, in the Western academic tradition, would be seen as a qualification for entry to the profession. Then, the title extends beyond professional meaning. Some people in related, but not as educationally advanced, professional roles often misappropriate the title, rather than use the more linguistically appropriate Thai word "Khru" (ครู), which means "teacher". Usually, this is either because they are foreigners who are unaware that Ajarn contributes to a cultural idea that is implicitly semantic, thus has "higher" relational value, or they themselves seek to self-elevate to a higher standing in Thai social practice. Both, unfortunately, are often made worse due to face culture. Misuse of titles is problematic for many Thais, who can feel conflicted between correcting the misappropriation or ignoring it out of cultural deference.

Therefore, the appropriate use and reply of Ajarn as a title has real weight in Thai society. For this reason, Ajarn acts as a point of passage towards social change and enrolment, through their relational capacity to dictate the form of new dialogue. When most Thai people interact with the term Ajarn, it is a relational-vocational sense that is invoked. This polysemous depth and linguistic complexity add to the challenge for Western academics interacting with Thai Ajarn. Such complexity is important to understand, as Thailand 4.0 drives higher

education towards globalisation; misunderstanding, thus loss of face, can cause offence, another feature of "Thainess" (Skulsuthavong, 2016).

To clarify this point, the concept and practises that exist and surround Ajarn, and therefore people who are styled as university lecturers within Thailand, would likely confuse many from outside of an academic system that prides itself on, prior to Thailand 4.0, a similar kind of cultural isolationism that prevails within Thailand. Intrinsic to Thai identity is to protect Thai culture from outside colonialism. There are, as a result, likely potential communication or cultural mishaps that would entail collaboration and, indeed, academic migration into Thailand. In one example, the concept of ranking, as discussed in another paper by the authors (Day et. al, 2021), offers considerable points of divergence.

Whilst Assistant Professor in the UK/US, for example, is an entry level rank, perhaps gained after several years of postdoctoral research or teaching fellowship, in Thai HE Assistant Professor is a relatively senior academic rank, one scrutinised through intensive peer review and academic service. It is, then, a position of status, not a job appointment. Confusingly, in Thai HE the title of Assistant Professor, known as "Phuchuai Sattrajarn" (ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์), is the formal professional rank above Ajarn, which is likewise the entry-level rank as well as an honorific. However, a Thai Assistant Professor title is of much higher status than a Western-level appointment by the same name; full professorship is applied for as a process made directly to the government itself and influenced by factors beyond just academic achievement, so it is not decided upon just by a university or its academic leadership (Lao, 2015).

Hence, moving up ranks increases standing and political centrality. At the same time, the four-tier ranking, that begins with Ajarn, creates a situation where even gaining Assistant Professorship,

in a setting where academic work is so deeply scrutinised, is seen as something akin to a far more senior rank. The application process for Assistant Professor alone can take years, including intensive scrutiny of work published, teaching records, and even national views and alignment termed as 'service'. The result is that, at the very least, a Thai Assistant Professorship holds an informal equability to Associate Professorship in the US, or perhaps even has some semblance of the Habilitation academic process in Germany. Whilst Ajarn in some form or another exist in many Thai HE roles, not all entry-level lecturers are akin to Assistant Professors, unlike in the US tenure track system. Indeed, the honorific and the academic rank of Ajarn are conflated and overlapping; favouritism plays a role in rank appointment as well (Lao, 2015).

Meanwhile, academic migrants from senior professorial ranks overseas would likely be surprised to discover that experience, within Thai HE, is counted as within service to a university. It is not uncommon, even, for academics to find themselves restarting at the bottom of a pay-scale if they move universities domestically, and it would likely present a considerable barrier to entry for overseas academics to discover that their hard-won ranks would need to be reapplied for, likely after a period of minimum service and, then, additional rounds of peer-review beyond that of a publication submission, a process that has its own unique interpretations of high-quality, often tied to state metrics and research priorities governed by ideas of maintaining Thai service (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2021a; Waters & Day, 2022). Cultural exchange, and education, will be key to global Thai HE.

Even linguistically, the cultural practises and language choices towards the Thai term Ajarn are likely to be very confusing to outsiders, potentially leading to a challenge or point of offence. The conceptual understanding of face-culture that exists within Thailand,

coupled with a central focus on respect for honorifics and tradition, is something unusual, perhaps even unique to Thailand (Persons, 2008). An obvious and inherent example of this respect of the Thai face stems from avoidance from conflict, which extends so far as to include criticism of others, their work or their professional standing. Instead, authority is seen to be gained and held in absolute. Because of this, questioning authority or, indeed, not acting in authoritarian terms is unusual. Social class, age, economic wealth and even gender roles are seen as very important within Thailand, all shaping power within Thai universities. This can be felt in a multitude of ways and, whilst research expertise is respected, often admired, it is not seen as any more, or less, important than managerial roles or teaching, but even teaching may be very different to what western academics would expect to find in university settings (Day et al., 2021; Waters & Day, 2022).

This could be a significant difference leading to points of conflict. The west weighs much of its decision making, in our view incorrectly, on academic output, ranking and international prestige; Thailand, by contrast, has its own journal system, THAIJO, with its own ranking and prestige. Meanwhile, teaching is largely Rote in emphasis, placing great proximity to the Ajarn as over their students, a relationship which often can continue beyond the academic setting, even after graduation. Such graduation in itself might alarm western academics, with elaborate rituals and ceremonies that unfold usually over several days, become city-wide events and, notably, often involve strict rules that enforce conformity, behaviour and etiquette up to and including deciding the colour of braces that a student may, or may not, often with rules focused heavily on female students.

More unusual is that professorship levels are likewise called Ajarn instead of their actual title; even those without PhDs are seen as equivalent under the word's meaning. This is because Thailand places

its professorial responsibility as tied to teaching, more than scholarship. Furthermore "rough" borrowed translations into English do little to help, as the word Ajarn itself is informally translated as 'professor' in Thai. Often, these translations are utilised by foreigners or international academics in Thailand who are less aware of the complicated systems of academic ranking, cultural value, and sociolinguistic meaning of the term. This adds problems for collaboration. They, after all, invite the question of what an Ajarn actually is or at least means, a point raised in academic research and seen as problematic in trying to build international collaboration (Lao, 2015).

Even in Thailand, Ajarn, as a title, has multiple senses, including an early-career position and a life-long title. These exist alongside a rich honorific of deep importance and status in Thai history. They are applied to the same referents, suggesting that the "linguistic heritage" of Ajarn, and those that hold the title as a job, are one and the same. Thailand 4.0, however, seeks to take academia beyond Thai society. With globalised ambition, it is reliant on collaboration with foreign universities, with different values and traditions. Ajarn, then, are actors with agency integral to social and technical transformation under Thailand 4.0 (Law, 2000). However, despite prestige and endorsement, Thai HE is not as successful as it perhaps should be. Lao (2015; 2017), Rangsivek (2017), Kaur et al. (2016), and Knox (2019) attribute this to convoluted government education policies leading to poor results, cross-communication problems, authoritarian personalities, internal conflict, and a lack of teacher training.

Literature Review: Actor-Network Theory in Thai HE

Therefore, Ajarn is a title in meaning, but also a descriptor of a network of "actors" that exist and have agency within Thailand, from

a sociological viewpoint, with greater power than a typical academic in the West, and mainly civilians in Thailand. They act upon Thailand's material-semiotic networks, forged by relationships. Intriguingly, however, as of 2021, a new kind of "Ajarn" is showing. For example, on social media content-sharing websites, Western European foreigners, known commonly as "farang" (ฝรั่ง), often based as digital nomads in Thailand, now use media tools, which are non-human actors that include marketing, language skills, technical URL protocols, cameras, and a studio, to create an "actor-network" to teach Thai learners, often to learn English. Some go so far as to take on the linguistically value-driven title of Ajarn, despite, possibly, never having served in a university, in a "new wave" of educational "network reassembly".

This is an idea borrowed from the work of sociologist Bruno Latour (2005). The concept of network reassembly, when diffused into the Thai context, suggests that despite acting in an informal and unaffiliated academic role, online tutors' actions supplant traditional Ajarn and university networks. Diversity leads to change, which is sociologically rooted in creating new, stable relationships and wider, more accessible pathways towards empowerment (Latour, 2005). Such "translations" of relationships, perhaps better phrased as "transformations", are of particular interest to Latour, alongside his contemporaries John Law and Michel Callon. All contribute to the school of thought known as Actor-Network Theory (ANT), often termed the Sociology of Translation (Callon, 1984; 1991; Latour, 2005; Law, 2000). ANT is a way of describing actions between humans and non - humans in shaping networks and discourses that change in response to a problem (Latour, 2005). ANT invites us to consider that actors, human and non-human, are equal in a network that constitutes a feature, or phenomenon, within the world, so both can create disagreement, or alignment, influencing stabilisation of a process of change (Law, 2000).

For example, the "World Wide Web" central to education is one network we use, amongst other things, to learn, create new forms of expression, and share language (Day, 2019). There is no doubt that the Web has changed education, which in turn changes the Web as a tool for new and innovative forms of mass communication (Day et al., 2015). However, what we call "the Web" is a linguistic simplification, a reified act converting a complex thing to its most perceived action, such as to "surf the Web". These actions unfold across networks, held temporarily stable, in an aligned way, by actors who repeat or facilitate social and technical agency (Law, 2000; Latour, 2005; Callon, 1984). For Latour (1991, p. 110), we "...are never just faced with social relations. We are faced with chains which are associations of humans... and non-humans". On the Web, a focal actor might be a social media giant, a virtual learning environment or search engine; any such technical thing grants a stable process for our socially driven textual discourses, questions, alongside technical cables, protocols, and economic forces, all mixed together in a network. If one part fails to work as expected, it reshapes meaning and can destabilise communication (Law and Singleton, 2003; Callon, 1989; Mackenzie and Wacjman, 1999).

Castells (1996; 1997) reminds us that ever-improving communication technology shapes unpredictable new communities of practice, alternative languages, and alignment. As such, these forces become integral actors in the development of new networks. Therefore, as we debate Thai HE reform, we must recognise the role of technology in shaping social transformation (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2021a). ANT draws away from social theory positioning an elite, hierarchical, or dominated social group conditioned by class or gender, which allude to sociological views of conflict "between a belief in the importance of actively promoting social change (often from the Marxist heritage) and an advocacy of disinterested, value-free scholarship (inspired by

Weber)" (Tucker, 1998, p. 66). Such prior social theories have been subject to "crises" that "often intersect with larger social crises, from the 'great transformation' of Western industrialization...to the anti-colonial struggles, student movements, civil rights movements, and anti-war" (Tucker, 1998, p. 66).

In this way, we could see Thai HE as undergoing such a great transformation, influenced by Western industrialization carried "through" to Thailand via new connective technologies, immigrating academics, the reverse-culture shock of those trained overseas returning to work in Thailand, and a gradual "raising the bar" driven by Thailand 4.0 to push for improvements to higher education. According to Callon (1984, pp. 203-210), networks in states of such flux have "four 'moments' of translation" and by looking for these researchers can identify potential failure points with greater descriptive depth and analytical meaning. Between these four moments, the first is "problematization", where actors identify the source of conflict that drives change and establish points of passage that lead others. Second, "interessement", is where roles are agreed upon and actors become focal leaders, often not without conflict that can cause a process of translation to fail. The third is "enrolment", where new strategies emerge to encourage assimilation into the network, and the fourth is "mobilisation", where change unfolds but "translation is a process, never a completed accomplishment" (Callon, 1984, p. 196).

Conflict emerges during such change, an idea originating from philosophers Karl Marx and Max Weber. Both considered that governments are, often, key actors within any network of change at a national level, such as seen in Thailand 4.0, and as a result of this such a government often will seek to install a socially emphasised, values-based reform of an entire economy, usually in the hope of securing a change in the means of production or to assume greater

control (Tucker, 1998). Thailand 4.0's efforts to reform higher education would certainly fit this description, and within it, we cannot separate the social from technical as both co-construct the other in the process of translation (Mackenzie and Wacjman, 1999). As Day et al. (2021) noted, with the evidence presented in Waters & Day (2022), there has been considerable government effort to install a nationalist reform in Thai HE. This creates a very different system of academia to that found in western settings, which necessitates that in order to understand how to collaborate across communities and cultures, we need to trace how non-human and human actors in Thailand 4.0 act as "the entry point of techniques into the human collective" and then trace the problems that prohibit change, or facilitate new modes of communication that empower it within the context of our higher education setting (Latour, 1991, p. 103).

Law and Singleton (2003, p. 4) suggest that consensus is key, so it acts as the first point of call to look for when unpacking a network. In some cases, as researchers, we find a stable network, so one that is "immutably mobile" and thus fixed for some time and in a particular space, thereby unchanging but always open to change. This is because the practises, and conditions, within the network, shared between actors, are repeated often enough to create a "solid" impression of activity and enable continuous agency (Law and Singleton, 2003; Latour, 2005). Of course, actor-networks only hold steady in this way as long as repetition between all actors can be found, or until something disrupts relations (Law, 2000). Given a global pandemic that has prevailed in 2021 and significant social upheaval Hence, disagreements prevent a passageway; this has relevance, given the potential for misunderstanding about the role of Ajarn in a globalised collaboration initiative embedded within Thailand 4.0. Latour (2005), Law and Singleton (2003), and Callon (1989) suggest that, as researchers,

we need to "punctualize" overlapping complex actor-networks and in doing so "convert an entire network into a single point" (Callon, 1991, p.153). For Thailand 4.0, we can thus punctualize Thai HE as a network "within Thailand 4.0" yet also apart from it and key to its success.

Why Do We Need to Trace Problems in Thai HE Translation?

This creates a complex web of network relations that need to be traced, visualised, and understood as relational phenomena in order to begin to form recommendations towards stability. At the core of any movement of change and relationship between cultures relevant to Thai HE, we contend, are the Ajarn. Therefore, we use the term "actor", referred interchangeably as "actants" by Latour (2005), to describe Ajarn, but in doing so suggest they are part of a network of human and non-humans acting in, and upon, one another, which creates an unfolding actor-network. We might assume Thai HE reform cannot succeed, given the problems established in the introduction and, indeed, critical work often suggests it is deeply flawed (Lao, 2015). However, if we "...turn away from an excessive concern with social relations and weave them into a fabric that includes non-human actants, actants that offer the possibility of holding society together as a durable whole", we might interpret new ways forward (Latour, 1991, p. 103). The process of translation, a theoretical sociological theory, is complicated.

Therefore, within this article, we dedicate our analysis to consider the first point of it, to identify actors that serve as points of problematization and trace their semiotic and semantic relationships. Fitted in a Latourian framework, we can find problems that require new direction. Thailand 4.0 has clear ambition; it wants to "ensure that at least 5 Thai universities are ranked amongst the world's top

100 higher education institutions within 20 years" and seeks this via a drive towards research-led, high-impact academia (Royal Thai Embassy, 2015). This is no easy task. It requires solving issues of degree quality, diverse Ajarn academic qualifications, and politics of Thai universities, which prevent a passageway towards fulfilling this ambition (Khang and Sandmaung, 2013; Kanjananiyot et al., 2002; Kamnuansilpa, 2018; Joungtrakul, 2019; Lao, 2015; 2017).

Upon writing, the idea of reform itself in Thai HE had points of controversy; many in the profession became Ajarn when discussion, critical thinking pedagogy, and liberal idealism were less prevalent in Thai education (Mala, 2019a). Within Thai HE, we find university "actor-networks" driven by ancestral actors who pass down power, to borrow from French sociologist Michel Foucault (1980). Much of the "original" course design of degrees that emerged several decades ago still exists today, despite being more than thirty years old. Quality assurance metrics, generally, update degree programs in Thailand once every five years, and even then not all assurance is carried out accurately. There have been some strong suggestions from serving Ajarn that data is often misrepresented by universities simply because the process is seen as bureaucratic (Lao, 2015).

Arguably, Thai degrees were formed not for Thailand 4.0, but rather when thinking and learning tried to underwrite skills in agriculture and service industrialization. This emphasis is articulated in the previous Thailand 1.0-3.0 agendas, which, because of business relationships often shaping government decision-making, influenced Thai higher education policy for the past three decades (Wittayasin, 2017). When we begin to look beyond Thai HE towards global academia, we see different priorities. The closer we go towards the top-100 universities, the greater the demand for research impact becomes, a particular challenge for an academic system that has been grounded in

a values-based and service-industry design framework for a long time. Baker (2019) notes that Thai authoritarianism is another such actor that minimises egalitarianism and reform; like other aspects of Thai culture, education has been operated as an actor-network within a wider system of tightly centralised political governance, which is different from the autonomous atmosphere in global top-100 HE settings.

Even use of funding is different, especially given a campaign for "Twelve Thai values" to be displayed as posters around education institutes, cost the Thai government 7.12 million THB, or around 212,000 USD and such an idea would be an unlikely event in a top-100 university (Fernquest, 2014). One key point by Latour (2005) is that we often treat problems as isolated social phenomena, or attribute them abstractly. In doing so, we incline critique, perhaps even dismissively, to singular explanations of inequality tied, for example, to arguments about gender, culture, governance, educational insufficiency, or politics viewed in isolation. We might then diminish issues of Ajarn behaviour or teaching as tied to conservatism, clashes with educational liberalism, or technical know-how.

Rather, as an alternative, we must seek to trace them as an interconnected set of phenomena acting upon each other to construct a larger phenomenon, which requires adopting a relational view. Accordingly, in the ANT framework, we attempt to do this first by describing the problems affecting Thai HE, then by visualising them as a relational map. Thai HE, as shown in the example above, has different systems and priorities for funding educational development and resource provision- a diverse network. Rangsivek (2017) similarly notes that authoritarianism in Ajarn increases after their first year in the profession because universities foster attitudes to dominate rhetoric and push "Thainess" values over critical thinking. This creates an exponential pattern where, over-time, Ajarn inherently aligns with the

more conservative right-wing values prevalent at a government and policy level within Thailand. Many non-human actors further such human authoritarianism, an actor itself within Thai HE 4.0; school-like university uniforms, for example, along with restrictions on hairstyle, daily roll call, elaborate ceremonies and student hazing ritual events stand as distinct actors, as well as in contrast to the norms of newly inducted students in other countries (Segaller, 2005).

These have even created media scandals due to their extremity and for some time "hazing has been flourishing in Thailand because it is an embedded 'Thainess' that holds regards to hierarchical relations and conservativeness." (Winichakul, 2015, p. 56). Hence, one point of problem that prevents a passageway towards reform is that in Thai HE, an authoritative command can be imposed upon those lower without explanation, while those lower in rank, year, or class obey their superiors without question; this extends to Ajarn. In Thai student cohorts, hazing games are present in the earliest weeks of term and students who do not participate often find themselves socially discounted, which hinders cultural integration; Thailand's education quality is lower than ASEAN's average, despite having over 300 Thai Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) (Chaitrong, 2019).

A flavour of cyclical Thai nationalist learning culture is one reason why older generations are, usually, willing to engage in deferment to the government, as they have been taught across all levels of education that freedom is due to their government's diplomatic skills maintaining Thai independence, during historically situated regional conflicts (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2009). This notion of nationalist pride is then designed into education, upheld by some academic actors who then push for the continuation of nationally focused, credit-carrying courses in undergraduate degrees, for example, which extend a period of undergraduate study to four years, rather

than three as found in the UK systems of study. This mentality impacts Ajarn and likewise divides their ranks, an idea captured in the traditional yearly teacher worship ceremony, Wai Khru (พิธีไหว้ครู).

Every year, during this ceremony, students are required to express their gratitude and symbolically submit themselves. The ceremony involves students crawling on their knees, prostrating at the feet of Khru and Ajarn with trays of flowers, which have auspicious meanings and symbolically convey respect. To those external to this culture, it conveys a very different linguistic, social, and psychological meaning regarding student equality. Such practice would not be allowed in the top-100 universities, where the success of students is driven by their own capacity for independent study, critical thinking, and a relationship of synergistic co-constitution with their teachers as collaborators (Zilli, 2019). This suggests, then, that culture itself within Thai HE can be problematic and, indeed, a technical actor that influences change.

Analysis: Applying Latourian "Problematization" to Trace Problems

Given such embedded hierarchy, Mounier and Tangchuang (2010) argue a mentality of stratification casts Ajarn, as instructors, along with education policy and political games, into hierarchical divisions, preventing a passageway towards change, as well as international collaboration, visitation, and assimilation of ideas, exchange of research practices and teaching methods. Ultimately, this ensures reformist Ajarn are set against thirty years of traditionalism, which come from a point when Thai HE was about values education and founding principles reflected Thai social emphasis on patron-client relationships that fuelled favour of Rote, so hierarchical, teaching in Thai HE (Tangchuang, 2002). This is a very different status quo to the one found upon writing,

in 2021. It may also explain the lack of motivation to change the approach to teaching, as there was no connection between teaching skills and praise from society for embracing a conceptual endeavour that would challenge thinking within society that has dominated for a long period, and in many senses is a deliberate status quo that prevents the emergence of dissent, or those who might speak against such cultural practises (Sinlarat, 2000, p. 91).

Indeed, as of 2021, the changing nature of social transformation, led by students in protest throughout the year, and prior to it, in particular, over freedoms of expression, is highly sensitive and divisional in Thailand. Some projects suggest that the momentum, and diversification of a cultural mosaic, had been building for some time, largely due to generational differences and a wider view of culture that is influencing profound change in the identity of younger Thais, reshaping their heritage, politics and communication acts (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2021b; Waters & Day, 2022; Low et al., 2020). Given the emphasis on tradition and historical lineage found amongst Ajarn, there is likely less desire, overall, to be seen as an actor who is creating a passageway forward to renegotiate personal, employment, or wider social norms and values. This echoes, as well, a psychological phenomenon, and an actor, found in Gollwitzer's (1986) study on self-symbolization; once a person is recognized with a descriptor they had been striving toward, they are less likely to do tasks that bring them closer to the "true" meaning of that aim. Consequently, if we apply this as an actor and problem, we may say, in other words, "once an Ajarn, always an Ajarn." For this reason, the symbolic value of the title is very high in Thailand.

Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981, p. 90) elaborated upon this idea earlier to suggest that a "person who can point to symbols that support the self-definition aspired to (e.g., physician) will tend to

neglect the pursuit of further symbols. Thus, self-symbolising efforts will be undertaken when the person is lacking in symbolic indicators of the status of 'physician,' 'guitarist,' or other self-definition." Within Thai HE, a Thai academic acquires honour and approval from society upon entrance, so has actualized the esteem of others and furthered their self-esteem, which lessens the drive to do more and yet more is paradoxically needed. After all, Thai academics now have to uphold the high-value, public and elite patronage bestowed upon the title, from its ancestral and cultural lineage, as was discussed in the opening of this article, on the global stage or risk creating considerable loss of face for their patrons (Coleman, 1988).

Simultaneous to imbuing honour relative to society, the honorific weight and meaning of the title of Ajarn, counter-intuitively, has a flattening effect on Thai HE and Thailand 4.0; it can itself be a problem, and an actor. The common Thai academic convention of stacking titles, for example, Ajarn (อ., sometimes styled as A or Aj when used in English rather than THai) ahead of a grander academic achievement, such as Dr., seeks to overcome this neutralisation, suggesting titles themselves are actors influencing Ajarn. Lao (2015, p. 12) reinforces this when they describe a "prevalent social and cultural value of credentialism" amongst Ajarn that may distract from educational egalitarianism or academic advancement. Yet, as Callon (1984, p.196) reminds us, "translation is a process, never a completed accomplishment" and, as Evans (2016) urges us to recognize, what goes on in the Western academic traditions is not necessarily best, academically speaking, or even right for Thailand.

In Western settings, well-managed public media personalities often achieve professorship before others on a similar track to tenure, suggesting popularity, fame, and controversy are actors influencing their higher education. There is, consequently, a smorgasbord of international

universities, all actor-networks with different fixations and problems. Thailand is not the first country to have a university and academic system filled with academic inconsistencies. As described by Evans (2016), a problem in Western universities is hiring staff preferentially, on impact publication, to elevate internal quality assurances. So, hiring is not based on teaching, furthering nepotism. In contrast, Thai HE could actually be argued as being far more advanced, egalitarian, and effective in its higher education system; a focus on teaching dominates its educational systems, when compared to Western academic systems. Students are valued highly, albeit with hierarchy.

Meanwhile, the status of Ajarn conveys tenure-like contractual job security, with some employment contracts lasting over 20-years, along with respect from society. Thailand even has an open-access national research journal database: THAIJO. Certainly, these are features that are ahead of other academic systems (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2019). So, to "trace" the network and its problems becomes easier when we visualise these relationally, as expressed in Figure 1, where solid lines and arrows represent relations between nodes in socio-technical relationships. Nodes housed within the dotted lines represent sub-nodes and their relations, or in other words, "networks within networks". The connections between actors shown in Figure 1 are non-exhaustive, and many more can be drawn across different domains and cultural fields. The purpose of the diagram, then, maps the interrelated social and technical complexity between equally important humans and non-humans. Put another way, it shows the complex heterogeneity of Thai HE.

One reason, it is important to trace Ajarn and map their relationship is because of a significant cultural difference to western academia. To understand this is to understand international education, at least in part, within Thailand, as well as the inherent problems

of developing Thailand 4.0. If we change one focal actor, the entire actor-network reassembles. Hence, why it is necessary to trace these complex relationships through analytical review of literature, and critical discourse. Within the west, we find a considerable focality on the lecturer; their appointment is not socially seen as being of comparable high status, but their proximity within a university setting is considerable. Such academics operate their own research agendas, apply for grants and present research at competitive levels, in doing so creating a locality that is driven by their endeavours. In this sense, academics serve themselves and operate symbiotically with a university in a relationship of encapsulated interest.

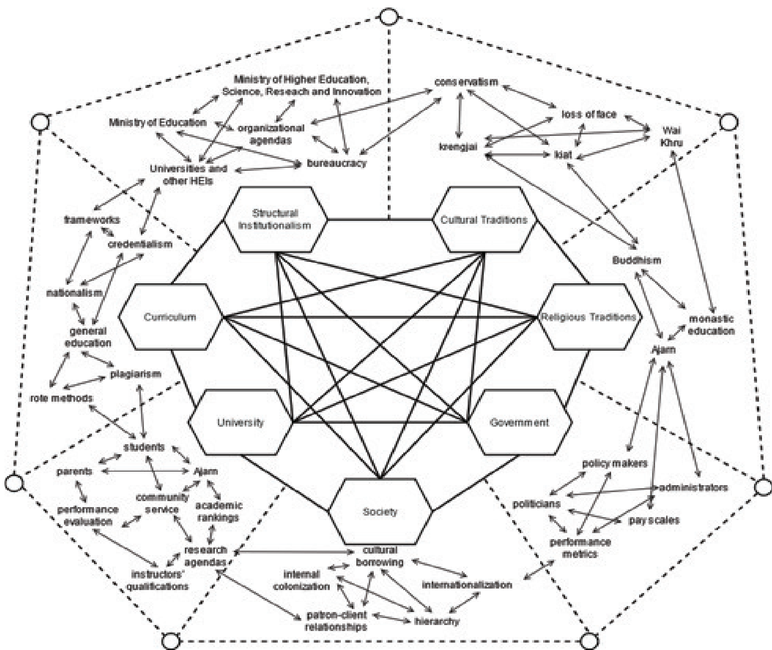

Figure 1: A Socio-technical Actor-Network Tracing of Ajarn in Thai Higher Education

In contrast, Figure 1 explores a different dynamic; Ajarn have a proximal role in one aspect of Thai HE, but are part of an integral socio-technical network of networks that is heterogeneously diverse, and with many more moving intermediaries, we contend, than in other contemporary university settings. This complex is always changing, as educational development, criticism or contention is never far from the centre of Thai HE. Notably, the point of tracing the network of Thai HE is to exemplify the forces and agents that act in or around Thai Ajarn. Therefore, criticism of their skills or even nature is, then, a misguided notion because no actor shapes a network in isolation, as Figure 1 demonstrates. The model can be read in a variety of ways, but begins by isolating the seven focal themes, or actors, that occurred often in our review of literature, that is cultural traditions, structural institutionalism, curriculum, religious traditions, government, society, and the university itself. From here, we can move out into semi-formal networks of actors that are positioned and consider the many moving parts that shape this network. It is easy to note, then, that Ajarn features in the religious network and in the university network. Their nature is not defined to just one form of agency, or act. Rather, they form part of an interconnected web of heterogeneous actors and intermediaries all shaping each other as a co-constructed process. The proximity of Ajarn, connected as actors across multiple networks within Thai HE, grants them a unique position to influence multiple aspects of Thai society, reshape curriculum and redefine traditions in the future of Thai HE.

Recommendations to Redefine Thai HE under Thailand 4.0

As a reform initiative in part of Thai HE, Thailand 4.0 was formulated to address national interests and invites suggestions for

cultivating better academic development (Siripitakchai et al., 2015; Wittayasin, 2017). Consequently, we have traced problems in an attempt to form the basis of recommendations for reform that may provide ways forward to achieve Thailand 4.0 goals for Thai HE. To begin, we recommend the introduction of a formal tenure track and progression pathway that is independently managed, without bias or political influence; tenure is a central goal for Western academics due to its provided job security and marking of academic success, yet the concept is not found in the Thai academic vocabulary, because the title of Ajarn itself implicitly embodies it. This has to do with another technical actor effective of Ajarn: "kiat" (เกียรติ).

Persons (2008, pp. 57-58) identifies kiat as one of several very complex qualities of the multifaceted idea of "Thai face" and defines it as a "quality in human beings that commends them to others as worthy of genuine acceptance and respect" that is usually associated with "possessing rank or a position of authority, signified by a title or a prefix to one's name". However, this is more accessible and understood by Thais. To be an Ajarn is to assume a position of honour, superseding even financial success; kiat is often reported as being felt too by members in state, political or public service (Persons, 2008). This has a lot to do with Ajarn in public universities being employed, at one point, as civil servants; the role of the Ajarn also derives its kiat from a relationship with elite actors in Thailand. To embrace and rise to this elite is seen as an important feature of being an academic, focusing on citizenship as the central feature of academia (Persons, 2008). The kiat of Ajarn, then, is based upon affinity to the state; yet this positional primacy is not found in Western academic traditions. Consequently, such a difference creates diverse values challenging for collaboration with international institutions.

For instance, public Thai universities wield greater prestige than private; the honourable kiat of being an Ajarn shapes social psychology and, in turn, Ajarn can lead to the indirect affront of the proximal elite that support their title. Persons (2008, p. 58) notes that the kiat derived from being an Ajarn "brings its possessor a sense of legitimacy and contentment" evident in the behaviour of Ajarn who hold the position, despite relatively low pay when compared to similar roles found globally. This is furthered by a relationship between the expensive nature of study of a higher degree, so something reserved for those elite in Thailand in any regard. Financial reward disparity between Ajarn in Thailand and their international academic counterparts is yet another point in need of addressing, raised previously in Day et al. (2021) and suggested as deeply problematic to securing overseas expertise needed to advance Thai HE.

Commonly, it is expected that salaries are directly tied to employee satisfaction and motivation, thus indirectly influencing job performance and quality. Yet, as Lee and Lin (2014, p. 1582) describe, employees will likely develop "unsatisfactory feelings, make less effort to the organisation and feel tired or want to leave their job" if they realise that they are being paid below the market average. This is true even at the "national research universities" (NRUs), which are meant to "enhance the country's research activities and... national competitiveness" (Siripitakchai et al., 2015, p. 287). It is often difficult to identify fixed numbers across the variety of public and private universities; the entry-level salaries for academic staff at Mahidol, Prince of Songkla, and Thammasat universities for staff holding bachelor's, master's, or doctoral qualifications is reported at around 21,000 THB, 25,000 THB, and 32,000 THB per month respectively, which is approximately no more than 724 GBP and essentially limits the funding of Ajarn academically, professionally and personally, limiting

their effectiveness considerably and reducing new entrants into Thai academia, or putting off those who cannot afford to work for such low salaries (Mahidol University, 2013; Prince of Songkla University, 2009; Thammasat University, 2018).

To compare, UK Lecturers holding a PhD receive an average of 149,232 THB (3396.75 GBP) per month whilst US entry-level Assistant Professors at public four-year baccalaureate institutions get around 177,900 THB (5715 USD) a month (DiscoverPhDs, 2021; Flaherty, 2020). Elsewhere, in Hong Kong, PhD-holding Assistant Professors take home at least 158,580 THB (39,550 HKD) per month (Hong Kong Legislative Council, 2007). Geographically closer, Singapore's median monthly basic wage for university lecturers, including professors at all ranks, stands at a significant 301,350 THB (12,843 SGD), dwarfing Thailand's numbers (Singapore Ministry of Manpower, 2020). Whilst simple salary comparisons are insufficient for in-depth analysis since factors such as living costs and work benefits necessitate consideration, such large disparities coupled with other perceived inequalities may contribute to dissatisfaction among Ajarn amidst Thailand 4.0.

This means that Thailand 4.0, in seeking to foster an environment of cross-national academic collaboration within Thai HE, risks introducing new points of conflict and destabilisation of Ajarn. As we have argued previously, we may interpret that Thai HE has historically satiated Ajarn job satisfaction via granting high social standing, honour, and kiat in lieu of a better pay grade. Yet, whilst their international colleagues may not enjoy the same social privileges in their home regions as Ajarn do in Thailand, the knowledge that a possible majority of international pay grades are higher than what is available in Thai HE may be unsettling to staff found within the system of employment.

Such dissatisfaction can prove costly to Thailand 4.0; there are many skilled Thai academics who, now trained increasingly overseas, not just domestically, can gain employment elsewhere. Thus, academic unhappiness with below-market-rate salaries may disrupt job satisfaction and, consequently, enthusiasm, leading to decreased performance or resignation (Lee & Lin, 2014). Resignations, in turn, can lead to a brain drain situation in which talented individuals move abroad to more satisfactory climates, destabilising socioeconomic networks, a problem faced by other Asian societies, such as Singapore and Taiwan, discussed in both territories for some time (Lee, 1982; Taiwan Today, 2009).

Singapore's response manifested in four strategies: to improve local conditions, promote the return of overseas Singaporeans, engage with Singaporean overseas communities, and recruit more internationally diverse skilled workers (Ziguras & Gribble, 2015). These echo former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's sentiment that, "Unless we can provide our able graduates a satisfying career in Singapore, one where rewards, job satisfaction, and the prospects for their children's education and future are comparable to those...in [the West]... we shall be depleted of talent" (Lee, 1982, p. 8).

In other settings, academic plans to address brain drain, then, include the National University of Singapore's Presidential Young Professorship (PYP) scheme offering around 6.232 million THB (200,000 USD) a year for Assistant Professors, with accommodation and spousal employment support (Lim & Pang, 2018; National University of Singapore, n.d.). Similar to Singapore's PYP scheme, Taiwan launched the Yushan Scholar and Yushan Young Scholar programmes in 2018 to attract top academic talent by offering internationally competitive salary packages (Taiwan Today, 2020). Yet, Taiwan shares problems with Thailand; low salaries for academic staff out of the Yushan

programmes have been a controversial topic (Cheng, 2018; EBC News, 2019). Nevertheless, Taiwan has identified this problem for more than a decade, leading to some efforts to address it gradually through salary increments and the Yushan programme (Taiwan Today, 2009; Taipei Times, 2016). To our knowledge, Thailand 4.0 does not propose any academic talent scheme similar to Singapore's PYP or Taiwan's Yushan programmes. The closest concepts might be the Reverse Brain Drain project initiated in 1997 or the postdoctoral programmes of the National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), yet neither seem to have improved Thai HE significantly and the issues we outline in the present paper remain as of 2021 (International Labour Organisation, 2017; NSTDA, 2021).

Our recommendation for Thailand 4.0 reform of Thai HE focuses not merely on increasing salaries, but on increasing Thai HE's competitiveness in comparison to Thailand's international partners. We situate this as a problem of intercultural communication. In essence, we advocate for more points of commonality with global academia. One aspect may be to match salaries with the West, as was done by Singapore and Taiwan, while another may be, as previously argued in Day et al. (2021), reworking the rank structure of Thai HE and its promotion mechanisms. Further research by relevant agencies on these points of disparity would be a beneficial first step for Thailand 4.0's vision. Such problems are neither social nor just technical; a relational semiotic web of meaning. We have highlighted Ajarn as a linguistic actor, steeped in a valuable cultural heritage intrinsic to Thai society, which reshapes the meaning of Thai academia, itself an actor built, upon writing, in a moment-by-moment translation. This is unfolding in diverse ways, which creates a bottleneck towards immutable mobility, or a fixed and thus stable network. Put another way, Ajarn means different things in different settings and for different people, all of which are

problematic for outsiders drawn into Thai academia via Thailand 4.0 reforms. Since network stability is seen within ANT as key to success, we must find ways to create greater and longer-term stability within Thai HE.

Conclusion

We conclude, then, that we cannot ignore the important heritage of Ajarn. The role is something more than a linguistic item; it is likewise a title that has socio-technical power to reshape society. This is very alien to entry-level lectureships found globally. Ajarn, as expressed in our introduction, are descendants of the decisions made by honoured elites, who built the groundwork for Thailand's higher education and hold a revered idolization amongst Thai citizens. A status has been afforded to those in the role of Ajarn; efforts are even made to avoid laying them off, even in degree programs that have low to non-existent student enrolment and during times of global crisis (Joungtrakul, 2019). Taken this way, we begin to see why, from a Latourian perspective "Knowledge and power. Context and content. Materiality and sociality. Activity and passivity. In one way or another all of these divides" are rendered irrelevant by the relational view of ANT (Law, 1999, p. 3).

The key point buried within the argument put forward by Law (1999), then, is that we cannot draw clear divisions between where the impact of Ajarn begins and ends in a society where the role has such wide proximity, focality, as well as social and technical meaning. Thailand 1.0 focused actors around agriculture and in agriculture, much like in ANT, a single negative condition can wipe out a network, whilst diversity makes a system susceptible to counter-power (Wittayasin, 2017). However, to realise Thailand 4.0, we need to be careful that in

criticising Thai HE's juxtapositions to the West; often, a flaw in this kind of thinking is we treat each issue as something in isolation, perhaps even attributable to a single human actor who is blamed for issues that include low research output, devalued degrees, and low international transferability and, in doing so, we inevitably ignore the many unique advantages of Thai higher education, along with the meaningful importance of Ajarn (Joungtrakul, 2019; Mala, 2019a; 2019b).

As we move forward through this process of change, understanding the clear relationship between problems, themselves actors, and points of change, is necessary, an insight this paper offers in Figure 1. From this visualisation, it is easier to gain a sense of recommendations needed to improve Thai HE moving forward, in order to promote cross-cultural integration and more effective communication management between academics of different systems. Based on, then, our literature review and reading of the field, coupled with Figure 1, priorities for Thailand's education system must include but are not limited to, the following key areas that need to form the basis of professional and institutional development. Greater understanding of international and intercultural nuances in Thai HE is going to be paramount in the next decade, whether Thailand 4.0 is successful as a government initiative or not.

We need only look at how rapidly Thailand has increased inbound international degree students, and the increase in hybrid university degree awards; in one analysis by Michael (2018) that draws upon a range of data sets, situated between 1999 and 2012, the number of international students increased from 1,882 to 20,309 and, in the context of those coming from the US, the total number of inbound students nearly doubled, from 1,128 in 2004/05 to 2,093 in 2016/17. Many came from China, which has led to a new range of academic investigation about the cultural differences between Thai

and Chinese students (Waters and Day, 2022). Meanwhile, whilst the reasons for studying in Thailand are far ranging, commonly they relate to lifestyle and affordability, rather than academic degree relevance or cutting-edge enquiry (Day et al., 2021). In many instances, degrees are designed with quality assurance metrics and protocols that seek to further the state and serve it as loyal citizens, with principles and educational design concepts introduced from the boom of the Thai university arena in the 1970s, with little subsequent update (Waters & Day, 2022). Therefore, to meet this rising change, and drawing upon the review of literature, as well as theoretical modelling within this article, we identify and tentatively prioritise ten different strands of training and development for Ajarn:

1. The development of more effective heritage and cultural education for integrating academics trained overseas.

2. Broader language skills training to enable more effective integration of students from overseas.

3. Introduce a formal process of teacher training for all academics.

4. Establish a more robust process of academic appointment and professorial review that increases accountability and a need for collaboration.

5. Link quality assurance to more meaningful areas of curriculum design and development in order to strengthen planning.

6. Provide more refined academic degree offerings that ensure a relevant, modern template for skills and critical thinking.

7. Develop systems to offset the generally low pay and conditions, such as by introducing a greater incentive for publication in impact journal outputs.

8. Introduce roles and routes, tied to research and teaching fellowships, offering to widen employment for the staff of all academic levels.

9. Standardise the minimum entry requirements for academic employment to match in internationally competitive university settings, so a PhD is upheld.

10. Develop more affordable training and opportunities to implement distance-based online learning opportunities.

11. Move away from the emphasis on hierarchy, Rote pedagogy, and patron-client relationships with students in Thai HE.

12. Encourage the recognition and transfer of academic ranking from outside of Thai HE into its systems when and if academic migration occurs.

This is necessary because, at present, they may not be ready, nor supported, to fulfil Thailand 4.0, which has already indirectly been tethered to a significant reform of academic ranking, publication and research restructuring in the last two years (Day et al., 2021). Jones and Pimdee (2017) establish that significant reform of the expectations of research, degree training and citizen development is problematic for Thai HE, which has been slow to reform, despite considerable investment and educational policy, which is itself often contradictory or not results-orientated, a point discussed in greater length by Michael (2018). Economic innovation and business entrepreneurship is seen in previous government agendas; the move towards a digital renaissance in Thailand means that degrees are simply designed for older systems of business and process, which includes agriculture (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2019; Baker and Phongpaichit, 2009). After all, Thailand 4.0 wants to produce "a high-income nation through developing it as a knowledge-based economy, with an emphasis on research and development, science and technology, creative thinking, and innovation" (Wittayasin, 2017, pp. 29-35). Yet, according to data-analytics firm YouGov (2019), as of a survey of 1,233 graduates in 2019, 52% of overall Thai graduates work in jobs unrelated to their degrees, worsening in the humanities

as a specialism and where 24% of graduates worked in a related field.

Meanwhile, and highly relevant to Thailand 4.0, only 59% of those in Information & Communication Technology worked in a highly related field to their degree post-graduation, suggesting, perhaps, that the skills they had been taught in their degrees were not sufficient to cope with the rapidly shifting digital economy, a problem not unique to Thailand (YouGov, 2019; Day, 2014; Day, 2019). Outside of scientific fields, for example in Marketing and Communication only 59% again would describe their degrees as 'very useful' and in this same field, only 40% of graduates worked in a highly related field aligned to their degree of study (YouGov, 2019). Whilst these are by no means exclusive or exhaustive in terms of sample size, or even specific explanation of why this may be the case, these statistics lend weight to points raised commonly across the literature we have reviewed. Hence, that Thai HE is outdated, as are the degrees and practises found within the institutions delivering them. To this end, we mapped a central role of Ajarn in our own theoretical analysis and network tracing, as shown in Figure 1. Our point, then, is that in order to change this status-quo, Ajarn will likely be focal actors in enabling change; as seen in Figure 1, they play a role as one part of a bigger phenomenon underway in Thailand.

Consequently, within this paper, we have set out to describe the challenges facing Ajarn, and also position them as focal actors stuck in a moment of translation. The Ajarn of Thai HE are important, instrumental even to the future of Thai society. Our analysis seeks not to humiliate their shortcomings. Rather, to assure that any given problem faced by Ajarn, or found within Thai HE, is not a problem in isolation, but part of a multifaceted network, engaged in a struggle. Therefore, by using ANT, we find a tool to describe these problems and the need for a passageway forward to reach Thailand 4.0. Presently, to

mobilise change without momentum is a paradox. This will be the case until a balance between expectations and admiration of the Western academic traditions can be found; the nuances of Thai HE are complex. However, a relational vantage is needed in order to know what must change in Thailand 4.0.

We position this article to stimulate discussion within international academia and Thai HE. Yet, we also recognize a need for more research into job satisfaction and the testing of our hypothetical model. Thai HE itself works in cycles of degree revision and recruitment of new students, often modelled in five-year periods of quality assurance and assessment. To this end, if further research is to be forthcoming, and we feel it is paramount, we point out that it should not exceed this period, and therefore be engaged as soon as possible. This is because the educational situation in Thailand is changing rapidly, sometimes for the better and others worse, but always in line with a complex social and political landscape. The role of academics within Thai HE is widely criticised. Our work, in this article, in contrast, offers a novel vantage, which suggests any such critique misunderstands the fundamental nature, as well as the role, of Ajarn. We contend, instead, change with respect to Thai HE needs to be constructive, not combative, and led by those Ajarn who are seeking to reform universities to meet Thailand 4.0, embrace international education and globalisation, if Thailand's universities are to succeed on the global stage and thus become highly competitive, in-demand institutions of learning and research.

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