

Reading Habits of Thai People in a Cultural Dimension

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Reading before Printing Press were Available

Although the Thai writing scripts existed long ago traditional Thai society was not a literary society and most communications, be they for government administration or daily contact and communication amongst people, did not take place using the letters of the alphabet.

The need for written communication was so minimal that although Siam's contact with China dated back for centuries, Thais have never felt the need to import printing technology from China.

The limited production of literature as well as some religious manuscripts, the latter being more numerous, including various "texts" such as massage handbooks, handbooks on watching doves, etc., including legal compendia, legends, royal chronicles and various historical notes mostly perished with few examples having survived. The central administrative power received only occasional reports from the regional seats of power with some not bothering to submit a written report at all if nothing extraordinary occurred.

On the other hand, the central government also rarely sent written orders to the periphery. This was due to the limited power of the central government and so the need to communicate with the regional centres of power was not that great when compared to other ancient societies which used written language such as China or Japan which have an incomparably greater number of written documents. Thai Buddhist temples were not tasked with recording the births, marriages and deaths of local people and even records of the abbots of the temple do not exist.

It should be noted that trading, which gave birth to a written script, played almost no role in producing written texts in pre-modern Thai society before the introduction of the printing press beyond some written contracts of trading transactions and slave contracts. If one looks at the borrowing and loan transactions (of money, boats, draught animals, rice farms, etc.), one will notice that none were conducted through written contracts. Writings on the debate over religious texts are also almost non-existent with most religious texts being written in order to be used to preach to others.

As for so-called literature, very little was penned and most scripts were consumed not through the direct act of reading but through listening, reciting, prayers or stage acting. One royal tradition is the lullaby, the reading of texts before royals go to sleep. The royal page would read books in a rhythmic manner (itself a kind of poetic recital) thus these texts were created not to be read but to be listened to.

This is the reason why prose writing is very limited in Thai literature prior to the introduction of the printing press (the nature of prose is not suited for listening or 'reciting').

What is more, the number of written manuscripts prior to printing are few and far between (when compared to many other societies) and the need to produce a written text was limited while possession of a written text was costly (including the cost of having a book hand copied). So most people did not get the opportunity to read. The records of a missionary clinic noted that in the early Bangkok period a survey revealed that 45 per cent of their patients (who are mostly lower class people and Chinese) were literate, but they would still mostly have little or no opportunity to read in real life. Whether their writing and reading proficiency is adequate for a daily use or not is also doubtful.

How does such society pass on knowledge, ideas and beauty?

The answer lies in memorization along with the religious teaching (of all religious faiths) that there exists one set of truths, thus learning is about memorizing the right information which is absolutely correct and requires no critical thinking and no argument from other vantage points beyond that which exists in the text or istaught by the teacher.

The Reading Process in Contemporary World

The reading process that Thais are familiar with today is not what we were used to. But what is this reading process like?

Reading is directly accessing meanings through signs, such as reading traffic signs, reading facial expressions and body language. Although the signs used in language are composed of written scripts and it appears that we first transform the scripts into sounds and then decipher the meaning from the sounds, in reality those proficient at reading understand what the text conveys without first transforming it into sounds. We look at the written words in the way the Chinese or Japanese see their characters because we are familiar with the combined letters to the point where the meaning simply flows into the brain and the inner consciousness. (This is why, although the old way of spelling words in Thai differs somewhat from the present, we still

manage to read, although it takes more time for us to translate words into a more familiar set of signs).

We look at words as signs, especially often displayed words which we repeatedly see in a certain type of writing that requires only a glance in order to make out the meaning. This explains why we can read daily newspapers quickly and why we only scan for meanings which interest us.

Even in books where the content is mostly known in advance, people tend only to casually glance through it.

One more interesting aspect of the reading process is the question whether the “meaning” that we receive through reading differs in accordance with the type of manuscript or not. It seems that direct reading of written signs enables our brain and heart to acquire more detailed consideration of the meaning of the text compared to oral reading. (Some people can instantaneously react to the no parking sign and plan what to do next while others also take a split second to consider whether they will be arrested for breaking the traffic laws.)

Thus, when reading creative works, people automatically open up their hearts to meanings that touch their feelings no less than ones that affect their rational thinking. The demands of the contemporary world dictate that readers today seek a linear line of reason in order to find out what authors seek to convey and why they conclude things the way they do. In other words, contemporary reading is always filled with analysis (both through rational thought and feelings).

This is markedly different from writings which are consumed through listening. Please note Sunthornphu’s following poem.

“People whose love resided in both places, enjoy love from both mother and father

One relies on oneself, one speaks after one thinks”

“มนุษย์นี้ที่รักอยู่สองสถาน บิดามารดาก็รักมักเป็นผล

ที่พึ่งหนึ่งพึ่งได้แต่กายตน เกิดเป็นคนคิดเห็นจึงเจรจา”

The rationale of the above poem seems very fuzzy if it is to be judged through the current reading process. What Sunthornphu tries to convey is that only the loves of one’s mother and father as well as self-love can be trusted. The last line does not appear to be related to a trusted love but is an attempt to relate self-love with actions beneficial to oneself. But

Sunthornhu did not elaborate why thinking before speaking is the most beneficial thing one can do to oneself.

Most writings today were penned in order to have people “read” in accordance with the determined meaning and one must read accordingly in order to derive joy and knowledge from contemporary writing.

Thus the problem is how Thais who were not used to reading this way adapt after the introduction of the printing press.

Dissemination of the Reading Process through Schools

Printing came into being in Siam only four decades prior to the inception of modern education. After printing presses were introduced, not that many new writing was produced specifically for the printing press. Many of the books published were those written prior to the introduction of the printing press and even those written after were written in the same fashion as those penned prior to the introduction of the printing press (such as Wat Na Kor’s poetic tales).

For this reason, Thais’ reading habit did not immediately change even after the introduction of Western-style education and schools. Texts were written and published for purchase by students although these texts were written under the old paradigm of education which stresses the importance of rote memorization, the only difference being that texts that were translated from Pali are now replaced by those translated from English. Thai school texts today thus mostly lack the aspect of academic “debate” and mostly contain easily understood summaries without the need to know the source of the content that is required to be memorized. It is almost no different from religious scripture.

The continuous expansion of schools until the present is thus the propagation of a reading culture which existed prior to the printing press in Thai society. Students are taught to read carefully, and to pay attention to every word, rather than to comprehend the text and its underlying thinking process which led to the production of the text. We read literature in class by relying on our imagination more than our knowledge of vocabulary and rhythm. Reading thus ends up being hard work and a serious undertaking and so what area of our brain will be left to do the critical thinking, in-depth understanding, debate or agreement with the text which one reads?

(These days, campaigns to promote Thais to read more still stress the benefits from the knowledge gained from reading while no mention is made regarding the joy of reading)

The failure in the teaching of precise reading is an indicator of the feebleness of reading in Thai education. This subject was modelled on the précis of English schools and used to be found in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools although the teaching of précis in Thai schools has turned into readings that the teacher uses as short practice models without training students to learn how to grasp the thrust of the texts and to concisely extract the main issue expressed (together with the rationale the writer used in his or her work).

In many schools, the reading texts used for practice are only a paragraph or two, and do not include the main point of the writer's complete piece. At many of these schools, teachers would underline certain passages in the reading assignment and string them together for students to read.

In reality, the teaching of précis constitutes an important foundation of education and can aid students to learn how to read and write all the way to advanced levels. The Thai system teaches students to summarise in the service of brevity without regard to what should be shortened. In the end, Thai educators saw no merit in the subject and discontinued it in schools.

To summarise, while Thai schools teach students to read, they teach it in a manner which existed prior to the introduction of the printing press and many Thais continue to read in that manner. So although the literacy rate amongst Thais is almost 100 per cent there are not many readers when compared to the percentage of the population who can read and write. The explanation that books are too costly for most Thais can only provide part of the explanation for the dilemma Thai society finds itself in, as we must also note the fact that statistics regarding the number of users of public libraries, and even university libraries, are low.

Part of the challenge in the promotion of reading in a society which only recently entered the printing age is to provide greater access to books, but most important is how we can launch qualitative educational reform.

Thai education must stop teaching one-dimensional truths or singular truths but must teach students to search for the truth by themselves from various dimensions of truth, from various contexts where the truth is situated. In order to achieve this, students must be cajoled to read, but reading must be enjoyable and fun. Students should be able to speed read, to scan texts, or engage in close reading, to read in order to enjoy, and to read in order to search, so that schools can be a forum for the exchange of views amongst readers and not an abode where the accepted truth is eternally declared.

As long as the attitude toward reading does not change to that of the reading process in the age of the printing press Thais will find it difficult to read books no matter how hard the promotions and campaigns may try.