

A Perspective on Culture and Technology Transfer of OTOP in Thailand: A Lesson from Japan

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Abstract

A study of "A Perspective on Culture and Technology Transfer of OTOP in Thailand: A Lesson from Japan" is divided into 4 parts; Introduction, Historical Background of Culture and Technology Transfer in Thailand, Development of Science and Technology in Thailand, and Present Situation of Information Technology Market and Information Technology used in Thailand. Many government projects have been aimed for the development at the grass roots level. One of them is OTOP Project which is operated on promoting local products to be sold not only in the local but also to worldwide market. Most of the products are highly valuable Thai traditional products which have been inspired by the local wisdom and cultural heritage. The products owners are Thai rural people. Most of them produce the products during their free time, since this group of people is neither professional in doing business nor traditional commerce. To promote the products of OTOP Project via a new technology is considered rather difficult and challenging. This paper indicates the two points of the difficulty to promote products by using new technology; historical background of cultural and technology transfer, and Development of S&T and Public communication of science and technology. The final part shows the situation of utilization of information technology in Thailand especially, E-commerce case.

Keywords: OTOP ,Technology Transfer, Thailand, Japan

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General Information of OTOP in Thailand and OVOP in Japan

In Thailand, there have been many government projects which aim for the development at the grass roots level. OTOP Project is also one of the projects. This project has been extensively promoted since April 2001, by the government of the Prime Minister Thaksin Chinnawatra.¹ 'One Tambon One Product' (OTOP) is Thailand's version of OVOP. The OVOP concept is a unique approach which has been very successful in the Japanese prefecture of Oita and has attracted and continues to attract wide international appeal, particularly in developing countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and so on. The OVOP rural community development concept has been implemented in different ways where it has been introduced, depending on the over all objectives and the unique circumstances of each country. As a result, it was widely adopted by many local governments of Japan and spread to the rest of the world. The OTOP idea was borrowed from Oita- a Japanese village that creates unique products for the village as tourists' attraction in order to generate better income among villagers, but adapted to the Thai context at national scale. The OTOP project operates in promoting local products (which are products champions of each district) to be sold not only in the local but also to the Worldwide market. Most of the products are highly valuable Thai traditional products which have been inspired by the local wisdom and cultural heritage. The products owners are Thai rural people. Most of them produce the products during their free time. Since this group of people is neither professional in doing business nor traditional commerce, for the government to promote the products of OTOP Project via a new technology is considered rather difficult and challenging. The difficulty arises from the following points:

- Historical Background of Culture and Technology Transfer in Thailand

¹ Compiled from the document in the National Seminar "OTOP Project : Policy and Plan" for the Governors from all over Thailand and the speech by the Prime Minister Thaksin Chinnawatra, on 30th April 2001.

- Development of Science and Technology (S&T) in Thailand

Historical Background of Culture and Technology Transfer in Thailand

A central goal in public communication of science and technology (PCST) is aimed at filling the gap between advancement in science and technology on one side and the sustainability of culture and society on the other side. Communicating science to the public is a rather old story in the European cultural patch work². However, in a less developed country like Thailand, modern science and technology from the West is an imported concept and practice. At this present moment when Local Wisdom is given high importance, PCST needs to consider the reality of Local Wisdom along side science and technology, in a mutually respectful manner, not trying to convert people to only materialistic science. This calls for a new way of thinking.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, Thailand received a great deal of American economic and financial aid, advice, training and education. Many high ranking government military officials and even businessmen were trained and educated in the United States. Even in this new millennium, Thailand is striving to keep up with the world as modernization and globalization have swept over her. While modern international science and technology gave rise to both new products and new knowledge, the open nature of Thai society allowed almost unlimited introduction of these new products, regulated only by market forces. However, the introduction of new knowledge is limited by the lack of skilled local personnel capable of acting as the transfer agents, and by underdeveloped infrastructure. This imposed an imbalance in the import into Thai society of science and technology *knowledge* versus science and technology *products*.³

² Fayard, P., 1994, Making Science Go Round the Public, *When Science Becomes Culture*, Schiele B. (ed.), University of Ottawa Press, Canada.

³ Yutthavong, Y., 1997, Introduction, *Science and Technology in Thailand: Lesson from a Developing Economy*, Yutthavong, Y., and M.A. Wojcik (eds.), NSTDA/UNESCO Publishing, Bangkok

Development of Science and Technology (S&T) in Thailand

In Thailand, S&T has been an imported concept, alien to traditional Thai life. Considered in a broad sense, science and technology are the constitution of knowledge about nature and about how to apply the principles of nature for human benefit. In this sense, Thailand has had “science and technology” all through its history, although in the form different from today’s modern science and technology. The development of S&T in Thailand has been trying to follow the trend in the west. However, the past governments did not make a serious effort to build up the capacity of S&T among local (native) personnel nor consider local needs and necessities. Investment in R&D was considered a luxury for a developing country like Thailand. This was the normal mentality in the past in other developing countries as the report on Building Scientific Capacity: A TWAS Perspective wrote: “...Indeed the prevailing belief was that developing countries would be foolish to invest a great deal of money in the development of science and technology because it would be more efficient to purchase already existing technology that had been developed in the North. Science, in short, was viewed as a luxury that developing countries could not afford...” Today this perception has been largely discredited. Developing nations have learned that technologies produced elsewhere may not serve their needs and that efforts to create their own appropriate technologies depend, in large measure, on their ability to nurture strong vigorous scientific communities at home (TWAS report on Building Scientific Capacity: A TWAS Perspective).⁴

⁴ TWAS – Third World Academy of Sciences, has changed its name to the Academy of Sciences for the Developing World. Its acronym and mandate to recognize and reward scientific excellence in the South still remain the same. Jacob Palis, TWAS Secretary General, and the Academy’s founders explained that they had no intention of hiding the source of their concern and inspiration. But today the world is different. The term ‘third world’ made sense twenty years ago. But since ‘the second world’ (countries that belonged to the former Soviet bloc) no longer exists, ‘the third world’ no longer reflects the current global situation, hence the change to new name. <http://www.twas.org> , retrieved 10 January 2005.

The Ninth Plan (2002-2006) recognized science and technology development as one of seven strategies. It points out the undesirable factors or conditions inherent in Thai society and culture that pose social and economic problems. Among them are superstitious beliefs and being without proper reasoning or rationality. Its openness to the influx of imported cultures as well as technologies renders Thai society a “consumer-at-convenience” lacking its own effort for local creativity and innovation. In coping with these undesirable characteristics, the Ninth Plan makes various recommendations. Besides education system reform, Thailand needs to put more effort in promoting awareness and understanding of science and technology among youth and the public. This can be done through activities that encourage youth and the public participation in their communities. Diffusion of science and technology knowledge and advancement through mass media is recommended to obtain a wider reach as well as more emphasis on both quality and quantity. The government is assisting existing scientific institutes in building their capabilities through R&D via increased budget allocation. Within the past few years more effort has been made to provide knowledge of science and technology through different programs. Thai people have been interested in science. However, there was not enough coverage and dissemination of information on science and technology. They felt that science did not sufficiently assume its important role in the development of the country and was somehow mildly degrading of the Thai society. They saw that Thai people depended and consumed products of technology in great quantity, but had no knowledge of science and technology involved in the products. They urged the government to promote public understanding of science and to develop efficient monitoring system on public understanding of science. The public believes that every part of society shares responsibilities for the future development of Thai science and technology. For a society to have the capability for the development and application of science and technology, it should have a proper attitude toward these important tools. Thailand and many other non-western countries have the attitude that modern science and technology have their origins in, and still belong to the West. This attitude creates alienation from science and technology. TWAS also points out that for science and technology to be used wisely and

effectively, everyone, children and adults, the educated and the illiterate, the public, politicians and policy makers must have an appreciation of science and its power to transform the quality of life. However, if one looks at science and technology in terms of a concept and system which focuses on the use of reasoning, curiosity-generated observation and experimentations in a systematic investigation, of thinking in conjunction with action, of readiness to be proven wrong, one sees that Thai society is still a long way from having scientific culture. Thailand has recognized S&T as a key role in the development of the country in the past decade, despite the low level of scientific culture within Thai society. Awareness, understanding and appreciation of the contributions of S&T to society definitely need to be widely communicated to various stakeholders in the society. Compared with several countries in the region, the number of human resources in S&T in Thailand is relatively small. This small workforce will be a burden for the Thai economy in moving toward a knowledge-based economy. The employment by level of education attainment shows that Thailand's workforce is relatively low educated. According to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report (1999), the percentage of science and technology students among the total university students is only 19 percent – compared to 39 percent in South Korea, 37 percent in China, 31 percent in the Philippines and 26 percent in Indonesia (Table 1)

Table 1: Percentage of Science and Technology Students in 1995

Country	Percentage
South Korea	39
China	37
Philippines	31
Indonesia	26
Japan	23
Thailand	19

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 1999

Present situation of IT market and IT use in Thailand (E-commerce case)

According to the National Electronics and Computer Technology Centre, a survey of 6,460 samples from websites using www.com and www.co.th addresses showed that in 2001, most of the websites were accounted for by the tourism, computer and internet, and entertainment industries. Most of them (88.58%) were at a beginning stage, and being focused on advertising only. Most of the websites (55.3%) were written in English; 26.5% were written in Thai, and 18.1% were in both English and Thai. The main reason for using English as a medium is to serve the purpose of expanding to overseas markets⁵. The success of using websites for e-commerce in Thailand depends on four factors, namely: Quality of information and service, System use, User-friendliness, and Quality of system design. The main problems of Thai e-commerce can be divided into two parts. The first has to do with the customers' lack of confidence regarding security. The second is the technical issue of implementation and enforcement of the e-commerce law.

As the research study entitled “A model of E-commerce for the Highly Valuable Traditional Products in Thailand”⁶ regarding the assessment of e-commerce awareness of the Thai rural people in OTOP Project, the study found that the level of e-commerce awareness is high but the level of acceptance on the knowledge and technology transfer is rather low. It is due to the problem of the digital device that has been resulted from the lack of the Internet infrastructure in the rural area in Thailand.

However, the most significant factor that has positive affect on this particular OTOP e-commerce model has been in the content quality construct. This lies on the strategy that had been designed on the content quality construct to arouse the

⁵ Mephokee, Chanin, “Transfer of Technology for Successful Integration into Global Economy: A Case Study of the Electronics Industry in Thailand”, United Nations, New York and Geneva, October, 2004.

⁶ Sakuna Vanichvisuttikul and Chamnong Jungthirapanich. *A model of E-commerce for the Highly Valuable Traditional Products in Thailand* Graduate School of Compter and Engineering Management Assumption University. Thailand.

customers to be satisfied with not only consuming products but also the cultural experiences. These had been done by providing content management regarding legend and local wisdom of the product and its production process, techniques and tools that could create value added and attractiveness to the product on the Web.

The study of Internet marketing should then be forwarded to the further research paper. Like doing commerce in the physical storefront that requires not only locating among the target customers, but also promoting and advertising will always require to be done in order to survive in the market. Therefore, in doing e-commerce of OTOP Project, this virtual storefront also requires the strategy and tactic to promote OTOP products to survive in the digital market. The trend in future, after the development and implementation of OTOP, e-commerce should be focused on the Internet marketing that requires the leveraging of Internet technology to enhance more market and reach to the target customer of these OTOP products in the world wide market