

PERSPECTIVE

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The Hazing Scandals in Thailand Reflect Deeper Problems in Social Relations¹

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Hazing in Thai universities leads every year to scandalous actions being performed on victims and even to fatalities.³ Calls for ending it are often opposed by its strong supporters, including academics and university administrators.
- Also known as SOTUS, hazing has been flourishing for decades in Thailand, and it seems to have found a relevant role in Thai society. It can be said to crystallize and even to reproduce “Thainess”, in particular with regards to the centrality of hierarchical relations and Thailand’s person-based social institutions.
- The rise of SOTUS is part of the strong conservative trends of the past few decades that have come as a reaction to globalization and the perceived threat from the West, and as a consequence of growing hyper-royalism. In universities, rituals invented to promote a conservative understanding of “Thainess” are proliferating.



¹ Hazing is defined as “any action taken or any situation created intentionally that causes embarrassment, harassment or ridicule and risks emotional and/or physical harm to members of a group or team, whether new or not, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate”. See <http://hazingprevention.org/home/hazing/facts-what-hazing-looks-like/>. All Internet sources for this article were accessed on 15 September 2015

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- The hierarchical relations and the person-based social institutions that hazing is aimed at preserving are however the roots of serious problems in Thai society. These trump the laws, rules, professionalism and principles that are needed for a complex modern society to function properly.

INTRODUCTION

Hazing in Thai universities is known as SOTUS. In recent years, SOTUS has made the headlines frequently for its notorious corollaries, from scandalous acts to the deaths of a few freshmen every year. Calls to end the practice recur every time a scandal breaks out, but defenders of hazing are many, and influential, and include not only students and prominent alumni, but also professors and university administrators.⁴

The English acronym “SOTUS” stands for “Seniority Order Tradition Unity Spirit”. It is said to be an import from the United States, although this claim has never been substantiated.⁵ While initiation rites still exist in many American colleges, hazing has been prohibited across that country for some time, even in military academies schools.

Interestingly, if one searches on the Internet, “SOTUS” refers to initiation rites in Thailand alone, despite its English name. Why does SOTUS thrive only in Thai universities? At a time when Thai higher education is preoccupied with international reputation and ranking, and its universities are trying to become world-class institutions, one must ask why college administrators and many scholars staunchly support the practice instead of getting rid of it in order to improve university rankings.

This essay argues that Thai society as it is today is fertile soil for hazing. Regardless of its origin, hazing has been localized and transplanted on Thai soil, where it has flourished. SOTUS is now Thai. Some observers claim that it has flourished even more in the past decade or so. If true, this means that it fits and expresses Thai conditions in the past decade even better than before.

SOTUS is more than merely teenage play. Instead, it reflects serious problems in Thai society today.

WHY IS THAILAND FERTILE SOIL FOR SOTUS?

SOTUS represents and reproduces the two primary modes of social relations in Thai society, namely hierarchy and person-based social institutions.

Thailand is a strongly hierarchical society. “Thainess” is thus first and foremost characterized by attentiveness to hierarchical relations among individuals based on their social positions. These latter reflect seniority, class, rank, wealth, gender and/or power, depending on the particular setting. In key fields such as education, law enforcement, the military, the justice system, business, journalism, and so on, which are apparently professional in nature, relations among people become very “personal” or person-based rather than “impersonal”.

⁴ See, for instance, “MSU President: Thailand will be in a terrible way if freshmen complain about hazing,” *Prachatai*, 13 June 2011, <http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/2584>

⁵ See, different histories of SOTUS in, for example, “Getting through a dangerous haze,” *Bangkok Post*, 31 August 2014, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/lite/topstories/429656/getting-through-a-dangerous-haze> and Saksit Saiyasombat, “Sanctioned sadism: Thai universities’ barbaric hazing culture,” *Asian Correspondent*, 1 May 2015, <http://asiancorrespondent.com/132574/thailand-university-hazing/>

The “personal vs. impersonal” signifies two contrasting types of social institutions. A social institution is personalized if its culture and power structure has a specific person’s social position as an essential factor for interactions. Such personalized relations include but are not limited to nepotism, patronage, acrimony, and other interactions. Person-based social institution is the basis of the patrimonial state in Thailand.

In contrast to this is the impersonal social institution whose culture and power structure are based on certain criteria that are independent of personal or person-based relations. There are different forms and levels of criteria in various social institutions, such as laws, rules, regulations, standards, professionalism and principles.

In reality, both types of social relations exist in every society and institution on earth. No society survives on only one type. The difference is in the extent to which each type obtains and in the relationship between the two types in a society, that is, in which type of social relations is the primary or dominant one informing social institutions and which is the secondary or supplemental one.

Generally speaking, in small and less complex societies, social relations tend to be primarily person-based or personal. Rules and laws often become secondary or are selectively enforced according to the persons involved. Patrimonialism is the mode of power relations in this kind of society. In a larger and more complex society with intricate differences and conflicting interests, social institutions need to be primarily impersonal in nature, and adhere instead to laws, rules, regulations, standards, professionalism and principles.

Thai society is definitely a complex one, and yet its social institutions remain overly personal and patrimonial. The “who” factor often matters more than laws, regulations, professionalism or principle. Professionalism in some social institutions, such as journalism and academia, has not been adequately developed.

In the judicial system, for example, what is seen as a rampant “double standard” in fact is one standard, a standard that depends on one’s social position. Or perhaps no standard at all. Historically, laws and rules in ancient Siam were applied according to a person’s feudal rank. It seems that, despite modernity, the archaic culture persists. The most important principle is attentiveness to the “who” factor in social hierarchy.

These personal social relations, nevertheless, are also the basis for the charms and attractiveness of Thai society to many foreigners. Some see these social relations to be “more human” than impersonal institutions. In many cases, Thailand’s charm is perceived in contradistinction from what foreigners find missing in their societies. Getting entangled on occasion with the Thai police or judicial system may however make the detrimental side of person-based social institutions painfully obvious to them.

The entire Thai education system, including higher education, is an infrastructure responsible for the reproduction and sustenance of person-based hierarchical relations over generations. Supporters of SOTUS tend to argue that it provides proper preparation for the real world. They are probably right in that SOTUS enhances patronage networks that can last an entire career, molding the next generation of practitioners of Thainess. It crystalizes the major values seen in real social relations in Thailand into teenage play, namely the importance of *seniority* or hierarchy, obedience to power or *order*, uncritical acceptance of *tradition*, the ultimate goal of

social relations in *unity* or harmony, and *spirit* or pride in unique Thainess. SOTUS is a preparation, a practice, and reproduction of established social relations.

As an initiation rite, SOTUS may seem thoughtless, violent and dangerous. But as an institutional practice for molding teenagers for life in a hierarchical society and for patrimonial power relations, SOTUS is reasonable socialization and only mildly violent. Thai universities serve their mission well in this respect. Those administrators who staunchly support SOTUS do their job very well according to the key performance indicators (KPI) required for universities (see below).

WHY HAS SOTUS COME BACK STRONGLY?

SOTUS was actually in decline for a few decades especially after the 1973 democratic uprising, when students rose up to challenge all forms of tradition and institution. One of their prime targets was SOTUS. In recent years, however, cultural trends in Thai society have grown more conservative. A rigid Thainess is heavily promoted both by the state and in civil society, partly in reaction to perceived threats from the West in the form of globalization and the reckless practice of capitalism which hurt the country in, for instance, the 1997 economic crisis. Politics has become increasingly conservative and hyper-royalism has also grown since the mid-1980s.⁶

People have become overly conscious of behaviour appropriate to one's position in relation to others. Several public rituals and customs and practices that inform, reproduce, and strengthen hierarchical social relations have been invented, revived, promoted and amplified. Many have become more extravagant and elaborate than ever. Excessive sensitivity to proper behaviour and to rituals of hierarchy has become a norm. This trend of excessive performance of hierarchy has been palpable in educational institutions in the past few decades. The following examples are a mere fraction of examples of the theatrical society that Thailand has again become.

- Student uniforms are back in use in universities across the country. Considered a sign of authoritarianism, the requirement for uniform was abolished on most campuses after 1973. Now the uniform is mandatory again in regular classrooms in most universities.
- Since 1997, new students at Chulalongkorn University have to perform the ritual of ถวายสัตย์ปฏิญาณตน [*thawai sat patiyān ton*], literally giving an oath, to Kings Rama V and VI.⁷ It is the taking of an oath to become loyal servants of the monarchy, said to be the revival of an old ritual ถวายตัว [*thawai tua*], literally offering oneself, that students used to perform in the early years after the university was founded as a school for civil servants under King Rama VI (r. 1910-1926) during the period of absolute monarchy. New faculty members at Chulalongkorn also have to perform the ritual “พิธีถวายตัวถวายใจ”

⁶ Thongchai Winichakul, “The Monarchy and Anti-Monarchy: Two Elephants in the Room of Thai Politics and the State of Denial” in *Good Coup Gone Bad*, ed. Pavin Chachavalapongpun (Singapore: ISEAS, 2014), pp. 79-108.

⁷ Watch a news report 'ถวายสัตย์ปฏิญาณตน' ก้าวสำคัญนิสิตจุฬาฯ [‘Giving an Oath’: an important step for students at Chulalongkorn University], *Voice TV*, 25 July 2015, <http://news.voicetv.co.th/thailand/237000.html>. The ceremony is reported every year in จุฬาสัมพันธ์ [Chula relations], the newsletter of Chulalongkorn University.

[*phithi thawai tua thawai chai*], literally offering oneself and one's mind (to the monarchy).⁸ This ritual was invented only a few years ago. Some new students and faculty resent but are obligated to take part in these rituals. Most of them are however delighted and proud to join the ceremonies.

- A similar ritual for King Naresuan, a national hero of the sixteenth century, has been invented at Naresuan University in Phitsanulok, in lower northern Thailand.⁹ It is now a sacred ritual. Many other Thai universities follow the trend and have been inventing sacred and extravagant rituals.¹⁰ High-school students in Phitsanulok also have to offer themselves to King Naresuan.¹¹ Even students at a middle school in Bangkok take an oath to King Rama III (r. 1824 – 1851), who built the temple whose name and premise are shared by the school.¹² Each of these is an invented tradition.
- One of the old customs in every Thai school, from kindergarten to university, is the ritual of showing deference to teachers (ไหว้ครู – *wai khru*). Perhaps because of the increasingly wealthy Thai middle class, ritual is now becoming incredibly extravagant everywhere.¹³ Needless to say, a graduation ceremony has always been an extravagant rite of passage for the educated Thai middle class. It is even more so today.¹⁴
- The conservative trend in higher education in Thailand is being institutionalized through its incorporation into the mission state of the universities and its adoption as a KPI for assessment; graduates should be able to “preserve Thainess amidst globalization.”¹⁵

⁸ See for instance, “ปฐมนิเทศอาจารย์ใหม่ รุ่นที่ 2” [Orientation for new faculty members, the second group of the year] in *จุฬาสัมพันธ์* [Chula Relations], 52:19 (1 June 2009), p. 8.

⁹ “ม.นเรศวร ต้อนรับนิสิตใหม่ตามแนวแห่งองค์สมเด็จพระนเรศวรมหาราช,” [Naresuan University welcomed new students to follow King Naresuan], *Eduzones News Network*, 22 May 2012; http://www.enn.co.th/news_detail.php?nid=3243

¹⁰ For example, a new ritual at Rajabhat University-Songkhla, “พิธีแสดงตน นำน้องถวายตัวเป็นคนของพระราชา ประจำปีการศึกษา 2555,” [The ritual displaying new students offering themselves to the monarchy, for the academic year 2012], *OK Nation Blog*, 22 June 2012, <http://www.oknation.net/blog/ruendorkrak/2012/06/22/entry-1>

¹¹ “โรงเรียนพิษณุโลกพิทยาคมจัดพิธีถวายตัวเป็นลูกสมเด็จพระนเรศวรมหาราช” [Phitsanulok Phitthayakhom holds the ritual for students to offer themselves to King Naresuan], *II Quare*, 6 July 2015, http://iiquare.com/post.php?post_id=939

¹² See “พิธีถวายตัวของนักเรียนวัดราชโอรส,” [The ritual of offering themselves by students at the Ratcha-o-rot school], *YouTube*, 28 April 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkLS3BdKI4>

¹³ Even at Thammasat University, once an icon for commoners, equality and freedom, the ritual is now majestic, see “พิธีไหว้ครูมหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์,” [The *Wai Khru* ceremony at Thammasat University], *YouTube*, 23 June 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWAei5W9jqo>

¹⁴ Jon Fernquest, “Graduation season has arrived: Big business” *Bangkok Post*, 14 June 2013

¹⁵ The quote is from the document, “คุณลักษณะบัณฑิตที่พึงประสงค์ของจุฬาลงกรณ์มหาวิทยาลัย” [The desired character of a graduate of Chulalongkorn University], approved by the university board, 24 June 2010, p. 3, http://www.academic.chula.ac.th/Curriculum/Diagram_grade/Rubric_grade.pdf; see also http://www.academic.chula.ac.th/CU_CAS/CU_CASMaster_02.pdf Similar statements can be found in every Thai university since this desired character is mandated by Ministry of Education. See, for example, the document, “คุณลักษณะบัณฑิตที่พึงประสงค์(MU Learning Outcomes),” by Mahidol University, pp.7-8, http://www.sc.mahidol.ac.th/scbi/download/2011/MU_Desired_Graduates_2011.pdf It should be noted that the desire to preserve Thainess amidst globalization has been clearly expressed in the preamble of Thailand's five-year social and economic development plans in the past twenty years, i.e. the eighth to eleventh plan from 1997 to 2016.

The list goes on. It is in this environment that SOTUS has come back strongly. In the past several months, two telling incidents revealed how strong SOTUS and authoritarian culture currently are in Thai education. In the first one, a school teacher hit a student on his head after the latter protested against the fee that the school charges for SMS messages that it sends to students. After the video of this incident went viral, the teacher made a clear public statement admitted his fault for hitting the student but would not apologize for doing his duty or for his conscience as a teacher. He meant that a teacher's duty and conscience are to groom a student to be obedient to teachers, school and to power. Hence the punishment was justified, though excessive.¹⁶

In the second incident, a professor criticized SOTUS on her campus. Quite a number of students, alumni and professors at her school and beyond reacted to her criticism negatively, including issuing sexual and violent threats. As if the matter was not bad enough, the next day one of the university's administrators refused to protect her, saying that it was her personal matter and that the matter was unrelated to the university.¹⁷ Instead, he defended SOTUS and the students. These cases may be extreme symptoms, but they are not exceptions.

PERPETUATING SOCIAL MALAISE

The problem is that the hierarchical social relations and personal or person-based social institutions that SOTUS helps to reproduce are a serious cause of the malaise and social ills that permeate major social institutions in Thailand. SOTUS and the damage that it regularly causes are microcosmic of the larger society.

Take Thai academia for example. It has been corroded by an obsession with Thainess and by person-based social institutions, too. It is well known that academic promotion, from top to bottom, depends not only on academic merits but also heavily on political or personal relations between the junior and the senior, that is, on connection, favour and acquaintance or the absence of it. The rule of thumb for those who would make scholarly criticism is to recognize the social position of the person whose work one comments on, and then to calibrate the comment accordingly, or not comment at all. Respecting one another is not enough; reverence may be required. Even an academic cardinal sin – plagiarism – can be overlooked for years if the wrongdoer has good connections, until he finally becomes an untouchable senior.¹⁸ In addition to the every-day culture of the academy, the explicitly anti-democratic politics of most

¹⁶ See the video clip that went viral, “รอง ผอ. ร.ร. เสิงสาง ดบนักเรียน” [Vice Principal of the Soengsang school hit a student], *YouTube*, 21 August 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTQiXUPCH48>. Then he gave an interview afterward, “รอง ผอ. ร.ร. เสิงสาง ชี้แจงสดๆกรณีดบหัวลูกศิษย์ ชันไม่ขอโทษ” [Vice Principal of the Soengsang school explained why he hit his student, insisting he would not apologize], *YouTube*, 24 August 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcM6sq5L-fA>

¹⁷ “ลลิตาเปิดใจศึกไรต์สตอรี่ขงคศิลป์” [Lalita speaks about her battle with SOTUS at the music school], *Prachatai*, 27 August 2015, <http://www.prachatai.com/journal/2015/08/61083>

¹⁸ See the case of Dr. Suppachai Lorlohakarn, “Doctor no more: Thai official finally loses title,” *Times Higher Education*, 28 June 2012, <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/doctor-no-more-thai-official-finally-loses-title/420399.article>; “Death threats in Thailand for UK whistleblower” *Time Higher Education*, 22 August 2013, <https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/death-threats-in-thailand-for-uk-whistleblower/2006659.article>. The case also shows the problem of Thai journalism too, see Erika Fry, “Escape from Thailand,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, 2 September 2011. http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/fry_in_thailand.php

university administrators in the past decade and the conservative trend discussed above make life in Thai academia a precarious one for critical scholars.¹⁹ No guarantee of academic freedom exists, and denials of promotion on political grounds are known. Even the expulsion of a member of a university's faculty for political views has taken place.²⁰

In a society in which good personal social relations are imperative, good academic institutions and good media are hard to achieve, since merit is overlooked and professionalism trumped. The malaise described here is epidemic in the military, police, bureaucracy, and probably every public institution including, sadly, the judicial system. Inefficiency permeates these institutions from top to bottom because their personnel are, by and large, recruited, socialized, promoted and molded not by professional standards, but by nepotism, connections, favoritism, and the personal and hierarchical relations that have been in place for generations. These institutions are not capable of handling complex and sophisticated business.

The resultant inefficiency has come to have serious consequences recently. Infamous examples include the downgrading of the Thai aviation industry by the International Civil Aviation Organization due to its failure to meet safety standards,²¹ the EU's warning to the Thai fishing industry and growing sanctions by businesses in the US and EU markets against fishery products from Thailand due to the chronic problem of slave labour in Thailand's fishing fleets,²² and the punishment by the US for Thailand's failure to attend to the problem of human trafficking.²³ In every case, it appears that the relevant Thai authority is aware of the problems but has been negligent for years. The Thai police are notorious in their unprofessional handling even of major cases that are of international interest, let alone everyday cases that hold purely domestic interest. Corruption, too, is condoned and encouraged by this type of social institution. Putting blame solely on individual politicians for corruption while ignoring the ingrained problem in every social institution, especially the military and the government bureaucracy, Thais are in self-denial again.

Thai patrimonialism depends heavily on a charismatic monarch as the pinnacle of legitimacy. With the King's deteriorating health, the future of the whole country is uncertain since he is unlikely to be replicable. For decades, the king has been considered the pillar of stability in Thai politics, and Thais have yet to learn that a mortal person cannot be the basis of a stable political system.

¹⁹ See Saksit Saiyasombat, "Thammasat University split as it debates for and against Nitirat," *Asian Correspondent*, 3 February 2012, about an incident to a group of academic critics,

<http://asiancorrespondent.com/75151/thammasat-university-split-as-it-debates-for-and-against-nitirat>

²⁰ See the case of Dr. Somsak Jeamteerasakul in "Academic Freedom in Thailand," *New Mandala*, 27 February 2015, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2015/02/27/academic-freedom-in-thailand>

²¹ Leisha Chi, "Thai aviation sector under scrutiny after safety audit," *BBC News*, 2 Apr 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-32126817>; and "Thai aviation sector 'red flagged' for safety," *BBC News*, 18 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-33181534>.

²² Jonathan Stearns, "Thailand Faces EU Threats of Seafood Bans on Fishing Rules," *Bloomberg Business*, 21 April 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-04-21/thailand-faces-eu-threat-of-seafood-ban-on-fishing-rules>; and "Thai efforts on illegal fishing still not enough, EU warns," *The Straits Times*, 18 July 2015, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thai-efforts-on-illegal-fishing-still-not-enough-eu-warns>

²³ "US demotes Thailand and Qatar for abysmal human trafficking records," *The Guardian*, 20 June 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/jun/20/thailand-qatar-downgraded-human-trafficking-report>;

CONCLUSION

The problem of hazing or SOTUS in Thailand is the tip of the iceberg of a much bigger and more fundamental problem; the microcosmic manifestation of widespread troubles; and a symptom of chronic and structural deficiency. To stop it will require confronting the hierarchical and authoritarian social relations discussed above, and modernizing social institutions—especially public ones—by making them more impersonal in adhering to laws, rules, professionalism and principles.

In the meantime, should the rankings of Thai universities go further south, it would be justified.

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