

BOOK REVIEW

A Critical Study of Thailand's Higher Education Reforms: The Culture of Borrowing By Rattana Lao (2015), 209 pp. ISBN: 9781317691921, New York: Routledge.

Rattana Lao's *A Critical Study of Thailand's Higher Education Reforms: The culture of borrowing* is part of the Routledge Critical Studies in Asian Education series edited by S. Gopinathan and Wing On Lee. The book covers the major trends and events of Thai higher education policy and utilises an interpretive framework of policy borrowing and lending. It is remarkably readable and its depth and quality of historical, theoretical, and empirical analysis cannot be overstated. The main argument of the book is the "culture of borrowing" which relates to selective borrowing of higher education policy in Thailand from a variety of global sources and the assumption that doing so will achieve a brand of "cultural supremacy" sought after by Thai policymakers.

Much of the book emerges from Lao's dissertation, a qualitative case study using document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and a three-month observation at the Office of National Educational Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA), a key governmental organisation in higher education policy. In a region that has also relied overly on quantitative research in social science, Lao breaks from that tradition to offer rich qualitative data to support her interpretive framework.

The book includes chapters on a variety of topics including historical developments of higher education policy, the changing role of the Thai state, and quality assurance policies and repercussions. A chapter on autonomous university policy unveils a controversial aspect of higher education policy in Thailand, where the flagship universities of the country, once controlled by the state, are being empowered to function with increased institutional autonomy and large budgets approved by the Budget Bureau. Additionally, Lao confronts the normative view that Thailand, having never been formally colonised, was free to pick and choose which higher education policies and practices it would like to borrow from other nations. With care and precision she delves deeply into the politics, economics, and culture of borrowing in the Thai context. Lao's in-depth and nuanced analysis shows how Thai elites have jockeyed for selectively implementing international standards in a way that safeguards "Thai-ness." She also demonstrates how the forces of globalisation, regional pressures from the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and internal quality assurance goals and measures have ultimately led to "reform fatigue."

One of the major contributions of the books is a compelling exposition of Thai "socio-logic" – a term coined by Schriewer and Martinez (2004), which refers to the unique history, politics, and culture of a nation that influence the policy borrowing process. Lao acutely expounds on how policy borrowing in Thai higher education syncs with the socio-logic at play in the Thai context.

The book is rife with captivating stories and statistics: how Ramkhamheang University at one point enrolled 700,000 students, that only around 1.5% of Thai faculty have achieved academic rank of full professor, and how faculty staff are frustrated with doing hours of paperwork they believe is unlikely ever to be read.

This book will appeal broadly to anyone with interest in higher education in Thailand. For those working in Thai higher education policy, this book will be enlightening. Lao displays a mastery of higher education policy in general, so this book will also serve as a primer to globalisation in higher education policy through the case of Thailand.

This book has the potential to begin a more candid conversation about the past, present, and future of Thai higher education policy. The case study research methodology is an effective way of

contributing to knowledge in this area, and one hopes this book spurs on more empirical research. One limitation is the lack of focus on the experiences of private universities in Thailand, which would have been enlightening considering their emergence after 1969 and subsequent stagnation due largely to government regulation. Also, since higher education was viewed through the framework of policy borrowing and lending, much is left to be said about student experiences and the admissions process, the growing involvement of the business sector in higher education, and how much higher education in Thailand contributes to or assuages societal inequality. Still, despite Lao's admission that this book is not exhaustive, it is by far the most comprehensive understanding of Thai higher education in English print today, and its contribution to knowledge will have significant implications for understanding the future role of Thai higher education in the politics, economics, and culture of Thailand.

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