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Community Learning Resources Management Practices in Thai Buddhist Monasteries

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Abstract

Before the introduction of modern education in late 19th century, Buddhism monasteries in Thailand had long played the significant role in traditional education. Without the role in today formal education, the temples still serve the need of the nation in reading promotion in rural areas. This study is a part of a research on development of community learning resource management model in monasteries. It aimed to investigate the information management practices in 59 reading resources in temples, and factors affecting the success of the resources according to their opinions. It revealed that 28 temples (47.46%) organized temple libraries, 17 temples provided village reading corners and 4 temples had public libraries. Most abbots agreed that currently, temple are centers of learning activities in the communities, temples are supporters for community education, and should provide information services to attract people and revive the temple role as the centers of the community. Whereas most temples had small number of printed material, they owned palm leaves manuscripts, and community radios. Most temples provided reading services while 50% offered reference, and computer services to the primary group of user who were students and people aged 11-20. The finding of the second part confirmed the precedent studies that the abbots' characteristics, the accessibility and atmosphere, and the community engagements were prominent factors (> 3.5) for the success of learning resources.

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1. Introduction

Thailand, formerly known as Siam situated in the center of Southeast Asia and shares borders with Myanmar, Lao People's Republic, Cambodia and Malaysia. In the past 100 years the country had developed from an agricultural society to the industrialized one. However, with the rapid economic and social changes, the education gap between rural and urban people widen significantly over decades. Socio-economic factors including access to information and reading material play a major role in the gap. For people in rural area,

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prominent factor for reading behavior and use of reading resources in Thailand were book prices and library accessibility [1]. With number of more than 37,000 in the country, the appropriate location in the heart of most communities, and the former function as a center of all community, Buddhist temples nowadays could offer easy and free access for locals and being the high potential community learning resource [2].

1.1. Reading promotion in Thailand and Community learning resources

Even though the literacy rate in Thailand is as high as 90 %, the reading rate is still a critical problem for the country, resulting in low learning outcome. For decades, the government had tried to eradicate the problem by providing multiple forms of rural information services, i.e. district libraries, community learning centers, village reading centers, mobile libraries, and numerous national reading campaigns [3]. Recently in 2009, the government announced “A Decade of Reading 2009-2018” and “Reading as a National Agenda.”

A major cause of low reading rate is the ineffectiveness of public libraries services in Thailand. Studies showed that insufficient of budget and staff considered being the most severe problems to public libraries in the government system [4]. Thus, public libraries in Thailand simply failed to meet minimum standard and had been unable to serve as a resources for people’s life-long learning or informal education [5]. Nevertheless, there were information provision projects supported by UNESCO [6,3] and rural community-led library initiatives locally organized as the alternative to public libraries [7,8]. These independent information provision projects had been showing effective services in public places such as community centers, schools, and temples.

The term “community learning resources” used in the study is a generic term derived from UNESCO’s CLC Management Handbook [2] and Rural Information Provision in Developing Countries (1997), and three Thai sources, the National Education Act of 1999 (B.E. 2542), Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education, and the Department of Local Administration [9]. According to these literatures, the term was chosen as it encompasses the wide scope of the provision of community information services and community learning center (CLCs) in Asia. There are three countries where most CLCs are located in the compounds of Buddhist temples, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand. UNESCO [6] divided rural information provision into two groups: community centers and community libraries. Community centers can be called by various name as well as community libraries which can be called rural library, community library, village library, and village reading room.

1.2. Thai Buddhism and Thai Temples

With current 66 millions in total, 61.5 millions Thai (93%) are Buddhists, mostly Theravada. However, the distinctive characteristic of Thai Buddhism is that the beliefs and practices are varied [10]. This is because the ancient primitive belief in this region was animism, which had been incorporated with later introduced Hinduism-Brahmanism cosmology, and gradually blended with Buddhism in 13th century. Since then, Siam had developed its education system in Buddhism temples. Fry [11] stated that “the remarkable progressive nature of Buddhist epistemology resulted in traditional Siamese education that Buddhist monks were expected to be proficient in Pali grammar, fine arts, law, medicine, astronomy and arithmetic.” These scholars had made merit by reading, writing, teaching, healing and helping people for centuries. Thus, Thai temples had long been public learning space and cultural centers where monks had to master all subjects and completely engaged with the communities. In the past, monks in Siam had engaged with worldly matter, just like in Sri Lanka before the colonization period [12]. The role of religious in Thai society was greatly lessened by the introduction of Western education in this period. It is undoubtedly true that this part of the great effort of King Rama V (Chulalongkorn) to modernize and build the nation during 1868-1910 had

opened opportunities for girls and commoners to be equally educated. However, it totally diminished the traditional knowledge especially those inherited in temples and monks.

By law, the Sangha Act of 1902 stated that those reside in a temple do "service to the nation" [10]. Practically, although the temples in Thailand have currently declined the role in formal education, they still engage with the communities and altered their role to community informal education. This could be obviously seen in the Family-Temple-School partnerships concept. This adaptation of the School-Family-Community partnerships clearly represent temple role in education as "community." Moreover, temples are still the cultural center in the village, especially in the Northeast region, the remote and second populated region of the nation, where temples and villagers had long been primarily connected.

At present, with huge population of 22 million or 33% of the country population, the Northeast region hosted a number of around 48% of current 37,331 Buddhist temples in the country [13]. Temples in the region remain to play strong roles in religious ceremony, community development, and community services [14]. A study on reading resources by the Faculty of Education, Khon Kean University [15] also indicated that students, parents and communities leaders agreed that Buddhist temples were one of principle places for community reading and learning resources. If the temples are supposed to be the effective community learning resources, this shall be a good strategy to fill the education gap and learning opportunities of the people between rural and urban areas. This study, therefore seeks for the model for community learning resources management in Buddhist temples, of which the first phase of the study is presented in this paper.

2. Research concept

Although several literature have found related to community learning resource management, such as UNESCO publications, and Bunch's handbooks [16,17] this study primarily based on two previous studies of Mostert [18] and Ahmed [8]. Mostert's study on community libraries in South Africa articulated some implications of ill-matched information service provision in rural areas, and reminded the reader that there were high expectations of public libraries when they were established in Africa, but most of these services fell far short especially with regard to providing services that were capable of reaching all readers. He described public libraries in South Africa were underutilized due to several factors, including lack of knowledge on the part of librarians with regard to rural information needs, inaccessibility of the library, and lack of understanding on the part of community members regarding how the library might be used and the type of services available. The results of his study suggested 9 key factors for managing a community library; establishment, governance, finance, aims, users, information, services, staff, and co-operation.

Ahmed [8] has developed a community library model from a study of 3 small community-led library initiatives in Central Thailand. The model involved the following steps; 1) community motivation and participation, 2) education and training, 3) information needs studies, 4) site selection, 5) budget, library stock and staffing, 6) library activities, 7) access to computer and the Internet, and (8) monitoring and evaluation.

Methods

As a part of a mixed-method research on development of a model, this first phase of the study used a quantitative method. Population of this study was multi-stages selected from 1,622 temples in the northeast region. Preliminary survey to identify the temples which have effective learning resource activities was firstly done, 71 temples were selected.

A questionnaire comprised of three parts; 1) the temple information, 2) learning resource management practices, and 3) the factors affecting the success of learning resource management, was developed and done a Cronbachs' alpha coefficient test. The questionnaires were sent to 71 temples, 59 of them (83 %) responded. The data was analyzed using percentage, mean and standard deviation.

3. Results and discussions

As the study was a first part of a multi-stage research, it provided merely basic information for the next stage. Nevertheless, findings did provide emerging issue for discussions.

3.1. *Sample characteristics*

There are four types of learning resources related to reading activities in the temple: temple library, temple school library, village reading corner, and public library. About half of the 59 respondents were temple library (28 temple 47.46%) while 17 temples provided village reading corners. Four temples stated to have public libraries. Most temples located in the community and had other types of learning resources in their compounds.

3.2. *Management practices*

Management practices were divided into 7 basic components, important findings were as follows. In term of administration, most temples had learning resources committee derived from various group in community, mainly from monks. Most abbots agreed that currently, temple are centers of learning activities in the communities, temples are supporters for community education, and should provide information services to attract people and revive the temple role as the centers of the community.

In terms of buildings, most of these information provision initiatives were in large rooms in buildings with small number of library furniture. Only several temples had more than 1,200 volumes of books while most of the temples owned only 100-300 books. Whereas most temples had small number of printed material, most of them owned palm leaves manuscripts, and community radios.

These findings reflected the nature of practices in learning resource and rural public libraries which were varied greatly from place to place [19]. The small number of printed material also indicated that the traditional modes of communication, i.e. talks, storytelling, and music, can be adapted to use in information transfer in the new media form -- community radios. This confirmed the previous findings that oral communication audio-visual approaches are rich in learning possibilities [6].

It was found that more than 80% of staffs were monks and 63 % of the whole staff holding bachelor degree. All learning resources were supported from donation money but more than half wish not to inform their annual budget. Only 25 temples told the figure which average means was 36,020 Baht (900 Euro) per year.

Most temples provided reading services while 50% offered reference, and computer services to the primary group of user who were students and people aged 11-20. The finding supported the fact that these learning resources substituted the country's poor public library system. Student needed to rely greatly on any easy access resources, even though materials and services provided were rather not in a good condition or insufficient for their need.

3.3. *Factors affecting the success of community learning resources*

In the second part of the study, mean and standard deviation were applied to analyze opinion of the temple representative beyond factors affecting success of managing learning resources in Buddhist temples. Factors were divided into 4 main categories: temple fundamental components, learning resources management factors, services and activities factors, and community engagement factors. It was found that in the first category where 15 factors were listed, the results revealed that there are 5 factors considered to greatly influence the success of learning resources ($X > 3.5$). Out of 5 five factors, 4 factors were noticeably

about the abbots. They were the leadership of the abbot, the abbots' concept in relation to human development that emphasize on other dimensions and tools rather than the use of Buddha's teachings, the strong determination of the abbot concerning education, and the abbots' good education, both religious and secular educations, to understand social changes.

Even though the study was done in the more specific resources, abbots' factors still are the most influential factors in education in temple. The results confirmed numbers of Office of the Educational Council studies [20,21].

Furthermore, besides these abbots factors, another factor emerged was the physical facilities and cleanliness of the temple. This factor matched with group of location and buildings factor which was the most outstanding amongst management factors. All 3 factors listed in the group: the accessibility with free of charge, the clean and safe atmosphere, and the environment that is conducive to learning were considered greatly influence.

Though the period of study were different, the finding proved to be similar to the National Statistic Office [1] reading survey and Sacchanand's study [5] that expense i.e. book prices, and library accessibility were of significant importance.

It should be noted that financing and staffing were not problems in the case of libraries in the temples. This was because the most influential factor for temple is the abbot who administers and practices differently from temple to temple. Another last and notable factor was community engagement. Most factors in the group i.e. contemporary leading roles of the monks, temple role in community development, potential to adapt to the changing needs of society, and faith, good attitude and cooperation of people in the community toward temple activities were rated most influential factors.

In conclusion, the results support previous community libraries studies which emphasized on full community engagement. They will be used to design community learning resource management model in temples which can be replicated to support rural development in Thailand.

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