



Learning centers in Buddhist temples: The development of community service management in Western Thailand*

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Abstract

This research aims to 1) examine the history and leadership status of administrators and the problems of learning centers; 2) investigate the guidelines for the management of temple learning centers for public services in Western Thailand, and 3) explore the learning management model in the temples for public services in Western Thailand. The qualitative research was conducted at 9 temples in three provinces in Western Thailand. The research tools included interview, observation, focus group, and seminar workshop. The research results revealed that the majority of the temple's learning centers in West Thailand had been developed for more than 100 years for art and cultural transmissions. The problematic conditions were the lack of personnel, budget, and care from the government sector. The abbots were of high seniority in terms of age, education, devotion and morality. Regarding guidelines for the management of the academic learning centers, all learning centers have the guidelines in the same 3 aspects: management process, method, and function. The temple learning center management model is based on 4 activities. These are: 1) religious studies; 2) education support tasks; 3) public support tasks; 4) dissemination tasks. In addition, moral training camps were set up to transmit local culture and disseminate Buddhist doctrines through various kinds of media.

Keywords: Community services, Learning centers, Management, Temple

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Introduction

Since the origin of humanity, people have lived as groups or societies and culture has been a mechanism to move society forward. Living as a family develops the learning process and increases compassion and desire to live together. Ways of living together are described as cultures. Thus, different lifestyles and environments cause different cultures and traditions. (Wasee, 2004). However, the impact of social change and globalization has led to rapidly changed the economy, society, politics, dominance, and culture. Religious leaders, ecclesiastic or community spiritual leaders, should make community members more aware of the importance of culture and local wisdom by supporting local cultural heritage and conservation, cultural learning and teaching and cultural management (Heeb-o-soth, 2007).

Buddhist principles are the core of every branch of Thai culture and traditions. Buddhist temples are therefore the centers that transfer knowledge, morality, culture and traditions in each community. They need systematic management and development in order to make the community culture stay based on morality and creativity (Wasinsarakorn, 2001). Temples are the centers of Buddhism and abbots should be responsible for the development of culture and moral learning activities and ceremonies. Therefore it is necessary to study the development of learning centers in Buddhist temples in order to improve the potential of abbots in managing and developing of Buddhist temples as community learning centers.

Literature Review and Framework

The two major related theories discussed in this paper are structural-functionalism and knowledge management theory. Structural-functionalism emerged as a prominent theory in social studies during the 1960s as a way to examine the roles of different structures within societies and how they functioned and co-existed in the larger national machine (Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion and Rees, 2008). The theory has its origins in the works of famous anthropologists, such as Malinowski (2006) and Radcliffe-Brown (2013), who began to use organic and biological analogies superimposed upon their explanations of societies. Actually, rather than a separate theory, Talcott Parsons (1961) has argued that structural-functionalism is a stage in the development of social science thinking. It is a large-scale, *macro-sociological* term that is used to examine societies in their wider context (Turner, 1995). This study will attempt to place Buddhist learning centers within the scholarly debate and view them as a key cog in the social system. Knowledge management, by contrast, is a relatively new academic concept

built on a collection of varying theories from widely different fields (Baskerville and Dulipovici, 2006). The key feature of knowledge management theory (or theories) is to create systems for effective organization of information in the technological age (Earl, 2001). Of particular interest in traditional communities, such as those in Thailand, is how to overcome conservative cultural obstacles to modern knowledge management changes in society (De Long and Fahey, 2000). The relationship of these theories to the investigation is presented in the framework model below.

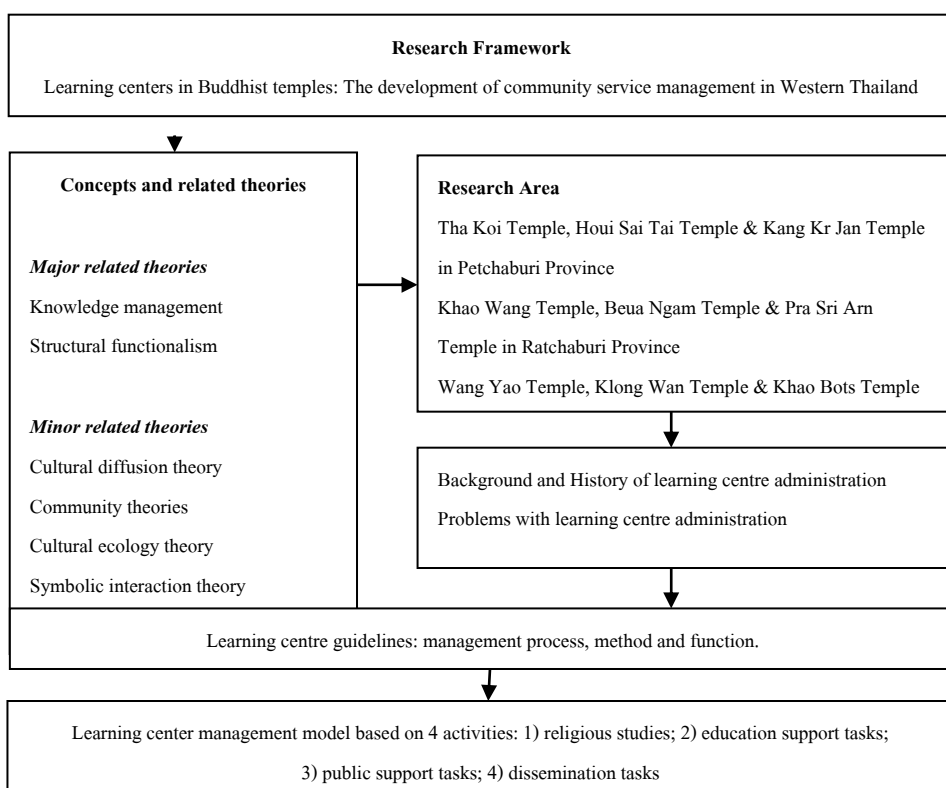


Figure 1: Research Framework

There have been many examinations of Buddhist learning by international scholars but only a handful of international forays into the field of Buddhist learning in Thailand. Burnett (2011) conducted a comparative analysis of secular and Buddhist learning to inform approaches to teaching mindfulness in organized institutions. Much has been made of the positive effect that Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy can have on society if incorporated into education, particularly primary and secondary education (Kernochan, McCormick, and White, 2007). Actually, many of the studies on Buddhism in Thai education center around the effect of Buddhist teaching in communities, such as the study of forest



monks and the environmental movement by Walter (2007). Additionally, a trending topic in academic research is the charitable nature of Thai Buddhism and its effect on social minority groups. Some common themes are social work with domestic abuse cases, HIV sufferers and the gay and lesbian community (Klunklin and Greenwood, 2005). This investigation will add to the the scholarly debate by examining how Buddhism impacts on community management in Western Thailand.

Research aims

This is a qualitative investigation that aims to:

- 1) examine the history and leadership status of administrators and the problems of learning centers;
- 2) investigate the guidelines for the management of temple learning centers for public services in Western Thailand;
- 3) explore the learning management model in the temples for public services in Western Thailand.

Research methodology

This investigation was conducted at 9 temples in three provinces in Western Thailand, including Phetchaburi, Ratchaburi, and Prachuap Khiri Khan. The sample area was chosen from community learning centers in these three Western provinces of Thailand, including Tha Koi Temple, Houi Sai Tai Temple and Kang Kr Jan Temple in Petchaburi Province, Khao Wang Temple, Beua Ngam Temple and Pra Sri Arn Temple in Ratchaburi Province and Wang Yao Temple, Klong Wan Temple and Khao Bots Temple in Prachuap Khiri Khan Province.

Research data were gathered from documents and fieldwork according to the qualitative research principles of Songkoon Chantachon (2006). The research tools included interview, observation, focus group, and seminar workshop. The researcher chose a sample population of 105 respondents by a purposive selecting method. The informants included 15 key informants (temple and community leaders), 45 casual informants (prominent community members and temple personnel) and 45 general informants (general community members). The researchers entered the field and performed participant and non-participant observations in the communities to determine the current state and problems with community management. Structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with all informants according to the three research aims to add to the observations made by researchers. Interviewees were

also asked for suggestions that might improve community management. These suggestions were discussed with small-sized groups of respondents in each community. The findings were analyzed, and a development model was drawn up, which was presented back to the informants at a workshop. The research data was verified by using a triangulation technique, analyzed in accordance with the given objectives, and the research results were presented in a descriptive, analytical format.

Results

According to this investigation, Buddhist temples used to be purely religious learning centers for priests, novices and others who are interested in Buddhism. Over time the temples developed their role as religious schools for children. Nowadays, religious learning centers can be divided into 2 categories, according to temple size. Large religious learning centers (Tha Koi Temple, Khao Wang Temple, Beua Ngam Temple, Pra Sri Arn Temple and Klong Wan Temple) provide all religious learning activities and community services, for example, Pali and Buddhist schools of theology and Buddhist schools on Sunday. Moreover, they support scholarships for disadvantaged students and support the teaching profession to develop local career knowledge. In addition to the religious learning centers, Buddhist temples encourage religious distribution, relying on important traditional ceremonies and religious festivals.

The researchers found that the religious learning centers in Buddhist temples were faced with a decrease of ecclesiastical Pali students and a lack of expenditure and support from related government offices. For these reasons, the religious learning centers had to rely on donations from the congregation. Furthermore, the learning centers need more experts in local knowledge. According to this study, the leadership of abbots is a major factor in the development of temple learning centers for community services. The results showed that the 9 abbots from the sampling population were highly qualified in both morality and leadership.

Guidelines for the management of temple learning centers for public services in Western Thailand

According to the study, the management of temple learning centers is based on brainstorming and planning between involved community members and organizations in order to complete 4 missions of community services, including:



1) Religious studies – the pariyattham schools were established in the temples, which were supervised and managed by the abbot and the school board members. The school had two divisions (monk and general public);

2) Education support tasks – this was the worldly education support. The school for general education for monks, novices, and youth was established. Grants were founded, and the students were awarded those grants. There were also Sunday Buddhist schools and Youth Buddhist missionary groups;

3) Public support tasks – community learning centers were established, there were guidelines for the community learning center establishment, the establishment of Information Technology centers, clubs for preservation of local arts and culture, groups of local wisdom and the establishment of a local fund and bank;

4) Dissemination tasks – the learning centers acted as cultural tourism centers, making the temples cultural learning centers, setting up learning centers for the community, establishing cultural tourism centers, studying the local lifestyle and customs, and exposing others to the culture within the temple and religion. In addition, moral training camps were set up to transmit local culture and disseminate Buddhist doctrines through various kinds of media.

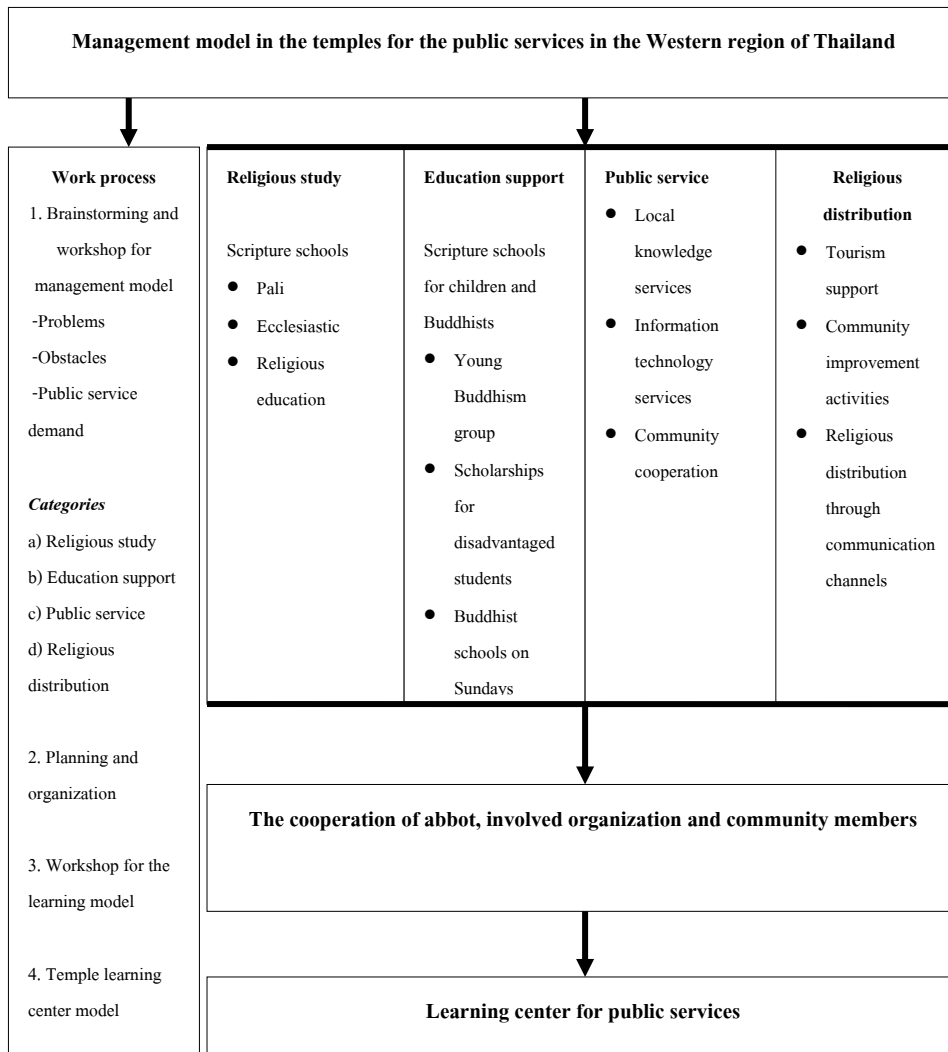


Figure 2: the management model for temple learning centers for public services in Western Thailand.

Discussion

The research results revealed that the majority of the temple's learning centers in West Thailand had been developed for more than 100 years. The reason for the establishment of temple learning centers was that the temples wanted the people in the communities to develop their quality of life continuously. Therefore, the temples established the learning centers for art and cultural transmissions. The abbots and their assistants closely oversee management. The problematic conditions were the lack of personnel (both students and teachers), budget and care from the government sector. The abbots were of high seniority in terms of age, education, devotion and morality. They had a full and



wide range of knowledge (religious and the world), with compassion, selflessness, generosity and integrity for monks, novices and youths in all localities to get sufficient education.

Regarding guidelines for the management of the academic learning centers, all learning centers have the guidelines in the same 3 aspects: management process, method, and function. Processes were operated through community participations, meetings, and discussions, working out a plan and implementing it in accordance with tasks set in the given plan. This plan was the temple plan, set up to meet the needs of the community. Priorities were arranged in accordance with the needs of the community. These were done for the purpose of categorizing center types and activities. Every aspect had to be appropriated and related to given frames on 4 types of activities, aiming mainly for efficiency and effectiveness of work and returning benefits in accordance with the given objectives. Every member of temple staff was given working assignments, as well as religious duties.

The temple learning centers need the cooperation of abbots, related government offices and community members, providing location, human resources and budget support to achieve the four goals of public service, including 1) religious education; 2) education support; 3) community service, and 4) religious distribution. The success of the organization depends on the leadership and capacity of the abbot to operate and manage all of the work and problems. This is related to the theory of knowledge management championed by Wichan Phanich (2005). Knowledge management is the key to success using work priority and applying knowledge and experience to manage work and missions in order to reach the goals. So, as Salvaacion (2000) concluded, education, in the beginning, was organized by the family, religious institutions, and councils. Education was managed to satisfy human needs. This is related to the research of Chutima Sajjanant (2005). Sajjanant's study results show that priests are important knowledge resources In terms of composure and humility. Consequently, the role of the abbot is to support religious education and practice, making the temple a community learning and development center (Wimolmathee, 2006).

The temple learning center management model is based on 4 activities. These are 1) religious studies – the pariyattham schools were established in the temples, which were supervised and managed by the abbot and the school board members. The school had two divisions (monk and general public); 2) education support tasks – this was the worldly education support. The school for general education for monks, novices, and youth was established. Grants were founded, and the students were awarded



those grants. There were also Sunday Buddhist schools and Youth Buddhist missionary groups; 3) public support tasks – community learning centers were established, there were guidelines for the community learning center establishment, the establishment of Information Technology centers, clubs for preservation of local arts and culture, groups of local wisdom and the establishment of a local fund and bank; 4) dissemination tasks – the learning centers acted as cultural tourism centers, making the temples cultural learning centers, setting up learning centers for the community, establishing cultural tourism centers, studying the local lifestyle and customs, and exposing others to the culture within the temple and religion. In addition, moral training camps were set up to transmit local culture and disseminate Buddhist doctrines through various kinds of media.

These conclusions are related to structural-functional theories. Niyaphan Wannasiri (1997) found that the study of culture is the study of human behavior and the function and relation of each structure of society allow us to understand each society. This is consistent with the knowledge management research of Phornthida Wicheanpanya (2004), who found that the key element of knowledge management is “man” because man is a knowledge resource and application, “technology” is a tool used to search, store, share and apply knowledge, while “knowledge process” is the management and application of knowledge in order to make it easier to implement. This is similar to the network theory of Saree Phongphits (1991), which states that connections between co-workers and organizations lead to a strong work network. According to this study, the model for public services in temples is based on four missions of public service: 1) religious education, 2) education support, 3) community service and 4) religious distribution. The temple learning center provides scripture schools for priests and Buddhist schools for young Buddhists. Moreover, temples support cultural tourism and cultural activities. This is related to the concept of local wisdom (Meekusol, 2007). Thai wisdom is the basis of the knowledge of all Thai people. This has been improved, inherited and applied to be appropriate to different people, societies, and eras. The temple is the constant center for the conservation of cultural heritage, and priests have a responsibility as trustees of heritage conservation (Saewseng, 2001).

Suggestions

The results of this investigation have led the research team to identify a number of suggestions for the development of temples, which are similar to those recommended by Boonsri Phanachit and Srinuan Lapphakittaro (2002) from their investigation into the achievement of temples in Chonprathanrangsarit



Pakkret District, Nonthaburi province. There should be just three areas of focus for Buddhist centers: 1) religious education – temples should promote policies on Buddhist principles and study for priests and novices; 2) education support – temples should provide scholarship and education funds for disadvantaged students; 3) religious distribution – temples should encourage advertisements on the radio, television and in other media.

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