

The Role of Public Library in Thailand as the Learning Center for Rural Communities

Narit Nimsomboon (nar@alpha.tu.ac.th, narit@slis.tsukuba.ac.jp)

Department of Library Science
Faculty of Liberal Arts
Thammasat University
THAILAND

Abstract

Thailand presently has a very large rural population of approximately 48.96 million (80% of the total population of 61.2 million). According to the 9th National Foundation Education Development Plan of Thailand (2002 – 2006), to increase the chance of learning access for all is one of the strategies to fulfill human resource development. Public library system as the learning resource in rural communities has to tune its role to support this policy. This presentation will introduce the Public Library System in Thailand in terms of history, development, status, current tasks, future plan as well as give discussion about the facing barriers of public library in Thailand in various aspects.

History of Public Library in Thailand

“ Public library ” was developed from the “public reading room” , which was firstly established in Bangkok in 1916 by the Education Department, in which the first three “public reading room” were organized to make use of existing facilities of the following schools : Wat Sutat Thepwararham, Sam Chean and Prayoonrawongsawas, Thonburi, in 1949. Ministry of Education had set up more public libraries to expand both quantity and quality, as well as promulgated public library regulation. Its purpose was to inculcate reading and learning habits into people’s mind. Those libraries were also utilized for providing training and giving knowledge to people in terms of discussion, conversation, and excursion. At that time there were 20 public libraries in various provinces, after that it increased to 64 public libraries in 1950.

In 1952, the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior, had made the policy to expand public library to district level. The Ministry of Interior provided the places in the community areas, while the Ministry of Education supported the budget for construction. In the same year, the former public library regulation was improved and repromulgated , in which the public libraries were classified into 3 categories, namely provincial public library, district public library, and mobile library to give services t people both inside and outside library by circulating the books to peoples in the rural areas.

In 1973, the public library was upgraded to an educational unit attached to the Adult Education Division of General Education Department. It was operated to serve the following functions :

1. To provide nonformal education services to general people.
2. To promote people’s reading and learning habits
3. To provide people with up-to-date information and knowledge
4. To promote and give advice on knowledge to people, as well as attitudes.

5. To promote and disseminate culture and
6. To promote and give advice to people on spending their spare time usefully

In 1979, the Department of Non-Formal Education (NFE) was established and the public library was transferred to come under the supervision of the Provincial NFE Center responsible to promote, support, and assist in public library's administration and personnel so that the public library could be carried out more actively and effectively according to the public library regulation 1986 issued by the Non-Formal Education Department.

Later on, the Department of Non-Formal Education (NFE) public library regulation 1992 to make public library be community information centre for promotion of community learning and activities, as well as for development of community learning network.

Public Libraries can be classified into 3 sizes and the followings:

1. Large-size public library

1.1 Provincial public library was firstly established in 1939 in Ubon Ratchathani, giving services to the people within the provincial areas. It also acted as the centre for circulating the books and materials within the province. Later on in 1949, the government had policy to expand adult education more widely and suitably to the condition. Currently, there are 73 provincial public libraries, which are classified in the large size. Provincial library will be set up in the municipality, which is under the responsibility of Provincial Non-Formal Education (NFE) Centre. Besides providing various to give service on text books and materials according to the NFE curricula, as well as providing Sukothaithammathirat Open University and Ramkamhaeng University corners.

1.2 Rajamangalapisek Library, Klai Kangwon Palace, Prachuap Khiri Khan is the only one organized particularly within the front areas of the Palace due to the Rajamangalapisek Royal Ceremony of His Majesty the King.

2. Middle-size public library

Chalermrajagumari Public Library was established to serve Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Jakri Sirindhorn's resolution and ideas to promote people's education as she addressed in various occasions. In honour of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Jakri Sirindhorn and to celebrate Her Royal Highness' 36th birthday in 1991. Chalermrajagumari Public Library was established with the Princess' permission, the name of which was kindly bestowed by the Princess, as well.

Chalermrajagumari Public Library was set up in cooperation with local people, government and private sectors. The library is 2 storey building and comprise of various rooms such as the rooms of royal exhibition, for local information, for audiovisual media and computer, as well as general exhibition upstairs. Downstairs, there are the rooms for general libraries altogether joining in the project.

3. Small-size public library

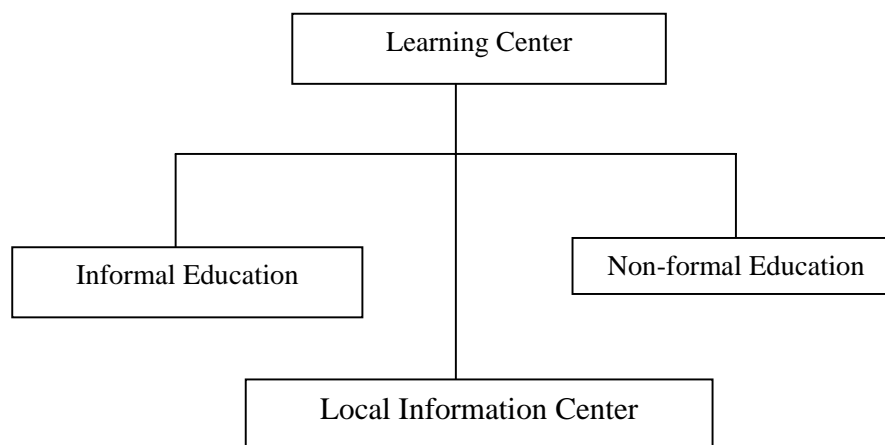
District and sub-district public libraries are classified in this acting as the network of provincial library to give services to people within the district areas in terms of informative and materials sources for their studies, as well as to disseminate culture. The construction of most district libraries is partially supported by the community, who

helps to donate land, money and materials and by the government budgets, as well. Bang Bor District Public Library, Samut Prakan was the first one established in 1943.

In 1952, the government had a resolution to establish a district library in every district, the task of which the Ministry of Education was assigned to carry out in order to promote learning and teaching of both formal and nonformal education. At present, there are 73 provincial public libraries, 686 district public libraries, 79 Chalmrajagumari Public Libraries, and 50 sub-district public libraries.

Tasks of the Current Public Library

To develop the tasks of public library, in 1995 the NFE Department had the policy to make all kinds of public library be learning centre giving services as the follows :



(Cited from : Kulthorn Lerdsuriyakul. "Public Library in Thailand " in 65th IFLA Council and General Conference Bangkok, Thailand August 20 – August 28,1999)

Informal education is providing the general public with educational opportunities. They can learn through resource persons, working experience, society, surroundings, printed materials, radio, television, electronic media, and from other sources through their whole lives. In addition, the learners can transfer their grades gained from informal education to formal nonformal education.

Informal education is an education system provided for supporting persons to learn without particular system and planning. That is the learners can learn by themselves from various kind of material and media, as well as from other source such as from environment, experience, and local intelligence, which are real thing in their way of life.

Nonformal education is providing nonformal education activities to persons who miss the opportunity to learn in schooling system with flexible methods and response to the needs of learners of each level in various models.

Local Information centre is the centre that collects various kinds of local information in various form of giving services, for provision of learning and teaching activities, for vocational development, as well as for exchange of information among networks and for giving services to those interested. Local information centre in public

library is the form of organizing system and disseminating necessary information useful to both village level and provincial level. It puts the emphasis on the collecting community information within the areas of the public library established.

Main Activities of Public Libraries

The Department of Non-Formal Education had policy for all types of public libraries to provide and promote various activities to community as the followings:

1. Community Information Center

- 1) Promote reading and information searching such as provide reading contest, story telling, speech contest, etc.
- 2) Promoting local intelligence such as collecting information, provide exhibition, study tour related to local intelligence
- 3) Providing mobile library service to community
- 4) Promoting community to form interesting groups
- 5) Promoting good family relationship such as provide children and family corner, have activities in father day, mother day, etc

2. Community Learning Center

- 1) Giving advice related to non-formal education
- 2) Providing facilities for experimental service related to innovation
- 3) Providing space and facilities for non-formal education activities

3. Center for Community Activities

- 1) Providing space and facilities for seminar, product exhibition, local product corner, etc.
- 2) Providing activities related to children and family such as promote activities in children day, mother day and father day, etc.
- 3) Providing activities and space for multi purpose activities of community

4. Developing Learning Network in Community

- 1) Information and media providing such as promoting resource sharing and routing in community
- 2) Producing, developing, distributing and training such as document or media producing, providing training related to media producing in order to disseminate information media to community network efficiently

Public Librarians Standard

According to Thai public library standard set by Thai Library Association (TLA), the qualifications of public librarians are as the followings :

1. Head Librarians into the government organizations (library) equal to sub-division level or higher must have one of following requirements:
 - Master degree in library science or information science and have at least 5 year experience related to library performance.
 - Bachelor degree in library science or information science and have at least 10 year experience related library performance.

- Bachelor degree in any field and have to pass the course training related to science or information science and have at least 10 year experience related to library performance.
2. Head Librarians into the government organizations (library) equal to sub-division level must have bachelor degree in library science or information science and have at least 5 year experience related to library performance.
3. Head librarians must have one of the following qualifications:
- Master degree in library science or information science
 - Bachelor degree in any field and have to pass the course training related to library science or information science and have at least 3 year experience related to library performance.

Additional Roles of Public Librarians in Thailand

Because of the changing role of public libraries as mentioned above public librarians in Thailand have to fine-tune their roles to be the supporters in studying, teaching activities, and information service providers inevitably. The additional roles of the librarians are cooperators and coordinators in order to provide information service and activities related to study and teaching. Furthermore, public librarians have to survey the needs of community in order to plan for good quality service.

Software Used in Public Library Work

The Department of Non-Formal Education is responsible for creating the software for public library works. The software, Public Library Service (*PLS : Educational version*), is distributed to public libraries and other types of libraries in Thailand free of charge. Its capacities are as follows :

- Storage of bibliographic information of books, other media, user profile, as well as circulation information.
- Printing barcode sticker and library user card
- Providing password system and preparing statistical report
- Providing backup system

Electronic Library Project to Celebrate the King Diamond Jubilee

Though more than 800 public Libraries were established, the services still don't efficiently serve the learning needs of users in such IT environment. The Department of Non-Formal Education has set the policy to develop 75 provincial public libraries to be electronic libraries in order to utilize modern technology information system to support the quality of learning and teaching development according to NFE curricula at all levels and types particularly on individual self-study and student-center principle. The electronic library project was established to celebrate the King Diamond Jubilee (1999) with the following objectives :

- To develop provincial public libraries to be electronic libraries
- To disseminate information related to the King's Project in every provinces via Internet
- To provide electronic media for self learning.

At present (2003), 10 provincial electronic libraries were launched their services and provide electronic media as well as internet service corner for their users.

Public library as the Distant Learning Center of Thaikom

As Thailand successfully launched the first satellite in 1993, the Ministry of Education had policy to extend education service to rural area and develop the equality of educational standard countrywide so the distant learning television programs via Thaikom was settled. There are cooperation between the NFE Department and private sector to produce educational media and launched the program on August 12, 1994. The scope of service covers both formal and non-formal education but emphasize the target groups in rural areas. The Public Library System has additional role to be the distant learning center of Thaikom.

Research Conducting Related to Thai Public Library Works

There are only a few research projects related to public library works in Thailand and most are master theses of graduate students whose major subject is Library and Information science. To do content analysis of master theses abstracts during 1974-2001 (about 30 items) related to public library works, Aree Cheunwattana reported that the theme of the studies can be classified as the followings:

1. Performance of Public library. For examples, public library patterns, activities, services, status & problems, and service & performance evaluation.
2. User studies. For examples, information needs, activities by individual user groups, factors affecting non- user and user groups, attitude survey, problems of usage, reading interest.
3. Library worker studies. For examples, attitudes, satisfactions, responsibilities, including continuing study
4. History and development of public libraries.

Most research projects (more than 90%) used survey questionnaire and interview as tools for data collecting and only a few used more than one methods for data collecting. The research results can be used within limited scope and cannot be applied for public library system development. It maybe because public librarians misunderstood that research conducting is partially higher education studies and they are not qualified. Consequently, there is not efficiently academic information to support public library development.

Patterns of Library Service Delivery to Rural community and Problems

According to Aree Cheunwattana's research project, the patterns of library services to communities are differed by the 3 three systems of library services distribution : the public library system, the university library extension program, and the formal school system.

- The public library system is within the Non-Formal Education Department.
- The university library extension program is within the

Ministry of University Affairs, the Department of Library Science of a university in the northeast provides the bookmobile services to rural children. There are 10 university extension programs for service delivery.

- The formal school system is under the Office of the National Primary Education Commission, this particular school has adopted the pattern of a combined school and community library. There are at least 5 schools which follow this pattern.

In the part of public library system service delivery, the result show that The public library system : *rural public libraries* are located in the district town centers and function mainly to support non-formal education. *Learning Centers* and *village reading centers* serve to extend services to communities at the grassroots level. While *learning centers* have demonstrated their potentials as an effective pattern of delivering services to rural populations; village reading centers, despite their long existence, appear to be in a state of decline. All service patterns under the public library system reflect a large number of constraints in terms of organizational structure, funding, and human resources and staff, certain factors have contributed to the ineffectiveness and slow development of public service in rural area. These include low level of authority of public libraries: a lack of good planning and management; a lack of adequate budgets and professionally trained personnel; and not enough appropriate library resources.

Facing Barriers of Public Libraries in Thailand

Although the history of Public Library System in Thailand had started more than eighty years, it can not be successfully function as the learning resource for rural communities. According to document of the Department of non-formal education, “Relapse into illiteracy” that wastes foundation educational investment and brings about unknowledgeable communities is caused by the lack of “Systematic information center”. Rural people have slim chance to read and develop themselves after out of school. In order to solve this problem, the Department of Non-Formal Education established public libraries in rural areas in the pattern of “Public reading room” in 1951. Until now, public library system status is not promoted to be important task of the NFE Department. It is only a small task under Non-Formal Education Center and Provincial Non-Formal Education Center. Because most center managers are educators and not trained in library and information science so they lack of understanding in library performance .Besides, they don’t have the concept related to policy making, planning, budget, and personnel allocation. Though, there is education officer center to give advice, it is located in Bangkok so the public librarians who work in rural areas have only a little chance to meet the experts.

The result of Aree Chuenwattana’s research project repeats the aforementioned problem as it reveals that the administrators assigned to plan and supervise public libraries are usually educators and not trained in library and information science. Despite their commitment and enthusiasm, they lack a professional understanding of planning and management of library systems and services. They equate “literacy promotion” to “ library promotion ” and thus concentrate efforts and resources on non-formal education activities. Librarians and other library staff feel that they are not appropriately assigned to work according to their professional training. With low status,

dim career prospects, and low morale, they feel overwhelmed by too many responsibilities. However, they work with a commitment to the communities and express their needs for more training programs that will help update their knowledge and skills. There are also controversial opinions related to the low use or low demand for library service between service providers and community. While the service providers indicated that it caused by the lack of information awareness and lack of good reading habits of the rural population, but, from the community perspectives, low use and no use are caused by inadequate access to libraries services, unavailability of appropriate reading materials, preference of other media, particularly television, and lack of time because people are struggling for their economic survival.

The facing barriers of public libraries in Thailand can be concluded as the following aspects :

Public library status: The legal status of public libraries is still problematic that cause slow and inefficient development. The former research result revealed that only once a year, public librarians have to send the report related to library performance to the NFE Department. The department had policy to make the public libraries as the learning centers and information centers which give useful information to people at all educational levels. The libraries have to provide activities that promote reading behavior and essential academic skill but in real situation, the lack of legal status as mentioned above is still serious problem because the librarians don't have chance to be promoted as well as lack of morale.

Personnel problem: At present, most public librarians in rural area are not professional librarians though their titles are called "Librarian". Actually, they are other government officials who normally are not interested in library works. In some small libraries, the librarians have to function as librarians, clerks and sometimes janitors. Whenever they have chance to move themselves to better positions, they don't hesitate to do so. Even the Department of Non-Formal Education(NFE) public library regulation 1992, the qualifications of public librarians are not specified. The lack of chance to be promoted is also another problem and the status of public librarians is not so important when compare with other academic officials' so public library managers are often turned. According to public library standard , the middle size libraries should have 1 librarian, 3 non professional staff, 1 typing staff, 1 janitor, and 1 guard but at the beginning there are only 3 positions available, 1 librarian, 1 non professional staff and 1 janitor. Because of lacking of human power, public libraries cannot produce good works and activities to fulfill the ultimate goals as a learning centre in rural areas. The latest research result reveals that this problems is still going on without being solved until now. Besides, the public library task is not considered to be the main task of the department.

The lack of reading culture among Thai people maybe wastes the value of public library as learning center. The statistics related to the low production of printed material maybe affect the development of all kinds of library development. The lack of behavior to search for information is still remaining in the society. Anyway, people in developing country, especially in the rural areas, still don't have good quality of lives. They are still struggling for their economic survival as Aree's mentioned.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The problems of public library are still going on if the aforementioned barriers are not alleviated. According to Aree's findings, while she found appropriate policy directive exist, the level of success in implement those policies seems to depend on a combination of various factors. In addition to favorable factors relating to organization structure and resources, serious consideration of local concerns and structure contribute to successful implementation. For example, in public library case, most policies have not been successfully implemented due to an organizational framework which deemphasizes library activities in favor of educational activities, an administrative structure which is highly bureaucratic, and a lack of resources. Nonetheless, success could be seen when policy directives are conducive to local involvement (such as mobilization of local resources and institutional cooperation), and when the implementation of policies take into consideration local concerns and structures as exemplified by some learning centers and village reading centers. She also suggested the way to maintain community enthusiasm, interest, and involvement in the library project. Community empowerment is therefore recommended. This strategy includes: leadership training on topics such as participative planning and decision making as well as collective actions; active mobilization of community participation in library activities; and creating a support system for local initiative and actions. In addition, other useful recommendations include the reformulation of the national information policies that focus more on social needs, organizational capacity building through education and training , provision of appropriate information, application of appropriate information technology, designing innovative approaches in library and information service delivery, raising awareness of the important role of library and information services in the process of rural development, and systematic evaluation of rural library and information services. From the author's point of view, the understanding of rural communities in various aspects is essential for public librarians. Public librarians have to have proactive role to provide appropriate library services to communities. In rural communities where people still trouble with many conditions, library services are not so important as public health services or public utility services. Librarians should have "knowledge" about their own communities both sociological and psychological aspects. To cooperate closely with other government authorities in the same community is recommended. For example, the authorities of the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Interior work very closely to rural population so librarians should disseminate essential information via this channel According to the research result from the information providers' perspective, there are many kinds of information that rural populations are not aware of , such as health education, drug prevention, sex education, parenting information, and environmental conservation.

The status of public library system as the learning center in rural community is the new role and it is good chance for public librarians to work in such a challenge context. Public librarians should have more cooperation with communities to find their real needs. In Thai rural society ,the personal relationship is still important and people are still friendly and optimist. Public librarians should take this good point to be a chance to promote library services to grassroots level.

Bibliographies

- Aree Chuenwattana. "Delivering and Promoting Library Services in Rural Thailand " in **65th IFLA Council and General Conference. Bangkok, Thailand, August 20 – August 28,1999.** available via : <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla65/papers/023-11e.htm>, 24/12/2545.
- " Research conducting related to public library works" in **The Annual Conference of Thai Library Association(TLA) 2002.** Bangkok : TLA, 2002.
- Kulthorn Lerdsuriyakul. " Public Library in Thailand " in **65th IFLA Council and General Conference. Bangkok, Thailand, August 20 – August 28,1999.** available via : <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla65/papers/106-79e.htm>, 24/12/2545.
- Monwipha Chiachanpong. " Public Libraries : Information Center of communities have Problems" **Arts and Culture** 16,3 (January 1995) : p.67-73.
- Non-Formal Education, Department, Ministry of education. **Electronic Library Project** available via : http://dnfe5.nfe.go.th/wwwking72/T_Copywrite/intro.htm, 20/01/2003
-**Public Libraries** available via <http://dnfe5.nfe.go.th/ilp/liciti/index.html>, 24/01/2003.
- **Public Libraries Directory** available via : <http://www.nfe.go.th/prosouthlib.html>, 14/02/2003
- Non-Formal Education, Department. Non-Formal Education Promotion Center. Non-Formal Education Center (Central Part). Ministry of education **Public Library Services Version 2.00** available via: http://dnfe5.nfe.go.th/localdata/Library2000/pls_web/alpha.html, 24/01/2003
- Pranee Indrarakulchai. **The Study of Public Library problems in North Eastern : Public library as the Distant Learning Center of Thaikom** Master of Education (Adult Education) Mahasarakham University. Mahasarakham(Thailand) : Graduate School, 2001.

Sample List of Master Theses related to Public Library in Thailand

- Ampa Jullamon. **Information Services on Environmental Conservation of Public Library, Non-Formal Education Department, Changwat Nakorn si Thammarat** Master of Science (Environmental Science). Interdisciplinary Graduate Program(Environmental Science) Kasetsart University. Bangkok(Thailand) : Graduate School, 1992.
- Boonchuay Tamthai. **Preferred Reading of Selected Groups and Relative Popularity of Public Library Materials in Education Region 1** Master of Education (Foundations of Education) Silpakorn University. Nakhon Pathom (Thailand) : Graduate School, 1979.
- Chalermchai Kemchai. **Development of Public Library System in Thailand during 1916 – 1989** . Master of Education (Library Science) Srinakharinwirot University, Prasarnmit . Bangkok (Thailand) :Graduate School, 1991.
- Kaesorn Palawan. **A Public Library Service Management Models Supporting Non-Formal Education Activities : A Case Study of The Public Library of Amphoe Khuan Don, Changwat Satun** Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) Prince of Songkla University. Songkla (Thailand) : Graduate School, 1997.
- Kusuma Rattanukul. **Factors Affecting the Non-use of the Chalermratchakumaree Public Library in Changwat Pattani.** Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) Prince of Songkla University.Songkla(Thailand) : Graduate School, 1997.
- Mongkhon Thepkamneod. **Public Library Services as Perceived by Their Members to Central Region of Thailand** Master of Education (Adult Education) Srinakharinwirot University, Prasarnmit . Bangkok (Thailand) : Graduate School, 1995.
- Nongluk Burapornnusun. **Educational Needs for Work Improvement of Local Librarians Under the Department of Nonformal Education** Master. Education (Adult Education) Srinakharinwirot University, Prasarnmit, Bangkok(Thailand) : Graduate School, 1997.
- Phethai Naksuk **Library Public Relations for The Students of Distance Learning Methods at The Lower Secondary Level** Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) Ramkhamhaeng University. Bangkok (Thailand). Graduate School., 1998
- Praphasilp Pongpeaw. **Problems and User Needs about Library Service from Public Libraries as Perceived by Remote Learning Students in Secondary school under Nonformal Education Center , Pracheanburi .** Master of Education (Adult Education) Srinakharinwirot University, Prasarnmit . Bangkok (Thailand) : Graduate School, 1991.
- Siree Hoonjalearn. **Study of District Public Library Management in Central Region** Master in Education (Adult and Continuing Education) Silpakorn University. Nakhon Pathom (Thailand) : Graduate School, 1979.
- Sugunya yaowachirapong. **A Study of Public Librarian Characteristics under the New Policy of Non-formal Education Department, Ministry of Education**

- Master in Education (Non-Formal Education) Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok (Thailand) : Graduate School, 1997.
- Surang Nuntakawonges. **A Study of Opinions of Public Library Librarians and Administrators and Public Library expert Concerning the Causes of Provincial. Public Library Administration Problems** Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) Srinakharinwirot University, Prasarnmit . Bangkok (Thailand) : Graduate School, 1994.
- Vilailuck Rojanasrirat. **Factors Affect Public Library Performance which are Under responsibility of Non-Formal Education Department : Compare the Attitudes between Public librarians and Department Managers** Master of Liberal Arts (Library and Information Science) Thammasat University. Bangkok (Thailand) : Graduate School, 1993.
- Wipawee Ponganon. **The Evaluation of “ Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn Public Library Project”** Master in Education (Adult and Continuing Education) Silpakorn University. Nakhon Pathom (Thailand) : Graduate School, 1996.
- Yukonthorn Thumma **The Reception and Dissemination of Information on the Distant Education Project by Public Librarians** Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) Chulalongkorn University. Bangkok (Thailand) : Graduate School., 1999.

(From : Technical Information Access Center (TIAC). **Thai Theses Online** available via <http://thesis.tiac.or.th/>, 24/01/2003)