‘Reinventing’ Thai Universities: Ajarn, Thailand 4.0 & Cross-Cultural Communication Implications for International Academia

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Abstract

Thai higher education (Thai HE) is changing. Thailand 4.0, a socioeconomic and educational development policy of the Thai Government, wants universities to ‘reinvent’ themselves into the world’s top - 100 and so draw closer to international ideas of quality assurance, research, impact and teaching. This has, for example, led to a radical proposed revolution in mid - 2020 for Thailand’s academic ranking system, one that is both unexpected and unprepared for. Therefore, using a literature review, alongside policy analysis, we describe publicly available information on Thai academic systems and question the forthcoming proposed changes against the pre-existing systems for academic progression. Through this, we debate the academic expectations and traditions in Thai HE. These are unique, a reflection of a country that prides itself as never having been colonised, yet favouring the borrowing, rejecting and reinterpretation of other academic systems. We propose consideration of

the cross - cultural communication implications for Thai HE is needed, as it seeks to move towards an international setting. Then, we conclude that critical restructuring of academic ranks would create a more progressive educational policy, in line with international ideas of academia. Meanwhile, it raises further implications for cross - cultural collaboration, as well as communication, which has the potential for a lucrative knowledge exchange between institutes of learning in western higher education and Thailand.

Keywords: Higher Education, Thailand 4.0, Professorship, Communication, Thailand, Culture

Introduction

Thailand 4.0 is, in part, an education development policy led by the Thai government to prepare citizens for the digital era. It prioritises digitally minded, high - income, scientific, academic and industrial research innovation, with an emphasis on development furthered by higher education (Buasuwan, 2018, pp. 154 - 173). This hopes to shape an inclusive Thai society and educational collaboration; Thailand is not without criticism over educational standards, even at the university level (Lao, 2015; OECD, 2019, p. 18). Thai institutes of learning have struggled to echo pedagogical traditions from US, UK Commonwealth or European education systems, yet borrow ideas from them, often liberally (OECD, 2016; Lao, 2015). Before COVID - 19, economic resources financed a political revolution, but not an educational one (World Bank, 1998; Jones & Pimdee, 2017). Thailand 4.0, as an initiative, relies on what many have begun phrasing as 'reinventing' Thai higher education (Thai HE). Hence, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation (MHESI) now integrates parts of the Science and Technology Ministry,

the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC), the Office of National Research Council, the Office of the Civil Service Commission (OCSC), and the Office of Thailand Research Fund towards this objective, which, throughout 2020, has gradually gathered momentum (Theparat, 2019).

An uneasy and, for some, unwelcome alliance, this collaboration emphasises interdisciplinary academic innovation, alongside research, in an attempt to prevent further decline in Thai universities' world rankings, which can shift variably and have a distinct division nationally (The Nation, 2018a; 2018b). Thailand 4.0 is needed, and this paper seeks to highlight why this is; in particular, it considers the Thailand 4.0 objective to "Ensure that at the least 5 Thai universities are ranked amongst the world's top - 100 higher education institutions within 20 years" in a drive towards a research - led, internationally collaborative system that relies on effective cross - cultural communication with global academics (Royal Thai Embassy Washington DC, 2015). Five years on, and upon writing, the top - 100 is dominated by universities embracing higher teaching, pedagogical and research - intensive standards than Thailand. The QS Ranking (2020), a survey of expert opinions on teaching and research quality, suggests 75 of their top - 100 can be seen as in, or descended from, what we term, in this paper, as 'Western Academic Systems' to summarise the US, UK Commonwealth and European academic traditions.

However, to realise this ambitious aim in Thailand, we must explore new ways to reinvent not only higher education, but educators and academics found within universities, which can be accomplished through new teaching and learning paradigms that push "Personalized Learning; Generative Learning: Edgeless, Idea - Based, Out - Of - The-Box, and Mentoring" yet such dynamics require a "Multidisciplinary

Infrastructure, Hands - On Learning and Research, Innovation Projects, and Demand - Led Research" to move towards practice found in the top - 100 universities (Buasuwan, 2018, p. 162). Up until now, OHEC (2014) policy has governed Thai HE outright, but OCSC (2020) driven change is coming. In Thailand, university academics and educators are collectively referred to as Ajarn (อาจารย์), and fall under the purview of OHEC. The word Ajarn describes academic faculty throughout their career, despite being a technical term for a position at a point of entry - level career hierarchy. It is a title unique to Thailand, much like the communicative practices found within its academic systems. Sometimes romanised as Achan or Ajahn, it is likewise the foundational word in senior Thai professorial ranks.

The title, then, is one of high social standing across Thailand. Problematically, it is not always a mandatory expectation for Thai academics to have a teaching qualification. As Pawawimol (2017) and Power (2015) establish, such lack of emphasis on training ensures Thailand 4.0's aims are problematic. Furthermore, rumours of universities having institutional resignation forms with a 'Debt to the University' section are not uncommon; Ajarn might be working in a culture built around repaying a university for funding their education, not 'Reinventing' academia or pushing philanthropic ideas of nurturing educational development. Similar rumours abound of Thai universities using staff qualification shortfalls to create indentured service, with a not - so - commonly - known system of Thai academics putting up home properties as collateral, to their universities, for overseas study financing. For those whose prior education has not prepared them for international academia, and who then fail to complete their studies, Thai academia could become a financial prison. If such alleged tales are true, this is a very different status - quo than in top - 100 universities. For Thai HE Ajarn, employment involves loyalty to universities; career

service is an expectation, perhaps even a norm.

Yet, compared to practice in top - 100 universities, this is one example of an academic system littered with oddities. Hence, clashes under Thailand 4.0's goal to collaborate and compete internationally are coming; Ajarn is a title meaning, due to the depth of the Thai language, Professor, Lecturer, or one who teaches, and in the works cited we observe translation variances. Internationally, there is a big difference between all three. Domestically, departments formed of Ajarn display a spread of unequal qualifications; the requirement to be an Ajarn has risen to a postgraduate degree and one publication, published within, or before, appointment probation, but variably enforced, which means we must ask difficult questions about research, creativity, graduate quality and student satisfaction, as we move towards international cross - institutional alignment (Panich, 2012). Transposed into an international setting, through collaboration and competition sought by Thailand 4.0, some Ajarn would encounter loss of face, a component of Thai culture that denotes not acting in a way, be it implicit or explicit, where you humiliate another, lowering their social standing; this strives to reduce conflict but can result in a breakdown in dialogue (Persons, 2008; Wyatt & Promkandorn, 2012).

Saving face is vital in Thai culture, including in higher education, yet some Ajarn have gained only an undergraduate degree, especially those who joined more than a decade ago, which is quite a difference from global expectations and would not warrant appointment to a lectureship in a top - 100 university. The authors of this paper agree that Thailand 4.0 "Proposes new approaches to education, but the extent to which Thailand will be able to overhaul its education remains a challenge" because most lecturers, otherwise known as Ajarn, in Thailand, "have been trained in the use of traditional approaches, and can have difficulty adapting" (Buasuwan, 2018, p.162). Presently,

whether Ajarn will be ready to meet the subsequently described 'reinvention' of Thai HE is debatable and is the focus of this article. There are established Full - Professor Thai HE academics with doctorates and, currently, a tenure - lite track does exist for professorial rank. However, both are based on national expectations, which our paper shows are different from the top - 100 practices, principles and priorities for academic professionalism. Thai HE, then, stands far from western academia.

Thai Academic Revolt, Reinvention or Revolution?

This is most apparent because Thai HE has a different emphasis on what lectureship and academic responsibilities entail when compared to global emphasis. In looking towards the western setting, we find an emphasis on impact, publication and research dominating much of the role. The entry - level Ajarn, in contrast, can choose to apply for an initial professorial role akin, when translated from Thai, to Assistant Professor, regardless of substantial academic publication. Instead, service years matter, with a sliding scale relative to qualifications. Admittedly, Thai quality assurance (Thai QA), led by OHEC, weighs any professorial role significantly over entry - level Ajarn, creating de - facto tenure status even at the lowest professorial track point (OHEC, 2014; Bovornsiri et al., 1996). However, it is suprised to being an Ajarn, so fulfilling a lectureship within Thai HE, is defined more, as OHEC (2014, p.54) note, by serving "Missions of teaching and learning, research, academic service to society, and preservation of arts and culture. To carry out these main missions, a higher education institution needs to set developmental and operational directions so that the implementation is in harmony with its identity or emphases." The core identity of an Ajarn, then, is to be a teacher, and to serve

a university. Not necessarily be a researcher; even here, there is a clear emphasis on development of the role in line with cultural harmony and Thai homogenized identity. Thai HE, therefore, tries to accommodate for a range of academic backgrounds, by utilising a three-pronged, trident-like hierarchy structure for professional development; this is confusing, undoubtedly, to those in western universities, perhaps led into collaboration by Thailand 4.0. Many western academics, for example, might struggle to understand how an academic could gain seniority in a university with little, or perhaps no, practical research experience. Or, without a PhD.

First, the shaft, which we term as Ajarn, applies to all full-time faculty, a universalising title that is not determined by any sense of qualification, rather participation and service within Thai HE. The first prong, adds - on academic rank of professorial assistant, associate and full titles: Phuchuai Sattrajarn (ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์), Rong Sattrajarn (รองศาสตราจารย์) and Sattrajarn (ศาสตราจารย์). The importance of the word Ajarn is self-evident. Second, a separate administrative ranking system, disconnected from the academic side: Huana pakwicha (หัวหน้าภาควิชา), or Department Head/Chair, Phu amnuaikan (ผู้อำนวยการ), or Institute Director, and Khanabodi (คณบดี), or Dean of College/Faculty. Third, honorary titles, such as Sattraphichan (ศาสตราภิชาน), Distinguished Professor. The trident's points reflect an executive office, such as academic affairs, overseeing their respective branch or area of management. These roles, however, have different senses to the top - 100. Thai HE views administrative leadership apart, yet grants it a peculiar form of high status, that of the power of committee formation. Unlinked from professorial experience, a Huana pakwicha, for example, may not do research, yet will lead a department of Ajarn, or higher status academics, and direct their workload, which impacts research.

Hence, Thai academic rankings 'borrow' titles of western academic rankings and thus, Assistant, Associate or Full Professor can be found in place of Thai titles above. They do not mean the same thing, however, when stacked in terms of their Thai HE meaning and, indeed, social capital. Rong Sattrajarn 'holds' against Associate Professor, but Rong (รอง) can, in Thai, mean, deputy, subordinate, associate, and 'prop - up' to emphasise a hierarchical sub - textual language. Meanwhile, Phuchuai Sattrajarn translates to Assistant Professor, yet, this is a very senior Thai HE academic rank, far away in meaning from the entry - level US tenure - track role; it is something uncommon in Thai HE academia, and a point of significant pride when awarded, largely due to the status of being affirmed a role other than Ajarn in a system built around the title. Yet, it would be unusual for an Assistant Professor, so Phuchuai Sattrajarn, to be appointed to Chair within a ranked top - 100 university.

Appointment to leadership responsibility without rank or doctoral qualification would be more than acceptable in Thai HE; lack of research experience is seen as less relevant to administrative responsibility and years of service matters more (Lao, 2015). Changes to criteria for academic rank are forthcoming and emphasise international journal databases like Scopus, moving away from internal peer - reviewed projects and a Thai Journal Citation Index (TCI). Upon writing, these changes have been encapsulated in a dramatic ranking 'reinvention' of academic progression published in the Thai Government Gazette on the 23rd of June 2020; the Office of the Civil Service Commission of Thailand (OCSC, 2020) announced a detailed reform to the process of appointing an Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and Professor in Thai HE. This is part of a national agenda, reported in mainstream media and specialist conferences as 'Reinventing Thai HE' to move education forward and make it internationally competitive (MHESI,

2019). Therefore, it is clear that change is not only desired, but recognised across policy thinking within Thailand.

It should not come as a surprise, as 'reinventing' refers to the need to move beyond outdated 1970s principles of course design that prevail in Thai HE today and prevent a Thai future focused on digital innovation and research, one pushing towards top - 100 status (Bangkok Post, 2020). There are many shifts, from decentralising power held by a small group of figures within administrative roles in universities, often who capitalize on internal appointing committees that lean towards bias, to overhauling teaching into a research - informed atmosphere grounded in a letter-graded and categorised teaching system (Thai Government Gazette, 2020). Changes to the length of service as an entry - level Ajarn prevail. Yet, these still enable those with only a bachelor's level education to apply for ranking, despite this degree-level being 'phased out' as an acceptable entry qualification. Therefore, to be appointed Phuchuai Sattrajarn, equivalent in name, although not necessarily in meaning, cultural status or higher education capital, to Assistant Professor, an Ajarn with a Bachelor's degree must have been teaching for six years, with a Master's, for four, and a Doctorate, for one year (2020, p. 21).

Central and most polarising to reform is the new standards for research carried out for each rank on the Thai 'tenure' progression system; no longer can research undertaken during degree study, then published post - award, be counted. Importantly, the expectations introduce, far more formally and with emphasis, the need for publication in internationally ranked journal outputs. So, Assistant, Associate and Full-Professor in the new framework denote very different expectations than historically within Thai HE, a point discussed subsequently. There are still some methods of 'special' flexibility, but the reforms proposed and ratified in the Thai Government Gazette

up - scale the expectations of all rank appointments, in particular of those who join Thai HE but have not transitioned through it in career service to one institution, or within the system itself. Thus, to move from Assistant to Associate Professor in the Sciences, for example in the disciplines of Technology, Engineering, Medicine and other related areas, an applicant is suggested to need to submit one, or more, aspects of a peer - reviewed academic portfolio. Primary within this portfolio is the emphasis, within the Sciences, of at least '10 research outputs published in journals listed in Scopus' and ranked in the 1st or 2nd Quartile after appointment to their previous role, and 'five of which must be first author' (2020, pp. 24 - 25).

Furthermore, in the Sciences, there is an expectation of at least '500 Scopus references' of prior academic studies, thus for the first time the life-time citation of academic work counts but excludes self-referenced research and refers to needing an h - index value of not less than 8. Likewise, to have acted as Principal Investigator (PI) of at least five externally funded research projects, with grants that must be drawn from sources outside the academic institution where the academic is affiliated (2020, pp. 24 - 25). In the fields of Business, Administration, Economics or 'other' disciplines aligned in this regard, the expectations are slightly more generous: 5 research outputs, 3 as lead author, 150 Scopus references, as a lifetime citation with an h-index of 4, and 5 projects from external funding where the applicant is the Principal Investigator of the project and its subsequent output accordingly 'owned' by them as lead (2020, pp. 25 - 26).

However, upon writing, there are around 200 journals in TCI listed in Tier 1. Of those approximate 200, around 50 of those could be said to fall into the Humanities and Social Sciences, thus creating a questionable purpose of knowledge dissemination with limited output mechanisms that narrows the field of opportunity somewhat, especially

for those working outside of the favoured scientific emphasis deeply embedded in Thailand 4.0. Few Thai HE academics and institutes were contenders for top - 100 success or academic promotion under the 'old' rules, which were far more generous and much less concerned with citation numbers, let alone with the new, demanding and perhaps inversely polarized extreme for ranking (Thai Government Gazette, 2020). This, of course, has a knock - on effect on the capacity for international grant award, collaboration and research expertise, if less and less Thai academics are in a position to pursue ranking. Likewise, on the capacity for universities themselves to progress in academic ranking leagues often linked intrinsically to research output, or at the very least student sanctification and cutting - edge degree training.

Mahidol University (Mahidol), however, is a global contender and could achieve a place in the top - 100; as of 2020, when this article was conceived, it was ranked #314 in the QS World Ranking (QS, 2020a; 2020b). So, it is within 'throwing distance' of the top - 100 and has a reputation for precision, expertise and research. Hence, it has components needed to meet Thailand 4.0's goal to reach the top - 100. A role model, most other 'top' Thai universities are ranked some 400 places lower globally. To show the polarized flip for ranking, however, it is important to consider what was required for Thai academics prior to the proposed reforms highlighted above. As it stands, at least one internal criterion, that of Mahidol's, for academic ranking can be found published openly online, in English and valid as of 2017. As such, it provides a useful case study of an academic policy offering insight to those outside of Thai HE of what academic ranking and progression looked like prior to the proposed reforms; this policy establishes that a normal procedure exists along with a special route for those who have an insufficient duration in a given post, insufficient achievement, or wish for a rank jump over a prior rank level, so for example applying

for a more senior rank in an atypical route (Mahidol, 2017, pp. 1 - 2).

This implies flexibility. However, as in all Thai HE settings, Sattrajarn/Full - Professor is "presented to the Prime Minister" as a request for an award, so is not actually decided upon by universities (Mahidol, 2017, p. 25). Thus, such wording suggests one of the highest cultural statuses in Thai HE, and indeed in academics systems globally, the rank of Professor deviates from the award and meaning in the top-100 universities, which focus on impact rating and global presence. Rather, it is decided upon by service - culture and engagement in Thai HE, as well as influenced in and across the wider sociopolitical economy of Thailand. For Phuchuai Sattrajarn, hence Assistant Professor, until such reform comes fully into effect, a holder of a doctorate needed only be in post for two years, whereas a holder of a master's level qualification, or a bachelor's degree, must have been in post for five and nine years respectively, before they can apply for ranking. For this, and under this pre - existing criteria, workload hours were counted first and must be "not less than 1,380 per year" and include not less than "180 working hours of teaching in the university's programs per academic year" with 'ethics, morality and proficient teaching skills with good quality output' (Mahidol, 2017, pp. 2 - 3). What these skills encapsulate, however, varies from institution to institution, as does the idea of 'good' quality outputs.

Consequently, service hours focused initially much of rank award: in the above, 26 hrs/per week of working, and 3 hrs/per week of teaching, averaged across a year, against an estimated 61 hrs/per week of working in US universities for a typical tenure - track academic (Mahidol, 2017; Wyllie, 2018). The idea of what passes for teaching varies considerably. Indeed, "proficient teaching" uses "learning evaluation tools in accordance with evaluation principle, being punctual, responsible, polite personality and utterance, pleasantly dressed" and

yet this describes the entry - level expectations of a teacher, hence 'adequate' category. What is described, without much specificity, as being an "expert" teacher, which is one of the key criteria needed for Sattrajarn, is a professional educator that must teach learners to "think, analyze and synthesize, (be) highly efficient in using various teaching techniques, able to construct high quality students' learning evaluation tools, able to evaluate evaluation tools with suitable adaptation, always keep lesson plan up - to - date, being punctual, responsible, polite personality and utterance, pleasantly dressed (Mahidol, 2017, p. 38).

However, these 'experts' are really demonstrating the basis of educational pedagogy in many western settings, and it is impossible to not notice the emphasis on politeness and dress - sense as determining criteria. Given that dress - sense is an extension of personal identity, this raises intriguing ethical discussions in itself, and it is not unheard of for gendered uniform codes to be in - effect in some Thai universities, such as requiring female staff members to wear skirts. Patriarchal influence and gender biases not absent from Thai universities, nor wider society conditioning and expectations of women as representing certain ideas of 'Thainess' (Skulsuthavong, 2016). This in itself communicates a very mixed - message during an agenda to globalize Thai education. Meanwhile, in smaller, private Thai universities, class sizes can be as small as five students and, in public universities, as high as 80. This suggests an uneven playing - field for academics applying for ranking. Whilst context may drive up teaching, and it often does, the authors note a general standard between their universities, situated in Thailand, of a class load of four classes a semester, so 12 hrs/per week, or three classes a semester, 9 hrs/per week, with a research output, or evidence of postgraduate teaching that semester. This echoes OHEC (2014, p. 35) evaluation criteria linking degree - level taught to publication expectations and quality assurance metrics for determining workload,

alongside professional competency.

Whilst ranking changes still offer variable routes towards professorial award, up until now the system has been far more flexible, and generous than seen in western academic traditions. As Lao (2015, p. 172) points out, despite actually having less demanding expectations than in other academic systems, a 'culture of borrowing' around ideas, work outputs and teaching schema prevails in Thai HE. Meanwhile, a majority of 'senior' Thai academics, so those with rank, upon their analysis of OHEC (2012) data about the award of ranking, work at 'autonomous' universities. Hence, they are those with little direct or daily oversight, perhaps employed in an institute with a private nature. Therefore, one not publicly funded. What this has allowed, historically within Thai HE, is bias and flexibility. Lao (2015) infers both invite discrepancies in the quality of academics and their material used for ranking. This is because a variability exists between academics in Thai HE and how far they are prepared to go to generate evidence, according to reports found by the author and their interviews, often indicating an overwhelming degree of paperwork and bureaucracy that exceeds anything found in western academia. Conversely, anything and, indeed, everything taught within a Thai university is subject to considerable scrutiny, often by multiple committees that seek to politicize the learning environment in line with nationalism. Hence, it is fair to conclude a relationship exists between the successful achievement of an academic rank, and alignment to such a committee deciding it, which are often internalized and, perhaps, even stacked by the applying academics colleagues, or potential conflicts they have encountered in the workplace.

Wild West Academia: Are Ajarn short - changed heroes, indentured servants or academic outlaws?

Overwhelming paperwork is needed for what has, for years, been an internally driven quality assurance process, as well as academic application system. Both influences how an academic can seek to apply for academic ranking within a Thai university. The scale of this application can take years to lead to successful award, multiple committee meetings and assessments of teaching, which can be a drain on an academics time, as well as limit their careers. Inevitably the pressure of this process and setting can be seen to encourage them to cut corners, 'borrow' ideas, or perhaps even appropriate work from others and it forces us to question if "academics are actually producing research and new knowledge. Undoubtedly, the system is filled with individuals that perpetuate the existing forms of knowledge, mostly from western academics" (Lao, 2015, p. 172). It is not unheard of some academics to have applied previously for rank and evaluation of their teaching, in Thai HE, using teaching material presented as a textbook of original design, when in reality this is a re - purposing of what would be simply termed as a course reader in western academic settings. Presently, the publication prerequisites for Thai academic rank is a striking contrast to an international top - 100 university. As described by Lao (2015), there are differences in the degree of flexibility applied in ranking requirements across Thai HE settings, especially between private and public universities, which are much more deeply scrutinized and seen as having higher status.

However, a commonality, until the proposed reforms discussed above, was generally a minimum of 10 research outputs split into two, three, and five publications for each professorial rank, consistent in the experience of the authors and evident in policies of at the least one

university found within Thailand (Mahidol, 2017, pp. 2 - 4). This suggests a rapidly changing landscape, given the significant differences found in the proposed reforms described above. Less research funding and, indeed, language skill does present barriers to western - dominated international publication, but this is still also a drastic incompatibility compared to these systems; there are post - doctoral researchers starting their careers with the same number of publications as an academic who has pursued the process of ranking in Thailand. This invites cross - cultural communication clashes, misunderstandings and collaboration problems for Ajarn seeking to work in and across international systems focused not on years of service, but on the citation ratio, h - index calculation and impact rating. Meanwhile, all these ideas are found, then intensified, in the proposed reinvention reforms of Thai ranking, which itself seems to go to the opposite extreme than the underwhelming expectations up until now.

Reinero (2019), in contrast, estimates appointment to a US entry - career point tenure track as Assistant Professor of Psychology requires 16 publications, usually seven as the first author, for a top tier university, and four, as the first author, in a small liberal arts college with less emphasis on research. This is a clear contrast to Thailand, be it with respect to the new ideas for ranking, or the older pre - existing systems. Another contrast is highlighted by Wiwut (2000), and Mounier and Tangchuang (2010); all imply distinction between international scholarly PhDs, and PhDs awarded in, and examined akin to nationally normalised expectations, Thailand. Moreover, there is little standardisation across universities of teaching material submitted for ranking, or taught in classrooms; this includes right/wrong quizzes, read - from - the - deck - slides and dissected, or seen internally as ‘translated’, western textbooks, passed as original, which has been noted anecdotally by the authors alongside in reporting by Lao (2015).

This invites inconsistency depending on who is appointed to review teaching material and suggests a connection between quality assurance and misinterpretation, by higher education leaders, of educational policy, creating a system rooted in favoritism (George, 1987, pp. 38 - 42).

Hence, we must question if Thailand 4.0 and the campaign to 'Reinvent Ranking' will eventually be another victim of what Wiwut (2000) and Mounier and Tangchuang (2010) infer as 'Bar Lowering', in exchange for expecting adherence from staff in what then becomes an authoritarian setting. Cryptographic groups evaluate disagreeable Ajarn and quality assurance does little to offset bias (Rattananuntapat, 2015; Lao, 2015, pp. 160 - 162; Khang & Sandmaung, 2013). Pamela George (1987), a former Fullbright Professor at Chiang Mai University (CMU), reinforces these points; their arguments attribute differences between other, more general international academic standards and those found in Thailand as related to cross - cultural variances in need of grander study, rather than scorn. Put another way, George (1987) has long presented that teaching has been historically seen as more valuable than research in Thai academic culture. Moreover, what constitutes research has a different cultural and communicative mindset than found in top - 100 universities; so, less about impact academically and more on impact domestically, or within the university, as service culture to extend its reputation or attract students. Thus, university - sponsored and internally peer - reviewed projects broaden the view of research, at least until the recent reinvention outlined sought to change this route entirely.

George (1987) speculates a broad idea of research and emphasis on internal projects helps Ajarn to garner social capital, develop Thai society and supplement income. Service culture, it seems, in research, ties to the state, or the self, so research often extends social capital for academics, who hold a high - status role in society and rely

on government approval for funding, or advancement. The dearth of international - quality Thai research and self, peer, alongside political, censorship in research culture has not been absent from discourse (Kamnuansilpa, 2018; Yuthavong et al., 1985; Kempner & Tierney, 1996; Bovornsiri & Fry, 1980; Bovornsiri et al., 1996). Yet,it would be all - to - easy to critique and question the ethics of such 'Encouraged' national, as well as internally reviewed, research, when measured cross - culturally to the highly scrutinised work found in a top - 100 university, with a relatively unlimited resource base by comparison to that of a typical Thai university. Yet, it is important to remember that such approaches are not only necessary but enable Ajarn to teach in the first place. Appointment in Thai university undoubtedly relies upon connection and, even upon appointment, Thai academic salaries are low, relative to qualification achieved. A base, fixed - pay - scale model does exist that is then supplemented by ranking or responsibility (Mahidol, 2013; Prince Songkla, 2009).

Experience, however, is often informally factored internally for pay progression, stopping significant pay rises and reducing the relevance of experience gained outside of Thai HE. Ajarn often find themselves in a struggle, then, when seeking to afford tuition to improve their research qualifications. Or, even, from engaging in research, which is often internally scrutinised. Based upon the authors anecdotal experience, upon writing, the base salary (THB/baht) for an Ajarn with a PhD is between 32,000 - 41,000THB, approximately US$970 - $1,250 per month. Academic rank top - ups begin at 5,000 - 10,000THB, so approximately US$150 - $300, for Assistant Professor. Applying for rank, then, helps staff without PhDs, whose base can be much lower, around 24,000THB, approximately US$700 per month, to level salaries. However, as academic rank increases, so does publication output, itself now under reform and with much higher standards as discussed.

Therefore, the prior approach of employing cheaper, non - PhD Ajarn to perform what is seen as a teaching - focused role diminishes the value of research expertise, as it becomes increasingly valuable internationally and within Thailand 4.0 (Flaherty, 2018).

In some public universities,perhaps as a response to Thailand 4.0, Ajarn with Master's degrees are now increasingly required, upon signing a contract, to take internally tuition - funded 'Indentured Study Leave' within three years and, for this same duration, complete a PhD. At this point, their continually paid - forward salaries during the study are not drastically higher than migrant service - industry workers in Bangkok, paid 15,000THB (around US$460 a month), so, for some Ajarn, their salaries barely cover cost - of - residence (Tun - atiruj, 2020). Given the desire to be internationally competitive, per Thailand 4.0, such salaries sit starkly against the average western US academic salaries in some fields and reduce recruitment for overseas experts in a place that, until now, seems to devalue research (Lin et al., 2017; APA, 2017).

Consequently, it is difficult for Ajarn alone to afford international studies; even in Thailand, a PhD course can cost between 35,000 - 70,000THB, approximately US$1,100 - $2,200, a semester. Many Thai Ajarn, then, have to try to complete doctoral studies domestically, or overseas, perhaps on an indentured scholarship tied to a home university. This in itself offers a need for reform, as it is demanding to Thai HE academics to require them to study overseas, in a system of academia they are unfamiliar with and working under expectations and standards that have a very different philosophy of education. Solutions are needed to help Thai academics begin to engage in the international QA. These might included an established independently governed research council to support all academics and fund their studies, or for research, as presently both peer review and ethical approval are often determined by national agendas, rather than contributions to

knowledge. This is a particular problem, if the knowledge or field of research is controversial (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2021).

The reduction of teaching workload would also enable academics to study at their home universities whilst also teaching, or the widening of academic roles through the creation of alternative educational pathways. This might include opening more opportunities for Research Associateship, for example, or clearly defined teaching or research pathways, as is found within western academic systems and would like to greater coherency between the two. Alternatively, the investment in language skills, in particular English, which dominates within academia internationally and, in particular, in publication outputs, would enable more Thai universities to open international courses and attract a growing student body seeking affordable education in other parts of the world, when compared to the substantially higher costs in domestic western countries for students. There are likewise considerations to be had with respect to workload; it is not unheard of for a single class to have upwards of 80 students in a public university, with some academics managing class loading as high as six courses, preventing a renaissance of academic research (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2019).

Additional responsibilities could likewise be streamlined, which include serving on university service committees, something that generates long hours of meetings that often require follow-up discussion, due to quality assurance metrics and paperwork required as an Ajarn to satisfy regulatory bodies. This includes, for example, a termly defending of courses that often require external invigilation and considerable structuring of courses in line with internal philosophy of a particular university, or national agendas with respect to Thainess and service culture. Beginning to address such issues through a person-centric, professional mindset of supporting the continued professional

development of Ajarn would narrow the global gap considerably. A national training program for higher education academics, to formally qualify them, in a manner to similar to other systems of education found globally, would likewise contribute a valid pathway of continued professional development.

Cross - Cultural Communication Clashes Under a 'Reinvented 'International' Thai HE'

The promotion of cross - cultural communication, as we move towards an international agenda in Thai HE, is an important way to promote more holistic educational development. The idea suggests a protocol of conveying meaning and translating it, inter - culturally, between different cultures. This begins with a need to examine the focuses of interaction between different cultures, in this case across higher education, whilst comparing and contrasting both areas of overlap, and potential points of coherency. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that culture is intrinsic to humanity, a core concept that influences our cognitive thinking (Low et al., 2020). Therefore, promoting communication widens approaches for human development, change and critical thinking. Thailand 4.0 can be seen as a really important mechanism for constructive communication between cultures. In many senses, then, this undertaking and potential for reform could be instrumental in driving Thai HE towards becoming a prestigious and globally known system for learning, rather than a place at present where it is not. Indeed, Thailand often falls short with respect to investigations of their educational policy prowess, and this is well documented by the OECD (2016; 2019).

The problem, we contend, until now, has rather been that the internal emphasis of education within Thai has demonstrated selective cultural borrowing, as is well documented by Lao (2015). However, where this study ends is addressing that by enticing overseas study by Ajarn, whilst lowering international recruitment of specialised staff, by cultivating less optimal climates for collaboration and cross - over, the issues of Thai HE and its internalized, inward facing decorum actually lessens the potential for successful cross - cultural communication. Put another way, in Thai HE it is often the Thai way, or the highway. This builds an educational culture that keeps Thai HE, as well as wider society, in particular with respect to gender norms and cultural nuances, as a system rooted in a state of 'Thainess' (Sinlarat, 2000; Skulsuthavong, 2016). This is reflected in low salaries and government-driven curriculum policy emphasising nationalism (Lao, 2015). Few well - qualified international PhDs could pay their doctoral student loans on a typical starting salary of around US$970 a month, which in itself acts to prevent external influence from shaping Thai educational systems.

This maintains Thai HE as sovereign of western pedagogy and its higher employment conditions. Ajarn are socially elite, so in terms of working rights, entitlements and roles many Ajarn can be conditioned to advocate rules of leaders; this includes accepting salaries that are less than that of a typical PhD student scholarship stipend in the UK. However, change, not followership, is needed to 'Reinvent' Thai universities; student enrolment is falling, exacerbated by Thailand's ageing population and declining birth rate. Around 27.1% of the population will be over 65 by 2050, whilst, in 2017, the birth rate fell to only 1.5 births per woman, perhaps due to improving social entitlements and education that has began to shift an emphasis of patriarchal influence that has long been rooted in Thai society and

determines much of cultural identity, as well as communication agency, of certain groups (Skulsuthavong, 2016; Sasiwongsaroj & Burasit, 2019; Mala, 2019).

So, what are the Ajarn, in empty classrooms, doing under Thailand 4.0? In an academic system scrutinised and centralised, perhaps they feel pressured; pro - government academics exist, with disagreements yielding bizarrely repressive outcomes between those in academia, political office and the media, evidenced in a disputed instance between The New York Times and a leading academic figure in the constitutional amendments post the 2014 political coup - d'etat, over proving the rise in crime (Charuvastra & Ruiz, 2015; Fuller, 2015). Laungaramsri (2016) notes academics can be arrested for socially controversial research. Criticism and peer review in research academia are likewise culturally difficult, and different, for some Ajarn, given the cultural communication of krengjai (เกรงใจ), the Thai act of consideration to, or being considerate of, another; it is a value deeply embedded, and an antithesis of peer - review. Thai people act with krengjai to avoid losing face and generally struggle with overt, rather than deeply encoded, criticism (Segaller, 2005).

Many academics struggle with peer - criticism, but this is intrinsic to the field of academic research. Therefore, very few see negative feedback concerning their work as a personal affront or treat it as a true psychological attack counter-productive to their culture, self or psyche. Rather, they often jokingly blame 'Reviewer Two' and say, ironically, that 'They must be stopped'. However, we cannot pretend this communication component, that of peer - criticism and surveillance culture, would not have an impact on a reinvented, internationally minded research environment under Thailand 4.0 (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2021). Furthermore, professional leaders and social figures, Thai or not, report feeling like criticised imposters upon achieving degrees of

success (Clance & Imes, 1978). Such feelings of being 'An Imposter' are, however, even further intensified among powerful groups, when they do not receive success or are held against those most successful within them, lowering esteem and self - actualisation, which can cause conflict in acts of workplace communication, especially when enacted globally (Sakulku, 2011; Clance & Imes, 1978). This, then, is compounded by krengjai and reminds us that, intentionally or not, self - esteem, identity and even credentialism affect Thai research status. There are, as a result, implications for self - actualisation and cross - communication to be found here; Thai HE would benefit from increases in developing a culture of constructive criticism, in order to further communication capacity and integration on the global academic stage.

Thus, Thai academic society must be mindful that academic culture internationally and 'Thainess' are inherently contradictory. There are distinctive differences for communication of status between national Thai HE and the rest, or perhaps West. This is not to say either is best. However, in both, the lead author, for example, is seen as key in academic work. Yet, in Thailand, any academic listed as less than the majority cannot easily use their work towards progressive academic ranking (MUA, 2000; OHEC, 2014). Problematically, co - authorship offers a way for many to learn and is an important internationally integrative tool for publication success under Thailand 4.0. Through a culture deeply focused upon respecting face, we could easily find the idea of co-authorship as a presumed insult to an author's capacity: that they 'Need, So Require' help. Whilst 'First Author Fixation' exists globally, Thai HE has a culturally embedded idea of avoiding acts that diminish the leader. Consequently, pressure on Ajarn to perform at an international professional level means we see an increase in desperation that itself limits the potential for communication and collaboration. This is not unique to Thailand, as Payne (2013, pp. 117 - 119) grants a chapter to

discussing indecencies in US higher education.

As pressures rise, Ajarn left under - qualified by Thailand 4.0 and the proposed reinvention, along with the changes in between, have been reported as compelled to buy new/fake academic qualifications, appropriate work and even, as implied by the media in May 2016, murder colleagues who cause loss of face (Sridokkham, 2017; Yongcharoenchai, 2017). This describes a higher education system steeped in volatility, which is echoed across most chapters of Mounier and Tangchuang's (2010) work, highlighting a 'Self - sustaining culture of bar lowering' for the attainment of Thai academic qualification, rank and publication, rendering Thai HE incompatible with any 'Quality system of higher education' as long as Thai HE is "Absorbed in selling diplomas" and "Credentialism emerges as their dominant ideology, according to which the aim of higher education is to maximise short-term individual or corporate economic gains" (2010, p. 234). Thai HE, it seems, is the academic Wild West, with universities what we might describe as something akin to a dwindling post - gold - rush townships, rapidly under siege by the digital era and the widening of global exposure.

For much older Ajarn the idea of the digital age, along with global exposure, peer - review, criticism and differing professional expectations is problematic, as communication clashes and misunderstandings seem inevitable due to the different operating philosophies found nationally, historically, culturally and internationally. The target of Thailand 4.0, to raise Thai HE towards the top - 100, ensures conflict because of the professional standards of top - 100 academic practice are much higher: citing it right, data triangulation, quality assurance with providence and a controlled review process, often distanced, create research that is meant to be free of service - mindedness or the self. Rather, commitment to an epistemological and ontological

enquiry is sought, not all of which Thai HE policy does or if it does at all, it ensures this, in some Thai HE settings, though not all, has the same flexibility as in academic rank. Lao (2015, p. 174) uses the idea of cultural borrowing to describe 'Appropriation as the philosophy of Thai HE' compounded by credentialism and loss of face. Therefore, an educational paradox resonates through Thailand 4.0 educational policy: it looks outwards towards academically successful countries and borrows their ideas, whilst claiming ownership and belief in the superiority of these reinterpreted ideas.

This is readily apparent in the way Thai HE borrows translated titles of academic rank, and variably uses the English translations of these titles, despite these same titles holding different senses contextually and, it seems, to Ajarn themselves, as well as creating a different sense of academic hierarchy. Lao (2015, p. 171) notes that cultural borrowing "Highlights knowledge transfers or knowledge emulation from the West rather than knowledge production" whilst claiming to likewise recognise "Cultural supremacy, which the borrowing countries aspire to emulate". This has led to a national academic state of play, likewise untenable under the reinvention described, based on knowledge emulation; Thai quality assurance varies, and research has an aura of inescapable personal gain. After all, if a researcher wished to apply for ranking at Sattrajarn (Full - Professor), they, at least in one setting, until now, must submit 5 unused publications, a book contribution and "The person making the request must have not less than 50% participation" (Mahidol, 2017, p. 5).

An author with a 49% contribution could not use the work to apply. Yet, the full professorial role is accepted as including research leadership of early - career academics, not acting as academic lone rangers (Evans, 2016). Not unsurprisingly, for Lao (2015, pp. 171 - 172) the lack of "financial support for research projects continues to dominate

the Thai higher education system. Intellectual development has never been the primary objective of the system" and, historically, Thai HE was established to gear graduates towards serving the government - public universities were once government universities with academics as civil servants, thus a loose borrowing of academic traditions from elsewhere 'Looked Right' (Baker, 2019; Baker & Phongpaichit, 2009, p. 123). However, looking right and doing it right is not the same thing. Presently, Thai HE has failed to produce graduates ripe for employment; whilst studies are not readily apparent during the years of political unrest in the last decade, it is estimated that graduates made up 20% of all employed in Thailand as of 2016, and this was with employment defined as at least 'one hour of work' per week (TNSO, 2016; Wangkiat, 2019).

For Mounier and Tangchuang (2010, pp. 234 - 235), along with the proposed reinventions of rank and research climate, nothing short of a "Radical change of this attitude towards education will allow the total realignment of higher education to a knowledge acquisition perspective". However, is such a western perspective right one for Thailand? We contend the current bias of teaching is not a bias, rather being unable to embrace, due to loss of face, a culture of criticism intrinsic to academia, along with a lack of training that can quickly illuminate shortcomings, which is, itself, part of furthering knowledge (Evans, 2016). Discussed above, those who can research, do but do not necessarily help those less-than-qualified, as it would dilute their originality, rank advancement, and face. As Sinlarat (2004, p. 202) argues, as of 16 years ago "More than half of the faculty do not have sufficient academic or research qualifications and cannot be promoted to higher academic status". Meanwhile, this problem has long limited the development of higher degree learning programs, as often there is insufficient expertise or qualification shared within

a faculty department in order to ensure the systems of research supervision can be implemented effectively.

Indeed, as of five years ago, Lao (2015, p. 172) suggested data that evidenced 52.28% of all Thai HE academics were lecturers, otherwise termed as Ajarn, the entry - level academic position and informal title used across the profession as described in the introduction of this paper. Meanwhile only 1.5% are Full - Professors. Therefore, little has changed within Thai academia for sometime; teaching has long been the focus of professional responsibility, and much of these is grounded in Rote traditions and pedagogy that prioritizes the role, as well as power, of the Ajarn. Indeed, we might go so far to suggest that this has a relationship to the fact that, as of 2015, only 55.65% of Ajarn obtained master's degrees, 29.45% obtained doctorates and 14.86% still utilised bachelor's degrees, despite this no longer being allowed as sufficient qualification for career entry. Indeed, framed in this way, it is clear why few Thai academics have been able to pursue academic ranking. it is likely only accepted still due to such staff being 'grandfathered' into the profession long ago and thus protected by the career-service mindedness of Thai HE and the wider cultural emphasis of Thailand where one most respect elders, in particular those found within venerated roles such as academia (Lao, 2015, p. 172).

Conclusion: Developing Commonality to Further Cross - Cultural Academic Communication

Since 2005, a shift towards international standards of practice have been coming, so it is no surprise that a question of reinvention has arisen. The question now is if Thai HE has sufficient academics to answer it. A decade ago, Mounier and Tangchuang (2010, p. 235) noted that questions of quality arose in PhD training in Thai programs, with

reform introducing that any student should be supervised by “Five people (who) must be well qualified, they must hold a doctorate or occupy the position of associate professor or professor”. Worryingly, this implies such a standard was not always the case, and we know that it is not a guarantee that a Thai academic, at Rong Sattrajarn rank, will have a PhD; after all, only 29.45% of academics do, according to Lao (2015, p. 172). Furthermore, such PhDs might be indentured, diminishing cross - institutional experience. This limits the potential for internationally collaborative supervision. Indeed, to supervise a PhD in the top - 100, you must first have one yourself, and an emerging publication record; this is quite a communicative, academic and professional distinction, one of many that limit Thai HE (Kanjananiyot et al., 2002). Meanwhile, discrepancy and loopholes produce an academic system of hierarchical power games among competing groups of differently qualified, socially empowered elites, who are anything but academically.

Such a mindset could be why Thai universities failed to meet Thailand 4.0 - inspired ministerial standards in 2017, which led to a ranking reform as of 2020 to ‘Reinvent Thai HE’ (Mala, 2018; Bangkok Post, 2018; OCSC, 2020). ‘Reinventing Thai HE’ is a long - overdue agenda (MHESI, 2019). Indeed, Section 41 of the Private Institute of Education Act of 2003 (MOE, 2003) is still relevant today and describes a leader in a private university in Thailand as only needing, as a minimum, a bachelor’s degree and five years of experience teaching bachelor - level education. There are many points of a cross - communication breakdown we can anticipate, however, if such change is not done right. International universities, especially the top - 100, have expectations grounded in robust pedagogical and ethical practices. Grant applications, data validation and other ethical worries emerge when we find Thai Ajarn convinced that they are Professor, even referring to themselves as it, linguistically, without any real

research training.

Therefore, reforms 'Reinventing' Thai HE, pushing for greater expectations, will lessen cross - cultural clashes with international academia, but perhaps increase them within national settings and between academics unprepared for such an overhaul (OCSC, 2019; OCSC, 2020). Meanwhile, disconnected rules at provincial, central and higher government levels, echoed in universities, creates varying obedience. The semi - recent Standards for Higher Education Curricula (OHEC, 2015) infers Ajarn should all now hold a Master's degree and publish once in each four - year QA curriculum cycle to qualify to teach on an undergraduate program (Rangsivek, 2017). In a 2016 survey, 60% of Department Chairs in the US were ranked Full - Professor, a role gained through considerable research prowess (Flaherty, 2016). In contrast, Bovornsiri et al. (1996) have argued for some time that it is not economically advantageous to do research and Thai HE has before driven internally led reform attempts to change this both in the 1980s and 1990s (Fry, 2002; Sinlarat, 2000).

None succeeded fully and thus, so far, a volatile higher education system, trapped in the same academic practices, pedagogy and culture as thirty years ago, has resisted change, helped by particularly polarising forces within Thai HE itself. From the printing press to the World Wide Web, communication and collaboration across cultures have led to revolution (Day, 2019; Bourdieu, 2005). New ideas, however, can be dangerous things. Thailand 4.0 offers an innovative, interdisciplinary and research - intensive education policy, but until such a time that speech is no longer repressed, world - class education will not emerge - after all, why would academics risk reprisal (Mala, 2019a; Mala, 2019b) As for 'Reinventing' Thai universities, as an agenda, perhaps it is now the right time. 2020 has been marked by social upheaval, especially within universities and by students.

Undoubtedly, Thai HE is in crisis and unemployment will soon follow; Ajarn are no longer the only people teaching Thai students, who are connected by distance learning and the Web (Joungtrakul, 2019; Day & Skulsuthavong, 2019).

Online learning itself creates a global educational free market, which in turn furthers a systemic identity crisis for Thai universities and, in particular, their Ajarn. Key to solving this is to place research upfront, use it to inform teaching and attract graduate students, with funding, to help often dissatisfied learners turning away from what some have reported, for a long time, as a system of outdated higher education that fails to prepare them for the realities of working in the modern era (Tangchuang, 2002; 2003; Draper & Kamnuansilpa, 2018). Problematically, defiance by Ajarn is not uncommon because of their high cultural status in society and, as a result of this, an ability to amass social, technical along with, ultimately, human capital because of it; in realistic terms, teaching small classes of students, with very simple teaching methodologies, is far from a taxing form of employment, especially as fixed working hours are enforced variably, and universities are in a state of crisis, with some academic leaders less qualified than the criteria they enforce, leading to an avalanche effect in a process of academic offloading where more senior staff rely overly, perhaps unfairly, on newcomers that are often better qualified and more adept at research, yet culturally conditioned to adhere and accept the more - often - than - not heavy teaching responsibilities assigned to them by their 'Elders' in rank, administration role and age (Bangkok Post, 2018; Bourdieu, 2005; Sinlarat, 2000).

For Ajarn entering roles under the era of Thailand 4.0, however, this is far from an ideal environment to build a foundation to develop their careers and progress as academics in their own right. We thus propose a compromise must be found, across all levels and

directions. However, we welcome the government academic ranking reforms as forward - thinking; early - career academics are, presently, dropped into the role of Ajarn, with little teacher training, if any, and, for some, a lack of academic research supervision necessary to progress in an internationally competitive publication field, competitive global research setting and the job market. Raising the bar helps everyone. After all, most successful scholars in US universities have undertaken a post-doctoral posting before gaining a professorship track appointment (Reinero, 2019). Thailand 4.0 has only begun to initialise post - doctoral study, mostly in scientific disciplines. Yet, we caution that a dramatic reinvention of the status quo is destined to overwhelm, rather than inspire, many Ajarn in Thai HE.

After all, we have highlighted in this paper some of the delicate sociocultural balances found in Thai HE. Consequently, any aim to elevate Thai universities by a fixation on rank, loopholes, or comparing TCI to well - established index metrics like Scopus, with arbitrary numbers tied to a citation count, or even readership, neglects the key driving - force of academia: impact. Not all journal outputs are created equal, even those within TCI and Scopus. Therefore, we should remember to place at least some 'Reinvented' focus on the quality of the work itself. Pushing, then, towards academic evaluation that is recognised by a metric defining the impact of the work itself and relative to the journal, not just the total sum of parts. Now, despite increasing cohorts of valuable fee - paying international students seeking study opportunities in more affordable locations across South - East Asia, we find more and more students drawn into academic systems found in near-by ASEAN countries (Day & Skulsuthavong, 2019; The Economist, 2017; Thongnoi, 2019).

We must, consequently, look to reduce outdated ideas in Thai HE, but not colonise it outright with western values. There is a need to recognize the role of the Web, and digital technologies, in reforming education and furthering it towards utilizing new forms of experimental learning, often driven by the Internet (Day et al. 2015; Day, 2019). Rather, as an academic community, we need to strive to promote self - actualisation within a multifaceted and volatile education system, starting with discussing vulnerabilities openly, as we have, to encourage the greater potential for cross - cultural collaboration, research communication and idea exchange (Ivtzan, 2008). Simultaneously, we must protect the honorific cultural value of Ajarn, but question indeed if the workload is as intense as some claim when compared internationally, as we move into a Thailand 4.0 and 'reinvention' of higher education (Chaitrong, 2019; Phothongsunan, 2018). During this, we must remember to ask: does modernising have to be the antithesis of preserving an icon in Thai culture, as some fear, or is reforming a cultural icon mutually intrinsic to modernising educational development, to the betterment of society, yet in such a way as to overwhelm Thai HE?-

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