

# The Localization of Foreign Words and the Impact on Thai Foreign Policy Formation and Practices: A Case Study of the Conceptual Word “Development”<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The aim of this research is to study the relationship of language and politics and focus particularly on the influential role of the foreign loan word “development” on the meaning and practice of Thai foreign policy since 1950, along with the way in which Thai elites adopt and localize words into Thai political culture through the contestation of interest groups, as well as the process of foreign policy-making and practices.

This research found that the Western word “development” played a significant role in constructing a new dominant set of truth or discourse and controlled the political environment in Thailand, which facilitated the United States in the conduct of their political and economic foreign policy in Thailand. “Development”, coined as “*phatthanakan*” in Thai, restructured not only the existing Thai meaning of development, but also domestic

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and foreign policy in line with American foreign policy and interests. Through domestic localization, this powerful conceptual word gradually was exported from Thailand with characteristics that sounded more Thai and became one of the most significant foreign policy of Thailand. Language is, therefore, a new facet to study Thai foreign policy in relation to the outside world.

## Introduction

Words matter and shape reality, and the world can shape word changes as well. Words play a significant role in constructing social meaning and the practices of foreign policy within the international system. Their role possesses different levels of importance and different meanings depending on the domestic and external context at different time periods. Once words move into other states, they can generate interaction and changes within local processes of transfer and transformation.

The conceptual word “development” is one of the most distinctly powerful words of Western origin that has traveled across time and space and has had a strong influence on Thai politics, economy and society since 1950. The long vitality of this word reveals shifts in its interpretation and practices – from an economic point of view to human aspects – and power struggle among stakeholders, both at the domestic and international level. This term has not only had significance in Thai domestic policy, but also in foreign policy. Linguistic meaning could provide a new facet to study Thai foreign policy under a global force.

Words are not fixed to the place of their initial construction, but travel globally, transgressing new territories. Conceptual words created by the West play a crucial role in international politics; they can target developing states that are historically, politically or economically associated with their creators/colonizers. These words can contain more than their direct meaning and also retain political, economic

and cultural ideologies. The words attach meaning and changes in interpretation according to the time and space in which the words are located; however, these words can still share the core value of the original meaning.<sup>3</sup>

This research studied the influential role of the foreign loan word “development” on the meaning and practice of Thai foreign policy. The first part of this article examines how the Western concept of development evolved and was localized in the Thai political context. The meaning of development, American international political policies and the localization by Thai governments are explored. The second part of the article is an analysis of the extent to which the word “development” has impacted Thai foreign policy behavior. The engagement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and related agencies in tackling the incoming and outgoing concepts is investigated.

## **Development: A Powerful Word that Moves across Time and Space**

### **A Moving Word with Its Political Force**

The Western idea of development existed in Siam since the colonial era. In the reign of King Mongkut (1851-1868), certain numbers of the royal family were familiar with this concept because of their overseas education. The Western development model greatly impacted administrative, social structure and technological reform in the era of King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910). A number of Western advisors were hired in significant departments: finance, foreign affairs, public transportation, education, police, law and postal services. The concept of development gradually grew in Thai politics and society. One of the six principals of the 1932 Revolution Council explicitly demonstrated the idea of development, stating an aim to “restore economic prosperity of people... [and] draft a National Economic Project... .”<sup>4</sup> During the first administration of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram (1938-1944), State-ism [รัฐนิยม] was the main

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<sup>3</sup> Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*.

<sup>4</sup> Pridi Institute, *The First Declaration of the Revolution Council*.

mechanism for “modern” economic and socio-cultural development. Phibun promoted investments in industrial sectors and constructed what he viewed as a modern and civilized Thai culture – deemed uncivilized in the eye of the West.

After the end of the World War II, the meaning of development was used in its politically determined meaning by Harry S. Truman, in January 1949, in order to set up a new world order, in which the world was redefined and restructured. For the first time, the concept of “underdeveloped” countries was constructed, followed by economic development programs aimed at improving those countries through scientific advances and American industrial progress.<sup>5</sup> Underdeveloped countries were defined by experts from the United Nations as those who had annual income less than one-fourth of the US, Canada, Australia and Western Europe. It was, therefore, a uniquely American burden to modernize these “underdeveloped” countries through economic means in the name of development.

The emphasis on economic growth required underdeveloped countries to manage the economic mechanisms of development, including state-led economic policy, promotion of foreign capital, industrialization and construction of infrastructure, in order to increase productivity,<sup>6</sup> and as a way to confront the communist threat. Social development, education and training people to be qualified laborers was another means leading to effective production and economic growth.<sup>7</sup>

To implement the development ideology worldwide, two powerful mechanisms were introduced. A new discipline – development studies (development economics in particular), including fields such as health, demography, urban planning and education – had been created in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to construct truth, identity and norms of “underdeveloped countries” and “underdeveloped economies”, and direct the whole development process.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Esteva, “Development”.

<sup>6</sup> Suphachai, *Decoding Development*.

<sup>7</sup> Upadit, *Economic Development of Underdeveloped Countries*.

<sup>8</sup> Escobar, “Power and visibility: Development and the Invention and Management of the Third World”.

“Development” became a central value and was recognized as a “dominant problematic” that created a common value/image/meaning of poor countries.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, international institutions – USAID, World Bank, IMF, United Nations, Rockefeller Foundation and CARE – were supportive mechanisms providing financial aid and technical assistance, including grants, loans, projects, scholarships and research programs. The United Nations, for example, offered recommendations on the effective management of production factors (land, labor and capital), assisted in setting up appropriate economic plans and facilitated implementation of such plans through their Economic Projections and Programming Centre. In other words, the formation of a network that produced and expanded knowledge and specific intervention in order to ensure its existence and exercise of power through the working concept of development.<sup>10</sup> This structured knowledge about the object of development assistance resulted in the organization of subsequent interventions.<sup>11</sup>

After the announcement of the Truman Doctrine in 1949, Americans gained a strong interest in developing Thailand for geopolitical reasons. John E. Peurifoy, the American ambassador to Bangkok from September to December 1954, told the Department of State, “... it would be extremely desirable at this point in international developments [to] reassure Thailand, which remains a keystone [of the] US position in Southeast Asia, of our continuing and sympathetic interest in development Thailand.”<sup>12</sup> This desire was similarly emphasized in the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), stating that the economic and political stability of Thailand would “return not only more economic development per dollar but also more strategic benefits and more long-term assurance of political support.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*.

<sup>10</sup> Escobar, “Power and visibility: Development and the Invention and Management of the Third World”.

<sup>11</sup> Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine*.

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957*.

<sup>13</sup> Kullada, *Thai Politics in Sarit-Thanom Era under World Power Structure*, 92.

The perceived communist expansion in Southeast Asia strengthened the relationship between Thailand and the US since the US viewed indirect or direct expansion of communism as a threat to world peace, American security, interests of American capitalism and the liberal economy under which US industry functioned.<sup>14</sup>

The US government required Thailand to open up to become a liberal economy and encouraged Phibun's government to facilitate foreign investments by providing fundamental infrastructure and laws that privileged investors. As a member of the World Bank and IMF since 1949, Thailand stepped into the world of capitalism and was pushed by both institutions to conduct liberal economic policies. The World Bank focused on economic and social development, while IMF proposed to change the exchange rate from a multiple to single exchange rate system.<sup>15</sup>

Economic experts were employed to produce language for the specific disciplines that rationalized the regulations, support what the professionals labeled and prevent criticism from potential opposition.<sup>16</sup> Americans started the Griffin mission for the evaluation of the Thai economy in April 1950 and arranged financial and technical assistance to liberalize the economy, terminate state enterprises and promote foreign direct investment for Americans.<sup>17</sup> Phibun, in his second term (1948-1957), immediately adopted Griffin's suggestions as a guideline for economic development. A loan from the World Bank for the development of transport and irrigation systems was received to increase national productivity. Agreement on American Investment Insurance was signed and the Investment Promotion Act was implemented in 1954.

American consultants also intervened in the teaching of Buddhist precepts by monks. They successfully convinced the government to prohibit the teaching of the principle of solitude (“*sandot*” [สันโดษ]) because the elements of self-sufficiency, respect

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<sup>14</sup> Kullada, *Thai Politics in Sarit-Thanom Era under World Power Structure*, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Rapheeporn, *The Role of Thanat Khoman in Thai Foreign Affairs During 1958-1971*.

<sup>16</sup> Edelman, *Political Language*.

<sup>17</sup> Rapheeporn, *The Role of Thanat Khoman in Thai Foreign Affairs During 1958-1971*, 39.

for nature/humanity/animals and the concept of non-exploitation were considered outdated and would obstruct the country's development and the growth of capitalism.<sup>18</sup>

In May 1958, Lieutenant General Thanom Kittikachon's government (January-October 1958) approved Sarit Thanarat's request for American support to combat communism, support Thanom's administration, strengthen the Thai economy (along with people's living standards) and reinforce the Thai military. The US reciprocated by asking Thailand to permit private foreign direct investment and foreign investors as a means toward national development. The US pledged to assist Thailand with development loans.<sup>19</sup> This was the beginning of the Thai government's embrace of liberal economic policies.

### Localization and Contested Meaning

Constructed from Pali stem, “*vaddhana*” [วฑฒณ], meaning increasing, augmenting, fostering and enlargement,<sup>20</sup> “develop” and “development” was formally coined as “*phattana*” [พัฒนา] and “*phatthanakan*” [พัฒนาการ] in 1950. The Dictionary of the Royal Institute 1950 and 1982 defined *kanphatthana* as progress, growth, and advancement.<sup>21</sup> The new editions of 1999 and 2011 further expanded the meaning as progressive change and improvement. The version of Dictionary of Political Vocabulary by the Royal Institute provides a more detailed definition: “... a process of change in different aspects from less progress to more progress in economy, society, politics, science, technology, and industry. Economic development could focus on an increase in the efficiency of production and sustainable development. Political development could emphasize the rights and freedom of people. Social development could be considered a balance between economic, social, and environmental development.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Sulak, “Impact from Development”, 146-147.

<sup>19</sup> Rapheeporn, *The Role of Thanat Khoman in Thai Foreign Affairs During 1958-1971*.

<sup>20</sup> Phumiphaphiku Foundation, *Pali-Thai-English Dictionary*.

<sup>21</sup> Royal Institute, *Dictionary of the Royal Institute 1982*; Royal Institute, *Dictionary of the Royal Institute 1950*.

<sup>22</sup> Royal Institute, *Dictionary of Political Vocabulary*.

Before the coinage, Thais usually used different words signifying development such as *watthana* [วัฒนา] (augmenting, growth, advance), *bamrung* [บำรุง] (maintain), and *charoen* [เจริญ] (progress, advance). Although *phattana* or *phatthanakan* was not popularly used, the word did exist, but appeared infrequently, such as in the names of the Royal Family, for example, Princess Sripattana of King Mongkut (1851-1868). The meaning was similar to “*vaddhana*”.

The coinage of *phatthanakan* was to reuse the existing word in a new context and separate the areas in which *phatthanakan* and *watthana* fit in. *Phatthanakan* was repositioned in the politico-economic field to reflect practical, concrete, procedural and materialist implications.<sup>23</sup>

Although the definition of *phatthanakan* is precise in terms of its positive direction, the word still retains a vague meaning about what exactly development is, why we need development and how we attain development. Development becomes a floating signifier that could provide an opportunity for powerful actors to define their own specific meaning, which could dominate logical thinking and policy and finally could be transformed into myth.<sup>24</sup> Such words remain open to diverse interpretations that are partly based on shared concepts, but differ in meaning.<sup>25</sup> This characteristic of language can serve a particular political purpose of those who monopolize these words.

Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958-1963), a serious importer and supporter of *phatthanakan*, remained enthusiastic in following the American development mode, as he stated on the national day in 1959: “... [the] invitation of foreign investments in Thai industries. This measure is based on the condition that a country cannot live on agricultural resources alone but has to develop a suitable proportion of national industries.”<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, Sarit found difficulty in explaining the concept to his government as the understanding of the word “development” and “*phatthanakan*” differed between Americans and Thais. Development for Americans meant investment from loans in a

<sup>23</sup> Sumali, Personal Interview.

<sup>24</sup> Nithi, *Language, Culture and Power*.

<sup>25</sup> Gallie, *Essentially Contested Concepts*.

<sup>26</sup> Direk. “Thailand Among the South East Asian Countries”, 17.

positive light, while Thai viewed the same action negatively because taking on loans was to mortgage future generations,<sup>27</sup> and politically cause conflicts between the borrow and the lender.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the different interpretations of development between Westerners and Thais, the conceptual word “development” was adopted with ease by elites who could gain economic benefit from this discourse: opportunities to establish state enterprises and commercial banks and monopolize important industries.<sup>29</sup> In addition, they believed that economic growth could lead to peace and security and would reproduce political and social stability. After the promulgation of *phatthanakan* by Sarit and his government, the word became in-fashion and the word *watthana* and *bamrung* consequently had limited use.

The government and technocrats agreed to bring the country in line with international economic structures by emphasizing economic growth (GNP) and follow proposals of international financial institutions on economic liberalization, capitalism and import-substituting industrialization as a way to “development”. The Board of Investment and the Council of National Economic Development were consequently established in 1959 to support development discourse and policies, followed by the first National Economic Plans that fully reflected the Western concept of development. The expansion of the industrial sector would also increase productivity in the agricultural sector. Infrastructure and human resource development in rural area aimed to permit access to resources and increase productivity serving the macro economy of the nation.<sup>30</sup>

In summary, Thais had gradually become familiar with the Western concept of development since the 18<sup>th</sup> century because of economic, political and social interactions with the West. The emergence of the conceptual word “development” and its coinage in the early 1950s responded to the desires of both American and Thai

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<sup>27</sup> Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960*.

<sup>28</sup> Kullada, *Thai Politics in Sarit-Thanom Era under World Power Structure*.

<sup>29</sup> Suphachai, *Decoding Development*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Suphachai, *Decoding Development*, 30.

elites in terms of security and economic interests, even though the understanding of “development” between Americans and Thai was obviously different. Thai elites seized the development discourse and followed the changing global trends in the later periods.

## **Thai Foreign Affairs: Reproduction and Representation of Development Flow**

### **Foreign Affairs Agencies and the Incoming Political Concept**

The conceptual word “development” has been accompanied with a distinct process, method and practices managed by Thai government agencies and forced the government to set up a central unit to coordinate various incoming overseas development assistance among different ministries and departments. In 1950, a committee on American Economic and Technical was appointed to support an agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation between Thailand and the United States of America. Its status evolved into the Unit of Economic and Technical Cooperation under the Council of National Economic Development. This unit dealt not only with the US, but also other foreign countries in light of increasing overseas aid from Japan, Australia, England and Germany since 1961.<sup>31</sup> The unit then transformed into the Department of Technical and Economic Cooperation (DTEC) under the Ministry of National Development in 1963 and then moved into the Office of Prime Minister in 1972 because of termination of the Ministry (DTEC was transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002).

Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) did not take charge of coordinating development assistance at the beginning, the ministry, led by Thanat Khoman (1958-1971), actively reproduced and strongly supported the Western concept of development. He started with organizational reforms that resulted in establishing an economic department in response to national economic expansion. A few representatives from the Ministry of Finance working in foreign countries were insufficient; Thanat renewed offers of scholarships for

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<sup>31</sup> Veraya, *The Environmental Impact to the Organization*.

officials to study abroad because he believed graduates who returned were more enthusiastic and attained international standard.<sup>32</sup> In addition, foreign policy sought more foreign investors through regional cooperation, such as SEATO and ASEAN, and through various road shows and promotions in the United States.

### **Repositioning Thailand: An Exporter of “Phatthanakan”**

The end of the Cold War started a new facet of Thai foreign policy regarding development. The role of aid providers became more visible after 1991 because of the demise of the Cold War, the economic growth of Thailand, a new Thai regional policy of “transforming battlefields into marketplaces”, and a push by Thai capitalists, entrepreneurs and businessmen to integrate Thailand into the world market based on their hope that a free market might bring prosperity.

Thailand’s position had merely shifted from recipient country to donor, starting in the administration of Anand Panyarachun (1991-1992), providing development assistance projects and technical cooperation mainly to neighboring countries. The Official Development Assistance was set up in 1992 and contributed a significant amount of development assistance to its neighbors, around 0.3% of Thailand’s gross national income, compared to 0.20%, 0.17% and 0.15% for Japan, Italy and the United States, respectively.<sup>33</sup> Japan and other OECD donors also cooperate by lending support for technical assistance, fellowships and training. Thailand considered this strategy as a long-term investment in regional stability.<sup>34</sup>

After the financial crisis in 1997, both the international community and Southeast Asia witnessed several challenges: high levels of market protectionism from developed countries, unresponsiveness in international institutions to the global challenges for developing countries, the slow growth of ASEAN, a decrease in

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<sup>32</sup> Rapheeporn, *The Role of Thanat Khoman in Thai Foreign Affairs During 1958-1971*, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Thailand: The Emerging Donor*.

<sup>34</sup> Secretariat of the Prime Minister, *Accomplishments of Anand Panyarachun’s Government*, 56.

American influence in the region because of the war in Iraq, the rise of China with its progressive influence in Asia, the emergence of Vietnamese power in Southeast Asia, and Thailand's own perception of itself as the focal point of a stable Southeast Asian continental bloc.<sup>35</sup> Thaksin's government (2001-2006) fully repositioned Thailand from an aid-recipient nation to a donor agent, actively keeping its immediate neighbors on Thai economic development strategy track, offering assistance programs on the basis of self-help and partnership.<sup>36</sup> The development programs on infrastructure, agriculture, public health and tourism possessed a more compatible level and scope of technology and know-how with recipient regional countries than the more-advanced technology from developed donor nations.<sup>37</sup> More Thai development assistance programs, including loans, grants and technical assistance, were launched during the Thaksin period than in previous administrations.<sup>38</sup> DTEC, subsequently transformed into the Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency (TICA) in 2004, was transferred to the MFA in 2002 to implement this development policy effectively through regional cooperation frameworks such as Aeyawadee-Chaophraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation.

Under the mainstream development approach, Thailand, led by the MFA, sought to integrate its own development model, called the "sufficiency economy", into different development assistance projects. This model was originally conceived in 1974 by King Bhumibol, but only publicized in December 1997 to respond to the effects of the financial crisis, particularly at the individual and household level. Considered a philosophy of sustainable human development, this word and its concept have been actively and continuously promoted to the Global South in Asia, Africa and Latin America. For a decade, Thailand, through TICA in collaboration with a number of government

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<sup>35</sup> Weatherbee, *International Relations in Southeast Asia*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Pranee, *Thai Foreign Policy Toward Neighboring Countries under Thaksin Shinawatra's Government*, 53-54

<sup>37</sup> Kesarin, *Thailand's Official Development Assistance to the Mekong Sub-region*, 188.

<sup>38</sup> Thitinan, "Battle Between Continuity and Change", 35.

agencies, has organized international training programs in the sufficiency economy, focusing on nutrition, health and agriculture.

The Thai conceptual word “sufficiency economy” has also been exported and retains its influence as it appears. The concept has moved into Bhutan and retains its influence as it appears to serve the Bhutanese development path, having a number of similarities in principles and goals with Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) and winning the praise of the Bhutanese Minister of Culture.<sup>39</sup> The philosophy of sufficiency economy and GNH share common pillars, which are sustainable economic development, preservation and promotion of culture, conservation of environment and good governance. In addition, similar to the goals of GNH, happiness and wellness for all (at the individual, community and national level) are expected to be outcomes of a sufficiency economy.<sup>40</sup> According to Sangay Tashi, Samdrup Jongkhar district cultural officer, the word “sufficiency economy” (“rang go rang dong” in Bhutanese) and its concept has been used widely by all the people involved in planning and implementation of economic development in Bhutan.<sup>41</sup> Sufficiency economy has also been promoted through international organizations, especially the UN agencies, UNDP and UNESCO. The former UN secretary general highly praised this philosophy as “useful for Thailand and other countries in the world which can begin behaving by building the self-awareness from people themselves to the bigger state such as community and economy.”<sup>42</sup> Significant UN support has been seen in the form of lectures, conferences and exhibitions.

Thailand’s diplomatic relations with recipient countries have continued to be strengthened by development cooperation and Thailand gains regional trust with its reputation as a center of expertise. Friendship between nations, on all levels, including development, tend to increase trade reciprocally and investment linkages. Subsequently,

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<sup>39</sup> National News Bureau of Thailand, *Bhutan Government Praises Sufficiency Economy Philosophy*.

<sup>40</sup> Upadit, *Economic Development of Underdeveloped Countries*.

<sup>41</sup> Tashi, Personal Communication.

<sup>42</sup> Office of the Non-Formal and Informal Education, *The Essence of Life Skills Textbook*, 13.

Thailand's companies and investors have benefited from access to new markets and secured competitive advantages with the extension of special offers from aid recipient countries, such as Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. In the long term, according to an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, lowered disparity between these countries and improvement in the living conditions of all people in the region would greatly benefit Thai national security, especially in the borderland, where it is hoped epidemic diseases, illegal migration and human trafficking will decrease.<sup>43</sup>

To conclude, localization of the conceptual word "development" demonstrates that the word does not only concern knowledge, means and technology, but reflects power politics, that is, the process of control on the construction of international truth, rules and identities, which, in turn, determine the meaning and the existence of the "development" discourse through established institutions, their experts, new disciplines and professional languages. This localization plays a vital role in constructing the state's legitimate power in direct policies. The word "development" can be used to respond to the needs of Thai leaders or to match their values, norms or identities by its existence as a discourse in Thai society. This pattern continues in parallel for regions of the Global South who have received assistance from Thailand.

The word "development" of Western origin not only determines domestic policy and administrative structure, but also has a direct influence on foreign affairs. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and relating agencies are forced to respond positively to government policy. In other words, they localize the Western concept, while it is represented and reproduced out of the country through organizational and policy mechanism. However, sufficiency economy is produced as a construction of a unique Thai identity on the development concept in the international arena. It can be assumed that the development mission is one of the main tasks that the ministry seriously engages in.

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<sup>43</sup> Arthit, Personal Interview.

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